

Bossy ALPHA
PROTECTOR

AVA NICHOLS

Bossy Alpha Protector

Ava Nichols

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Chapter 1

Samantha

That's it. I'm packing my bags.

I don't know where exactly I'm taking those bags to, not yet, but I know I have to pack them. I can't live with my parents for a moment longer.

It's not that my parents don't love me or that they aren't good people. I love my parents, and I know they want what's best for me. It's just that they have a very specific idea of how they want my life to go, and it doesn't fit with my life plan for myself.

Specifically, they want me to hurry up and get married and give them grandkids. And there's no way I'm doing that before I get my career started.

As I pack, I eye the bookshelf covered in Harlequin novels, old worn paperbacks, some from as far back as the 50s. My grandmother was a huge romance reader, and as soon as I could read, I was sneaking books from her collection to devour. I was way too young for some of those books, in retrospect, but I didn't care at the time. I loved, and still love, the swoon-worthy stories of people finding true love.

And now, I'm going to write those stories.

I have a manuscript I've been working on. Well, I have a few, but this is the one that's closest to being ready. I'm so close to having it ready to go out to agents, I can taste it. I'm not giving that up to pursue marriage and a man. Once I have kids, I know it'll be harder for me to take the time for my writing, and I want to be a mother; I always have, but my career is important to me, too.

Besides, the right man wouldn't ask me to do such a thing.

I know exactly the kind of man I'm going to find, and I know my parents

don't care. They think I need the protection and sheltering of some alpha male who will swagger around and tell me what to do. Meek little Samantha, that's all they see me as. But I know there's more to me than that. I know my dream of being a writer isn't silly. I don't need a man to show me how to live my life because I'm "unrealistic", "too artsy" and have my "head in the clouds".

The right man will be like the men I write about in my novels. He'll be sweet and considerate. Thoughtful. Maybe a bit reserved, at first, a little mysterious. He'll take time to get to know, but he'll be worth it. He'll support me and my dreams and my needs, and he'll be as eager to be a father as I am to be a mother. He'll be a traditional romantic, the kind of guy who opens doors for me, buys me flowers, and takes me out dancing.

I know a lot of people will probably roll their eyes if I ever say that out loud. But I know those kinds of men are out there. I just have to be patient. I'm willing to wait and be picky if that's what it takes. I have a plan, and my plan does not involve settling just because my parents want grandbabies today instead of in a couple of years.

That's what our argument was about tonight. I try to keep my noise to a minimum as I pack, but it's hard with my frustration at an all-time high. My parents want me to take on a practical job and set about finding a husband. They think my dreams of being an author are ridiculous. They haven't outright *said* that I'm throwing my life away, but it's obvious that's what they think.

I'll show them. I'm going to make my dreams come true, all of them, and they'll get their grandbabies and see me married. Just on my terms, not theirs. And not before I sell a damn novel.

My phone rings and I wince as I glance at the Caller ID. Of course, my brother would call. My parents must've asked him to try and talk some sense into me. As if Oscar's ever been sensible a day in his life.

"Hey," I answer, keeping my voice low. "Are you the cavalry?"

"They're just worried about you."

"No, they're worried that they'll mysteriously die before I can give them grandkids. Probably of impatience. I hear that's going around."

Oscar chuckles. "And they wonder where you get your stubbornness from."

"I know, right?" I grin, tucking some of my long dark brown hair out of my face. I love my hair, it's thick and curls nicely, but it does tend to get in

my face a lot. “Anyway, they don’t know this yet, but I’m packing right now.”

“Oh, shit, you’re actually moving out?”

“That’s the plan. I need to find a place but when I do...” I wince. “And I need to get a job before that.”

I’ve had work experience. My brother is a rodeo cowboy and since I had to go with my family to all the rodeos anyway, I’ve taken on a lot of jobs there. I’ve worked the ticket booth, the concession stand, betting, and accounting... but I don’t know how good they’ll look on a resume at a steadier job.

“What are you thinking of applying to?”

“Oh, y’know, just office stuff. Maybe a front desk position.” Working as a receptionist will give me time to get writing done while I’m in the office, as long as I also get my paid work done. I’m sure I can manage that.

Oscar makes a thoughtful hum. “Y’know, I might know someone who’s looking for a personal assistant. It’s a more involved job than a receptionist, but it pays well. It can be a bit of a high-pressure environment but I’m sure you can handle it, and you should still have time to get your writing done.”

“Oh? What is it?”

I’m a little wary. Oscar tends to be the kind of guy with big ideas that don’t always execute how he pictured them. But he has a lot of connections. If he knows of a job, this could solve my dilemma and help me get a much-needed break from my parents.

Oscar clears his throat. “Okay, don’t say no right away...”

Well, now I’m definitely suspicious. “Oh, God, what is it?”

“It’s... working as a personal assistant. For Travis.”

Oh, hell no. “Absolutely not!”

Travis Ray is my brother’s best friend, and he’s every bad stereotype of a rodeo cowboy: a horrendous flirt, a playboy, who doesn’t care about his own life or safety, an adrenaline junkie, a spotlight hog, and a cocky sonofabitch.

I’ve never liked Travis, and I’ve done my best to keep my distance from him. He and Oscar get along (in spite of, or perhaps because, my parents also don’t like Travis) and I don’t want to ruin Oscar’s friendship. But really? Travis is like the poster child for everything I dislike in a man.

I like my men sweet, earnest, and romantic. The kind of men that sweep the heroines off their feet in my romance novels. The kind of man who will appreciate my drive and career goals; who won’t want to hog the spotlight or

be resentful if his wife becomes a bestselling author; a man who puts his child and fatherhood first; and who will think it's sweet that I still haven't had sex, instead of making fun of me for it as I'm sure Travis would.

Travis Ray is *none* of those things. I doubt he'd understand earnestness if it slapped him across the face, and he sure as hell isn't sweet. He's annoying and I don't know what Oscar sees in him. I never have.

"Come on. He pays really well, you know him, he doesn't care about your resume, and it's just for a short while. Just so you can get on your feet away from Mom and Dad."

"Absolutely not! He's the most annoying jerk I've ever met in my life!"

"You're not always sunshine and rainbows around him either, y'know, Sam."

I sigh. "Look, I know I need a job, but I'm not that desperate. Yet. I'm sure I'll find something."

"At least talk to him about it. Seriously, he needs a good assistant, and you're super organized. I know you'd do a good job at it. And he pays really well. You probably wouldn't have to be there long before you had some savings, y'know?"

I feel like I'm being coaxed into a deal with the Devil, but... I am the sister of Travis' best friend. Surely he won't be that awful to me because of that, right? Just for Oscar's sake?

Besides, if I say no, Oscar will just continue to bug me about it. I sigh. "I'll talk with him, but that's all I can promise."

I can hear the smile in my brother's voice. "Great! Why don't you meet us at the rodeo next weekend? Mom and Dad won't notice that you're meeting him that way, it won't seem out of the ordinary."

"Sounds good."

As I hang up the phone, I can't help but wonder if this is a bad idea. But then I look at my folded clothes, haphazardly packed into my suitcase, and I remember my parents outside my childhood bedroom door, stewing in the living room, convinced I'm going about my life all wrong.

I'll put up with just about anything if it means that I can get out of here and live my life. Even if that's a cocky jerk like Travis Ray.

Chapter 2

Travis

It's not my fault that I go through assistants like tissue paper.

Look, I'm a man who knows what he wants and a man who has a lot to get done. Ever since I had to take over the company from my father, I've had to juggle two professions at once, and we're very hands-on here. This company has been in the family for generations since we were cattle farmers starting our first ranch, and even though it's now grown into a multi-company, billion-dollar business, I still try to oversee as much as I can personally.

If an assistant can't keep up with that, then that's not my problem. I'm just going to find someone who can.

My job is high-pressure. And that's not even taking into account my other job as a rodeo rider.

When I had to swoop in and take things over from my father, I vowed I wasn't going to let it get in the way of my dreams as a rodeo rider, and I meant it. I've managed to handle the business on the weekdays while traveling to the various rodeos on the weekends, training and practicing around meetings with clients and shareholders.

But I can't do any of this if my schedule isn't taken care of, which is why I've just fired my latest assistant.

"Again?" Oscar asks me as I rummage through my desk with one hand, the phone pressed to my ear. "Didn't you hire her two weeks ago?"

"I'm not going to keep someone on when they can't handle the job. I don't need to hold onto her for another two weeks to know that she's not cut out for this. If she hasn't picked it up by now, she won't ever, even if I give

her more time.”

“Or, consider, maybe you’re just too demanding and expect too much.”

“Or consider that maybe I just need the best, not someone who thinks they can slack off and fiddle around all day.”

I know that I have a reputation at the rodeo: ride hard, and play harder. I wonder sometimes if that means my incoming assistants think they’ll just be babysitting a playboy. I’m the actual CEO and I act like it, dammit. I’m not here just because of nepotism and coasting on my laurels as the founder’s son. I’m the one who dragged this company back from the brink of ruin like it was a wild bronco, and I’m only going to keep it tamed and in line through constant attention and training.

Oscar sighs. “You could stand to be less of a hardass. These are real people, not bucking bulls.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” I finally found the planner I was looking for. If my assistant actually did her damn job correctly I wouldn’t have to panic to find it, and I wouldn’t have to deal with my shifting meetings on my calendar all by myself.

Oscar hums. “What if I had someone for you?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if I had someone who I think would be a good personal assistant? Someone who could handle your schedule?”

“I’d ask you if you’d also found me a unicorn.”

“I’m serious. I have someone who I think could handle your workload, and you as a person.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Oscar laughs. “Oh, come on, Trav. You and I both know you’re a handful. You’re a great guy to be friends with, and you’re a great guy to flirt with at the rodeo, but if someone works for you, you’re a terror.”

“I am not. I just have high standards.”

“Yeah, you sure have high standards when you flirt with any woman with legs.”

It’s true. I’m a player and I don’t see what the problem is with that. I also don’t see a problem with being an exacting boss. At least I’m fully honest. I don’t have time for a relationship with my two careers, and I don’t cheat or lie. I’m not going to get into a relationship with someone and then turn around and be unfaithful.

“Y’know, they say sarcasm is the lowest form of humor,” I point out to

Oscar.

He chuckles. “Look, I think you could stand to lighten up a bit as a boss, that’s all. Or at least hire someone who isn’t scared of you. I know that someone, and I want you to give her a chance.”

“Why do I sense a catch?”

Oscar sighs. “It’s my sister.”

“Oh hell no.”

Samantha is a goody-two-shoes who’s hated me her entire life. Oscar’s parents hate me too, they think I’m a bad influence on him, but I don’t care about that. Samantha, though, I’ve had to interact with a fair amount because she was always doing odd jobs or something at the rodeo, and she’s always made it painfully clear that she doesn’t like me and thinks that I’m a jackass, which... look, I don’t have time for judgmental people up on their high horses. If Samantha wants to think I’m no good, then that’s her problem, but I’m sure as hell not making it mine.

“Just listen,” Oscar pleads. “She’s in need of a job, to get out of the house. She wouldn’t have to work for you for long. She’s good at handling chaos and she won’t be intimidated by you. Just do me this one favor, okay? Have her on your payroll and let her be your assistant for a few weeks, then you two can go your separate ways. She needs this job on her resume and she needs some money to get her own place, that’s all.”

Dammit. I can’t refuse Oscar. He’s been a good friend to me. We’ve been on the rodeo circuit together for a decade now and he’s had my back and I’ve had his. He’s never asked me for any kind of big favor, even though he’s known how rich my family is. Hell, he could ask me to just give his sister money. He knows I can afford it. But Oscar wouldn’t ever accept a handout and I’m sure his sister is the same. They both want her to earn her way honestly.

I can’t help but respect that. And I really do owe Oscar a really big favor. This is the only thing he’s asked of me in all this time. I have to do it.

“Okay,” I give in. “I’ll let her try it out. Or at least we can meet up and discuss it.”

“Thanks, Trav, seriously.” Oscar’s relief is deep and genuine. “She really needs time away from our parents. You have no idea how much this means to me.”

I do know. Oscar’s the peacemaker in his family and he’s probably been stuck in the middle of this spat for a while. If this will end up making my best

friend's life easier, I guess I can suck it up for a few weeks. Especially if Samantha is good at what she does, I'll take someone I don't really like being my assistant if the work will get done for once.

"Of course," I say out loud. "Have her come into the office..."

"Hell no," Oscar interrupts me. "She'll meet us at the rodeo on Saturday. Our parents can't know about this."

I roll my eyes, but I know how overbearing Oscar's parents can be. "All right, fine."

I'm not looking forward to my rodeo time being interrupted with a prickly conversation, but I learned long ago that you gotta do what you gotta do in this life. If I did only what I wanted, my family's company would have been sunk years ago and gobbled up by vultures after declaring bankruptcy. But while I might play hard, I also work hard. So, I didn't just do what I wanted. I dropped out of what I had to in my rodeo career, and I saved my family's company from my father's mismanagement and incompetence.

Compared to that, honestly, putting up with a person I don't like for a few weeks as a favor to my best friend doesn't seem so bad.

"Great." I can hear Oscar's grin through the phone. "I'll see you then! Thanks again, man, I really owe you one."

"You owe me nothing," I retort. "What are friends for? See you then."

I guess we'll find out on Saturday if this will be a good idea or if Samantha and I will kill each other before we work together. My weekend just got a little more interesting.

Chapter 3

Samantha

I'm weirdly nervous as we pull up to the rodeo.

I know I shouldn't be. I've known Travis for years and I know what kind of guy he is. I also really need this job, and Travis is well aware that I'm not his biggest fan. What if he turns me down, best friend's sister or not? Then I'd have to start from square one.

I take deep breaths as Oscar leaves me to go and get ready and I prepare to dive into the gathered crowd. I need to find a spot near the stables where the riders get ready so that I can talk to Travis easily after his performance. I'll probably look like another one of his fangirls, which I hate, but it doesn't really matter.

Travis always has women hanging around him. I'm not surprised that he can't seem to keep a hold of one as his assistant. He probably sleeps with them and then dumps them before they have a chance to think they actually mean something to him. God forbid he has an adult, mature relationship with someone, but that's Travis for you. The only things he cares about are the rodeo and my brother.

Luckily for him, I need him, and his friendship with my brother is the one thing I admire about him. Oscar's had a tough time the last few years, and Travis has really been there for him. I have to try and respect him for that, at least.

I get to the front and find a seat just as the rodeo begins. Travis and Oscar are two of our best so they're not on for a bit; they usually have a couple of showy people doing horse tricks and stunts to get the crowd excited, and then they bring in the newbies and work their way up to the best riders, the ones to

beat.

I've been going to rodeos all my life, and I do enjoy it; however, I worry about the safety of the riders. I don't know that I could ever be in a relationship with someone who did this; I worry enough when it's my brother. But I understand why all the girls go crazy over the riders. It is pretty sexy, what they do.

Actually, this is the first time I've watched Travis ride in years. I try to think back to the last time but it's hazy. I must've been a teenager. Wow. Have I really been avoiding him for that long?

I cheer along with everyone else, my heart in my throat as the men ride bulls and bucking broncos. They don't usually have terrible injuries, but concussions and sprained ankles and wrists are common, and there's always a chance that something worse happens. Everyone seems to love the danger and I think some people watch actively hoping they'll see a disaster. I just hope everyone makes it out okay.

Oscar goes, and I cheer wildly, jumping up and whooping and hollering. Oscar claims I'm always loud enough that he can hear me over any crowd, and I do my best to make sure he can. I'm not sure if it's true or if he just thinks he can hear me because he knows I'm there, but I do my best anyway.

My brother's damn good at what he does, and he has a grin on his face the whole time. That's one of the things I love about him, and I think everyone else does, too. Nothing gets Oscar down. He's whooping and cheering along with the crowd as he rides his bucking bronco, staying on for an impressive amount of time and grinning when he's sent into the dirt. He pops right back up like a jack-in-the-box, bowing theatrically, and I laugh. Yup, that's my brother.

And now it's Travis' turn.

He's riding a horse today, the same as Oscar, although he also rides bulls. He strides out, full of his usual confident swagger, his shirt stretched tight over his chest and arm muscles. It's been a while since I've seen him in person, and I forgot how... built he is. Travis is tall, and he's grown a bit of a beard since I last saw him, his dark brown hair hovering as it flops into his eyes a little. It's just long enough in the front to run your fingers through, and I find my stomach twisting a little as I look at him.

I just kind of forgot that Travis is really damn handsome, that's all. He's still a jerk.

His gaze scans the crowd, and I can't see his eyes from this far away, but

I know they're dark brown and intense. I shiver, and I'm not sure why. Maybe it's his confidence. He walks like he already knows that this horse is under his control, and it's not an attitude I've noticed from any of the other riders.

The other riders walk on with swagger, sure. They all do. But they walk on like the horse is something they need to conquer or tame, a mountain to climb. They're going to do it, but they're going to prove themselves with how they're so much tougher than the battle before them.

Travis doesn't walk in like he's going to battle. He walks in like he already knows the horse is going to do what he wants, like he's already won, and this is just a demonstration.

Another shiver works its way up my spine.

When the horse and Travis bust out of the gate, and the animal starts kicking, I find myself sitting on the edge of my seat. I watch as his thighs clench and relax around the flanks of the horse, his muscles rippling almost like water. He's got one hand up, but he looks completely relaxed, not stiff or fighting, like he's part of the horse and just rolling with it, moving in the same waves and rhythms as the bucking bronco.

I exhale shakily, squirming a little in my seat. It's just... it's nothing, really, it's just he looks so settled on the horse, controlling the horse completely with just his thighs, and the way his body is moving...

Fuck, okay, it's hot. It's hot! Travis is hot. I knew he was hot, you don't get all those girls without having at least some charm and good looks going for you. But I guess I forgot about that, with how long it's been since I saw him and how long I've known him. Travis' personality has always taken the spotlight in my mind. Now I'm reminded of his body and his skill...

My mouth is dry and I swallow hard. I understand now why all those girls flock to him afterward and flirt with him. It's so easy to imagine him translating his bull riding into the bedroom, riding *me*, commanding me as easily as he commands the horse, and I can buck and kick just as much as I want but we all know who's really in control.

My body feels like it's melting and I clench my thighs together. It's hot, but I'm not going to let that make me forget what Travis is really like. He's putting on a great show right now, and I'm sure he's good in bed. But he's still a cocky reckless jerk who only cares about sleeping his way through women and winning rodeo trophies.

Travis finishes and the crowd goes wild. He lasted the longest, to

nobody's surprise. Certainly not mine. I press my legs together and try to ignore the heat in between my thighs, pulsing in my core, as Travis bows in front of the crowd.

And there's that cocky grin I know so well. I scowl. Yeah, I'm not here for someone showy and arrogant like Travis, no thanks. He can have all the other girls who don't know better and think he's going to be their big romantic cowboy. He can also have all the girls who just want a one-night stand and a bit of fun. No offense to them, but that's not what I want. And I do know better than those other naive women.

I'm going to have a forever kind of love, and I'm not going to waste my time, in the meantime, with someone like Travis Ray.

Travis heads back, swarmed by women as usual, and I make my way down the stands to go through one of the employee doors. I wave as I enter and one of the organizers nods at me. "Here to see your brother?"

"Yeah, is he in the stables?"

"Yeah."

I nod in thanks and head that way. I'm not really here to see Oscar but it'll be good to say hi.

As I walk through the back area where all the riders and handlers are, I keep away from the various cowboys. When I was younger, I used to imagine I'd meet my future husband at a rodeo. Why not, right? A handsome, hardworking, talented man... it would be such serendipity to meet him while I was cheering on my brother and working various jobs around the grounds.

But most of the men here aren't that type. They only care about one thing: the rush of the ride. I've seen way too many women get heartbroken, their needs pushed aside again and again so their husbands could chase that rush. And it so often ends in injury, their husbands unable to work, and then crushed dreams on both sides.

None of them are as bad as Travis, though. He used to get into fights all the time. Oscar would tell me about them like I was supposed to find it hot or be impressed. Yeah, right. I'm not into those aggressive bad boys, no thanks.

I avoid the cowboys and head for the stables. I hope to find Oscar and say hi, but instead, I see none other than Travis, stroking the nose of one of the horses and murmuring to it.

I stumble to a stop in surprise. I've never seen Travis be so... gentle. So soft and quiet. He's always the center of attention. But he's being so kind to the horse right now like he's making amends for the rough way he rode him a

few minutes ago.

That makes a bunch of dirty thoughts spring into my mind and I force them out. I'm not going to become attracted to Travis Ray after all these years. Especially not when he might be about to become my boss.

I walk up, clearing my throat to announce my presence. "Hey. I thought Oscar was back here."

"He was. He's talking to Allan now."

I fight the urge to shift my weight and give away my nerves. I don't like Travis, but right now, I need him, I need this job he could give me, and I don't like that. "So, what's up with you firing people constantly? And needing to find a secretary you wouldn't fuck?"

Travis gives the horse one last pat on the nose and steps away, smirking at me and shaking his head like I'm a precocious child. "You would assume that's the problem, wouldn't you?"

"Well, you can admit I've got a good reason to think that. And we both know you wouldn't give me the time of day if it wasn't for Oscar."

"Honey, if it wasn't for Oscar, I would've seduced you years ago," Travis says casually like it's the most boring fact in the world.

My heart starts racing. "What?" my voice cracks a little. That's not at all what I expected. Travis has always made his contempt for me clear.

"Oh c'mon, don't act like you aren't aware the little goody-two-shoes act is what most guys think of as a challenge. They all want to be the one guy to make you give it up. It's always the quiet ones and all that."

I scoff, something coursing through my veins that I call fury but I'm not sure actually is. It might be something else, something I don't want to name. "Unfortunately for all of you, the kind of man who wants to seduce me isn't the kind I'm going to want to sleep with. Whatever happened to taking things slow and wooing a woman? I know the whole cowboy fantasy is just that but some of you could at least try a little harder."

"You know who else could try a little harder? My assistants. Now are you going to prove to me why I should do your brother this favor, or are you going to keep wasting my time judging my sex habits?"

"But judging your sex habits is so much fun," I quip. "And I think you should try keeping it in your pants, that might get your assistants to stick around. Luckily for me, that means you should hire me because the last thing I want to do is sleep with you. I'll happily take your money, though. If you pay as well as Oscar says you do."

Travis rolls his eyes and heads to the back of the stables. I follow after him, struggling to keep up. I'm on the short side and Travis is six feet tall with long, determined strides. "I know the sort of things I expect from my assistant and so I pay accordingly. I want my employees to be fairly compensated for the work they do. We've prided ourselves on paying well since our family business was just a ranch in the middle of nowhere and we intend to keep it that way."

"No amount of pay is going to make up for being sexually harassed."

Travis stops walking and turns on me; his face is like thunder. "I don't sleep with employees. Understand? I'm just a man who has a busy schedule running *an entire damn company*. Seems to me that the problem is people don't know how to actually keep up with me. You think you can manage that?"

I scoff. "I've always been able to handle you, Travis Ray, because I know what kind of man you are. I'll take whatever you can throw at me. As long as you keep your hand out of my skirt, you won't find a better assistant around. I'll be running *your* schedule before you know it. You don't need someone who can keep up with a CEO's demands, you need someone who can keep up with *your* demands, and when has anyone been able to do that except for me?"

Travis tips his head to the side a little, and I know that he knows I've got a point. We may have been at odds for years, me disliking him and him disliking me, but that means that I'm not scared of him, and I know him better than a lot of other people probably do, because of all I've heard from Oscar and seen from him hanging out with my brother.

"I suppose you've got a point." Travis arches an eyebrow at me. "But you will have to lose the attitude."

"Did you not pay attention to a thing I just said? My attitude is a part of why I'll be an asset as your assistant."

"To a point. But I don't appreciate you judging me for sleeping around. A few years ago, you used to flirt with all the men here too, remember that?"

"Yeah, when I was a teenager and too young to know better. I thought the men here might actually be decent. I didn't know how you all really were. None of you care about finding something real; you just care about 'wham bam, thank you, ma'am.'"

"And what's wrong with that? You can't tell me that you don't appreciate a little roll in the hay now and again."

Something must show on my face, a bit of vulnerability, before I can force myself into a blank expression because Travis' eyebrows rise. "Oh?"

"Oh, nothing, get that stupid look off your face."

"No, no, unless I'm mistaken..." Travis steps in closer, just close enough that I can feel the heat of his body. "You've never had sex? Never done... anything?"

"You know me. Or, you know Oscar, so, you kind of know about me. You know I haven't had any relationships."

"You don't need to have a *relationship* to have sex."

"Yes, as you have demonstrated perfectly any number of times over the years. So many times I can't even keep track."

Travis doesn't rise to the bait. Instead, he keeps looking at me with a thoughtful expression on his face, one that I can't decipher. "I don't think you realize how much you need to lighten up."

"I think you need to get more serious."

Travis shakes his head, smiling. "No, see, that's the thing. I'm plenty serious when I need to be. I just know when to leave the serious behind to have fun."

"Work hard, play hard?" I ask sarcastically.

"Sure thing. You'll find out soon enough, working for me. I know how to take things seriously. In fact, I take sex very seriously."

"No, you don't. If you did you'd've had a proper relationship by now."

"I said taking sex seriously." Travis steps into me, and he's looking at me like... like he's never looked at me before. I don't think I've ever seen him look at anyone like this, either.

I've seen him look at women with this look of... hunger and cockiness like he's already seen them naked and they're already in his bed. It drives me nuts, the sheer arrogance of it. I don't want to sleep with someone who looks at me like I'm a piece of meat.

But the way Travis is looking at me right now. It's like I'm a puzzle that he is suddenly completely invested in. Like he wants to put me together and take me apart.

I don't know what to do, being the subject of such scrutiny. I feel like squirming, and my skin is hot. My breathing feels shallow. "What?" I snap.

Travis shakes his head, then a slow smile spreads across his face. It's not cocky, though. It's delighted. "Oh, sweetheart, I bet I could show you a whole new world."

“No, you couldn’t,” I snap at him, but he steps even closer. I can smell him now, the sweat of him, the musk of him, all that exertion from being on that horse... he smells *powerful*. My mouth goes dry. “You couldn’t show me anything. That’s the problem with men like you. You’re all about the conquest, you don’t actually care about your partner.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. That’s why... that’s why I need a... a sweet man, a good man, who’ll make me feel good.” My breath hitches as Travis reaches up and skims his fingers along the side of my neck. I shiver.

“I think I know how to make you feel good. But if you want me to prove it to you...”

“I don’t.”

“I think you do.”

“I don’t,” I say, but in my attempt to make my voice louder, it only makes the tremor in it more obvious. I feel overwhelmed by Travis’ body and his attention on me, and for the first time, I feel like I truly understand why women swoon over him.

Travis smiles slowly, and his hands fall to my hips, pulling me in. I gasp, shocked, and too surprised to resist, and suddenly all six feet of muscle is pressed up against me. I grab onto him for balance and Travis moves one of his hands to tip my chin up, forcing me to look into his eyes.

“If anyone ever really took the time to properly seduce you,” he murmurs, “I think you’d have discovered a long time ago there’s no need to be so buttoned up. And there’s nothing wrong with having standards.”

“You should get some standards,” I hiss. “So you’re not just chasing tail all the time.”

“Maybe my standards are just different than yours. How about this? I’ll raise my standards a little, you lower yours a bit, and we’ll meet right in the middle.”

His body is so hot against mine that I feel like I’m going to combust. His grip on my chin and hip is light, but certain. I should push him away, but I can’t; I’m caught in that intense gaze of his. His confidence is... okay, it’s alluring, I admit. It’s making my heart race, to be the complete center of someone’s attention like this.

“I don’t want to meet in the middle,” I reply, my voice breathier than I would like it. “I don’t want to meet you anywhere.”

“And yet you’re already meeting me here.”

“For a *job*.”

“Well, see, we have a problem.” Travis’ hand moves from my hip to my waist, and I let him. “Because I just can’t help myself when I realize a pretty woman hasn’t been shown a good time before.”

“You never cared about me before.”

“Before, I didn’t know you were depriving yourself.” Travis grins, his face inches away from mine. “Let me show you what you’ve been missing.”

I shouldn’t, but I’ve never been the focus of someone’s gaze like this before, such concentration and focus. And before I can even process it, Travis is kissing me.

His mouth is warm and soft against mine. He doesn’t kiss the way I thought he would. He doesn’t try to slip me tongue, he doesn’t try to devour me. Instead, he kisses me over and over, light soft kisses that have me relaxing bit by bit until I’m practically melting into his arms.

My hands find his shirt and cling to him. I had no idea that you could be kissed like this, little by little until you’re hot and melting all over, like your knees can’t hold you anymore. I mean, of course, I’ve read plenty of romance novels, but those kisses tend to be intense ones where the heroine is literally swept off her feet and the hero ravishes her immediately.

Travis takes his time with me, and I have no idea how to feel about that.

Finally, his tongue darts between my lips, and I gasp, my mouth opening. He draws my tongue into play, coaxing me into kissing him deeper, until I’m clinging and rocking into him, kissing him passionately. It feels so natural, and I can’t stop the whimpers in the back of my throat.

Travis yanks himself back, the both of us gasping, chests heaving. “Bet you’ve never been kissed like that,” he murmurs, his voice rough.

I feel like I can’t breathe, even though I’m gulping in air. “Why... why did you stop?”

Travis lets go of me and steps back. “I know you don’t really want me. Much as I’d love to take you apart, show you just how good of a time you could have if you’d loosen up for five minutes... I’m not gonna fight a losing battle.”

“You can’t just leave me like this!” I snap. My body is on fire, I feel like I’m going to shake apart from desire, and he’s just walking away? Screw him. “You don’t get to start something you can’t finish.”

Travis turns to walk away, but I grab him, yanking him back to me. He smirks, and it’s infuriating. “Oh, now you want a roll in the hay? Little Miss

Goody Two Shoes, too good for me, too good for any of us...”

“Y’know what? Maybe I do.” I shove him back, and then shove him again, further into the back of the stables away from any prying eyes. “You showed me you’re a good kisser. Show me what all the other fuss is about, huh? Show me why all the girls go wild over you. Show me why you’re worth it.”

Travis gets a determined look on his face like someone just told him he can’t stay on a bull for more than fifteen seconds, and he grabs me and picks me up. I gasp, shocked at the easy strength in him. I knew he was strong, you have to be in his profession, but the way he just moves me around effortlessly has me shaking with desire.

He carries me around the corner to where a bunch of hay bales are stacked, and he tosses me down onto a stray pile. I can feel myself getting wet as he climbs over me, and my breathing is harsh and almost frantic.

This isn’t at all what I’ve pictured when I’ve imagined my first time. But at this moment, I don’t care. I just want him. I want his powerful body over mine, working me the way he did the horse earlier, letting me buck and fight, and being completely in charge the entire time.

I didn’t know it was possible to want someone like this. I mean, I’ve read about it and written about it, of course I have, but in the romance I wanted in real life, there was a build-up. There was *time*, it wasn’t this... tsunami of sensation that I can’t control.

Travis rips off his outer plaid shirt. “Lift your hips, baby.”

“I’m not your baby,” I snap, but I lift my hips anyway so he can lay down the cotton shirt, protecting me from the hay as he kneels down between my legs and undoes my jeans. He yanks them down with one determined tug, and then yanks my legs apart, exposing me to his gaze and the hot air of the stables.

Travis stares down between my legs like he’s starving and I’m a feast. I shiver. “G-get on with it.”

“Oh, really? You think I’m going to rush this?” He chuckles. “Years I’ve had to watch you sashay around with your pert little ass, those pretty dark locks of hair, and those pretty blue eyes, acting too damn good for me or anyone? And you think now that I’ve got you begging for me that I’m going to *rush*? That I’m gonna just get on with it?”

He clucks his tongue and shakes his head. “Oh, no, darlin’, you have no idea what I’m going to do to you.”

His Texan drawl is slipping more and more into his voice as he talks to me, and I hate to admit it, but it gets me hotter. Travis tends to exaggerate the drawl when he's flirting, playing into that cowboy stereotype, but when he's talking just with Oscar or other riders, his voice is clipped, and the accent is gone. I always assumed that meant he was putting the drawl on completely for show.

Now, though, it doesn't sound exaggerated. His voice is too thick and raw for that. This drawl is *real*, and it's coming out because he's genuinely turned on by me.

I don't know what to do about the way it makes heat swirl in my chest.

Travis bends down, and I think he's going to kiss me, but instead, he rucks up my shirt and then yanks up my bra, exposing my heavy breasts. "Fuck yes," he breathes, staring at them.

I want to ask why he sounds like that (has he been staring at my breasts all these years?) but before I can say anything, he dives in, latching his mouth around one of my nipples, and I gasp instead, my head falling back.

Oh God. He knows what he's doing with his tongue, I'll give him that. Travis laps at my nipple, then bites on it lightly, sucks, and then switches to my other breast. Whichever one he doesn't have his mouth on, he's massaging with his rough, callused hand, and soon my hips are thrusting up into empty air.

It just feels so *good*. I knew from reading that breasts were a sensitive area, but whenever I touched myself in bed, it didn't do much for me. I guess having another person makes it so much more because right now, I'm throbbing between my legs and I feel like I might actually orgasm just from Travis playing with my breasts.

My hands reach up and I grab his hair; my mouth opens and my vision blurs. Tiny noises are slipping out of me, noises I didn't know I could make. I've always been quiet when touching myself since I live with my parents and I've had to bite my lip to keep noises in, but always right when I was about to come. Now I feel like we've barely started and I'm already whimpering.

"Fuck." Travis pulls back, his lips shining with spit from sucking on my breasts. "You're fucking gorgeous."

I don't know what to say to that. He sounds so earnest like I might not be aware. "Thank you?"

Travis laughs, then kisses down from my breasts across my skin to between my legs. I gasp as his mouth seals over me, clawing and tugging at

his hair again. “I... I...” I can’t finish the sentence. I don’t even know what I’m going to say.

Travis chuckles against my clit and then laps at it over and over, driving me slowly crazy. My hips buck up into his mouth. I had no idea that he would be like this. I honestly assumed he would just throw a girl down onto the nearest surface and slide his cock inside. It didn’t occur to me that he might actually be courteous during sex.

It’s like how I imagined it would be with my dream partner, but also nothing like that at all. I pictured something at the end of a lovely romantic date, after several dates getting to know each other, my date walking me home holding my hand, and then kissing me goodnight at the door. I did imagine him eating me out, but after a lot of build-up, and after I was *sure* to let him. I definitely didn’t imagine that it would take place in a damn barn at a rodeo where just about anyone could walk in on us.

But that doesn’t matter, because Travis is making me feel so damn *good*.

“I’m going to come,” I gasp, sounding surprised because I am. I’m honestly shocked. I don’t know what to do with the fact that my orgasm is approaching like a train that’s about to run me over. His tongue is licking at me like he’s pressing right up against every single one of my nerve endings, making me writhe in pleasure. “Travis...”

He doesn’t stop, he just hums in acknowledgment. If anything, he speeds up. My vision continues to blur and then spins, and I feel like I’m going to fall even though I’m already lying down... oh *God*...

I come hard, right into his mouth, gasping and whimpering, biting down hard on the inside of my cheek so that I don’t do something stupid like moan his name.

Travis pulls back, wiping his face with the back of his hand. I expect him to look smug, but instead, he looks starving. He leans back on his heels and undoes his pants, and the sound of his belt buckle and zipper is deafening. I pant with heat, staring as he draws out his cock.

Fuck, he’s big. I find myself licking my lips, hungry. My body clenches like it’s already imagining that cock inside of me.

I spread my legs, pushing one knee up to give him more access, and Travis moves back in. He rips off his white undershirt, leaving him gloriously bare-chested, and lifts my head up to put the shirt underneath. This is the second time he’s been so considerate, using his clothes to keep me comfortable, and like everything else, I don’t know what to do about it other

than to use it to fuel my desire.

I feel like a completely different person. This isn't who I am, I don't want these kinds of wild trysts, except apparently right now I do. Maybe that's just the kind of spell that Travis casts. I don't know. I just know that I want him to fuck me.

And then he's sliding his cock into me, and it feels amazing.

I moan, and Travis kisses me fiercely, his hips thrusting into me without pause or warning. I can't lift my hips up to meet his, so I wrap a leg around his waist to keep him inside of me. Travis groans and speeds up. I'm so slick and loose from my orgasm, and the slide of his cock is absolutely incredible. I want more and more of it, gasping, arching, clawing at his bare shoulders.

He really is built, solid muscle. My hands are greedy over his slick, tan skin. I can barely fit my hand around his biceps and it sends another pulse of heat through me. I feel out of my mind like I'm not myself and I'm another version of Samantha who does crazy, reckless stuff like this. Travis kisses me frantically and I kiss him back with just as much ferocity, unable to stop myself. I feel possessed, but I don't mind it at all. In fact, I love it.

Travis grunts, grinding his cock inside of me, and I can feel him twitching. I know he's close. I don't want this to end, but I also want him to come. I want it all.

"Come on," I pant, and I'm not sure what I'm asking for or even really what I'm saying, just that words are spilling out of me.

Travis groans, kissing me savagely, possessively, and this is the kind of kiss I imagined him giving his conquests, full of power and control and dominance, and I'm swept up in it as I feel him spill inside of me. I gasp, clenching down hard. He doesn't stop fucking me; in fact, he speeds up, drawing out his orgasm, and it's so hot that I find myself coming a second time, shuddering and shaking.

Travis kisses all over my face and throat as he slows down the movement of his hips, gradually tapering off in his fucking until he's just inside of me and we're holding each other.

Our kisses eventually taper off, too, but they continue longer than I would've expected, clinging and almost sweet. This isn't anything like I imagined for my first time, but it's also nothing like I thought Travis was as a lover, either. He's far more generous than I ever gave him credit for being.

We pant for a moment, getting our breath back, and then Travis pulls away, sliding out of me. I wince a little at both the loss and the realization of

just how full he made me feel, how much he stretched me.

“You okay?” he asks.

I nod. “I was a virgin, not an idiot. I have touched myself.”

He nods. “Good. Good.”

I never thought I would see Travis Ray be awkward. I arch an eyebrow. I feel a bit embarrassed and unsure myself, not knowing what to do in the wake of this, but like hell I’m going to let him see that. “You regretting that?”

“Hell no. I’ve wanted to conquer the ice queen Samantha Davis for years.” He smirks. “And you were just as good as I hoped you’d be.”

“Good.”

“No need to thank me for showing you a good time.” He winks at me, and there’s the Travis that I know and dislike. I glare at him.

“Are you going to hire me?” I ask. “Because that was the reason I originally wanted to talk to you. I hope that sleeping with you means we got that out of the way, at least.”

Travis scowls. “I don’t sleep with my employees.”

“Well, good thing I’m not your employee yet. And good thing we won’t be doing this again. You gave me an excellent experience, congratulations, pat yourself on the back, because you’ll never have me again.”

I don’t know what came over me, what kind of recklessness possessed me, but I don’t intend to let it happen again.

Travis seems amused by my sass, even as he helps me up to my (shaking) feet. I throw his shirts at him and straighten myself out. Okay, so maybe I now understand why all those women would swoon over him, but he’s still a jerk.

“Maybe,” he shoots back, “I don’t want to work with someone who’s convinced I’m an asshole, have you ever considered that?”

My jaw drops. “Are you seriously not going to hire me?”

“No, I’m not, but not because we slept together. Because you’re convinced I’m a terrible person who sleeps with his employees. I may ride in a rodeo, but even I have limits to my womanizing. I won’t work with someone who just argues with me and thinks the worst of me all the time.” Travis helps pluck hay out of my hair, his touch gentle. “Best of luck, Samantha.”

The worst part is? He sounds like he means it.

Chapter 4

Travis

I have zero intention of hiring Samantha when it's clear she thinks so poorly of me.

Sleeping with her is one thing. I've thought she was gorgeous for a long time, and to be able to seduce her... honestly, it's something I'd given up on ever happening, but damn, does it get me hard. She's fucking beautiful, with curves for days, thick black hair, and sparkling blue eyes.

She's the kind of woman who could give any man a run for his money. You have to bring your "A" game when it comes to Samantha Davis. I always thought she was getting some, just not from me. It's been pretty clear she thinks she's too good for me. Why would I bother chasing after her—and possibly ruining my friendship with Oscar—when there are plenty of women out there who don't think poorly of me?

But I couldn't resist when I found out she was a virgin. She needs to have some fun and let loose every once in a while. Maybe if she sees just how great sex can be, she'll get off her high horse.

But I can't work with her.

It's one thing to prove a woman wrong and show her a good time. And damn what a good time that was. She's fucking amazing, I could've had fun with her in bed for hours if she'd let me, playing with her body; those beautiful breasts, eating her out... the way she got quiet until her climax, and then she made these tiny little noises that slipped out of her like she couldn't help herself.

Yeah, I have zero problem sleeping with her. It's fun to prove Samantha wrong in that way and show her all that she's been missing out on.

I know that people probably assume I sleep with my assistants. Especially with my father's reputation. He was forever sleeping with his employees and cheating on my mother, breaking her heart. I go through assistants quickly, and I flirt with women at rodeos—and just about anywhere else that's not connected to my company—so I get where the math comes from.

But I'm not going to sleep with an assistant and I'm not going to work with someone who thinks she's so much better than I am, who thinks that I'm some idiot who just fucks everyone and moves on callously. I need my employees to respect me, and if Samantha can't do that, then we won't be a good fit.

Samantha stares at me in fury as I finish getting dressed and head out. I know that I've just dashed her hopes, but come on, she couldn't even try to act as though she had some amount of respect for me? She couldn't tell me that she was willing to work with me, to put aside our differences to do a good job as my assistant for a few weeks? No, she had to come in all high and mighty and assume that she knew everything going on.

That's great if she's a woman I'm seducing, but not when she's someone I'll be working with forty hours a week.

I head out of the stables, leaving Samantha to splutter behind me, and try not to think about fucking her again. It's been a while since I've felt so satisfied by sex. I have plenty of women lately, and don't get me wrong, I adore the enthusiasm they show. But there's something about getting Samantha Davis to want me that has my blood pumping like nothing else has in ages besides actually being on a bucking bronco or bull out in the ring.

There's so much I could teach her and show her. It's like she's a wild horse that they've just brought in and they're asking me to tame her. I love the challenge. I love knowing even as I walk in that this horse is going to become one with me, that we're going to bond, and it's going to learn how to follow my every command. We're going to connect on a physical level that few ever achieve.

Good sex, proper sex, is like that, only more so, because the pleasure you get out of sex takes you out of your damn mind.

I know it could be like that with Samantha. But she wouldn't want that. She just wants a job from me, and I can't give that to her. I'm not going to keep yanking her down from her high horse the entire time we're working together.

I exit the stables and see Oscar... oh, shoot, and his parents. I clench my

jaw.

Oscar spots me and waves, so it's too late to avoid them. His parents are always polite to me. I'm too damn rich and powerful on the circuit for anyone to be anything but nice to me, but I know when people genuinely like me. And when they don't.

I walk over. "Great riding today."

Oscar grins. "That makes two of us. You ended things with a bang."

"Mr. Ray." I've known Oscar's father for years, but he still calls me by my last name like I'm a business contact instead of his son's best friend. "I hear you continue your undefeated status."

"For now," I say, trying to be humble. "There's gonna be some young buck who overthrows me someday."

Oscar laughs. "Give yourself some more credit."

"I give myself plenty of credit. It's just the truth of things."

The older you get, the harder it is to avoid and recover from rodeo injuries. It's a young man's game. I'm far from old; I'm in my late twenties, for crying out loud, but that's already pushing it by rodeo standards. When I turn thirty, people will start asking me if I'm going to retire. Especially with the medals I've got under my belt. People will say it's better I retire on a high note rather than let someone else supplant me while everyone watches me get slower and older.

But that's a problem for another day. I just believe in knowing your limits and being honest with yourself. That's how I had to be when dealing with the wreck my father made of the company.

"I wish that other people had your perspective," Mr. Davis says.

I laugh. "Well, these kids will learn soon enough."

He snorts. "I meant our daughter." He looks at Oscar. "Where is she, anyway?"

"Probably helping out; you know how she is," Oscar replies, his tone casual.

"She needs to focus," Mrs. Davis insists. "She can't keep running off like this to do these odd jobs. This is why she needs a husband."

My eyebrows fly up. I glance at Oscar, who looks exhausted. "She's just being helpful, Mom. You know she's a kind person that way, it's a good thing."

"She's keeping us waiting. Maybe if we'd taught her to have a little more respect for her elders, she wouldn't be defying us with this ridiculous

romance novelist idea.”

“Ridiculous?” I ask, incredulous.

“It’s hardly a real job,” Mrs. Davis says.

As if people haven’t said that to me a dozen times about rodeo riding.

“We’ve seen how the market works,” Mr. Davis adds. “Making a living as an author is difficult. She can’t possibly think that she can make it work. And we know she wants to get married, so I really don’t see why she isn’t being practical. She’s not getting any younger.”

Damn. The condescension sets my teeth on edge. “I mean, we’re not Victorians, twenty-three doesn’t make you an old maid.”

“We’ve given her a full year after graduating college to make this work,” Mrs. Davis says with a weary tone. “And she hasn’t gotten anything accomplished.”

I glance over at Oscar. He looks tired, like he’s had to hear this a few times now, and doesn’t have anything new to say. And doesn’t want to keep repeating himself.

I clear my throat. “Well, writing takes time, especially when you’re in an unsupportive environment.” I give them a butter-wouldn’t-melt-in-my-mouth smile.

“There you are,” Mr. Davis says, probably sparing me a lecture in exchange for glaring at his daughter. “Where’ve you been?”

“They needed some assistance at the concession stand. The poor girl was new, and I showed her how to report the tallies at the end of the night.” The lie slides off Samantha’s mouth smoothly, without hesitation.

I grin. It’s honestly kind of sexy.

“Your parents were just telling me about your plans?” I ask, unable to keep from poking the bear. “Writing novels, is that right?”

Samantha looks startled, but both of her parents glare at me. “She doesn’t have plans,” her mom says. “That’s the problem.”

“Look at yourself,” Mr. Davis says, which is the first time that I can recall him speaking to me in anything close to a respectful tone. “You’re the owner of a company. That’s how you take care of yourself in this world, not by going into the arts.”

He seems to have conveniently forgotten that I’m also a rodeo rider, but then, people seem to forget my riding or forget my company, whichever one suits them in the moment.

“I think that Samantha’s got a lot of talent,” I reply, startling even myself.

“I think it’s important we give things a shot so we know for sure if they work or not. As a CEO, my company needs to take risks from time to time, or we’ll never stay competitive in the marketplace, so I can respect someone who wants to commit to trying something. You never know until you give it your all, right?”

Oscar grins at me, looking relieved and excited. Samantha looks surprised, her eyebrows rising as she stares at me.

Look, I’m not a fan of how little Samantha thinks of me. But I like surprising people, and it’ll sure be a surprise for her that I’m taking the high ground and helping her out. And I really don’t appreciate the way her parents talk about her and to her. Samantha’s a damn adult, and if she wants to try something, they need to let her. All they’re doing is chasing her away and making it so that she won’t want to be around them.

“I would have thought that as a man of business, you’d understand practicality,” Mr. Davis says.

“Well, I’m also a man of the rodeo, sir, and you have to be a bit loose in the head if you want to ride in the rodeo.” I grin at Oscar, who grins right back at me.

“What’s going on?” Samantha asks, sounding suspicious.

“Oh, what’s going on is I’m just explaining that you’re my new assistant,” I tell her. “I think it’s important to do what I can to help people less fortunate than I am, and if I can help Samantha in her dreams by giving her a job that pays her bills and lets her work on her novels, then why shouldn’t I? We have a responsibility to help those who need it, y’know?”

Samantha’s jaw drops open. Oscar looks absolutely gleeful. Their parents, on the other hand, look deeply unamused, which is what I care about.

Working with Samantha will probably blow up in my face, yeah. But if I can just hold my tongue and get her to hold hers for a few weeks while she gets her feet under her, then I’ll have helped out my best friend, done my good deed for the year, and stuck it to two people who’ve never liked me and always been rude to me.

“I…” Mrs. Davis starts but doesn’t finish. She looks at her husband helplessly, like he’ll have something to say, but he just looks disgruntled.

Samantha recovers from her shock and smiles sweetly. “Yes, Travis has been… really kind and generous in offering me the job. I’m excited to work for him.”

We give her parents matching smiles, and I have to admit, it does feel

good to be on the same side as Samantha, making her annoying parents swallow lemons.

Let's hope we can keep up that feeling and not kill each other before the week is out.

Chapter 5

Samantha

I can't believe the 180 Travis did.

My parents are absolutely fuming. They head out to the car, and I know it's going to be an awkward, icy car ride back with them unless I want to drive back with Oscar alone. My brother's practically gleeful. I can't blame him. From his point of view, his best friend just told off our annoying parents and helped out his sister.

I'm... not sure if I'm happy or not.

On the one hand, I really do need this job, and I appreciate that Travis stuck his neck out for me. We're not kids anymore, my parents can't forbid my brother from seeing anyone, but they can sure give Oscar a hard time about his choice of friends, and I'm sure it'll be hard on Travis. He chose to rile them up on my behalf, and he doesn't even like me. I appreciate that.

On the other hand, I have to see this job through. And I'm not sure how well that'll go.

I grab Travis and pull him aside as my parents storm off in a huff. "Are you serious?" I hiss. "Or are you just messing with them?"

"There wouldn't be much point in me messing with them if I didn't follow through, would there?" Travis points out.

"Why? Why would you help me out? And don't say because of Oscar."

"Maybe I know a little something about parents holding you back." Travis has that cocky drawl again that drives me crazy.

Yeah, the sex with him was amazing, but it was definitely a fluke. Now that we've had sex, he's back to driving me crazy again, and not in a fun way. At least now I understand what all the fuss is about, having experienced it

myself. But Travis in no way fits my plan except as the employer who will give me a job while I finish my manuscript in peace, find a literary agent, get published, and get out of here.

“All right.” I shrug. “Whatever your reason, thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Good. And I’m sure you’ll understand when I say that I’d like you to quit after six months, sooner if you can swing a publishing deal.”

“I will definitely swing a publishing deal.” I pause. “Unless you think I can’t do this.”

“Oh, trust me, I know how stubborn you are. If you say you’re going to do something then you’re going to do it. But I don’t want you in my hair longer than necessary.”

“Trust me, I don’t want to be in your hair or anywhere else.”

“Oh, so that little roll in the hay wasn’t enough to convince you I’m not that bad of a guy?”

“Congratulations, you made a woman orgasm. Should we tell the local news? Should we print it in the *The Austin Chronicle*?”

“Ha, ha.”

“Look, you can be proud of yourself for having sex with me all you want, that’s great. I had a great time, sure, I can admit that. But you’re still insufferable, and I still don’t like you, so I’ll be *more* than happy to quit working for you as soon as humanly possible.”

“Good.” Travis looks relieved. Glad to know he’s so eager to be rid of me, as well. I know that I’m not his cup of tea, and I don’t expect sex to have changed that. I think what we did was a long time coming, letting off steam. Maybe that means it was a good thing, a smart decision. Now we can move forward with clear heads and all this... moved past.

“Six months,” I confirm. “Or a book deal. And I’m gone either way.”

“Great.” Travis nods. He glances behind me. “Your folks aren’t going to be too happy about you moving out, are they?”

“Well, they have to accept it. I can’t commute to your office every day.”

Travis has his office in downtown Austin, and a big fancy penthouse nearby. I’ve only ever been there once, to pick Oscar up after a party when he was too drunk to get himself home. My family and I still live in our small town, about seventy-five miles northwest of Austin. I’m not driving over two hours one way to get into town and then two hours back at the end of the workday.

Travis nods thoughtfully. “Well, let me know when you’ve picked out a

place.”

I stare at him. “What?” I can’t have heard him right. Why would he care if I have an apartment or not? “So you know when I can start working for you?”

“You’ll start work for me on Monday. No, let me know so I can help you move in. You’ll need to pick out furniture, maybe need a cosigner. It’s a lot.”

I can feel my jaw dropping again just like it did earlier when he was defending me to my parents. “I’ll... I’ll let you know.”

“Good. See you on Monday. Dress professionally.”

Then he walks away. Like he didn’t just give me emotional whiplash.

I spent the weekend packing my things and trying to find an apartment. Luckily I don’t have too much to pack, mostly clothes and no furniture. I will have to shop for furniture, unfortunately, but I think I can wait until after I get my first paycheck. In the meantime, I can use one of our sleeping bags that we have for family camping trips. I just need to find an apartment.

Oscar promises he’ll help me, but we haven’t found anything by Monday morning, at least no place that’ll instantly approve me. They want to look at my credit score and paperwork, and my salary hasn’t ever been steady enough for my annual income to look steady. I have to drive into the office from my parents’ house and hope that Travis doesn’t give me a hard time for being late.

Travis’ office, in downtown Austin, is clearly one of the newer pieces of construction. He decided to build new offices when he took over the company a few years ago. Something about wanting to help give jobs as Austin becomes a bit of a boomtown. Oscar was gushing about it, the way Oscar always gushes about Travis to me, like he’s hoping if he says the right thing and tells me how Travis saved a bunch of orphaned puppies from a fire, I’ll finally warm up to him.

I can appreciate Travis wanting to give jobs, I suppose, but it’s not going to make me like him when he continues to have an annoying attitude about it. Austin has become a bit of a boomtown in the last few years, though, the population swelling as people from the coastal cities moved here for the culture and lower living expenses, and I’m sure Travis actually did need a bigger office.

I might not like the guy, but I can’t deny the numbers. Travis took his family’s company from the brink of financial ruin to a billion-dollar asset in just a few years.

When I enter the building, the receptionist at the front desk smiles at me. “Hi, you must be Samantha.”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Ray said to keep a lookout for you. He said to go to the top floor so he can brief you on things, and you’ll go to HR at lunch to finish sorting your paperwork.”

Baptism by fire it is, then. Fine by me. If Travis thinks he can intimidate me by dumping a bunch of work on my lap immediately, he’s got another thing coming.

I get up to the top floor using a card the receptionist gives me. The elevator won’t work without it, and all visitors need to have a temporary card that shuts off after twelve hours or be accompanied by an employee at all times.

When I get to the top floor, I find that it’s just a large office with a lounge area, a large table for conferences, several screens probably for conference calls, and then there’s a proper desk with a view of the city.

“Wow.” I step out of the elevator. “Compensating for something?”

Travis is standing over by the floor-to-ceiling windows at his desk. He glances over at me. “That was kind of a predictable joke, I expected better from you.”

“Well, that’s what you get from me when I’ve been stuck in traffic: sub-par jokes.”

Travis frowns a little. “Traffic was that bad? Were you not able to get a place close to downtown?”

I wince. “I haven’t... found a place at all yet.”

“Why not?”

I can feel my face heating up with embarrassment. “Oh, I don’t know, because I don’t have a steady income, three paystubs, and bank statements to back up my credit score. So they need me to have a guarantor, and the guarantor has to make more money than I do. Oscar can’t help me, and my parents will refuse. Not all of us inherited a multi-million dollar company that they could turn into even more money.”

Travis doesn’t seem chastened by anything I’ve said. “Well then, I’ll be your guarantor.”

I can’t possibly have heard him right. “What?”

“You heard me. Pick out a place you’d like, let me know, and we’ll go over. I’ll be your guarantor. We can take care of it this afternoon, even.”

“You have work to do.”

“And I can multi-task. You better be able to do the same as my assistant.” Travis holds out his cell phone. “I’m assuming you used a housing app? Put in whatever the address was on the housing app.”

I stare at the phone for a moment in shock. “What?” I ask faintly.

“Put in whatever address it was for the apartment you wanted. On the app. You had a place you wanted, right? They turned you down?”

I take his phone, find the address in the housing app that I used on my phone, put the address in his phone, and then hand it back. Travis stares down at it, swiping through the photos, then shakes his head. “No, you need somewhere better.”

“I won’t be working for you forever,” I point out. “I’m trying to be economical.”

“You can still afford to do a bit better than that.” He taps away on his phone and then holds it back out to me. “Here are a few options.”

I scroll through. “I can’t…”

“With me as your guarantor, yes, you can. The salary I’m paying you will definitely cover these places. I know I’m a hardass, Samantha, but that means I compensate my employees accordingly.”

I frown at him. I can’t tell what his angle is. But these apartments are nice. They’re a little bigger than what I was looking at, with a few better amenities like washer/dryer units inside the apartments themselves so I don’t have to go to a shared laundry room in the building. If he really says I can afford the rent…

“Okay. Fine.” I pick the one that I like best from the outside and is close to the office. “This one.”

“Excellent. Let’s go.”

“Let’s go?”

“We’re going to get the apartment.” Travis taps away on his phone. “I’m messaging the realtor and building manager right now. You have furniture in mind?”

“Um. Just something simple.” I was going to look at second-hand places to get a few pieces. Just the necessities: a couch, a small dining table, a bed.

“Hmm.” Travis continues to tap away on his phone. “Well, as my assistant, you have a company credit card that you use for things; mostly to make purchases for me that I request, ordering me lunch, and things like that. HR will be giving it to you when you finish your paperwork with them, so

when you get it, use it to get yourself some furniture.”

My jaw drops. “You can’t do that!”

“Actually, I can. Any company worth its profit should make sure that the employees are covered for all expenses related to their employment. You’re moving to the city for me because you’re working for me, right?”

“Right.” At least in part. The other part is trying to get some independence from my parents.

“Then there’s no reason why I can’t fund your furniture purchases. I’m not letting you or anyone be out several hundred or even thousands of dollars because they chose to work for me. That’s the opposite of how I want to be a boss.”

I don’t even know what to say. “Thank you.”

“It’s no problem. HR will handle it all. Let’s go and get you an apartment, and while we drive, I can explain your duties. Most of it will be on your phone or computer anyway.”

My ‘duties’ as Travis put them, which makes me feel a lot like I’m a maid working for British nobility, are basically to keep track of his schedule, answer his emails, and field all communications. His schedule is definitely busy. He’s been taking the business internationally, a process that’s taken a couple of years, and that means meetings with people in different time zones. He also needs to be able to go to meetings that aren’t official meetings. Golfing, apparently, is where a lot of business deals and relationships are made, but nobody actually *calls* them business meetings. They just act like they’re going to have a fun time playing golf.

It’s a lot to take in, but my last jobs were working in the rodeo business, dealing with crazy crowds, where a bet about a rider’s chances could change every ten seconds. I can handle change, and I can definitely handle Travis.

“The other issue,” he says as we pull up in front of the apartment I had picked, “is that you’ll need to answer a lot of emails as me. You need to learn which emails need my attention and which can be answered by you as a proxy.”

“That sounds like a recipe for disaster,” I mutter as he opens the car door for me and offers me his hand. I take it. No reason to refuse his help; it’s a gentlemanly gesture.

“It has been with my previous assistants,” Travis replies. His hand is large and steady around mine, and I find myself flexing my fingers when he lets go, as if to make sure that touch really did happen. “It’s part of why I’ve

been so frustrated. I can't possibly keep up with the barrage of information and questions that are being sent to me, so I need someone to help with that."

"You need several someones, probably."

"Let's get me just one good assistant and then we'll see about adding another one," Travis retorts. "C'mon, let's go in."

The way the realtor talks to us is completely different from how people spoke to me when I was applying for apartments on my own. I know obviously that wealthy people can get what they want, but I always imagined it was more getting what they wanted because they could afford to buy it type of deal.

But no, people look at me differently. They talk to me differently. All because Travis is here with his name and his business card and his limitless line of credit.

He gets me the apartment and then sets up my heating, air conditioning, water, electricity, and everything else. The building manager basically tripped over himself to accommodate Travis. We're back at the office in only an hour, where Travis sends me off to HR to finish my paperwork, and I can get the things I need for this job, like a work phone, the company credit card—which may have no limit, but requires me to send a monthly report and receipts—and then, of course, ordering my furniture.

"You can just pick out what you want and put it on the card," the HR woman says when I stammer, telling her what Travis said to me. She doesn't even blink. "Just send us the receipts."

"This isn't weird special treatment, is it?" I can't help but ask. "My brother and Travis are friends, is the thing."

The HR woman shakes her head, looking amused that I even asked. "Mr. Ray looks after his employees."

Well. I really have underestimated Travis, after all.

When I'm finished with HR, I go back to the top floor with a new official card that can get me full elevator access. Travis is at his desk, scowling, and I ignore him to sit down at my desk and navigate my computer so that I can figure out how all of this works.

Yeah, the people who've been assistants before me really didn't know how to handle the pressure. They probably didn't know how to handle Travis as a person, either, but I do.

I glance over at him and see that he's now on a conference call, chatting easily and smoothly, a charming smile on his face.

The Travis Ray that I've always known would never have bothered to be so kind to me, to go out of his way for me. He just dropped thousands of dollars to get me a place to live and make sure I had nice things to put in that place. He's looking after me and acting like it's no big deal.

Could it be that maybe I have misjudged him this entire time?

Will working for him be easier, and better, than I ever expected?

Chapter 6

Travis

This was a terrible idea.

Samantha's a small-town girl, so I expected an adjustment period when she moved into the big city. Austin's not the biggest of cities—it's not Los Angeles or New York—but it's up and coming, and the last few years have seen a huge influx of people from out-of-state moving in to take advantage of the lower cost of living and the boom in jobs. I expected Samantha would need a bit of time to shift to living in a place like this.

And it's not like she's dumb. She's already doing better than my previous assistants, even if she does make mistakes. I threw her into the deep end, I can admit to that, and maybe I even threw her in because she drives me nuts, and I'm tired and annoyed. But she's in the office when I get there, and she hasn't screwed up my meetings yet, and she doesn't make me look like an idiot. I'll take what I can get.

No, the problem is that she just can't seem to stop. Or maybe it's me, maybe I can't stop. The point is, we argue. Constantly.

We lock horns more than two steers in mating season. She disagrees with where I order lunch, how I dress for a meeting, the hours I have her keep, the way I want her to answer the phone. I swear, I can't do a damn thing right according to this woman.

You'd think I hadn't been running this company into a new era of success with the way she talks to me. Even the way she says my name, *Mr. Ray*, has this undercurrent to it, like it's a private joke and she's laughing at my expense.

She drives me insane. Who cares about how I do certain things? I'm set in

my ways, and it hasn't been a problem before. But according to Samantha, it's not just my assistants who've been the problem, it's also me.

"You're too impatient," she informs me when I hold my hand out for some forms she should've printed by now. "I literally just got the file."

"You should've already printed them before I had to send them to you."

"You and I get your emails at the same time, Mr. Ray. I cannot time travel."

She chastises me for being a perfectionist, as if my striving for perfection and my high expectations aren't what got this company away from the cliff it was teetering on when I wrested control from my father.

"You don't have to terrorize everyone," Samantha mutters as she brings me another cup of coffee. "And the next one is decaf."

"Don't tell me how much caffeine I can or can't have. I'm the boss, not you."

"Pretty sure the real description for a personal assistant is 'personal nanny,' so no, I will bring the next one to you as a decaf so that you have less energy to yell at the poor people in accounting."

"They should've known better! They should've already audited those files—"

"They got them this morning and you said that you'd already handled it!"

"They should audit them anyway!"

"They can't read your mind!" Samantha shoves something else at me: half a sandwich from the deli down the street. She even remembered I like extra pickles. "There's no reason to put the fear of God into them."

"I pay them enough. I should be able to put as much fear into them as I want," I mutter, but I can't help but notice that while my accounting department isn't reading my mind, Samantha is. I had no idea I was getting hungry again until she handed me that sandwich.

That's the frustrating thing—well, one of the frustrating things. It's not just that we lock horns. It's also that she understands me. She's not scared of me, but she doesn't use that to be lazy or refuse to do something. She gets the work to me when I need it, and she makes sure I do things like eat, sleep, and hydrate.

The worst part is that she looks fucking gorgeous while doing it.

I've always been aware that Samantha is beautiful. I'm a man who appreciates beautiful women, of course, I've noticed. And usually, when a woman doesn't want to give me the time of day, I take that as a fun

challenge.

But Samantha was my best friend's sister, so what was the point in pursuing her if it wasn't going to be serious? I would never risk hurting Oscar like that, even indirectly. So I just... stopped acknowledging it. Samantha's looks just became a fact in my head.

Until we slept together.

Now it's even more important that I don't care about her because she's my assistant. No way am I going to be like my father and start sleeping with my employees. He ruined his reputation and my mother's life. To sleep with Oscar's sister, who is also my employee? I could never look myself in the mirror again.

But fuck, every time she gets sassy at me or contradicts me or tells me I need to do something differently, heat slides through my veins, and I can feel my cock twitching, pressing against the seam of my pants, *wanting* her.

The fact that she was a virgin before I slept with her just makes it worse. I never thought of myself as a man who cared much about that one way or another, but the idea of being the only one who's ever had her, the person who can show her all the ways to have fun in bed, it gets to me. More than I ever thought it would. I'm a possessive bastard, but I've never had a serious relationship or even wanted one, so I figured that possessiveness didn't extend to the women I slept with. I guess it does, though, and I just never had the right buttons hit.

I chew moodily on my sandwich, just so that Samantha doesn't go around thinking that she can manage me. Maybe she is being attentive and maybe she's even being right in how much she understands me, but I can't give her an inch or she'll take a mile.

Hell, she's already taking a mile. "What the hell is this?" I demand.

Samantha pops her head up from her desk. I'm starting to regret my open floorplan office. I had it designed that way so I could move easily from space to space as I needed it, and I could have a separate floor so I wasn't breathing down my employees' necks. But now, it means I can see Samantha the entire time, no matter where I am or what we're doing.

"It's your new schedule for tomorrow," she says, completely unrepentant.

"You rearranged everything for no damn reason."

"For a very good reason. You need to stop booking these people so late in the day for them. They're in Australia, for crying out loud."

"They're also giving me the runaround so they can suffer through a late-

night conference call.”

“Or, consider, you could give a little to get a little? If you give them a better time for the conference call, they might be in a better mood and more inclined to listen to you.”

“I’m sorry, which of us is the billionaire CEO?”

“And which one of us can people stand to be around for more than five minutes?”

“Just because you don’t like me doesn’t mean that nobody else does.” I can’t help a smirk. “In fact, I can think of a few dozen people who like me quite a lot, and they’ve spent more than five minutes with me.”

“Minutes where you’re fucking them doesn’t count. As long as you keep your mouth shut and let your face do the talking, you’re pretty okay.”

“Ah, so you think I’m good-looking?”

“I think you could stand to get kicked by a horse,” Samantha mutters.

The elevator doors open before I can retort, and I frown. I’m not expecting anyone, and not everybody has keycard access to the top floor. Who...?

And then the doors finish opening and he steps out, grinning. “Travis!”

Oh, fuck no.

It’s my father.

Chapter 7

Samantha

The man stepping off the elevator is instantly recognizable as Travis' father.

Not that I've met the man before. In fact, I've never met either of Travis' parents. They've never come to see his rodeo performances, and my parents weren't interested in encouraging Oscar's friendship with that "young daredevil" who would inevitably "get you both arrested," so they never had Travis' parents over for dinner or invited them to family barbecues.

But the man walking over has to be Travis' father, because he looks almost exactly like Travis. It makes me blink a few times like I'm seeing double. Mr. Ray is older, though, with salt-and-pepper hair and a neatly trimmed, artfully scruffy beard.

It's like seeing Travis thirty years into the future, and I have to say, man, he'll age well. His father is still handsome; there's no denying that, and I appreciate that he let himself go gray and show his laugh lines and wrinkles instead of trying to cover it all up with plastic surgery and hair dye.

Then the man starts sauntering over, grinning at Travis, and I have to suppress the urge to roll my eyes. Good to know the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. This man's as annoying as Travis is.

"How's it going?" The man walks over and clasps Travis warmly. Travis doesn't return the gesture. Then Mr. Ray pulls back and looks over at me. "And who's this lovely lady?"

"This is my assistant, Miss Davis." I've never heard Travis sound so formal, and he's sure as hell never called me 'Miss Davis' in my life.

I stand and hold out my hand. "Pleasure to meet you, Mister...?"

I let my voice trail off.

Mr. Ray's eyebrows fly up. "I guess the family resemblance isn't all that strong! Always knew I got the lion's share of the looks." He winks at me like I'm supposed to be in on the joke when he just said his son wasn't all that good-looking.

You can say what you want about Travis' personality, but you can't deny his good looks. And for all I love sniping at Travis, I suddenly feel uncomfortable doing it in front of this man. "Sorry, what did you say your name was?"

Mr. Ray looks slightly annoyed I'm not putting the pieces together. "I'm Charles Ray; I'm Travis' father. I was the CEO before I decided to enjoy retirement and let this whippersnapper get his boots wet."

I put a polite smile on my face. "Well, it's lovely to meet you, Mr. Ray."

"Charles, please call me Charles. Or Charlie! That's what my friends call me, and I gotta feeling you and I are going to be friends."

"Mr. Ray," I repeat. "Can I get you anything? Water? Coffee?"

Mr. Ray doesn't seem deterred by my enforcing distance. "Coffee would be great, sweetheart. Two sugars."

I want to snap at him *I'm not your sweetheart*, but I refrain. I don't want to cause Travis trouble with his father. Especially when Travis already looks like he might strangle the man. It suddenly hits me that I don't think I've ever seen Travis angry. Annoyed, sure. But right now, he looks like he's trying to hold himself back. How bad is their relationship?

"Great. Travis? Can I get you anything?"

"Just water, please, Miss Davis, and thank you." Travis sounds so formal, it's like we're in a historical romance novel.

"Of course, sir."

I've never called Travis 'sir' in my life, not even when I started working for him. Unless I wanted to be sarcastic about it. But the strange softening in his eyes when he looks at me after I say that makes me glad I did. I don't know quite what's going on here, but I do know that I'm on Travis' side.

What had he said to me when he stood up for me in front of my parents and offered me the job? He said he knew a little something about parents getting in your way. I guess I'm about to find out what that means.

I get the coffee and water from the lounge area. My back is to the two men, and they're keeping their voices low so I can't quite pick up on what they're saying, but their tones are tense. I wince.

“Here you are, gentlemen.” I bring the drinks over and set them down on the desk with coasters. “Is there anything else I can get you, Mr. Ray?”

“Nah, darlin’, we’re good,” Charles says.

Travis is looking at some papers and frowning, so I stand there. “Mr. Ray, anything else you need?”

He looks up, then gives me a small, soft smile, his eyes alight with surprise. “No, thank you, Miss Davis, I appreciate it.”

“I’ll get back to your emails then.”

I turn to go and Travis turns back to the papers—and I feel a hand grab my ass.

I yelp and swat the hand away with a loud *smack*, my cheeks on fire. Charles Ray grins at me, unrepentant. “Don’t tell me you’re one of those uptight girls.”

Travis drops the papers onto the desk. “Keep your hands off my damn assistant,” he snarls. “What, fucking your way through hundreds of them when you were in charge wasn’t enough for you?”

“It was hardly hundreds,” his father replies.

“Sure felt like it.” Travis looks at me, his eyes blazing but his voice calm. “Why don’t you go run some errands, Miss Davis? Or enjoy lunch outside today?”

“Of course, Mr. Ray, thank you.” It’s hard to keep my voice from shaking, but I manage it.

It’s far from the first time in my life some jerk has tried to grab my ass. I’ve got curves, and my ass is pretty damn sexy, thanks. But to have Charles Ray try to do that in front of his son? To his son’s employee? I don’t think even Travis has that audacity—and it clearly upset him that his father did that. Claiming his father slept with ‘hundreds’ of his employees.

It makes me wonder if maybe I’ve judged Travis too harshly.

I head out, definitely not wanting to be around for whatever blowup comes next, and enjoy my lunch in the park across the street. It’s a lovely day, not too hot, and I even get some good writing done, some really angst-filled scenes where the heroine learns about the hero’s tragic backstory, and the hero opens up to someone for the first time in years.

It’s easy for me to get into the right mood for these scenes while this knot is in my stomach. I never thought I would be worried for Travis Ray, of all people, but here I am, doing exactly that. I’ve never seen him genuinely upset like he was just now.

After an hour, I head back to the office. I can't imagine, given how much tension there was radiating from Travis, that he let his father stay that long. Sure enough, when I get up to the top floor, Travis is alone.

He's staring out the massive floor-to-ceiling windows, his face unreadable. It's concerning, actually, how blank his expression is.

I walk over. "Is there anything you need?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you."

I sigh and put my hand on his arm. "Travis. Seriously. Is there anything you need?"

He shakes his head.

"I can see why you never mention him." I pause. "You're the better-looking one. And I'm not just saying that because you're younger."

The corner of Travis' mouth twitches, but then he grows serious again. "I'm sorry he harassed you like that. I exchanged strong words with him afterward. He shouldn't be coming back, but if he does, he knows to stay away from you."

"Why did he come?"

"He shouldn't have," Travis says darkly. He sighs and finally looks at me, running a hand through his hair, making it flop into his eyes a little. "He didn't want to step down as CEO. He drove the company into the ground for years. He didn't care about business or doing any work. He just wanted to collect the huge paycheck and feel like the big man on campus.

"He would do the golf, the big parties, the fancy dinners. We're Texans, so he'd say, we like to live large." Travis shakes his head. "But you can't do all that if you're not taking care of your company. Thousands of people rely on C-level executives to do a good job. If we fuck up, people lose their salaries, and we're fine, but they're not. He didn't get that. He just wanted the glitz and the glamor. And the women."

The bitterness that enters his voice on that last part makes me wince. "Was it really that many women?"

He nods. "I don't have an exact number. I don't know anyone who could. But he dated every single personal assistant or secretary he ever had. All young, all pretty." He shakes his head. "He'd take them out, flaunt them, spoil them. Didn't even bother hiding them, or at least, those were the ones he didn't bother hiding. I have no idea how many others there might've been."

"I'm so sorry." It sounds so trite to say, but it's all I have.

Travis shrugs. “Broke my mother’s heart. And he doesn’t care.”

“Clearly.” I can’t keep the sour note out of my voice.

My parents frustrate me, but my dad has always been loving and supportive toward my mother. They’re a united front, devoted to each other. I’ve always wanted to have that with my own husband someday.

I can’t even imagine how much it would hurt to be cheated on. I know it would break my mom’s heart for sure. And I’m sure if I were in love enough, it would break mine. And to have it happen repeatedly? And everyone knowing about it?

Travis gets that little uptick in the corner of his mouth again. “Glad to know you’re just as pissed at him.”

“I can’t imagine anyone’s as angry as you are. Aside from your mother, of course.”

“No, but...” Travis shrugs. “My dad’s a charmer. Women still fall all over him.”

I snort. “Women fall all over you, too. You don’t see me doing that, do you?”

Travis smiles, but it’s a sad one. “No, I suppose not.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh, yeah, so that big sad smile and those brown puppy dog eyes mean nothing, okay.”

Travis shakes his head, but he looks sad. “It’s just that... I know I look like him. I can’t help it. Anywhere we go, if we’re together, people instantly know we’re father and son. But I don’t want to *be* like him. I instituted several strict anti-dating policies in the company so that no boss could take advantage of an employee. I know I’ve never had a serious relationship, but someday I will, and when that day comes, I’d rather get trampled by one of the damn bulls than cheat on her.”

I shake my head. “You’re nothing like your father. Travis, people love you. It’s so annoying being the only person who doesn’t think you’re great. Women fall all over themselves to be with you. Even I had sex with you! I would never have sex with someone who treated me the way your father did. You’re not alike at all, I promise. You care so much about your job and this business that you literally terrified every other assistant before me. You take this seriously. You’re the one who made this place worth a billion dollars.

“I might give you a hard time because you drive me crazy. But I would

have thrown a much bigger fit over all these years if I thought you were a bad friend to my brother or a bad man to be associated with. You're not a bad person, Travis. You're respectful. Including to the women you sleep with."

Travis snorts in amusement. "I never thought I'd see the day when Samantha Davis was complimenting me."

"Well, appreciate it while it's happening because you shouldn't get used to it."

Travis sighs, his shoulders slumping a bit. "I'll have to go and make sure he hasn't tried to get anything out of the financial department. Or the board. Every so often, he pops back up here trying to get some kind of control or salary back. As if I didn't give him a generous severance package when I replaced him. He can live fine off it; he's just not good with money and he hates not being in the spotlight anymore."

I can see so clearly, from what Travis is telling me, how his father is a dark, funhouse mirror of Travis himself. Travis flirts with women and sleeps around, but he's not a creep about it. He could frankly stand to relax a little more about his role as CEO, but he cares so much about it. He's genuinely charming and confident; that's why people like him. He's not arrogant, or condescending, or a chauvinist.

"Travis." My voice is soft. I squeeze his arm. "You really aren't your father. I know you two look alike. But you're a far better man than he is. I promise you. We argue, you drive me crazy, but I actually respect you."

"You sound surprised."

"Maybe I am. A little. But you've defended me twice now. From my parents and from your own father. You deserve my respect for that."

And maybe, also, a little, I'm realizing just how much I don't know about Travis Ray. I always thought I had this man's number, that I had him figured out when every girl who wanted to sleep with him and every man who wanted to be him didn't. He had them all fooled, but not me.

Now I think maybe I was also fooled, by my own hubris.

"You're a good person, Travis," I say out loud. "Or at least, a better man than I expected and certainly a better man than your father. Maybe that's not a high bar, but it's true."

Travis stares down at me with that soft expression still on his face and something in his eyes that I can't decipher. I've never seen him look at me like that. I don't think I've ever seen him look at anyone like that, actually.

And then he leans in, his hands oh so gently curling around my elbows,

his lips falling softly to mine, and he kisses me.

Chapter 8

Travis

Kissing Samantha is a terrible idea, but I can't help it.

When my father strode in here, I was furious. And when he was inappropriate toward Samantha, right in front of me, like he was still in charge and she was another assistant that he could treat like a toy and give expensive jewelry to so she'd put up with it, I saw red.

I read him the riot act after Samantha left. As usual, he just rolled his eyes at me, told me I should be more grateful, that everyone loved him, and that I wouldn't have been able to take the company so far if people didn't like us because they were all friends with him.

"People know you as Charles Ray's son. That's how you got this business to thrive. People gave you a shot because of me. And that's all you'll ever be if you keep acting like such a condescending tightass."

My father is great at parties. Ask anyone. I know that. And I know that a lot of the people I work with—the other high rollers, the CEOs and investors, company presidents, and board of directors—they all love to play golf or grab a beer with him; they love the parties he would host on our family ranch.

But he's not good in the boardroom. He's not good at handling the day-to-day responsibilities. He never responded to phone calls, always told his assistants to say he was in a meeting when someone called, overpromised, and underdelivered; and when email came around, he hated it and refused to learn how to do any of it, saying that was what secretaries were for.

So, yeah, he's liked. As a party guy. But I had to prove to everyone that I wasn't going to be like him. I had to prove that I was going to be responsive and accountable and that I wouldn't make the same mistakes. I had an uphill

battle in front of me as if I were a brand-new company that had never proven itself. No, worse, because at least brand-new companies have a clean slate. I had a couple of decades' worth of bad feelings to overcome.

But telling him that never works. He just accused me of jealousy and ungratefulness.

“You can't treat my assistant like that,” I snapped instead. “You have to leave her alone. Hasn't Mom suffered enough? Haven't you humiliated yourself enough? Samantha is off-limits. We actually keep things professional around here now.”

“Sorry, didn't realize that you were dating the woman,” Dad replied with a roll of his eyes. He was being sarcastic, but the fact that it was all he could think of as a retort for why I wouldn't be comfortable with someone flirting with my assistant and pinching her damn ass.

It is a fantastic ass. But it's not for anyone to grab like she's a piece of meat, for fuck's sake.

By the time that Samantha came back, my father was gone, thank fuck, but I was exhausted. And defeated.

Not for the first time, I have to wonder how much like him I am. We are the spitting image of one another. I suppose, in a way, it's nice to know how I'll look when I'm older and know that I'll still be handsome. My dad is good-looking; nobody can deny that, even if he's a preening peacock about it.

But I've always worried. I tell myself that I'm different, that I'm doing things better. But I know that I like to sleep around, and charm women, and flirt. And I know that I'm a bit overconfident. What if I'm more like him than I want to admit? What if I'm just giving myself excuses?

And then Samantha said all of that.

I worried I would see pity in her eyes when she came back, but there was none of that, only understanding. Kindness. Support. She talked to me like she's never done before, her hand on my arm reassuring and warm. She was insistent that I was not like my father and out of everyone in this world, I trust Samantha when she says that, because unlike anyone else I would ask—my mother or Oscar—she has no reason to lie.

Samantha doesn't like me and never has. If she didn't respect me, if she thought I was treating people that poorly, she'd tell me. Hell, she'd lecture me at the top of her lungs about it.

But she's not. She's just giving me those big, soft blue eyes of hers and squeezing my arm like I matter to her, like she genuinely cares about me.

Maybe it wouldn't mean much from anyone else, but from Samantha, it means far more than I ever anticipated. It might even mean the world.

So I lean in, very gently, and I kiss her.

Samantha gasps against my mouth, but she doesn't pull away. She lets me kiss her, something soft and slow, like a first kiss should be.

I plan to pull back and have that be it, I really do, but then when I try, she follows me, her lips clinging to mine, like she isn't quite ready for the kiss to end.

And, well. I can't resist.

I kiss her again, pressing back in, and Samantha's hand tightens on my arm, clinging to me. I slide my hands from her hips to her back and she steps in, pressing herself against me, making me flush with heat.

I tighten my grip as Samantha's lips part for me, and I deepen the kiss. She melts into me, my arms keeping her upright, and a thrill shoots through me like a bolt of lightning.

She's never done this with anyone but you, my brain reminds me. She's clearly craving this because she's never had sex until me. And I don't know what else she might've done, if she's exchanged kisses or heated makeout sessions, but I *do* know that whoever she was with wasn't as good as I am.

The kisses grow hotter, heavier, more frantic, until Samantha's clawing at my clothes, trying to get them off. Fuck, she's grinding against me, kissing me like she'll die if she has to stop, and there's a part of me screaming that we're in my office, we need to stop this, what if someone walks in, what if I have a meeting, what if—but then Samantha drops her hand down between us and squeezes my cock through my pants.

My mouth falls open in shock and arousal as she massages me, taking me from half-hard to absolutely aching.

All the voices in my head are drowned by white noise as I get my hands on her glorious ass—the ass only I get to fucking touch, thanks—and lift her onto my desk.

Samantha likes to dress very soft and feminine, something I didn't know until we started working together. I've mostly seen her at rodeos, where she's worn jeans and t-shirts or flannels, appropriate gear for being out in the mud and hay under the sun for hours. And don't get me wrong, she looks good in them, and I love the way the jeans hug her ass. But I've grown used to seeing her like that. I wasn't prepared for anything else.

At work, though, she likes to wear these flouncy pastel skirts, kitten

heels, and soft blouses that drive me insane. I want to rip them off and fuck her until she screams so that she knows exactly what wearing these clothes does to me.

And hey. Now, I'm doing exactly that. Not ripping literally, though, I'm not going to ruin her pretty clothes like that, I think Samantha would literally kill me when the orgasm faded. But I'm sure as hell tugging her button-up blouse open to expose her breasts, shoving her skirt up, and pulling her lace panties down.

Samantha gasps and squirms. "Travis—*oh*."

I slide my fingers down and cup her. She's pretty damn wet already, and all for me. "That wet from a bit of kissing?"

"Shut up," she snaps. "I—*oh*."

I circle her clit with a teasing finger, enjoying the way she twitches. I rub just underneath, making her hips jerk up. She moans.

"Yeah, that's it." Fuck she's getting even wetter. I rub just around it, teasing, then on the underside again, then circling. "You ever teased yourself like this? Let your need grow until you're so desperate to come you'll do anything?"

"N-no," Samantha whimpers. "I... no... *oh, oh...*"

I rub slowly, my fingers becoming soaked with her. I'm going to get her so turned on, so wet and desperate for me, that she can't even form words to beg with. "Fuck, look at you, you're gorgeous. You want me to fuck you? You want my cock?"

Samanth's eyes are glazed, her mouth open. I rub her clit harder, faster, and she cries out, legs spasming.

"You want my cock, hmm? You were so eager, grabbing it and playing with it like that."

"Yes, yes, yes," Samantha pants. She props herself up on her hands to stare down at how my fingers work between her legs.

I kneel, wink at her, and then slide two fingers into her at once.

Samantha moans, shivering from head to toe. One of her feet jerks and her heel falls off. I grab her leg and hike her knee over my shoulder. "There we go."

She falls back onto the desk, tossing her head back and forth, her dark hair splayed around her like a reverse halo. "Travis... *oh my God, oh...*"

"Yeah, that's it," I growl. I feel fucking possessed. I need her to come for me, harder than she ever thought it was possible to orgasm.

I wait until she's close, until I feel her tightening around my fingers—and then I slow down and partially pull out, just stroking the very inside of her with my fingertips.

Samantha moans, her skin flushing even harder. “T-Travis... wh...”

“Does that feel good, sweetheart?”

Fuck, the fury I felt when my father called her that in his condescending tone, like she already belonged to him. My father treats women like they're prizes to be won, shiny little toys. It's disgusting no matter who the woman is, but especially when it's Samantha because she *is* a sweetheart. That's the problem. She's a sweetheart of a person, completely unlike me.

At least when I say it to her, I fucking mean it.

Samantha whimpers. I kiss her jaw. “Were you close? Hmm?”

She nods, clutching at my shoulders. “Please...”

“Feels different when it's someone else, doesn't it? Even if it's just fingers...” I slide my fingers further inside of her and speed up again.

Samantha moans, thighs snapping together like she's trying to trap my hand inside of her. “Yes!”

“Feels good having someone else touch you, isn't it? My poor sweet girl, all these years holdin' out for some handsome cowboy to sweep you off your feet. At least now you'll have standards, huh? You won't let some two-pump chump work you over.”

I go faster, my fingers sliding in and out of her, making obscene noises, her thighs twitching open and then together, like she's trying to spread her legs to give me better access but also clench them together so I can't escape. Her nails claw at my arms and her eyes are glazed. She's real close again, I can feel it—

And I slow down again, pulling halfway out.

Samantha sobs. “Travis, please!”

“Please what, baby?”

“Please—please let me come. I'm—I'm so—it feels—please—”

I smirk. I can't help it. It's amazing to watch Samantha Davis, of all people, fall apart just from two of my fingers. “Just you wait.”

I slide a third finger in.

Samantha gasps and shudders. “Oh, yes...”

“Yeah? You like that? You feel nice and full?”

She nods, biting her lip. “So good.”

“Yeah, it feels real good, doesn't it? You're so fucking wet for me, baby,

look at you making a fucking mess all over my desk. What a naughty girl.”

I’m not sure if that’s going to get me thanked or slapped. I’m not sure that Samantha knows what she even wants out of sex, so I’m trying to tread carefully, but I can’t help a little dirty talk.

To my shock, she jolts when I say that, whimpering and going tight around me. Holy fuck, that was so fucking hot. She *liked* that.

“You like being a bad girl? You like when I tell you you’re being naughty and messy?” I growl, and Samantha grinds down on my hand like she’s the bull rider, her hips frantic.

“Yes,” she gasps out. She sounds almost shocked, like she didn’t expect herself to like that, either.

“Say it for me, go on. Say what a naughty girl you are.”

Samantha moans. “I-I’m—I’m a n-naughty girl.”

Fuck, I’m so hard it feels like I’m going to pass out. I undo my pants and take out my cock, stroking myself a few times to take the edge off. “Do you like making a mess?”

Samantha nods, biting her lip.

“Say it,” I encourage her.

“I’m a naughty girl who l-likes making a mess.” She can barely get the words out, her voice high and breathy as she squirms on my fingers, but fuck, it’s the hottest thing I’ve ever heard.

She’s close, too, those words bringing her right up to the edge, and I almost let her—but then I pull my fingers away and stand up.

Samantha gasps. “Travis, *please*.”

“I know, sweetheart, you were so close there, weren’t you?” I nip at her breasts, then pull back, massaging them with my hands. “But not yet. I want you screaming for me.”

Samantha whimpers, her hips squirming restlessly like she can’t help it. Fuck, I love her breasts. I want to take my time with her, explore her body, but that’s for when we’re in a proper bed, not for when we’re on my damn desk at work.

I pull a condom out of my wallet—thank God I always carry a few of these around—and slide it on, then slide inside Samantha.

Holy fuck.

I take a second, breathing in harshly as I try to scrape together whatever remains of my brain so that I don’t come in two seconds. Samantha whimpers, her legs spreading, her now-bare feet pressing up onto the desk

like she's trying to urge me to move.

I shudder and press further in, my hips twitching helplessly. I can't stop myself. I want her so fucking badly. The moment my body starts involuntarily moving, even just a little bit, it's over. I thrust into her and I don't fucking stop.

She's wet and hot around me, too overwhelmed to even claw at me anymore, whimpering and gasping as I fuck her. I stare down at her, watching her face completely taken over with pleasure. She's gorgeous like this. I could stare at her all day, fuck her all day, take her to my bed, and never leave.

Damn, I sound insane. I feel insane.

Samantha's voice gets louder, and soon she's crying out every time I thrust into her, writhing on my cock, tears at the corners of her eyes from how desperate she is to orgasm. "Please," she sobs. "Please, please, please..."

Her back arches as she comes, and she's so fucking slick and tight... holy fuck, holy *fuck*. I thrust messily a few times, and then my orgasm rushes over me, sweeping me away like an undertow in an ocean tide.

We breathe together for a minute, and my entire body is pulsing with ecstasy. Fuck. I can't remember the last time I came that hard. I feel like I'm going to start floating away on a tide of endorphins.

I look down at Samantha. She's panting and her skin is flushed and glowing with sweat. She looks so damn sexy, but on the heels of that thought comes another one: she looks so *debauched*.

I did that to her. I did that to her, in my office, when she's my employee.

Oh fuck.

I pull out of her and quickly pull off the condom, throwing it away and yanking a pack of tissues out of a drawer. "Here." I take some and give the rest to her.

Samantha redoes her blouse with shaking fingers, then runs her hands through her hair to try and tame it a little. I clean myself up, watching her out of the corner of my eye, trying to get a feel for her state of mind. Does she regret this? Does she look worried or pensive? Or is it just my imagination?

I can't believe I did that. One person shows me kindness, and I'm ready to throw my principles out the window. Jeez.

"You okay?" I ask.

Samantha looks over at me, her brow furrowing with confusion. "Yes,

are... are you? You look... upset.”

I shake my head. “I literally just told you about how my dad would sleep with his assistants and I...” My voice fails me.

Samantha finishes cleaning herself up and stands, smoothing out her skirt. “Travis, I always knew you were a moron, but this is a new level even for you.” She puts her hands on her hips. “Have you slept with any of your other employees?”

“No, never.” I’ve suspected that a few of my assistants wanted me to. I know I’m handsome and charming, and I’m more than happy to take advantage after a rodeo with my blood pumping and the taste of victory between my teeth. But I always ignored any hints I thought I saw at work. I didn’t even sleep with any of them after firing them.

“Well, there you go. And I’m not your typical employee. This is an... unusual situation. We’ve known each other for years. We slept together once a couple of weeks ago. We antagonize each other. And you’re in a vulnerable place right now.”

Samantha smiles and then puts on her heels so she’s tall enough to kiss me softly on the cheek. “You’re okay. We’re okay.”

I nod, still feeling a knot in my stomach. “As long as it doesn’t happen again. This is against company policy.”

“Trust me, I don’t plan to make a habit of sleeping with you.”

“Even though I gave you an orgasm that made you scream?” I shoot back, unable to help myself. I might have some guilt going on, but she doesn’t get to pretend that she didn’t just have an amazing time.

Samantha tosses some of her hair over her shoulder. “There’s that cocky jerk I love to hate.”

Her nonchalant attitude definitely helps me to relax. We can’t do it again, but it’s fine. Nothing’s changed between us. Everything is fine.

Of course, there is one small problem: I think that was the best sex of my life.

Chapter 9

Samantha

I have no idea what to do.

I'm glad that Travis doesn't want us to sleep together again. Not because of any boss-employee issue, although I know that would be a problem and we have to adhere to company policy. More because I don't know what to do with myself.

The way he talked to me, calling me a messy, naughty girl, taking me to the edge, and then not letting me come until I was a sobbing mess. It was so unbelievably hot. I had no idea I could get that turned on. I was screaming by the time I came, so desperate to orgasm I felt like I was about to burst out of my skin.

But this can't be right. This can't be how I enjoy things. Travis is everything I hate and nothing I want. I like sweet, clean romances; I always have. I often enjoy historical romances for that reason, although I have a weakness for Wild West stories. How can I enjoy being talked to and toyed with in that way? How can I enjoy being called a bad girl and orgasm from it?

I'm happy to reassure Travis, if only because it distracts me from the turmoil I feel inside. My stomach is churning. Who am I if what I thought I liked this whole time isn't actually what I like in bed? What does this mean for my plan, and what kind of man I want to find? My head's in a whirl.

Travis is subdued for the rest of the day, although you wouldn't know it if you were one of the people he took a conference call with that day. He sounds as charming and upbeat to them as ever. But when he stops talking with them, I see how pensive his face is.

I treat him as kindly as I can. I understand why he's struggling. He really isn't like his father. Our situation is complicated and having sex with me is not at all the same thing as what his dad did. Especially because Travis isn't cheating on anyone. That's what gets me the most. Sure, sleeping with your employees all the time isn't great, but the far worse choice to me is cheating on your partner. His poor mother. No wonder Travis never told us anything about his parents.

When I leave to head home at the end of the day, Travis seems to be calmer, and he smiles at me gratefully as I head out. I'm glad I was able to reassure him a bit. We might dislike each other, but I never want to be outright cruel to someone, especially not by kicking a man when he's down.

Once I leave the office, my thoughts drift back to the sex. My body shakes with heat as I remember his fingers inside me, teasing me, not letting me come as my need spiraled higher and higher until I was whimpering. The mess I made on his desk was embarrassing—and yet, I liked it.

But the kind of man I want, the kind of man I've always written about and read about and dreamt about meeting, wouldn't ever do that to me; he would be a gentleman. He'd make love to me, not ravish me on a desk.

Right?

I get home and drop my purse onto a chair, groaning with relief as I kick off my heels. I relax and pull out my phone to see what I've missed while running around for Travis.

Huh. My parents left me a voicemail. I press play.

"Hi, honey." It's Mom. "I know that your new boss is keeping you very busy, but I hope you'll be able to still come home this weekend for a family dinner. We miss you!"

The way she won't even say Travis' name shows just how much she dislikes him. I sigh. I would kind of like a longer break from my parents after the whole unpleasantness about moving out, getting a job, and pursuing my career dream, but I also don't want things to get worse because we took too much space. I want them to see that my having a career won't affect my ability to see them and be close to them and that I'm not the one making this hard, they are.

So I call back and tell them of course I can come to our family dinner this weekend, and I miss them.

Hey, at least arguing with my parents will distract me from whatever is going on between Travis and me.

I get there and notice that Oscar's car isn't in the driveway. He must be coming later. Or, maybe he wasn't told about this. I wouldn't put it past my parents to try and get me alone and wear me down to change my mind about all this.

Mom embraces me the second I get inside the house. "Oh, look at you! It's been so long since we saw you."

It's only been a couple of weeks. I try to put a smile on my face. "I'm excited for dinner, what did you make?"

"One of my best, the honey lemon roast chicken!"

That surprises me. That's one of the recipes that Mom only busts out when it's a special occasion like when we would have my dad's parents over and Mom was trying to impress them. Interesting. "Are we celebrating something?"

"Can't a mom make something nice for her daughter for dinner?" Mom pats my cheek. "Help me set the table."

She has me set four places, so Oscar must be coming over. I hate that I feel relief, but it'll be easier to stand up to whatever my parents have planned if I have my brother by my side.

I hear a car pulling up to the driveway, and then there's a knock at the door.

Odd. Oscar has a key, but I also don't remember locking the door.

I walk over and pull it open. "It's unlocked, dummy," I say, and then my jaw drops. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Um. Are you sure you have the right house?"

The dark-haired man in front of me smiles bemusedly. "Is this the Davis residence?"

"Um, yes?"

"Then I have the right house." He holds out his hand. "I'm Michael, you must be Samantha. Did your parents not tell you I was coming?"

I shake his hand automatically. "Uh... c'mon in, Michael."

My mind is racing. Oscar's not coming after all. Instead, this man that I don't know is here, and I'm starting to get suspicious.

"Michael!" Mom smiles and hugs him. "We're so glad you could make it!"

Dad finally emerges from his home office. He smiles and warmly shakes Michael's hand.

I've never seen or heard of this man before in my life. What the hell is going on?

I help Mom serve dinner and sit down, keeping quiet and wait to see what happens.

It doesn't take long.

"So, Michael, we're so glad you were able to finally meet our daughter," Mom says.

"I am too." Michael smiles at me. "I've heard so much about you from your father."

"Michael here is looking to start a family and settle down," Mom gushes to me. "And your father told him he knew just the woman."

Oh no. I'm being set up by my parents. And I'm trapped in a dinner with them.

Great.

Chapter 10

Travis

For all that we argue, when the weekend hits and Samantha's gone from my days, I find myself missing her.

There's a rodeo this weekend, and the thrill from that is the same as ever. I love those few seconds where I'm on a bull or a bronco. The world narrows down to just the two of us and nothing else exists. It's just me and the creature I'm joining with.

A lot of the other riders view rodeo riding as a war, a fight they have to win, a taming of the animal. I don't view it that way. I see it as joining with the animal, making us one creature for eight long seconds, an eternity, and yet a blink of an eye.

I finish with my blood pumping and my heart racing, each breath feeling like a miracle. Nothing in this damn world makes me feel more alive than the rodeo. I would never let my family know it, or anyone else at the company, but I'll never forgive my father for taking this from me. I have to balance my dreams with running the company he should still be in charge of.

If I can't rebel because of all the people who depend on me, then I sure can help Samantha rebel.

And there she is. In my thoughts again.

As I walk out into the crowd, grinning and waving at the people cheering, various women approach me. They've all got that look in their eyes that usually has me hot and ready to go. I usually get about a dozen phone numbers, and I have fun working my way through them throughout the week before the next rodeo.

But right now, as these various women try to compliment me, I find

myself scanning the audience. Hoping to see... what?

Or rather, who?

This is ridiculous. Samantha's not going to be here. There's no reason for her to be. Oscar's not here this weekend. And even if she were here, she sure as hell wouldn't have any interest in seeing me.

And why would I want to see her, anyway? Why can't I stop thinking about what it felt like to be inside her as these other women put their hands on my arms and bat their lashes and tell me how *strong* I looked out there? All I can think about is the way Samantha touched my arm and the way she looked at me, not batting her lashes but steady and strong, reassuring me.

I step away from them. "Sorry, ladies, gotta go take care of some things backstage."

"Come back soon," one of them, a gorgeous tall brunette, says. Damn, normally, I would be all over her. But when I try to picture sleeping with her, her face morphs into Samantha's.

Damn it.

I walk away and tell myself that this isn't a big deal. The sex was just unusually good with Samantha, that's all. I need a short break, and then I'll be back on the horse. The metaphorical one as opposed to a literal one. This doesn't mean anything.

When I get back into the office on Monday, it's like Samantha instinctively knows to help me out with this because she's in a particularly foul mood. I never would've classified our arguments as *playful* before, but that sure is what they feel like in comparison to the way Samantha snaps at me today.

"Okay," I snap back, at my wit's end. "What kind of bee crawled up your ass today?"

"You did," she snaps back and storms off to get some papers from the printer.

I get up and follow her. "You think I don't know what you're like when you're pissed at me? This is not you pissed at me."

"Oh, you fuck a girl twice and think you know *everything* about her," Samantha retorts.

"No, I argue with a girl for years and think I know a fair amount about her. I'd know something was up even if I never got a taste of you—and don't pretend you didn't enjoy that, either, by the way."

"You know what I'd enjoy? You getting out of my face."

“Hmm and you know what I would enjoy? Getting to do my work without a storm cloud for an assistant.”

“If you didn’t want that, then you shouldn’t have hired me. You know that I don’t like you.”

“Samantha.” I stop her with my hands on her shoulders as she tries to skirt around me. “I know something’s wrong. What’s happening?”

She glares at me for a moment, but then, her face softens. She sighs heavily and looks away. “It’s nothing. Just... my parents.”

“What about them? Everything okay?”

Samantha steps back and runs a hand through her hair. “Everything’s fine. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine,” I point out. “What’s really going on?”

Samantha sighs again. “It’s—it’s really nothing. It’s just, my parents asked me to a family dinner, so I went, but it wasn’t really. They had a guy there; someone my dad works with, and they were trying to set me up with him.”

“What?”

An unexpected rage flows through me, stirring up my blood, and I find myself taking a step closer to her.

Samantha nods. “Yeah. It was super uncomfortable. I tried to politely deflect, but my parents really made this guy think I was looking for a husband. And I couldn’t be too rude to him. It’s not his fault, so I was trying to get it across to him that I do want a husband! But of course I do! And I want kids! I want it all! But I want to get my career started first! I’m not—”

She starts pacing. “I’m a realist, okay? And I know the moment that you become a parent, it’s harder to get anything done. Your kids become your whole world. And they should be! Kids deserve that! But it means that I won’t have as much time to dedicate to my career when that happens, so I need to get a book or two out by then, y’know?”

I nod. “Makes perfect sense to me.”

“I’m only twenty-three, for crying out loud. It’s not like I’m running out of time to find someone or get pregnant.”

“Very true.”

Samantha glares at me. “Stop patronizing me.”

“I’m not, I’m being serious. You’re absolutely right. And that was unfair of them to trick you and trap you like that.”

Samantha stops pacing. “Really? I’m not crazy?”

“Why the hell would you be crazy?” My blood feels like it’s boiling. “They tricked you, and they’re refusing to respect your choices about your own damn life. You get to decide when you want to get married, when you want to have kids, and what kind of career you want to have. Nobody else. If your parents can’t respect that, then excuse me, but screw ‘em. You know your own mind, Samantha. And speaking as a business owner, your plan for your career is a sound one. You have a day job, you have a timeline; you’re doing everything right to have the life you want, okay?”

Samantha nods, still looking shocked. I’m furious. She’s a smart and confident woman who knows what she wants and has a solid plan for getting it. She’s not mooching off her parents, refusing to do anything to achieve her dreams, or just all talk and no walk. She’s not throwing her life away, either, or being unrealistic.

I know plenty of kids who don’t want to have children or make their parents grandparents at all. Samantha’s not one of those people. She just wants to take a couple of years before she has them so she can get her career off the ground, and what the hell is wrong with that? She is, as she said, only twenty-three. That leaves her plenty of time to still have kids and be a mother.

It just boils my blood that her parents can’t respect her. Nobody stood up to my father when he mistreated me. Samantha was the first person to even try when he came into the office last week, and I’m so grateful to her for that. I was almost in shock by how cold she was to him and how she stood up to him.

I want to do the same for her. No, more than that, I want to protect her. I had no idea I was capable of feeling such protectiveness toward her but I guess I’m finding out all kinds of things about myself when it comes to Samantha lately.

“If you need me to step in, in any way,” I promise her, “I’m here for you. You just say the word.”

Samantha smiles at me, looking surprised but grateful. I wonder if that’s how I looked when she defended me and told me I wasn’t like my father. “Thank you, Travis.”

“I mean it,” I add, and I really do.

Nobody, not some random jerk or her parents, is going to bother Samantha on my watch.

I try not to think about what it might mean that I feel so strongly about

this. It's just being protective toward a sort-of friend. That's all.
Or so I tell myself.

Chapter 11

Samantha

I didn't expect Travis to care so much or be so ready to protect me. It's a pleasant surprise, honestly. I don't know how to respond, other than to stutter out a thank you like an idiot.

I didn't think Travis would ever care about me that much. He's a decent guy, but why would he care about me, the person he's spent all these years fighting? Sex doesn't mean anything to Travis, it never has, so it's not like sleeping with me is a sign that he would care. I've never seen him or heard of him sleeping with the same girl twice.

As much as I appreciate his support, I don't think I'll need it. Dinner was painfully awkward, and I felt like I was going to combust from keeping my anger in so that I wouldn't cause an embarrassing scene in front of Michael, but I need to avoid my parents for a bit now.

I don't want to avoid them. I don't want this to damage our relationship. But I have to do this. If they're going to start springing a man on me every time I come home for dinner and see them, then I need to give them some distance so they see just how serious I am about this.

Besides, what kind of romance started with two people getting set up like this? I want to meet someone I naturally click with, not because we sat awkwardly making small talk under the watchful eye of my parents. As much as I love them, I'm not going to date someone because my parents approve of them. I'm going to fall for whoever it is I fall for, and then I'm going to introduce him to my parents, and they can like him or not.

Clearly, I underestimated the man they set me up with.

When I get home from work and walk up to my apartment, I find none

other than Michael standing in front of my apartment building. He smiles as I walk up. “Hey, you. Sorry, I wasn’t sure when you got off work; your parents told me your boss can be a hardass.”

I stare at him. “Wh-what are you doing here?” I’m completely bewildered.

“Got your address from your parents. I was hoping that we could spend more time together, just the two of us. I know you were a bit stiff at dinner because they were there.”

“I was a bit stiff at dinner because I didn’t want to be set up with someone,” I snap.

Michael grins. “There’s that sass I loved. You were trying so hard to be polite, but it kept slipping out; it was adorable.”

“You’re not going to find it very adorable when I’ve upgraded it from sass to wrath,” I snap at him. What the hell is this guy going on about? My ‘sass’ isn’t some quirky, cute trait like I’m a kitten. I was genuinely frustrated at the dinner with my family and he’s acting like it was just some adorable character trait.

“Look, I get it; nobody likes a surprise like that, and it’s awkward when your parents are trying to set you up. But I really like you and I’d like to get to know you better.”

I shake my head. “Look, I’m sure you’re a great guy. But my parents were unfair to you. I’m not looking for a partner right now. I’m focusing on my career and I’m putting that before finding someone to marry.”

“And what if you find an amazing guy along the way? You’re going to miss out on the chance for something great because it doesn’t fit your plan?”

Michael’s words sting, I admit, but I’m not going to let him persuade me. Maybe if I felt some kind of spark with him, it would be different, but I don’t, and the fact that I only met him because my parents tricked me leaves a sour taste on my tongue that I don’t think I could ever get over if I tried to date him.

The idea of my parents gleefully saying *I told you so* and sharing the story of how they’re responsible for my relationship makes me want to hurl.

“Look, I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but I’m not interested in you. I’m not interested in dating right now. And, sure, maybe the right guy could come along, sweep me off my feet, and change my plans, but you’re not him.”

Michael frowns, his brow furrowing in anger. “You’re perfect. You

haven't even been with anyone yet."

My eyebrows fly up and my stomach roils. "Excuse me?"

"Your parents said you hadn't ever dated."

"And that automatically means that I haven't ever had sex?"

Michael smirks. "Oh, please. You scream 'virgin' from every pore."

I gape at him, my shock almost stronger than my offense. Almost. "Did you seriously just say that out loud to me? I'm..." I shake my head. "What the hell? Is that why you want me? Because I'm some pure virgin that only you get to be with?"

"Is it so wrong to want that in this day and age? All the women are annoyed, exhausted, and snobby. You're not. You're sweet. Your mother told me all about your romance novels, the kind you like, and I checked them out. I saw the plots, I know what kind of relationship you're after, the same kind that I am."

"You *checked out the books I've read?*" This whole thing is getting creepier by the second. "You need to leave. Now."

I turn to get the door open and go inside, but Michael grabs the door and yanks it open, following me. "You're seriously just going to walk away?"

"Yup. Watch me." I try to keep my pace even and steady so that he doesn't see how panicked I am and how my heart is pounding. I'm sure he won't actually try to hurt me... right?

My phone rings in my purse and I pull it out. It's my business cell. Probably Travis. "What do you want?"

"That's how you talk to your boss?" Travis asks, but his voice is light and casual. Our usual banter.

"That's how I talk to my boss when he's bothering me after a long day of work. We're all set for tomorrow, what could you possibly need?"

"I have a question about the document you sent me about the wagyu beef."

Sometimes, I could strangle that man. But actually, wanting to strangle him right now is almost a relief. It's a moment of normalcy. I want to burst into hysterical laughter. "Seriously? That's what you're calling me about? I don't have time for this. If you can't figure it out yourself..." I roll my eyes again. "Look, we'll deal with it in the morning, okay? Your meeting for this isn't until two p.m. so this can wait."

There's a pause on the other end of the line. "Are you sure? I'd like to chat about it now."

“Yes, I’m sure.” I know that it’s unusual of me to run away from a conversation—a fight, really—with Travis. But I can’t deal with him right now. I have to get Michael to leave. “We’ll deal with it tomorrow.”

I hang up on him without saying goodbye, then turn to face Michael again. “You need to leave. Now. This is inappropriate.”

My voice comes out steady, even though my heart is racing. Michael doesn’t look like he’ll do as I say. “I think you should give me a chance. I want to give you everything that you want. We both want the same things. How can you be so dismissive of that?”

“Like this.” I turn and unlock my apartment door and try to slip inside.

I’m fast, but Michael is faster, getting his hand around the door before I can fully close it. “We’re talking about this.”

“No, we’re not!” I can’t let him inside my apartment. I yank the door open to startle him, then shove him hard so that he stumbles backward. I hurry to close the door, but he grabs my arm and yanks me forward, back out into the hallway.

“I didn’t drive all the way down here so that you could turn me away,” Michael snaps, and then I hear the last voice I expected.

“Let her *go*,” Travis snarls, and then he’s punching Michael in the face. Holy shit.

Chapter 12

Travis

It's fortunate that I'm in my car when I call Samantha. It makes it easy for me to drive to her apartment since I'm practically halfway there.

Something's wrong. I can feel it in my gut. Samantha never ignores a chance to poke at me. And to get one up on me about this document that apparently she understands and I don't. She should be dancing with glee. She should be mocking me and trading barbs.

Instead, she sounds tense. Upset. Almost... scared?

And then she hangs up on me.

It might be nothing. She might be in a fender bender, she might be in the middle of a tense conversation with her brother, or she might have burned her dinner and is trying to deal with the smoke alarm. But if it was something like that, I feel like she'd say what it was. She'd tell me that she was dealing with the smoke alarm or make a sarcastic comment about how she'd help me as soon as she gave the other driver her insurance information.

I don't know. Maybe I'm overreacting. But after what just happened with her parents, I'm still in an angry, protective mood. No harm in stopping by her place, right?

And if I break the speed limit a little in doing so, nobody has to know.

When I get there, I'm glad I did. The front door of the apartment building wasn't closed properly, and I let myself in, jogging up the stairs. Then, immediately, I hear raised voices and pick up my pace.

When I see this random guy with his hand on Samantha's arm, yanking at her, I see red. "Let go of her," I snarl, and I deck him right across the damn face.

The guy stumbles back as blood gushes from his nose. Samantha also stumbles back. She instantly draws herself up, her face calm, but I know that she's terrified underneath. I know what Samantha looks like when she's actually angry and unbothered. That's how she looks at me all the time.

Right now, I don't think this random jackass can see the animal panic lurking under the anger. But I can. And it makes me want to wring this asshole's neck.

"Like I said." Samantha's tone is ice. "You can go now."

I step in between the two of them so that the guy can't look at her, only me. "Listen carefully. Right now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking you have two options. You can punch me back and start a fight, or you can sue me for assault. But here's the thing. I wrestle bulls into submission for a living. So, option number one? Isn't gonna work out all that well for you. And option number two? Sure, it will be interesting since you'll be going up against a man with a billion dollars and an army of lawyers. I will countersue you into oblivion. You won't be able to breathe again without my say-so. Let me guess, you're somewhere on the rodeo circuit? Probably, since Samantha here is a fan of rodeo cowboys, and her parents are in the life and picked you out for her like we're in some kind of damn medieval period. I can promise you, I will make sure your career never gets off the ground. Are we clear?"

The guy tries to look around me to see Samantha, but I shift my weight to keep blocking his way. "Hey, you don't get to talk to her anymore. You talk to me."

"So all that talk about not wanting a relationship was just so nobody would know you've already got someone," the guy spits.

I burst out laughing. "Oh, buddy, you are not only barking up the wrong tree, you're in the wrong damn forest. Samantha's my assistant and she hates my guts. It's why I hired her. So I wouldn't have another assistant quitting in tears. Samantha stands up to me because she likes nothing more than despising me. It's like a fun little game to her."

The guy looks confused. "Oh, I'm sorry, that doesn't fit what her parents told you about her? Let me guess, they talked up how sweet and sensible their daughter is, and you thought she'd make a perfect little housewife. Her parents refuse to know the real Samantha, and trust me, she will never sit content under your heel."

I take a step forward, fucking done with this conversation and with this

guy's attitude. "So how about you move along before I break your jaw next."

The moron tries to glare at me, but I see the fear in his eyes. You get real quick at reading someone's eyes when you're a rodeo rider. You have seconds to determine how mean, or how scared, your animal is and what your strategy will be; and if you choose wrong, it could mean serious injury.

The guy books a hasty retreat.

I turn to Samantha, finally shaking out my hand. Ow. No matter how tough you are or how many times you punch someone—and I've been in a fair number of bar and rodeo fights in my day—it still hurts to have someone's face connect with your fist.

"You okay?" I ask quietly, keeping my voice soothing.

Samantha's breathing has picked up, close to hyperventilation. "Thank you," she whispers. "I... I don't know... I didn't know what I was going to do. I was getting really scared."

"You had every right to get scared." I know it's probably presuming too much, but she just looks so damn scared, and I want to make it go away, so I pull her into my arms and hug her.

Samantha sinks into me and bursts into tears. I rub her back, making quiet, soothing noises, and just let her work it all out.

"You're okay," I promise her. "You're okay."

"Am I?" Samantha whispers. "He knows where I live. My parents gave him my address. They could do that to anyone else who charms them enough. I'm not safe here."

I hate to be an alarmist, but I have to agree. Her parents have shown time and again that they'll do what they think is right no matter how much it violates their daughter's wishes, and they could very well inadvertently put her in danger again.

The vicious part of me wants to tell them what happened so that they feel proper horror and worry, but I know that's not my place. Samantha probably won't want to tell them, I'm sure, and that's her choice.

I just think they should know what crappy parents they're being right now.

Samantha doesn't deserve this. I want to find that guy and tear him limb from limb. But that's not going to help her feel safe again. Not really.

I take a deep breath. "Look, you can say no if you want to. But I'll move you into a new place."

Samantha pulls back and stares at me. "What?"

“I’ll move you into the apartment below mine. I’ve got the penthouse on the top floor, but there are other apartments that don’t take up as much room on the lower floors, I can easily get you into one of them.”

“I could never afford whatever place you have! I couldn’t afford to stand in the lobby!”

“I’m going to pay for it. Who said you had to pay for anything? Look, this way, you’ll be safe. It’s a new location that your parents don’t know about. I’ll handle the lease, and I’ll be right above you if, for some reason, things still go wrong. Your brother will be happier with you living near me, too, for when he can’t be here for shit like this.”

“My—my lease—”

“I’ll pay for you to break it. I’ll take care of whatever fees there are. It’s all fine. Let me take care of it for you.” *Let me take care of you.*

Samantha bites her lip, unsure, then sighs and nods. “All right. Thank you, Travis. Seriously. I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you.”

“Don’t even worry about it.” Getting to make sure that Samantha is safe is payment enough.

No jackass is going to touch her like that ever again.

Chapter 13

Samantha

I can't believe that Travis just showed up to my rescue like that. How he was able to tell that something was wrong, I don't know, but I'm so glad that he was able to. I guess he really does know me better than I ever expected.

Maybe I need to be a little kinder to him after this. After all, he's defended me twice, and then protected me from an actual threat, and now... I know that he's a billionaire. I know that this money means nothing to him. But I also know that other rich people aren't as generous with their wealth. It doesn't matter how much money you have; being rich or poor isn't what makes you generous.

It's still a kind thing for him to do. Something he didn't *have* to do. But he doesn't let me argue; he just takes care of it all.

It's so nice to feel taken care of again. I haven't felt taken care of by my parents in ages. I can take care of myself, I'm not a child, but it's not like I want to do everything alone, either. I want to know that I'm not alone. I want to have a partner who looks after me and lets me take care of him, too, the two of us together.

Obviously, Travis can't be that person, but it's nice to have him taking care of me in the meantime.

I genuinely didn't think he had this soft, caring side, and I'm not quite sure how to feel about it. I don't know how to treat him when we're not sniping at each other—or having sex with each other, which obviously can never happen again. Especially while he's my boss. That would hurt Travis, and he'd regret it.

Not that *I* want to have sex with him again, either, anyway. That's not my

plan. I'm not going to get distracted with sex, no matter how good, with someone I won't end up marrying.

Travis gets me all moved into my new apartment, and I admit that it's amazing. My jaw drops when I walk in.

Travis grins when he sees my face. "If you think this is impressive, you should see my penthouse."

"I did, once. I had to pick Oscar up from a party at your place."

"Oh? And what did you think?"

"I thought that you were a spoiled, stuck-up asshole," I say honestly. "I thought it was way too much and over the top."

"Well, you should come back now that you only kind of hate me instead of totally hate me. And when it's not full of drunk people and blaring music. I think you'll like it better when it's just me."

"Uh-huh. Sure." I try to keep my tone skeptical, but I can admit privately that he might be right. I hated coming to the penthouse because I hated Travis and everything to do with him, and the place was a mess, and then I had to get my exhausted, drunk brother home. Not exactly a fun time.

But this apartment that he's given me is lovely, too. It has huge floor-to-ceiling windows, lovely dark hardwood floors, and a massive kitchen for cooking in. I realize that I'm grinning, and when I look over at Travis, I see him watching me as I take in the space. That soft look I can't decipher is back in his eyes again.

I look away quickly. "Thank you for this. This place is beautiful."

"Of course. It's my pleasure. Seriously." Travis shrugs. "I'm not going to let you be someplace that doesn't make you feel safe."

I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with this.

Travis is being so nice, protective, and thoughtful, and he's literally just one floor above me. I could go up and see him any time.

As I get settled into my new apartment—Travis had all of my things moved in by a professional moving team and even bought me some more stuff so the place wouldn't seem so empty—and head to bed, I can't stop thinking about him being just one floor above me.

I keep remembering how he held me in the hallway and imagining how much more we could've done.

And how much I could do with him right now if I just went upstairs.

It's stupid. Travis wouldn't actually say yes; he's made it clear that he doesn't cross that line with his employees, *and* I shouldn't want to sleep with

him anyway. It's Travis Ray, of all people. The only reason that I'm still thinking about him is because he's the only person I've ever had sex with. That has to be the reason.

I go to bed, but I can't stop thinking about him. I even wake up in the morning hot and bothered, with vague dreams slipping away about a drawling voice whispering what a bad girl I am and big, warm hands touching me all over.

This has got to stop. I need a distraction.

So I call Oscar over.

"Wow, damn." Oscar whistles as he walks into the place. "I didn't know that Travis paid his assistants this well, or I would've signed up to try it myself."

"Oh, please, you wouldn't last a day," I laugh.

"True, true. But how did you end up here?"

I explain the entire saga. "Travis was really sweet about it in a way I didn't expect."

"Sam, I've been telling you for years that you should just give Travis a chance. I've been telling Travis to give you a chance, too, by the way, I know he's had an equal part to play in your little... whatever it is you two have going on. But he's a good guy. He'll take good care of you."

"Let's not get too carried away," I warn Oscar, getting out food for us to eat. "He is a good man, I'll give you that. I underestimated him. But he's still a cocky jerk who sleeps around and thinks way too highly of himself."

Even as I say that last part, I know that it's not really true. I know now that Travis fears he's becoming his father, who is definitely not the kind of man to emulate. His self-esteem must be lower than I ever suspected. Honestly, I don't think anyone has any idea that Travis has such a fear. He's far too good at projecting confidence.

But I can't let Oscar see just how much I've come to respect Travis, or the weird attraction I now have toward him. He'll never let it go, and I'll never know peace again.

"Let's just watch the movie and enjoy dinner, okay?" I ask.

At the end of the movie and dinner, I give my brother a hug goodnight. "I know Mom and Dad had no idea that Michael would be so unsafe, but I still need some space from them. I need them to understand they can't go against my wishes like this."

"I get it, seriously. They never should have given him your apartment

address. They're just so convinced that they're right that I don't think they understood they might have gotten it wrong about him." Oscar shrugs. "But I'll try and keep them off your back and try to talk to them."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

"I love you, y'know? What are brothers for?" Oscar grins, then winces. "Hey, can I use your restroom real quick before I go? It's a bit of a drive."

"Of course, no problem."

Oscar leaves, and I set about cleaning up the dinner. I'm washing the dishes when there's a strange gurgling noise from the pipes, and then the water bursts out, and I see a puddle start forming at my feet, coming from the cabinet under the sink.

Oh no. Oh *no*.

I rush to the bathroom and see that the toilet is leaking, too. Shit, shit, shit!

I call maintenance immediately. "Hi, I'm the new tenant, and it seems like my water pipes have burst? I have no idea how this happened but I need someone up here immediately!"

Oh, no, I don't want my apartment—the one that I'm not even paying for—to suffer water damage. That would just be so frustrating. I just moved in here!

It's late in the evening, so of course, it's going to be harder to get a plumber to come in here and fix it, and even once they do, the whole place has to be dried out, and they have to repair or replace anything that was damaged. This is such a mess.

What the hell am I supposed to do?

I bite my lip as my feet get soaked with water, debating. Oscar left half an hour ago, and I could ask him to turn around and come back to get me and let me stay at his place, but it's far away, and I'd have to make a two-hour drive into work every morning and then back in the evening, for who knows how many days. I'm not staying with my parents. Not just because of what happened between us but because they live in the same area Oscar does, so I'm back at the "annoying commute" issue.

I look up at my ceiling. The floor of the penthouse suite. Travis' apartment.

And I hit the call button.

Chapter 14

Travis

I'm relaxing on the couch with some paperwork when the phone rings. I glance at the caller ID and see the name on the screen says *Samantha*.

Odd.

I pick up the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey, Travis. I'm so sorry to bother you, but, um. My water pipes broke?"

"What?" I sit up. "You okay?"

"I mean, I'm annoyed as hell, but I'm okay. This whole place is just... soaked. I called maintenance, and they've apparently got someone on call 24/7, so they're sending someone out here to deal with it, but it's still going to take a couple of days to fix it and dry everything out. I don't suppose... I know it's asking a lot, but could I stay with you?"

"Hey, of course, no problem. Come right on up." I stand up and start gathering the papers, putting them into a neat pile on the coffee table as I glance around my place. I like to keep my penthouse pretty neat—I have a cleaning service that comes by every two weeks and I feel bad if stuff's left out for them to work around—but I rush around to tidy a few things up. "It's really not an issue."

"Thank you so much, seriously. I'll be right up."

She hangs up and I finish hurrying around, making sure everything's clean, wiping up the counters and spraying some air freshener. I'm not sure why I'm so nervous. It's not like Samantha's got a high opinion of me to ruin or anything. It's just Samantha for crying out loud.

And yet.

There's a knock at my door, and I hurry over to open it—and freeze. “Holy shit.”

She's soaked to the bone, her dark hair plastered to her face where it's not pulled back, her white shirt see-through with how wet it is. Samantha grimaces, shivering. “I tried to deal with it myself.”

“We have a maintenance team for a reason!”

“Yeah, and they still weren't there, and my apartment that you paid for is flooding! I had to do something! I'm not going to just sit there when I could try to figure out the problem myself.”

“Let me guess, you couldn't figure it out yourself.” I open the door wider to let her in.

Fuck, I can see her breasts through the thin, wet fabric of her shirt. Her clothes cling to her every curve. My cock stirs. I want her so fucking badly, I feel like a starving man with a feast in front of him that he can't eat.

“No,” Samantha groans as she enters the house. “I couldn't. It was so frustrating. I don't know how it could've happened!”

I've never had a huge problem like this in all my years living at this penthouse, so I don't know, either. But these things do happen. “Look, it's annoying as hell, but the people who run this building are good about taking care of things. That's what we pay them all this damn money for in the first place. Your apartment will be fine. In the meantime, let's get you into the shower to warm you up; you look freezing.”

“I smell terrible, too,” Samantha complains, wrinkling her nose.

All I care about is how much I want to pin her to the floor and fuck her again while watching those gorgeous breasts bounce for me, but I breathe carefully in and out, struggling to contain my raging desire for her. Fuck. I had thought I could keep myself under control around her, but her walking around all dripping wet like this, leaving nothing of her body to the imagination, is about to snap my patience.

I hurry her to my bathroom, which has a huge rain shower and a soaking tub. “Pick whichever one you want and relax,” I tell her. “Take your time. I'll find you some clothes that you can borrow.”

“Thank you, Travis, really, it's very kind of you.”

“Hey, like I said, it's no problem. I live directly above you and we know each other. I'm not going to make you go out to a hotel when I have plenty of room here.”

While Samantha enjoys the bathroom and gets herself clean and warm, I

try to find something of mine that she can wear. I'm bigger than she is so there's not much, but I find a t-shirt that shrank in the wash a bit and some soft cotton shorts she can roll the waistband up on.

"Here you go," I call, rapping on the door and then blindly sticking my hand in to deposit the clothes. "They're a little big but they should work, and they're clean and comfy."

"Thanks!" she calls through the door.

I leave her and go to whip up a late-night meal. I already had dinner and she probably did too, but I'm sure trying to fix the pipe situation made her hungry again. I'm a classic Texas guy, so I use some of our company's classic beef to make a burger patty and cook her a burger and some fries. I dice up the potatoes myself, too.

My family's company has been around for a while since back in the days when it was literally just a small cattle ranch, and we had to drive the steers up to Chicago every year to sell them. But growing up, my mother always made as much food as she could by hand, especially when it came to beef and steak.

"We always have to respect our roots," she would tell me. "And eat what our customers eat."

Honestly, in some ways, my mom taught me how to be a good businessman, even though she'd never worked a day in her life. She married my father right out of high school and never went to college, but she's a smart, perceptive woman. My father taught me what *not* to do to run a business, but my mother taught me the principles that I *should* apply.

"Something smells delicious," Samantha says, emerging from the bathroom. Her hair is still a bit damp, cascading down around her shoulders like she only bothered to partly dry it with the blow dryer. She did, in fact, have to roll up the cotton shorts, which makes them sit high up on her thighs, showing off her gorgeous legs. The shirt's a bit big on her, but it shrank enough in the wash that even though it's long on her, it stretches across her breasts, and I can just barely see the points of her nipples through the fabric.

Damn. I'm not getting out of this situation alive. I might die from a heart attack, having to stare at her looking like that—and in *my clothes*.

She probably smells like me now. Fuck.

"I made you something to eat. Just a burger and fries. I figured after all that, you'd be hungry."

"I'm starving, actually. I didn't realize it until I smelled the food."

Samantha sits down and I serve her. “And it’s never ‘just’ a burger and fries if it’s made right. I didn’t know you cooked.”

“Yup, my mother taught me. Meat’s important in our family.”

“I’m sure.” Samantha takes a bite and moans. “Oh wow, this is amazing.”

I want her to moan like that for me in bed. “I’m glad you like it. It’s been a while since I cooked for anyone.”

“Oh, don’t lie to me, it’s okay. I know you have girls over all the time.”

I haven’t in the last few weeks, but I’m trying not to think about that. “I don’t cook for them.”

“Oh? You just send them on their way without breakfast? Shame on you.”

“If they stay the night, and most of them don’t, I have breakfast delivered.”

Samantha winks at me. “Glad to know I’m special.”

God, she has no idea. It’s taking everything in me not to launch across the table and make her moan because of me instead of that burger.

“Don’t get too full of yourself. I’m still going to shoot down your insubordination at work.”

“Oh, please, you love my insubordination because I actually get the job done and I have good ideas. You’d hate to have a ‘yes man’ as an assistant. If you didn’t, you wouldn’t have fired all those pretty girls who wanted to date their boss.”

I roll my eyes. “You know why I don’t do that.”

Samantha finishes her food. “I know you wouldn’t sleep with them. But a lot of men, if they realized their assistant had a crush on them, would use that to keep her dangling on a string and keep her loyal and doing extra work for them. They’d take advantage. You didn’t. You just wanted them to be good at their jobs. And admit it, you’re scared of being like your father, so you want someone to keep you in line. And that’s me.”

Dammit. She’s got me there. “Maybe you’re right. But I didn’t plan it that way.”

“And yet, here we are,” Samantha smirks at me, all smug, and I just want to wipe that expression off her face—with a kiss.

“Here we are,” I reply, and I grab her empty plate to clean the dishes, so I have something to do that isn’t kissing her.

“You don’t have to do that.” Samantha grabs my hands to stop me, her warm, soft body pressed against mine, and I have to suppress a shudder of want. “You cooked, I’ll clean.”

“You’re a guest in my house.”

“I’m a guest who earns her keep. I’ve inconvenienced you—”

“It really isn’t an inconvenience.”

“Just let me,” Samantha insists, her face stubborn.

“All right. Just this once, I’ll let you win. Because I know how much it sucks to have a flooded apartment.”

“You’re letting me win out of pity.”

“That’s right, cupcake.”

Samantha rolls her eyes. “You’re such a child.”

“I’m going to take a shower.” I need to get some space, and if she insists on doing the dishes, that’s fine by me, just this one time. I need a moment before I win the argument by doing something unfathomably stupid like lifting her onto the counter and reminding her just how much I’m not a child but a full-grown man, and all that entails.

The shower helps. I focus on how relaxing the water is and how it eases my aching muscles after a long day. I talk to myself about the paperwork I was looking over, so that I don’t let my thoughts stray and think about Samantha instead. It’s difficult, to say the least. I want to think about her. I want to touch myself, to get off thinking about her just to take the edge off...

But that feels wrong when she’s right outside the door as a guest in my apartment. It’s one thing when she’s living one floor below me. This feels different.

I get out, dry off, and sling a towel around my waist to go and find some clothes. I open the door and step out—

“Oh.”

—and that’s when I remember that Samantha can see my bathroom door from the living area.

For the first time, I curse my penthouse’s open floorplan.

I’m used to just living alone and walking around in whatever I want, or nothing at all. I completely forgot that Samantha would, well, see what I’m wearing. Or rather, what I’m not wearing.

Her gasp is soft enough, I can pretend I didn’t hear it. I head for my bedroom, but out of the corner of my eye, I can see her staring at me, her lips slightly parted, her cheeks flushed.

Fuck. I clench my jaw and keep going, entering my bedroom and finding a soft shirt and boxers to wear to bed.

The idea of just walking over to her in my towel, gently lowering her to

her knees and sliding the towel away... her soft, smirking, sassy mouth all over my cock...

I swallow hard. Nope. No. I'm not doing this again. I throw on the clothes and then step back out into the living area.

Samantha's cheeks are still flushed, but she's now seated on the couch, glaring at her laptop.

"Writing?" I ask.

She nods.

"You look like you're trying to glare a hole through the poor computer screen."

"Maybe the computer deserves it," Samantha replies, but her expression softens a little as she looks up at me. "I just thought I'd get a little writing done before bed."

I walk over. "I have a guest room for you. I'll show you—I have a cleaning service come by every couple of weeks so it's clean."

I don't have guests over, not really. Unless it's a woman I'm hooking up with. Only Oscar ever stays the night occasionally when we've been up late shooting the shit and he doesn't want to make the long drive back.

"Oh, thank you. I didn't know you had a guest bedroom." Samantha sounds... disappointed? No. Surely, I'm imagining that.

"Yeah, but only your brother ever uses it once in a blue moon."

Samantha gets up and follows me. I can feel her gaze on me, and I'm sure I'm not imagining the heat in it, but every time I look at her, she's looking away, cheeks still pink.

"Here we are." I show her the bedroom with the ensuite bathroom. "Let me know if there's anything you need—"

I turn, but as I do, Samantha steps forward, and we literally bump into each other. I reach a hand out and steady her. "Whoa there. Sorry, you're just that eager to get away from me, but don't bowl me over while you're at it."

It's our usual banter, but it sounds far too stiff, like I'm pushing it too hard. My voice comes out soft and fond, and I know, in that moment, I've revealed too much. I've let her see that I still want her.

I gently push past her, trying to calm my overheated body. I need to keep my distance. It's not my fault that having Samantha in my home, wearing my clothes, fresh from the shower, does something to me. But I have to be strong. I have to resist her.

"Travis?" she blurts out.

I turn and see her bite her lip like she didn't mean to say that. Her face is flushed.

I want her so fucking badly. My hands curl into fists. "Yes?"

She stares at me. Her gaze travels down my body, then back up, and I know exactly what she's thinking. She wants me.

"I..." Samantha's voice dies.

I'm such a weak man for this, but I step in further. "If you want something, you need to ask for it."

I want her, but I'm not doing this unless she asks me. Samantha's eyes go dark, and the thought—that Samantha's never slept with anyone except for me—washes over me in a wave. She's never had to ask anyone for sex before.

It makes my entire body flood with heat. I'm the only one. I'm the first person she's doing this with. I'm the man who makes Samantha Davis give up on stubbornness and ask to be fucked.

Samantha swallows, and that familiar steely look comes into her eyes, the one that I see all the time when we're arguing—except now, it's determination of a different nature. It warms my heart in a way I didn't expect. I'm *fond* of that look in her eyes, I realize.

"Travis." Samantha's voice is soft, but her face is set. "Please. Fuck me."

And God help me, I do.

Chapter 15

Samantha:

I shouldn't ask for sex from Travis.

I should be keeping to our pre-established rule. Nothing good can come out of the two of us having sex, clearly. He's my boss, and that's a line he wants to preserve, and I respect that, even if I feel it's more complex between us than the simple 'boss sleeps with secretary' issue that he worries so much about.

But when I see him staring at me out of the shower... if Travis thinks I can't tell when a man is staring at my breasts, he's got another thing coming. And then I see him fresh out of the shower, all his bare skin that I so far haven't gotten to see or feel...

I know we've had sex twice, and it was amazing both times, but I want to feel that pure skin underneath my fingers. I want to lick the beads of water from his body and feel every inch of his warmth against me.

I try to resist, but I can't stop staring at him, and I know that my face probably gives me away. It feels like you could fry an egg on my cheeks, and my heart is racing.

He's just so—well, of course, I knew that he was built and strong; he's a rodeo rider. But seeing him in nothing but a towel, all that tan skin, those broad muscles, and one thing I should've expected but really didn't were the scars. None of them are big, just little cuts and scrapes, but I know they're from riding. No matter how good you are, you get thrown at one time or another, and so scars are inevitable. I know that Oscar's got a few. He and the guys love showing off their scars to see who has the biggest.

But Travis doesn't have any crazy big ones. I've definitely seen bigger. It

surprises me until I realize—he's the best. He hasn't been thrown as much as the others, or if he has, he's done a controlled fall and avoided injury.

The combination—the physical proof of how good he is, and the scars that he still couldn't avoid, the signs of his dedication—makes me a little weak at the knees. I know I have a weakness, and I know it's silly of me and probably because I read too many romance novels growing up, but I've always had a thing for the rodeo cowboys.

I just always thought that it would be a romantic, sweet cowboy, who would sweep me off my feet.

Not that Travis is sweeping me off my feet. The idea is insane. But he's my type, is what I'm saying. He's playing right into my weakness and probably has no idea, the way he doesn't even look at me as he hurries from the bathroom to the bedroom.

I wish he'd let me take the towel off. I wish he'd let me sink to my knees and—

I can't stop staring. I can't stop *wanting*. And when we bump into each other, and I feel his body against mine for just a brief moment, I can't resist anymore.

I can tell that he wants me, too, by his awkward attempt at banter and the heat in his eyes. Travis is *never* awkward. I've never seen him like that in our entire time knowing each other. But here he is, trying to awkwardly banter with me to cover up the fact that he wants me.

It's intoxicating. Travis could have any girl he wants and he's flustered over *me*. Who the hell wouldn't be flattered?

"I..." I start to speak, but my courage fails me at the last moment.

Travis has always initiated our trysts before now. I don't have the experience in this that he does. I don't know how to ask for sex. I guess I always pictured myself as being seduced slowly and tenderly over an evening, on a nice date, and then all I would have to do would be invite him in for "a coffee," and things would go from there.

Travis is staring at me like he's starving, but he doesn't make a move toward me.

"If you want something," Travis murmurs, "you need to ask for it."

I swallow hard, my body shivering with heat. He's making me step over the line. He's making me say it out loud: admit that I want Travis Ray.

"Travis," I whisper. I force my voice louder. "Please. Fuck me."

I've never even thought about saying those words before, but now they're

out into the world, and it feels—it feels sexy to have said them.

It's even sexier when Travis strides toward me, takes my face in his hands, and kisses the living daylights out of me.

I gasp against his mouth and allow him to pull my shirt up over my head. He kisses me again immediately once my shirt is off, picking me up at the same moment. Then, to my surprise, he turns and starts carrying me out of the room.

“Where are you going?” I gasp as his hot, hungry mouth kisses all the way up and down my throat.

“I'm not fucking you anywhere except my bed,” Travis growls. “And this time, I'm taking my time with you. I'm feasting on you, sweetheart.”

Oh God. I cling to him and tilt his face up, kissing him harder. That's so hot, it's so hot I can barely stand it.

Travis carries me into his bedroom. It's got a beautiful view and windows, and it's mostly utilitarian, but there's a dark blue accent wall and his rodeo trophies and medals on display on a beautiful hand-carved wooden shelf. I like those personal touches. I wish there were more of them.

He lays me down on the bed with surprising gentleness, then stands up and finally, *finally* gets his damn clothes off. I sit up and slide my hands greedily over his body, kissing across his chest.

I want to feel all of him. I want to *taste* all of him.

Travis runs his hands through my hair, smirking down at me as I kiss up his chest. “Something you wanted?”

“Shut up,” I mutter. “Not my fault you're hot.”

Travis slides his hands down my back to dip his fingers under the waistband of the shorts I'm borrowing. “You had to roll these up to get them to fit... it's just too cute. Seeing you in my clothes makes me so damn hard for you.”

He pulls the shorts down and massages my ass, pulling me into him and grinding us together. I can feel his hard, thick cock between my thighs, dragging along my skin, so close to where I want him.

“Fuck me, please,” I beg again, kissing along his jaw. “Travis, please...”

He nudges the head of his cock right up against me. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes,” I moan.

He thrusts teasingly a few times against my slick skin, but not inside of me. I reach down, wrap my hand around his cock and stroke, smearing the

precum up and down the shaft. He feels so full and hot in my hand, it makes me shiver with anticipation and want.

I keep stroking him, enjoying the power I feel, the way he twitches and jerks in my hand, and how Travis groans and breathes heavily, clutching at me.

Finally, he pushes me down onto the bed, yanking my hand away from him. “I said I was going to feast on you,” he growls, “and I meant it.”

The brown of his eyes is almost completely lost in the black of his pupils. He sounds powerful and commanding like I have no choice but to obey him. I find myself spreading my legs before I even register it, wet and hot for him when he’s like this.

I had no idea that I could feel so... so sexy, and get so turned on when Travis gets like this—like he’s going to eat me alive, and there’s nothing I can do about it.

His hands slide up my body, squeezing my thighs, teasing my sides, then moving to my breasts. His mouth runs up my stomach, then down between my thighs, avoiding where I want him most and then moving back up to my breasts.

“Did you know there are women who can come just from having their nipples played with?” he murmurs. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

I whimper. “Please—Travis, please, I want—”

He playfully pinches my nipples, and I moan, the pleasure-pain of it so, so good. “What do you want?” he asks.

“I-I want-I want your cock,” I blurt out, my face on fire. “Please.”

“Look at you. You’re so damn cute when you’re embarrassed.” He plays with my nipples between his fingers, and oh, it does feel so fucking good. “You’ll get my cock, don’t you worry, baby. I have no intention of letting you leave this bed without fucking you. But first...”

He leans down and licks at my nipples, then sucks them. My hands find his hair, and I writhe as he plays with my breasts, one after the other. It’s so good, it’s amazing, my body pulsing and my thighs clenching. I’m so close, I’m so very close I feel like one brush against my clit and I’ll come, but—

But it’s not quite enough.

Travis keeps going, even as I whimper and plead for him. “Please, please, oh, please fuck me, Travis, please...I need—I need it, I need to come. I need it so badly...”

He scrapes his teeth along the swell of my breast and I moan, arching into

his touch. I can't believe how good this feels. "Travis, *please.*"

He pulls off me with a chuckle. "Guess you're not one of those women." He doesn't sound disappointed. In fact, he sounds delighted. "And I just found a new way to tease you."

He sits back on his knees, smirking at me like he's a snake and I'm a juicy mouse. I find that I don't mind it. In fact, I might love it.

Travis drags his hands up my thighs and spreads them, then leans in and noses between my legs. His mouth catches on my clit, and I whimper.

Travis winks at me and laps playfully at my clit, just enough to have me moaning but not enough consistent pressure to get me to come. I'm so close, I'm sure I could orgasm if he would just consistently give me something to rub against, but he's not letting me.

"I love teasing you," he murmurs. "You're so fucking desperate. You want it so badly. Such a bad girl, writhing and squirming like this, trying to get an orgasm."

My whole body flushes and I feel myself getting even wetter at his words. My mind is in a whirl—this isn't how I ever thought I wanted to be talked to in bed—but my body is fully on board. It knows what I want.

Travis slides two fingers into me, and I cry out, clenching down. "Yes, yes, yes."

I can't stop myself from babbling. It feels so amazing. It's not exactly what I want—his fingers aren't as thick, aren't as deep, as his cock—but it still feels so *good*.

Travis kisses all over my body, his fingers moving slowly inside of me, taking his time. He curls them, shifting his angle, until he finds the one that makes my body seize up in unbearable pleasure. I cry out his name, clutching at him as his mouth continues to relentlessly pepper my skin with slick kisses.

"Yeah, that's it," he murmurs. "You're going to lose your mind by the time I'm through with you, sweetheart. Look at how wet you are. Listen to how much you want me. You can *hear* it. You're so wet for me."

I can hear it, the sounds of Travis fucking me with his fingers. It's absolutely filthy.

When I pictured what it would be like to have sex, I pictured it would be something with low lighting, and after a nice date, at the end of a lovely evening. I imagined that my lover would whisper in my ear about how beautiful I was, how good I felt, and how lucky he was to have me.

Sweet, lovely things like that.

Not this absolute filth.

But I love it. I love what Travis is saying to me. My mind might protest feebly that this isn't what I imagined, but my body is too busy nearing the edge of orgasm to care.

"Y'know, I never liked comparing women to the horses or bulls that I ride," Travis comments, almost casually, like we're having a drink and not like he's about to make me come. "It feels demeaning. I know a lot of other rodeo cowboys do it. But I don't much like the idea of treating a woman like an animal that way. But I *will* say that when it comes to riding and sex, I think most men get it wrong. I think they see it as having to win something. Getting the animal or woman to submit. I don't see it that way."

His thumb rubs at my clit, and I moan. Oh, I'm so close, I'm so fucking... close... I'm going to come, I'm...

Travis stops all movement, and I sob. "Stop teasing me!"

He chuckles. "See, that's what it's about, to me. Working with the animal. Letting them get all their energy out and moving *with* them. A partnership. I do think riding's like sex that way. And if you just let 'em get all that energy out and work with 'em, you'll both end up wanting the same thing."

He strokes my thigh and pulls his fingers out of me as I pant helplessly. "It was—it was hot, watching you ride—even when I hated you, I always thought it was really hot. You ride differently from the others."

"Coming from you," Travis says, and he sounds deadly serious, "that's a mighty compliment."

My heart doesn't know what to do with that statement, with the respect I hear in his voice for me.

Travis reaches into the bedside table and pulls a condom out of a half-empty box. I smother my glare at it. I know what kind of man Travis is. I can't be mad at him that he's had sex with other women. Besides, it's not like I'm jealous or anything.

Right?

Because that would be stupid, to get jealous over Travis Ray, and to be angry at the idea that he might sleep with someone else when I know all along that's what he does. It's fine, I'm fine about it.

Travis hooks my leg up over his shoulder, and I whimper involuntarily, all other thoughts driven out of my head as his cock finally, *finally*, nudges

against me.

“Ride me,” I whisper. I want him to. I want him to fuck me the way he rides in the rodeo, fluid, relentless movement until the animal has gotten everything out, and all it can do is be guided by him.

From anyone else, it might feel demeaning. But with Travis at the reins, I know it’ll feel amazing.

Travis flashes me a blinding grin, and then he’s sliding inside.

Oh, yes. Yes. This is what I wanted—no, what I needed.

Travis fucks me, steady, not quite as fast as I want but good and deep. The angle is amazing, driving him in until I swear I can feel him in the back of my throat. I moan helplessly, rocking my hips back down into his thrusts.

“There we go,” Travis growls. “Fuck, the look on your face... I want to fuck you forever, baby, to stare at you like this. You’re fuckin’ gorgeous.”

I claw at the bedsheets, grabbing fistfuls and squeezing tightly. He sounds so earnest, so raw, like he can’t help but tell the truth. His dark, growling voice is so hot, I almost wonder if I could get off to him talking to me and nothing else.

Travis fucks me deep, just like that, until I can feel myself clenching down, bearing down against the orgasm I know is about to—

He pulls out.

“Oh, God, why did you stop?” I pant, tossing my head in frustration. “Travis!”

“Shh, I know, sweetheart.” He grins. “You were real close then, hmm?”

He brings my leg down and pushes my knees up, exposing me to him as his cock teases me again. “But I just had so much fun bringing you to the edge last time, I had to do it again. And did you know...”

He slides back into me and tears spring into my eyes. It feels so unbelievably good, I can’t even make a sound.

“That if you hold off the orgasm, when it comes, it’s that much better?”

His voice is light but perfectly in command. I’m like the bucking bronco. I can wail and thrust and cry all I want, make a big fuss, but he’s just going to ride me out until he brings us to the end that he wants.

Honestly, that makes me so insanely hot, I can’t stand it. It has me shaking with need.

Travis slides into me again and picks up the pace. I gasp and moan, reaching for him, and he takes my hands and lightly pins them down on the bed, using the grip for leverage to lean over me and pound into me with his

hips.

Oh, fuck yes, this angle is amazing. It's so intimate. I drag my toes up along his sides, feeling his heaving breaths as he fucks me. Yes, yes, this is perfect. I can even kiss him from this position, we're so close, his tongue slick and sliding against mine, powerful, plundering my mouth.

I arch up into him, feeling my orgasm drawing close again. I've lost track of how many times I've almost come at this point, but I need it. I need it more than I need to breathe.

I moan helplessly as he slows down, rolling his hips. "D-don't—don't stop, don't fucking stop, Travis—"

He keeps up that slow pace, his large hands playfully pinning me down, his hot body over mine so that I don't have any choice but to take the delicious torture. "Look at you, so fucking wet and desperate for it."

I shudder. Fuck, I love when he talks dirty to me.

"Making such a mess all over my sheets," Travis muses. "What a bad girl."

The pleasure that spirals through my body at those words feels like wildfire. I whimper. Travis' hand comes down to lightly run over my ass and I gasp.

"I wonder if a bad girl like you would need a little punishment for making such a mess." His voice is a low, confident growl in my ear.

I feel like I'm so turned on I can't even breathe, my lungs filled with the smoke of pleasure.

Travis hums thoughtfully and then lightly smacks my ass. It sends a jolt of heat and pleasure through me, and I moan, clutching at him. Travis chuckles and does it again, and I clench down hard around him, unable to stop myself. Fuck, that feels so good.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Travis growls, but then he finally speeds up again, fucking me hard and fast.

I sob with relief. I'm so close, I can feel my orgasm just barely past the reach of my fingertips. He thrusts hot and fast into me, and I can hear how wet I am for him, how much I want him, how good this is for me. I should feel embarrassed, but I can't. I just feel euphoria.

"You want to come for me, sweetheart?" Travis kisses down my neck and I whimper, arching up into him.

"Yes, please, please, please, please," I beg, my words slurring together. I've never wanted to orgasm so badly in my life before. I feel like I'm going

to explode like a star, a supernova.

“What if I decided to slow down again?” Travis teases me.

I whimper. I want to come, but I also like how he teases me. I like how confident and in control he is with my body. “Travis, *please*, I need it...”

“My poor sweet girl, I know you do.” He kisses me, slick and possessive, then speeds up even more. “Go ahead, baby, come for me, come on my cock, c’mon...”

I cry out as he speeds up even faster, the delicious slick friction, the pressure, the stretch of it, and his low, growling, possessive voice are all too much for me. I come hard, and it really does feel like my body catches on fire. It’s so *good*. I didn’t even know it was possible for an orgasm to feel this good. I shake uncontrollably, like I’m not even truly in my body anymore.

Travis groans, and I feel him come inside of me, shuddering, and for a second, I almost wish the condom wasn’t there. I wish he was coming inside of me bare, making even more of a mess. Maybe, even...

Oh wow, what is wrong with me? It’s just the endorphins, it has to be. There is no way I’m actually imagining—fantasizing about—Travis Ray knocking me up. What the hell is wrong with my brain?

I stare, unseeing, at the ceiling as my orgasm slowly fades. It takes longer for me to come down from the high, basking in it, and I see what Travis meant by it being better sometimes when you take yourself to the edge and delay it.

It’s hitting me that I truly know so little, practically, about sex. How to make it good, how to enjoy it to the fullest. What if this is only a novelty for Travis—the fact that I’m so new at this and he can be the first to show me everything?

Travis pulls out and cleans up, but then, to my surprise, he climbs back into bed and kisses me, slow and deep, like he’s still hungry for me. I wrap my arms around him and let myself get lost in the kiss. I can’t help it. This is the kind of kiss that I imagined having, the kind where you’re not pushing for sex or anything further; you’re just enjoying the connection and the act of making out.

I never thought I’d get it from Travis Ray.

I have no idea how long we kiss, but eventually, Travis pulls back with a final, soft kiss to the corner of my mouth. Like it’s a secret. “We should change the sheets.”

My face heats up, and I know I’m blushing like wild. Travis chuckles.

“Don’t be embarrassed. It’s hot.”

“In romance novels,” I mutter, getting up to help him, “nobody has to clean the sheets afterward.”

“Well, in romance novels, nobody gets stuck in traffic, or has to use the bathroom, or deals with gunk in their water pipes, either.”

“Excuse you, traffic and gunk in water pipes can create excellent tension and mishaps!”

Travis throws a pillow at me, grinning. “All right, if you say so, you’re the expert.”

“I might actually use a burst water pipe in a novel; that’s a good one.”

It would be a way to force the heroine to stay with the hero, or perhaps the hero could come over and fix her pipes for her, and they’d both get wet and have their clothes clinging to each other...

Except in my romances, there isn’t any sex. I write sweet and clean romances; the kind where the guy shows up and fixes her pipes, doesn’t expect anything in return, takes a shower, and just talks with her all night because their connection is emotional and real.

It’s nothing like what happens with Travis.

We clean up the sheets, throw them into the laundry, and put on new ones. I’m exhausted and ready to climb into bed, but Travis pulls some papers out. “What are you doing?”

“I have to go over some stuff for tomorrow,” Travis explains. “But you get your rest; this isn’t your problem. And I mean that sincerely.”

“I am your assistant,” I point out.

“I know.” His tone, for once, is gentle, not mocking or cutting me out. “But this is a higher level than that. You really don’t have to worry about it. Get some sleep.”

I nod and turn to head toward the spare bedroom, but Travis grabs my hand. “Where are you going?”

“To... sleep? In the guest bedroom?”

“Just stay here.” He shrugs. “It’s no problem.”

“Okay.” I’m not sure how to feel about that. Flattered? It’s sweet and unexpected, and I think that maybe he wants me there with him and doesn’t want to admit it. Maybe he’s lonelier than I thought.

And, well, it is nice to climb into bed and have someone there with me, even if that person is quietly reading.

I fall asleep, wondering how much work Travis does. He’s a CEO and has

a second job—because rodeo might be his passion, but it is a job, a full career that requires dedication and time. Even if I was tempted to be with him, to try and make this something more than sex... I can't compete with his lifestyle and how much work he has to do. His company and the rodeo are his life.

Throughout the night, I feel warm and held, which is unusual. I can't place the sensation, but when I wake up in the morning feeling more rested than usual, the bed is empty.

There's a frittata warming in a pan for me with a sticky note stuck on it: *Headed into work, see you there.*

Yeah. No way is Travis fitting into the plan that I have for myself and my life. I'm not going to let good sex, or his hidden depths, distract me from getting what I want and need out of life.

The maintenance guy finally arrives, so I deal with all of that and get to work late, but Travis doesn't seem to mind when I text him. *Take care of your apartment, I'll survive.*

I want to shoot back that I doubt he would be so generous to any of his previous assistants, given the apparent terror they had of him, but that would mean admitting that I might be special in some way. I don't want to shine a light on that. I don't even know how to feel about it myself, or how can I handle talking to him about it?

I just say "thanks" and head in when I can.

As if he can sense my day is already chaotic and wants to add to it, Oscar calls me on the way to work. "How's it going?"

"How's it going? Don't even get me started. After you left, my pipes burst. I tried to fix it myself, but I couldn't do anything so I had to stay with Travis while waiting for maintenance to fix it."

"Oh, wow, damn." Oscar whistles. "That's crazy. Sounds to me like you could use some cheering up and distracting."

I groan. "What do you want?"

"I was hoping you could come to the rodeo this weekend. It's a big one, but Mom and Dad can't make it. Apparently, they have some party—an anniversary for their friends? It's like the 50th and Mom's helping with the food or something."

I wince as I move through traffic. I grew up in a small town, so I am not a fan of driving from the city out to country rodeos in the middle of nowhere. It makes me insanely nervous, especially with how many drivers will unexpectedly turn, change lanes, or try to squeeze in.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Please?”

“It’s such a long drive...”

“Then have Travis drive with you. He’s riding, you can just join up with him.”

That’s a whole other can of worms. “I doubt Travis would like me tagging along.”

“No harm in asking him, right?” Oscar’s voice grows serious. “I’m gonna be honest with you, Sam, I don’t know how many more of these I have in me.”

That gives me pause. “Are you hurt?”

“No, but Amy and I are thinking of settling down.”

This is the reason why, no matter what, I can never truly condemn Travis. He and Oscar are close, and he’s stood up for Oscar when other riders judged or weren’t supportive of him dating Amy because she’s fifteen years older than him. So, Travis kicked literal ass for my brother, and he’ll still break the nose of anyone who so much as looks at Oscar sideways. I’m so proud of my brother, but the fact is I’m just a feisty woman who’s five feet four inches tall. Travis is six feet tall and punches like a brick wall. Anyone who has a problem with my brother is going to think twice about it when they see that the beloved rodeo star Travis Ray can punch them and everyone will be on *his* side.

“That’s really great, Oscar. Mom and Dad will be pleased *someone* is going to give them grandkids soon.”

“Hardy har har, do not encourage them.”

I sigh. I know that rodeo riding is a young man’s game. Oscar, like Travis, is in his late twenties. They’re starting to get to an age where they might be too old to handle the rough wear and tear on the body that comes with riding. This might very well be his last season.

I’ve been going to my brother’s rodeos since we were kids. I can’t miss out on his last season. “Okay, I’ll come. I’ll see about Travis driving me.” It’ll be good to save on the gas, anyway.

When I get to work, I ask him. Travis is in the middle of signing papers, but he pauses when he hears me ask. “Sure. No problem.”

I can’t place his tone of voice or what it means. It’s like he’s trying to sound casual. Great, did I make him uncomfortable? I can’t imagine that he wouldn’t just say so if I did. “Great, thanks.”

I can't tell who's walking on eggshells more, Travis or me. It's so weird. Even when one of us does get a little snappy with the other, it feels off. It's like we're playing a game, but I don't know the rules or what the stakes are. I just know that it's not like normal between us, and I don't know what to do.

The morning of the rodeo, we get up at the crack of dawn so that we can get there in time. I meet Travis in the lobby of the apartment building, where he comes out of the elevator with a coffee in each hand. "I'm the one with the fancy cappuccino maker in his kitchen," he tells me.

His voice is low and rumbling, rough from sleep, and I shiver. I take the coffee to cover it up. It's not sexy, or so I tell myself.

We head out in relative silence. There are few people on the streets, which makes me feel a little silly for worrying about traffic. It's still dark out as we drive out of Austin and up the highway, and then off onto a paved road that hasn't seen maintenance in decades, and then onto dirt paths.

It's funny, but I can see Travis shift as we drive further out into the country, away from the city and the business. He becomes more alert but also more relaxed, his body molding comfortably to the seat, one arm casually flung over the steering wheel, his other dangling out the window to feel the morning breeze. His eyes are lit up in a way I never see in the office.

"You really love this," I murmur, speaking my thoughts out loud without meaning to.

Travis glances over at me. His face is open and relaxed in a way I haven't ever seen it be. "Yeah. I do."

My heart starts thumping wildly and I look away, out the window to watch the sunrise. For some reason, I get the feeling that Travis is still looking at me, but when I glance back over, he's watching the road.

We arrive at the rodeo, and from there, it's the usual flurry of activity. I help out wherever I can since I hate just standing still and not being useful. Then I find Oscar, give him a good luck hug, and finally collapse into the stands to rest and watch the other riders. Amy's a backstage gal who handles the horses; she doesn't ride herself, and Mom and Dad aren't here so it's just me in the stands.

The rodeo goes well. I cheer so loud my throat hurts while Oscar rides, and I think it's one of his best times yet. I think that knowing this might be one of his last shows has put some extra fight into him, and he stays on that horse like his life depends on it while I cheer and stamp my feet.

Travis goes, and I don't know, maybe there really is something different about him today, or maybe I just never saw it before I knew him so well, but I feel like there's an extra sense of... settled in him, as he rides a bull. Like he knows he's got it, and he's showing off a little.

He's not showing off for the women, though, I can say that much because when I leave the stands after the show, I find the usual gaggle around him... and Travis politely pushes through them.

"Scuse me." He adopts a bit more of a drawl than he usually has, smiling that charming smile. "Gotta get on back to the stables and help the others out."

I can feel my jaw dropping in shock as he just... walks past all the women trying to flirt with him and heads toward the stables without a backward glance.

Travis always stays and flirts with the girls, and grabs a few numbers. Huh. Something must be going on, it's so odd.

I shake it off and head to the back myself to see what I can do to help out—and to congratulate Oscar. "If this really is your last season, you're making the most of it."

He grins. "Thanks. Don't tell Mom and Dad just yet. Once I tell them, they won't stop talking about babies and marriage, you know that."

"Boy, do I ever."

"How are you and Travis getting along?"

I shrug, trying to sound noncommittal. There's no way I'm letting my brother know that Travis and I have hooked up. Three times now. "He's fine. Not as bad as I thought it would be but we still butt heads. He's stubborn and works way too hard."

"You're stubborn yourself," Oscar points out. "How's the book coming along?"

"Honestly? I've been really inspired lately. Even with the work Travis has me doing." Maybe it's the arguing with Travis getting my blood up or something, I don't know, but I've felt like I've had plenty of inspiration for my writing lately. "I'm feeling really good about this manuscript."

"Good, I'm glad." Oscar kisses the top of my head and I bat at him playfully. "I'm starving; I'm going to grab something to eat, come with?"

By the time we wrap up, it's Travis and Amy waiting patiently for Oscar and myself to jog over. Amy's starving too so Oscar gets her some food and then jogs out to the car to grab something he forgot to give a friend.

“You good to head home?” Travis asks me. He looks tired but pleased, a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

“Yeah, I’m beat.”

Oscar jogs back. “Okay, I’m going to run and give this to Riley, I’ll be back. You guys heading out?”

“Yup.” I hug him and Amy goodbye, and then Travis and I head for the car. We get in, and I feel a strange jolt as the car starts. I frown, but when I look over at Travis, he seems distracted. “You okay?”

“Hmm? Oh, yeah.”

“You didn’t get any of those girls’ numbers.”

“Surprised you noticed.”

“Kind of hard not to. It’s what you do every time. It drove me insane.”

“Oh, it drove you insane, did it?”

“Not like that, you egotistical blowhard. It’s just annoying how you would flirt with everything that moved and got a ton of numbers every night. I didn’t want anything to do with a man who saw the women around him as just potential notches on his bedpost.”

Travis laughs and shakes his head. “Sometimes I think you’re loosening up and then you go and say something like that.”

“What, are you saying it’s not true?”

“I’m saying that flirting is fun and sex is fun, and I had fun with both. No feelings were ever hurt. The women knew what to expect.”

“But how do you ever plan to find a meaningful connection or serious relationship that way?”

“You think I’m looking for a serious connection right now? I have a business to run and I’m busy riding on the weekends. When the hell would I have time to give a woman the attention she deserves?”

That’s not the answer I expected from him. “I... thought you’d say something about how you’re just not into being serious.”

“I will be when the time is right and it’s with the right person. You want something serious, right? Just not right now while you’re getting a book deal. Same thing.” Travis sighs. “I’d just like to get this company to a place where I don’t have to be on call all the time and get a few more seasons under my belt at the rodeo. Then we’ll talk.”

“The company shouldn’t be your whole life,” I point out. “My writing career is important to me but at least I can go to bed when I feel like it. You were up until who knows how late the other night.”

Travis snorts at me. “You want me to half-ass it? I have thousands of people depending on me. I won’t let the company slide like my father did.”

“I’m saying a little work-life balance, or, hell, a life outside of work—”

“I have the rodeo—”

“That’s just another kind of work!”

The car gives another jolt, like a kicking mule, and this time, Travis notices. He frowns down at the car. “What the hell?”

The car gives another jolt, and then I can hear the engine die. It just... stops. Like it shut down on its own.

We both stare at the car. “It was fine this morning.”

“Yeah.” Travis frowns.

I look around. We’ve made it far enough that we’re not yet on the highway but still in the middle of nowhere. It’ll be a long trek back to the rodeo to get help, but when I check my phone, I see I have no bars. Great.

We’re stuck out here.

Chapter 16

Travis

We're going to be stuck out here until someone else from the rodeo drives along.

I'm just glad that we weren't one of the last folks to leave. Usually, I stick around longer, flirting and getting numbers, maybe bringing a woman back to my car to have a little fun being ridden instead of doing the riding. But my heart just wasn't in it today. I had plenty of offers, but every time I thought about it, I just kept thinking about Samantha instead.

Damn. This is not what I planned. Hell, I didn't even plan to sleep with her the first time, and usually, I'm a one-and-done kind of man. I meant it when I told her I wasn't looking for anything serious right now. I'm far too busy to be dedicated to a person, the way any person in a serious relationship deserves to have attention and dedication. I'm not going to be the kind of man who's at the office until nine at night and then back up at five in the morning and away every weekend. I won't ask that of someone.

And yet, Samantha, I just keep coming back to. I can't resist her. When I was standing in that crowd of beautiful women, I just kept thinking about Samantha.

She doesn't seem to be aware of it, thank God. But I don't know what to do about it. My head's all in a fuckin' jumble. The car ride up this morning was the same; the air between us was soft and relaxed, and I didn't know what to do with how comfortable I felt. How sacred it seemed, to get up and enjoy the early morning with her. Just the two of us, no cars out on the road, like we were the only people to exist.

Samantha sighs and unbuckles her seatbelt, getting out of the car. "I'm

going to stretch my legs.”

“I’m gonna see what’s wrong.” I get out and pop the hood.

Samantha shakes out her arms and legs and does a few jumping jacks. I try not to watch her breasts bounce as she does—or stare at her ass as she bends over to touch her toes.

Focus, Travis, dammit.

I inspect the car. I had it checked out, like usual, during an oil change a couple of months ago, but I regularly drive it out to bumfuck nowhere for these rodeos, so it could be that something happened and I didn’t notice.

But no. There, sure enough, is normal wear and tear. There’s not anything torn or worn down.

Instead, it looks like someone undid some of the hoses.

Those bastards.

“What’s wrong?” Samantha asks. She walks over, hands on her hips.

“Nah, it’s just going to be an annoying fix.” I quickly close the hood so she doesn’t see. I’m not sure how much Samantha knows about cars, but she’s smart. I’m sure she can take a look and figure out herself it was deliberate sabotage, and I don’t want to worry her.

It’s probably a rival or two, angry at my winning streak. I’ve been doing unusually well lately and some guys can’t handle that—and I know a few of them also carry grudges for how many women I’ve pulled, and for the fights I got into on Oscar’s behalf a few years ago when he and Amy started dating.

But I think that’s all calmed down now. Everyone knows to be okay with it, or at least to keep it to themselves if they aren’t, and I didn’t pull any women tonight. So it must be some kid pulling a prank or someone’s mad I snagged first place again.

“This is what happens when you drive a car over dirt roads and gravel every weekend.” I roll my eyes. “We’ll just have to wait for your brother or someone else to come along.”

“Great. Good thing we already ate, I suppose.” Samantha climbs into the backseat and lies down, stretching out. Her legs are gorgeous. All of her is gorgeous, honestly.

She glances over at me and I quickly look away, over at the horizon. But she doesn’t tease me for ogling her. “I know that you feel you have to make up for your father’s mistakes. And I don’t think you’re going to ruin the company. But I do think you’re in danger of burning yourself out.”

I walk over and lean against the open door, staring down at her. “This

company's been in my family for generations. We started as just a small cattle ranch and now we supply quality meat and leather to restaurants and artisans all over the world. We have a brand. Especially with this whole..." I shake my head. "Vegan leather nonsense. It's just plastic! It's just fucking plastic. It's terrible for the environment and it doesn't last you generations like real leather does. It's a huge marketing campaign we're pushing, showing people need to rethink what it means to be truly ecologically responsible. Everyone just wants to blame meat eaters and it's more complicated than that. I have a responsibility."

"And I can see how much you care." Samantha sits up. "I do. I'm just suggesting you're borrowing from yourself in later years by overworking yourself now. What's the point of all this if you work yourself into an early grave?"

"Trust me, I'm not happy about how much time I spend on this. I'd like more time to ride."

"Are you sad that it's not your whole life anymore?"

"Sometimes. If my father had run the damn company properly then I would be able to focus on my riding. We can't be in this business forever. I've only got a few more years left. I thought I'd take over the company then." I shrug. "But we can't always have what we want. And I care about my family's legacy, too."

"I can tell."

I stare out at the horizon again. Sun'll be setting soon, and then it'll get cold. "This is like another one of your romance novel settings. Forced proximity and all that. Like when they get snowed in at a cabin."

"You really know your romance tropes." Samantha sits up. "Something you need to tell me?"

"Hey, I pay attention. You've been talking to your brother about these damn books for years, and he talks to me."

"You paid attention to the stuff Oscar said about me?"

I shrug. "Know your enemy and all that."

Samantha laughs. "Travis, my own parents don't bother listening to me about my novels. And I think they love me a lot more than you do."

"Well, I think they could stand to love you a bit better."

"Mmm, very protective of you."

"I've got a right to be. Can't have my personal assistant crying and getting distracted from work."

“Excuse you, I do great work. I’m a powerhouse. You’re lucky to have me.”

“I am,” I reply honestly. “You’re the best assistant I’ve had. I’ll be sorry to see you go when you make it big.”

Samantha blinks, startled. “I... thank you. I’m feeling really inspired, I plan to send the manuscript to agents next week.”

“That’s great.”

“Of course. In the novels, you know what happens once they’re stuck together.”

Samantha looks at me with one eyebrow cocked, apparently not following.

“Sex,” I clarify for her.

Samantha sighs. “My novels aren’t like that.”

“They’re not? No slow seduction, no ripping each other’s clothes off because they can’t stand the tension, no giving into temptation?”

“I write *clean* romances,” Samantha points out.

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“I should’ve known you wouldn’t get it.”

“You’re telling me that if you were in that situation, you wouldn’t be tempted? You’d resist the urge to get down n’ dirty with no one around to see you? The thrill of an illicit tryst, getting it on where you technically shouldn’t? You know you love it, we’ve already done that three times.”

“Some of us,” Samantha points out, “have self-control. I’m not one of your little conquests.”

“Oh, please. If I actually set out to seduce you right now, you wouldn’t be able to resist. You wanted to climb me like a tree the other night at my place.”

“You were just as bad! You started it! You always start it!”

“And I always finish it. You asked me to fuck you, remember?”

I step into her, my fingertips teasing along her knees. She’s wearing jeans, practical clothes for the dusty rodeo, so I can’t feel her hot bare skin, but Samantha shivers as I tease her through the denim. “You’re telling me I couldn’t get you to beg to be fucked again?”

She swallows hard. “Nope,” she says tightly.

“Oh, I think I could.” I reach forward and tuck some of her long, dark hair behind her ear, letting my fingertips trail down along her jaw. “I think I could get you to beg again.”

I rub my thumb lightly along her bottom lip and watch as her eyes darken. I smirk. “You’re mine, sweetheart.”

She swallows. “I’m not yours.”

She doesn’t push me away, though, as my fingers trail down her throat to her plaid button-up shirt. It’s a bit open at the collar, showing her white tank top underneath. I lean in, using her shirt to pull her into me at the same moment. Samantha’s hands grab onto my wrists. “Travis…”

“You’re telling me, that if I spread your legs,” I murmur, “and undid these jeans and slipped my hand into your panties, that you would stop me? That you wouldn’t whimper and moan and get wet for me? Hmm?”

I kiss her jaw and slowly undo her buttons. “You’re telling me that if I slip a hand into your shirt, under these layers of cotton, you’d stop me? You wouldn’t arch into the touch and let me play with your pretty breasts? I bet I could get you close to orgasm just from playing with your pretty nipples again.”

Samantha whimpers. “I… I…”

“Go on. Tell me to stop. Tell me that you don’t want this.” I kiss down her neck and finish undoing her buttons, pushing her shirt off her shoulders and down her arms, then teasing my fingers under the waistband of her tank top.

“We—we should stop.”

“But do you want me to stop?”

“Oh, Travis…” Samantha shivers as I nip lightly at her throat. I move my hands further down and undo her jeans, dragging the zipper down.

“I’m hard for you,” I whisper, and it’s true. I’m aching for her, throbbing in my jeans. “I’m always so fucking hard for you, baby, thinking about how wet you get for me and how much you like it when I fuck you.”

Samantha’s hands move from my wrists to my shoulders, clutching at me. I push her lightly and she falls back, staring up at the roof of the car. I take her hand and guide it between my legs until she’s cupping my clothed cock. I let her feel how hard she’s made me.

Samantha whimpers. “Travis… fuck…”

“You want this? Tell me you don’t, and I’ll stop.” I grind against the palm of her hand. “Tell me you’re not seduced by this.”

I kiss up and down her neck, along her jaw, up to her ear, sucking on the lobe. Samantha squirms and pants under me, massaging my cock. “Yeah, baby, that’s it. You want this. Give in. Let me take care of you and make you

feel good the way you want. You like being naughty. You like being a bad girl for me. Just let go and give into it.”

I pull her hand off my cock and step between her legs, grabbing her belt loops and tugging her into me so that I’m settled right up against the heat of her, and then I kiss her properly, licking into her mouth. Samantha gasps and winds her arms around my neck.

I grind slowly against her, and her legs spread farther. I’ve got her, I know I’ve got her, and the triumph that roars through me is stronger than any pleasure I’ve felt at any other seduction before.

“Yes,” Samantha moans in between kisses. “Yes, Travis, yes I want it, yes I want you, yes, please fuck me.”

God yes.

Chapter 17

Samantha

I definitely shouldn't give in, but I can't help it. Travis is damn good at what he does, and I understand how none of the other women can resist him. His voice is a low, sensual growl, and he has that same confidence that I saw when he goes into the ring to ride—like he's not conquering me but already knows we're on the same page, working together. He just has to get me to realize it, too.

When he guides my hand between his legs, I can feel how hard he is, and all I want is for him to be inside me again. He's so big under my hand, and I know that it'll fit, obviously, he's fucked me before, but there's a little thrill at how big he feels like he might *not* fit, and like I'm realizing all over again just *how* big he is. His size and strength hovering over me, between my legs, is so hot.

His mouth is soft and teasing all over my skin, his fingers brushing against my body as he slowly undresses me. I could push him back and tell him to knock it off, just like I tell him to knock it off when he's being annoying and arguing with me, but I don't. I can't. Because I don't want to.

His mouth is so perfectly insistent against mine, not too much, just enough to tease, his hands skimming over my body but not grabbing, not giving me the proper pressure and sensation. He moves between my legs and I can feel his cock against my hot, aching core, and he grinds slowly, making sparks shiver down my legs and up my spine. His stubble scratches at my skin, his hair is so damn soft when I run my fingers through it, and the calluses of his hands catch on my stomach and sides as he gets my shirt off and pushes my tank top up.

No, I can't help it at all. I know I'm being seduced, but I don't care. I want it. I want him.

So I beg him to fuck me.

Travis growls and kisses me a bit harder. "And you're telling me this never happens in your books?"

"Are we still talking about this?" I can barely string two thoughts together, especially as he sucks at my neck and grabs the backs of my thighs to grind harder against me. I feel like I'm catching fire. "No, it—it doesn't."

"You're telling me the heroine would resist this? She's a good girl and you're naughty?"

"No—the—I mean yes but—th-the hero wouldn't even try to seduce her, he'd—he'd respect her too much—"

Travis chuckles. "I respect you plenty, sweetheart. I just also can't resist you. You're telling me your heroine isn't so gorgeous the hero loses all reason?"

"Are *you* telling *me* that I'm so gorgeous you lose all reason?"

Travis growls again and pulls back, hovering over me, his eyes black with want. "Why do you think I'm about to fuck you?"

The idea that he's so into me and finds me so alluring he can't resist seducing me has my head spinning. I know I'm pretty, but I never thought of myself as *that* attractive. It gives me a hot little thrill in the pit of my stomach. Travis, who can have any girl he wants, can't resist me.

Travis smirks, running his hands up and down my thighs. "You want to be a really bad girl?"

I shiver. This isn't at all how my heroines would behave in my novels. But I whisper anyway, "Yes."

"Then turn around for me and bend over the seat."

Anyone could come along right now. We're just sitting here on the side of a dirt highway, and others have to be leaving the rodeo soon. Someone could see us from the road pretty easily, even with night falling.

But I don't point out the risk. In fact, the risk gives me another thrill. Like the fun of sneaking into an R-rated film when you're only thirteen.

I do as I'm told and turn over, bending over the back seat. Like this, I can't see Travis, which I miss, but then he plasters his body over mine, and damn, that's hot. He feels so much bigger like this, in command, pressing me down and greedily running his hands over me.

And then he undoes my jeans and pushes them down.

This angle is perfect for him to slide his hand between my legs and rub at me, and I gasp, shuddering. My legs spread automatically.

Travis chuckles. “Oh, yeah. Perfect. You’re perfect, y’know that?”

“I... I have a great teacher,” I point out. I’m just doing what he tells me, he’s the expert in sex here, not me.

Travis kisses along my neck. “Mmm no, that’s not ‘cause of me. It’s all you, baby.”

His fingers slide inside of me, saving me from answering. It feels amazing. From this angle he can get so deep inside of me and grind the palm of his hand against my clit, sending pleasure zinging through me like electricity.

“You’re so wet,” he murmurs like it’s some kind of miracle. His voice is so hot. I can’t deny it anymore. He could be reading from the damn dictionary and it would still get me wet for him.

His other hand slides through my hair, gripping it and then gently tugging my head back so that he can kiss more of my neck. “Grind down on my fingers, baby, show me how much you want me.”

In this position, I’m completely at his mercy, and it feels amazing. I do as he says without hesitation, grinding down and gasping at the pleasure. My clit’s getting rubbed and his fingers are inside me at the same time, and it’s not his cock, I want that too, but it’s still amazing.

I might actually orgasm from this.

Travis groans. “Yeah, that’s it.” He kisses me everywhere. “Fuck yourself on my fingers. Such a needy, naughty girl. Show me how much you want me to fuck you.”

I speed up, chasing the high that’s drawing closer and closer. It feels so good, being dominated a little, being *bad*, getting myself off on Travis’ hand where just anyone could come along and find us...

My limbs shake and I come, crying out, my breath on fire, clenching his fingers.

Travis groans. I can feel him against my ass, just how hard he is. “That’s it. Fuck you’re gorgeous. That’s so fucking hot, baby.”

He pulls his fingers out of me—and then he spanks me. I gasp, body jolting.

“You said you wanted to be a bad girl,” Travis growls. “Bad girls get spankings.”

I moan as he spanks me again. Fuck that feels good. He spanks me a third

time. “You like that?”

“Yes,” I gasp out. “I... I like... I like it...”

He spans me a fourth time. Damn, it makes me so turned on. I’ve already orgasmed and I want more. “You like what?”

“I... I like being a bad girl.”

“Louder,” he growls.

“I like being a bad girl!”

He spans me a fifth time and then spreads my legs as I mewl in desperation. “Yeah, that’s it.”

“Fuck me,” I gasp out. I can’t believe I’m still so turned on after coming once already. “You said you would.”

“And I will,” Travis growls. “Trust me. You have no idea how much I want to fuck you.”

“Then do it,” I snap, desperation in my voice.

Travis chuckles and pushes my pants all the way down, then spreads my legs. I can feel his cock nudge at me and I gasp. He’s so hot, wet and hard. He’s going to feel so *good*.

Travis slides inside of me and I impatiently brace my hands and push back, taking him into me. I moan—it’s a stretch but it’s such a fucking good one. Fuck he feels so good. No wonder I can’t resist.

Travis wraps his arm around me and slides his hand down between my legs again. I whimper as he rubs at my clit and rolls his hips, his cock dragging perfectly inside of me. He feels so fucking deep, deeper than he’s ever been inside of me before. He’s so hot and slick, and the texture of his cock is amazing.

He doesn’t thrust as fast as I want, though. He keeps it slow. His thumb rubs at my clit. “How hot did that get you, spanking you, hmm?”

With him over me like this, his muscular chest pressed against my back, there’s nowhere for me to go. I can only take what he gives me, his words hot in my ear.

“So hot,” I whisper. “I loved it. It felt amazing.”

“Yeah? Do you want me to bend you over my knee and spank you again? Spank you while you grind on my leg and come?”

That sounds so damn hot. I moan. “Yes, yes, I want that...”

I know that this means I’m admitting that I want to do this again. That there might be a repeat of this, that we might give into temptation and have sex again, no matter how much we pretend otherwise. This might even,

perhaps, be a semi-regular thing if we can't keep our hands off each other.

But in this moment, it doesn't matter what I'm admitting and what I'm giving into. All that matters is how good it feels to have Travis talking dirty in my ear and to admit how hot it all is.

Travis rests his hand against my clit so that as he thrusts into me, I grind down on it. It feels amazing and I'm already on edge from the spanking. I feel like I haven't ever truly come down from the high of my first orgasm and this is just sending me hurtling back toward that peak.

I claw at the leather of the backseat, my forehead pressed to it, sticking with sweat. "Travis... Travis, I'm... I..."

"Yeah, you're gonna come," he purrs. "I can feel it. Go on, sweetheart. Come for me."

I can't stop it. It rolls over me like a wave and I whine Travis' name as I come.

Travis speeds up, fucking me hard and rough. I'm getting fucked like our lives depend on it, and coming from it, on the side of a dirt road—nothing like how my novels go—and I'm *loving it*.

"Damn," Travis swears. "That—that's so hot, you're so hot, baby, fuck —"

I expect him to stop touching me, to chase his high, but he doesn't. Instead, he keeps rubbing his thumb against my clit.

My second orgasm peters out, but not really. It just morphs and starts to slide into something else.

Into another orgasm.

I can't believe it. I'm going to come again; his thumb is relentless on my clit. I sob, tears streaming down my face, my hips thrusting wildly, uncontrollably.

"Are you gonna come, baby?" Travis murmurs in my ear. "You just can't help it, can you? I told you it would feel so good to go the other way. Holding off an orgasm makes it so much better when you really do come. But coming over and over, that can be just as hot, too."

I claw at the seat. "I'm—I'm—I—oh—oh *Travis...*"

He doesn't stop touching me, not for a second, and I seize up, spilling into my third orgasm. My body goes limp with it, just letting the ecstasy crash through me like waves.

It's amazing. It's so sharp, so real, so grounding, I feel so helpless in the face of the pleasure. I love it.

Travis groans and kisses my neck. “You’re so gorgeous like this, fuck, you have no idea, Samantha...”

He comes hard inside of me, and I can feel the heat of it, and the hot rush of his pleasure.

For some reason, him saying my name like that as he orgasms means so much more to me than any pet name. I like the pet names; they’re sweet, but when you call someone “sweetheart” and “baby,” then they could be anyone. He probably calls every woman he’s slept with those names.

But I’m *Samantha*. He said *my* name specifically.

Travis pulls out, and I feel the hot mess that we’ve made together sliding down my thighs. It’s so dirty. It’s so fucking hot.

I can hear Travis breathing hard, panting over me. I hear the driver door open, then fumbling, and as I push myself up, there are tissues gently cleaning up my skin.

“There you go,” Travis murmurs. “Hold still, let me take care of you.”

He cleans me up and then helps me get my clothes back on. I tremble a little in the aftershocks, and maybe Travis notices because he wraps an arm around my waist and kisses me. Not just once, either, but over and over, soft clinging kisses that have me clutching at his shirt and pressing up into him.

Travis brushes his nose against mine. “There we go.”

I’m not sure what to say to that, or if there’s even anything to say. It feels so... soft and sweet, like something more than just a hot hookup. But before I can even open my mouth, I hear the sound of a car in the distance.

I jump, startled, and Travis hurries out into the road, waving to flag the car down.

“Car troubles?” the guy driving his pickup asks, slowing down. I recognize him, he helps to run the food booths.

I wave. “Hey, Jared, lend us a hand?”

“What seems to be the problem?”

Travis takes him over and they poke under the hood, muttering to each other while I wait in the car to start it and see if they’ve fixed it. As they work, my mind skitters back to what Travis said earlier.

At the time, it was just another way to tease me and turn me on, but now, I think he has a point. The car breaking down like that, stranding us together alone. My water pipes bursting, forcing me to stay with Travis and keeping us in close proximity.

And both times...

I don't like to suspect my brother like this, but Oscar is handy around the house. He'd know how to screw with a water pipe and sabotage it. He knows his cars, too. He could do something simple that would make the car break down without damaging it.

And he's the one who pushed me to take this job and pushed Travis to accept me.

Hmm.

Oscar's always pushed Travis and me together, hoping that we'll get along. I don't want to suspect him of being underhanded, but...

We get the car started and the second that I get home, I call Oscar. "You think you're pretty clever, huh?"

"I mean, generally, yeah, why do you ask?"

"You did this, didn't you? You sabotaged the car."

"What car?"

"Travis' car. It broke down, and yet it sure was an easy enough fix. No parts needed replacing or anything. I didn't see under the hood but I'm guessing it just needed some juice or a part put back into place. And my water pipes burst right after you left me the other night."

"That's unfortunate."

"It sure is! Crazy how I had to stay with Travis. And how you were the one pushing Travis and me to get me this job. If someone were suspicious, they might say that they're being set up."

"Good thing you're not a suspicious person."

"Oscar, I know you. I know how your mind works. You're trying to get us to date!"

"I would never."

"You're such a liar." I laugh, feeling a little hysterical. "I know when you're lying, and that's exactly what you're doing right now. There are just too many coincidences! You show up and my pipes burst. You rush off to the cars and the car breaks down. You did this!"

"Okay, fine, you're right. You're right! I'm trying to set you two up. I'm even, yes, trying to give you two romance novel setups. Because you love romance novels. And I thought maybe, if you got a romance setup with Travis, you would see that he's a great guy, and I think there are sparks between you. I think there always have been."

I stare down at my phone in shock. I was right. And my brother thinks—thinks there's a spark between us?

“I am going to get you so badly for this,” I snap, and I hang up the phone.
Hell. No.

Chapter 18

Travis

Samantha is spitting mad when she bangs on my door. “Open up!”

I open up since she’s so insistent about it. “What...?”

She storms inside. “Did you know about this?”

“Know about what?” I’m so confused. Our car ride back was nice, I thought everything was fine. What happened?

“What is going on?”

“Oscar,” Samantha snaps. “That’s what’s going on. Are you telling me you genuinely didn’t know about any of this?”

“No? What is up with Oscar? Is he okay?”

“Oh, he’s fine for now, but he won’t be by the time I get through with him,” Samantha hisses. “He’s been trying to set us up! He thinks we should date!”

She waves her phone in the air, and as if he’s been summoned, it starts ringing. I see Oscar’s name as the Caller ID on the screen.

“He’s been trying to set us up?” My brows rise.

“Yes. It’s why he wanted me to work for you. He made my pipes burst. He sabotaged them while having dinner at my place, knowing when I started washing the dishes, it would blow. Then he sabotaged your car so it would break down on the way home from the rodeo and we’d have to spend more time together.”

I have to admit, I’m relieved it was just Oscar who messed with my car and not someone else. At least this means it was an attempt at a friendly gesture by someone who cares about me, rather than someone jealous and trying to get back at me.

“He’s just as bad as my parents!” Samantha says. “Meddling and deciding that he knows better than I do about my own life!”

I take the phone from her and answer it. “Hey, Oscar.”

I can hear his wince through the phone. “I’m guessing she told you.”

“I’ve seen wet cats that hiss and spit less.”

“Tell him I’ll claw his eyes out, too,” Samantha says, pacing, her arms folded.

“Look, man,” Oscar says, “I know how unhappy you’ve been. You try to hide it but balancing these two careers... work is all you do. And I know Samantha deserves... she deserves a good romance, yeah, but I think she wants more than what she thinks she does from her books. I’ve seen the way you two interact over the years and I think there’s been a spark there. I think you two balance each other out and will make each other happy. But I knew neither of you would listen to me if I suggested the idea so I tried to just... make it so you two spent time together alone.”

“I see.” I sigh. “Listen, I understand why you did it, but you have to be hands-off from now on.”

“Or I’ll kill him,” Samantha mutters.

“Sounds good.” Oscar winces again. “I, uh, love you both?”

“Yeah, try that again when she’s less mad. I’ll talk to you later.” I hang up. “Samantha—”

“He really thinks just because he’s older and in a happy relationship that he gets to decide what I do and don’t need.” Now that her brother can’t hear her, Samantha sounds less angry and more upset.

I can understand why she feels betrayed. But I also understand how it’s not the same as what her parents did. “I don’t think that’s what happened.”

Samantha snorts. I grab her arms and stop her pacing. “Hey, hey.” I rub her arms. “Listen. I know that you feel lied to. And I think he owes you an apology for that. But I’ll be honest with you. I haven’t been happy.”

She looks up at me, startled that I’m admitting it so plainly. I shrug. “I’m not. I love my family’s legacy and company. I care about what we do. We provide people with food to eat, and frankly, I don’t think there’s anything more fundamental than that. When you cook for someone, you’re showing them love. That’s what my mom taught me, that’s how we bonded as I grew up.

“But I never wanted to take it over so soon. I thought I could have two dreams. And because of my father, now I have to balance them both, and all I

fucking do is work. You're right. I work all day and that's it. And I love both my careers, but it's killing me. It drives me insane. And I try not to resent him for it because it doesn't do any good to be angry at him, but I really, really resent him.

"Oscar knows this. Because he's my best friend. I'll always be there for him and he just wanted to be there for me, and he's right, you are good for me. You aren't intimidated by me, you don't take any of my shit when I'm being an arrogant cranky ass, you're not impressed by me, and you don't let me get away with stuff just because you think I'm handsome. I can see why he thought you could make me happy.

"And that's what he wants. Your parents want you to get married and have kids because that's what *they* want. Oscar wants you to be happy. He's not tricking you into meeting some stranger, and he's not trying to hurry you into a wedding. He just wanted you to spend time with me and see if maybe when we were alone, we could see if we could make each other happy that way. Because you're not happy, either, are you?"

Samantha wipes at her eyes. "Dammit. Stop being so nice, it's making me want to forgive him."

I grin. "That's kinda my goal."

She sighs, her shoulders slumping, and she leans into me. "You're right. I'm not happy. I want to be. I feel like I'm so close to getting what I want I can taste it. But I'm not happy. And I would like a relationship. I just... can't let it get in the way of my plans. You said that you're not looking to date seriously because you can't make your partner a priority. I can't do that, either. My career, my writing, is my priority right now."

"And I respect that, and I know Oscar does too. Maybe he thought, since we were both so focused on our careers, we'd understand each other and make it work. Who knows? But I think"—I squeeze her shoulders—"I think that you can forgive your brother."

"I suppose you're right. But I need time to forgive him." Samantha pulls away. "Besides, Oscar's wrong. We're not compatible. We'd never be good as a couple."

I'm so surprised by the hurt that smacks me in the chest that I don't say anything as she takes her phone back and heads out the door. "Thanks for the pep talk."

"I—anytime, yeah," I stumble out, watching her leave.

I stare at the closed front door. Samantha said we weren't compatible.

That hurt. It feels like someone just slammed a door in my face and took something valuable away from me, something I didn't even know I had or wanted. I want to go after her, to convince her that Oscar was right and we do work well together, that we could be good for each other.

Oh fuck no.

I have feelings for her.

Chapter 19

Samantha

I'm still annoyed at Oscar, so I'm going to let him stew in worry for a bit, but unfortunately, I also see what Travis is saying. It makes sense. It makes a scary amount of sense, actually.

I have to rush out of the apartment before I admit more than I want to. After all, it's probably just the good sex messing with my head. Travis and I aren't going to ever work out long-term, and it's long-term that I want. When I picture what I want in someone to be my life partner, my husband, I sure as hell don't picture Travis.

Oscar calls me. I let it go to voicemail.

He calls me again. Ugh.

I pick up. "You're really not going to give up, are you?"

"Nope!" Oscar says cheerfully.

"You're lucky Travis is always on your side. I'm only half as mad at you as I was before."

"Look, I knew you'd be mad. I'm not saying I wasn't a little underhanded."

"Just because you're happy in your relationship doesn't mean you need to rush me into one."

"I know."

"Travis isn't anything like what I want. We'd never work out."

Oscar gently clears his throat. "Sam, you're not a child, and you're not stupid. But sometimes, it's hard for us to see ourselves clearly. I've known you since the day you were born, and I see what kind of person you are. And you can say that Travis isn't what you want, and you'd be right because you

know what you want. But I think that what you want might not be what you *need*.”

I plop down onto the couch. “Are you seriously pulling the big brother card on me?”

“I sure am.” Oscar continues in that gentle tone. “What makes you happy might not be what you expect. Can you at least consider that maybe Travis is a better guy than you’ve been giving him credit for? I see how he challenges you and how lively you get around him. He helps you be your fullest self. And he’s an honorable man. You know that. I know you say he’s not an upstanding guy, but he’s stood up for me time and again. He’s never let me down. And hasn’t he been there for you when you’ve needed someone?”

That’s all very true. My stomach twists nervously. “He is a good guy,” I admit, grudgingly. “But I still don’t think you’re right.”

“Just think about it. Mull it over. That’s all I ask.”

“Fine.” I can do that—and then tell him that he’s wrong later.

“I love you.”

Dammit. “I love you too, you jerk, you know that.”

After we hang up, I lie on the couch, staring up at the ceiling. I hadn’t thought about the kind of person I was around Travis, but it’s true. He does make me come alive. He fills me with energy. I feel confident and powerful around him. And he does really look out for me, but he’s honest with me and points out when he thinks I’m wrong. Like just now, he calmed me down, held me, and reassured me while also pointing out my brother’s point of view.

Oh, no, do I have feelings for Travis?

Like I always do when I’m wrestling with something I don’t know how to address directly, I write about it. I go into my novel, and in a flurry of inspiration, I write the rest of it, bursting with feelings about Travis that I can’t express, so they all get poured into the story.

I stare down at the finally-finished manuscript. I should probably edit it and make sure it’s polished, but it feels powerful. It feels right. It feels good.

I do the usual search for typos and formatting, and I start sending it to agents.

Chapter 20

Travis

I have another rodeo this weekend, and this time, I drive alone.

There's been a distance between Samantha and myself ever since the revelation about Oscar's little schemes and hopes regarding us. I can't tell if it's her or me. I hope she can't tell. I hope I'm not making her uncomfortable. It's clear how she feels, and I have to find a way to deal with it.

It's just that I've never been in love before. I don't know what to do about it.

Hopefully, going to the rodeo will distract me. Everything falls away when I'm riding in the rodeo, and it's just me and the animal.

"We got a real mean bull today," Amy warns me as I prepare backstage.

"Nothin' I can't handle."

She rolls her eyes. "Yeah, well, Oscar took a hell of a fall and you know he usually lasts at least ten seconds. He only did seven."

"Poor guy must be cursing a blue streak."

"He sure is. There're a couple of new guys after you."

"Hey, hopefully, I wear this bull out, then." I grin. "See you on the other side."

Antonio's right, this bull is a fucking menace.

It's been a while since I felt like I was close to losing it in the saddle, but this bull gives me a run for my money. I manage to stay on, and I do well, but I walk off wincing. Damn. That was a tough one. Not my best ride, for sure, although most of the crowd can't really tell.

I head backstage, dodging the women. I feel like a moron for it, but, I don't know, it just doesn't feel right to sleep with someone when I'm in love

with someone else.

Hell, I even ran out of condoms in my wallet because I gave one to Oscar a few weeks ago and just never replaced it.

That nags something in my brain, but before I can think about it, I hear shouting and then screams of horror from the crowd.

It's been years since I've heard that, but we all know what it sounds like when a crowd reacts to a rider in danger.

I turn and sprint back out.

Fuck, it's that damn bull, and he's just thrown a newer rider. The guy's on his back in the dirt, twitching. Probably got the wind knocked out of him hard, and he can't get back up yet.

But the bull's headed right for him.

The bullfighters are trying to jump into the ring and distract the animal, but this bull seems to have a one-track mind. He tosses his head at the bullfighters, intimidating them with his horns, then goes back for the rider.

I don't even think about it.

I leap into the ring. While the fighters keep waving at the bull, running around to confuse him, I head straight for the downed rider. Now that I'm closer, I can see his leg's bent at a bad angle. Shit, that's broken.

"I gotcha!" I hook my hands under his armpits. "This is gonna hurt but we gotta get you out of here."

The rider groans as I drag him to safety. "C'mon!" Amy yells. "I got medics!"

I move as fast as I can without making it worse for the rider as Amy gets the gate open and I pass him over. The medics grab him, and I can see the concerned looks on their faces as they pat down his chest.

"Watch out!" I hear behind me.

Instinct is what saves me—I tuck and roll, and the bull's hoof skims at the side of my ribs. That'll bruise for sure, but I can already tell as I finish rolling and get to my feet that it didn't crack anything.

I hurry back out of the way as the bullfighters lasso the bull and get him subdued. The crowd applauds and whistles. There are some people who like bloodshed, but most people in the crowd don't want anyone seriously hurt. It's one thing to love the thrill of seeing someone risk getting hurt. It's another to see someone get trampled.

I get out of the ring and see Samantha, of all people, running up to me. Her gaze is wild with worry. "Are you okay?"

She grabs me and starts patting me down. “I’m fine, don’t worry about it, it’s just a bruise and some scrapes. The other guy’s the one to worry about.”

“You could’ve been killed,” Samantha hisses. She grabs me by the wrist and drags me away, toward one of the first aid tents. It’s empty when we enter, the medics are probably in another tent handling the more injured rider. “Let me take a look.”

I take off my shirt. It’ll be easier if I just let her see that I’m okay. And yeah, I like that she’s so worried. “Didn’t know you cared.”

“Of course I care.” Samantha inspects my bruise and scrapes. “It looked bad from the sidelines.”

“It’s not that bad, really.” I cup her chin and tilt her face up. “I’m fine, Samantha, I promise.”

I could call her sweetheart and baby and give her sweet words. But I know she won’t want them. Samantha’s never had empty sweetness from me, and I don’t think she’ll want me to start now. I’m not going to talk to her like she’s another random hookup.

Samantha huffs. “You didn’t *look* fine,” she whispers, her voice a bit hoarse.

I have no idea which one of us moves, but the next thing I know, we’re kissing.

Samantha climbs into my lap, clutching at me greedily, her hands skimming all over my skin like she needs to reassure herself I’m actually okay. I kiss her back, grabbing at her curves and shoving my hands up underneath her shirt. She settles in my lap, grinding down, making me hard, and fuck, I love how confident she’s becoming with me, taking what she wants during sex, knowing what she wants and how to move her body.

Samantha undoes my pants, sliding her hand inside and pulling out my cock, smearing the precum along my shaft and rubbing circles into the head with her thumb. I groan, my cock swelling even more, so hard I’m aching. I kiss frantically all over her neck.

“C’mon,” I urge her. “Sink down on my cock, Sam, show me how much you want it.”

Samantha whimpers and lines herself up, sinking down, her mouth falling open. “Oh, oh, *oh...*”

“Yeah, feels good when it stretches like that, doesn’t it?” I murmur. I kiss her deep and slick. “Work yourself down onto it, be a good girl for me, show me how good you are at being bad.”

She really does love it when I talk like this to her, and I love doing it. I love this other side of Samantha. I love bringing this out in her, I love—

I cut that thought off before I can finish it.

Samantha sits herself down on my cock, and I lean back, bracing one hand behind me on the table, and press up into her. She's fucking gorgeous moving on top of me like this, her shirt partially open, the both of us still mostly clothed. I can't stop kissing her, and she can't seem to stop grabbing at me, the two of us chasing our high—no, chasing each other. Getting lost in each other.

I just want to feel her. To be inside of her. To have as much of her as she'll let me have.

Oh, damn, I'm such a goner. I really am so gone on her.

I hold Samantha close and kiss her, fucking up into her as she rides me like she's the rodeo cowboy and I'm the bronco. Her hands brace on me and she pushes me down completely onto the examination table, fucking down on me in short, tight pumps, rolling her hips. She's fucking magnificent.

I grip her hips tightly and fuck her, the two of us working together, our bodies connecting over and over. She feels amazing, she feels so fucking good I can't stand it, and it's not long before I'm coming inside of her.

Samantha gasps, arching.

"Rub that pretty clit for me," I order with a growl. "Go on, baby, come for me."

She does as I say immediately, grinding down on my cock as I come inside of her and rubbing her clit; and I feel her tighten up, my orgasm heightened by Samantha's own as she comes on my cock, shuddering and whispering my name.

Fuck.

Samantha slumps forward and our foreheads rest together. We're both breathing hard. I feel like my heart is going to shoot right out of my chest.

I kiss her. Samantha responds, her hands roaming over my chest. It's soft and tender, and I feel like something in my chest is going to crack open. "I'm okay," I repeat. "Right as rain."

"You might not have been." Samantha pushes up so that I slide out of her, but she keeps kissing me.

I wrap my arms around her to hold her close. "That's how it works, you know that." I can feel a teasing smile forming on my face. "You've been watching your brother and me ride for years. You know what riding's like."

To my surprise, instead of smiling and giving in, Samantha pulls away. “Yes. I—I know.”

I frown at her and sit up properly, but instead of allowing me to pull her into my arms again, she keeps sliding away, getting onto her feet and using the first aid supplies to clean up. “Hey, this is my life. My career.”

“I know that.”

“You always had a thing for rodeo cowboys, and you can’t handle the risks we run?”

“The man I pick will retire and give that up. It’s a young man’s game, anyway.” Samantha puts her clothes back on.

“Well, this is who I am. You need to accept that.”

Samantha gives me a sad look. “That’s the thing. I’m not sure I can.”

She leaves me there, staring after her, wondering when the hell I fell in love with her enough for her to break my heart.

Chapter 21

Samantha

I don't know what shakes me up more: watching Travis nearly get trampled or the sex afterward.

I didn't know sex could feel like that, especially rushed sex with our clothes on in a first aid tent, of all places. It's nothing like what I imagined and planned my passionate sex to be with my partner, sex in a bed with low lighting and perhaps some mood music, with soft touches and whispered words.

There was nothing romantic about the sex we just had. And yet, I've never felt so connected to another person before. I've never felt so overwhelmed with my need for another person. Not just lust, although that was there, but *connection*. I wanted to have sex with Travis, not because I wanted to orgasm, but because I wanted to be as close to him as it's possible for a human being to be with someone else.

It scares me, how much I worried, and how much I needed him. How much I might—I might—

But it's *Travis*. I can't be in love with Travis!

This isn't how it's supposed to go.

I get home, my head still in a whirl. I know that I disappointed him. I don't think Travis is in love with me—how could he be?—but I've hurt him somehow, by not accepting his dream career. I don't know what he wants from me or what to do. I just know that I need to get my head on straight. I know that I don't want to be with someone if I'm constantly scared they'll die every other weekend.

My apartment feels cold and empty and too large as I get home. The

knowledge that Travis' penthouse is right above mine mocks me—it's so close, and yet, an uncrossable barrier.

I pull out my laptop instead and catch up on things, checking social media and emails, desperate for a distraction.

Sure enough, there is one:

I have an email from a literary agent.

She likes my manuscript.

She wants to meet to discuss representing me.

Chapter 22

Travis

Samantha takes the next week to work from home, and I'm fucking miserable.

It's not like she can't work from home. There are a few things that are better handled in person, but it's not a big enough deal to make her come into the office, especially when she so clearly wants to avoid me.

She knows how I feel, doesn't she? She figured it out. And she wants nothing to do with me. I'm not the man she ever wanted; she's made that clear time and again, and she's not great at letting me down gently after our years of fighting. Avoiding me must be her way of letting me know to let it go.

And yet, I can't.

By the time Friday hits, I feel like I'm going insane. I take off and drive to the one person I can go to when my head is like this: my mom.

She's still living at our family ranch house, where I grew up. She's still married to my father. She's still the same, even now that I'm no longer a child.

And she still welcomes me with the same warmth and affection.

"You're just in time to help me make dinner," she informs me and puts me on vegetable-chopping duty.

I watch her fondly as she moves around the kitchen, putting everything together. "Mom, can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Why did you stay married to Dad?"

It's a hell of a question. I've considered asking her a thousand times over

the years, but I knew it would probably distress her, and it never felt right to upset her to satisfy my own curiosity.

Now, though, now it matters.

Mom is quiet for a long moment, focusing on her cooking—stirring the onions caramelizing in the pan and seasoning the meat. Then, she speaks.

“It was a different time back then, Travis. There was still a lot of pressure—pressure to stand by your man no matter what, pressure to make sure you didn’t ruin your child’s home life. We were told that divorcing someone would be terrible for our kids and that it would make our kids depressed and angry. I didn’t want that for you. And it’s not like your father... he never hit me or spoke to me rudely. He was always buying me presents.”

“To make up for the affairs.”

“I know.” Mom’s tone is gentle. “But at the time, it felt like... well, I couldn’t really complain, could I? I had a beautiful son, a beautiful home, my needs were taken care of.”

“You were humiliated. Disrespected.”

“I thought that leaving him would only make a bad situation worse. And now I’m, well, I’m just used to it. He lives his life, I live mine. What’s the point in a messy legal struggle?” She shrugs. “Why do you ask, honey? After all this time?”

I swallow hard. “I... uh... there’s this girl.”

Mom smiles. “Tell me about her.”

So I do.

“And I don’t know. I understand why she was so scared. It is scary. I’m not saying my riding is risk-free. I’ve seen men get ribs crushed. It’s not all fun and games; it’s a lot of mud, blood, and tears. But I don’t want to give it up. Not when I’ve still got a couple of years left in me.” I look over at Mom as we wash up. “Does that make me selfish? Like how Dad was selfish?”

Mom shakes her head.

“Be honest with me, Mom. I know I’m your kid, but that means you gotta tell me if I’m messing up. I don’t want to be like him.”

Mom rinses her hands off, then grabs a towel and dries them. She turns to face me. “Honey, your father’s problem is that he’s never once considered how it must make me feel. You’re worried about how Samantha will feel and how to respect her; that’s the most important thing. Chasing a dream is different than what your father did. He just chased his whims. This is important to you. So, no, you’re not like him. I promise.”

“Then what do I do? How do I resolve this?”

Mom laughs a little, but gently. “Have you considered telling her how you feel? Telling her the fears and concerns you just told me?”

I feel a bit like I’m six years old again and just chased a frog through the house while covered in mud. “Well, when you put it like that.”

Mom puts her hand on my arm. “I get it, Travis. It’s scary to talk about these things. Maybe if I’d had the courage to talk about these things, your father and I could’ve had a healthier marriage. Or at least I could’ve walked away and found someone who would love me enough to be loyal. But you won’t get anywhere if you don’t tell her how you feel and what you’re thinking.”

I nod. The idea does terrify me, but I know that Mom’s right. I have to man up and tell Samantha how I’m feeling and what I want. If nothing else, at least it’ll be all out in the open and I’ll be able to pick up the busted pieces of my heart and try to move on.

I head back home. It’s a good thing she lives below me. Going to see her is as easy as taking the elevator to my place and getting off one floor early.

But when I get there and knock on the door, it’s not Samantha who opens it: it’s Oscar.

“Hey.” I try to peer around him. Is Samantha there?

“Hey,” Oscar replies. “Do you know where Samantha is?”

I stare at him. “What? She’s not here?”

Oscar pulls back to let me in. I enter, and I immediately notice the difference. The apartment is cleared out. Empty.

“She just left a note,” Oscar explains. “She says that she apologizes for skipping out on work and this is her quitting.”

“And she didn’t tell you where she went or why?”

Oscar shakes his head. “I came here wondering why she sent me a text saying she’d be kind of unreachable for a bit and not to worry.”

“So, of course, you instantly worried.”

He shrugs. “I’m her brother, of course I did.”

I look around. I have no idea where she could’ve gone, no clue whatsoever.

What the hell happened?

And is she okay?

Chapter 23

Samantha

When I throw up after the meeting with the literary agent, I figure it's just nerves.

But then, I wake up the next day feeling sick again.

I don't know what's wrong, so I go to stock up on cold medicine. While I'm at the drugstore, I head down the aisle, and something catches my eye.

Pregnancy tests.

I glance down at my flat stomach. I don't *feel* pregnant. But the last two times we had sex, we definitely forgot the condom; caught up in the moment. And I have felt sick in the mornings.

I try to think back to when I last had my period, and I can't remember. Crap.

I eye the tests again.

Surely it can't hurt to just take one and confirm I'm not pregnant, right?

I snatch it up before I can change my mind and hurry home.

And then the pregnancy test ends up being positive.

My mind races. I can't be pregnant. Well, clearly, I can, but... none of this is how I planned for my life to go. None of this is the order I wanted it to be in. And with Travis Ray's child? When he doesn't even have time for a girlfriend? I can't possibly make him a father right now.

But I can't possibly give a child of mine up, either.

I stay up all night thinking about what to do. I could try and pass the baby off as someone else's, but I don't know how much Travis or anyone will believe that when they've all seen me turn men down. But...

My literary agent has taken me on and is really excited about my

manuscript. She suggested in our meeting that I move to New York City since it's still the heart of publishing, even in our digital world. I hadn't thought to do it, really, since I still have my family here, and I love Texas and the rodeo culture, but...

If I move to NYC, I can claim that I had a one-night stand—some wild fling. I'll pass the baby off as some stranger's. That way, Travis won't feel an obligation to me or the baby. He already gave up dedicating himself to his rodeo career in order to save his family's company. He's split in two, I'm not going to split him in three. I won't make him fill up his life with one more thing he feels he has to do rather than something that genuinely makes him happy.

Besides, we could never work out as a couple. I believe that Travis would try because he's a good person, a much better man than I ever gave him credit for all these years, but how could we ever truly be compatible?

I won't trap him in a marriage he doesn't want. Not after meeting his father and hearing about how his mother suffered. I would never run around cheating on him, but does it really matter what kind of bad it is? The marriage would still be unfair to him and make him miserable.

I can't do that to Travis. I can't do that to anyone, but especially not him. I won't hurt the man I... I won't hurt someone I care about like that.

Moving to NYC is terrifying, but if nothing else, I can stay there long enough to pretend to get pregnant and keep people from guessing the real father. Thanks to Travis' generosity with my salary, I can afford to find a motel and stay there for a bit while I either find a permanent apartment or kill time until I come back home.

The temptation to tell my brother is strong. I've always told Oscar everything. As frustrated as I am with him trying to set Travis and me up, he did end up being right about how I'd feel about him. And he's always been there for me and had my back.

But if I tell him, being the incurable romantic that he is, he'll insist that I tell Travis and that I can make it work with him. He'll want me to tell Travis about the baby. And I can't do that.

I'm not giving up my dream of being a writer, and I wouldn't respect anyone who tried to stop me. Why would I turn it around and demand Travis end his rodeo dreams to be a father and chain himself to me?

I pack up everything in my apartment. I put the big things like my romance novel collection and the few pieces of furniture I have in storage,

then pack my clothes and some other necessities and take them with me on the flight.

The motel is decent, the room is clean but dated in the decor. I don't need it to be fancy or homey, just a place where I can rest safely while I figure out my next move.

Then I go to the doctor's.

The OBGYN informs me that the baby is healthy and I'm not too far along. I feel elated and terrified at the same time. I want to be a mother and seeing the beginnings of life on the ultrasound has me tearing up with joy. I already love this baby so much.

But on the other hand, I've messed up my plan for myself. I know being a single parent isn't easy, and I won't have the time I want for writing as soon as the baby is born and needs me. But I'll need some way to financially support myself. I don't want to move back in with my parents, and I won't have a husband to support me.

I messed up. And now I have to find a way to keep going.

My literary agent is excited that I'm in NYC, although I haven't told her about the pregnancy. It's just that I'm working on other manuscripts for her, so I figure, if I only have about nine months before everything will be about the baby, I need to write as much as I can now, and then the heavy-duty parts of writing will be taken care of once the baby arrives.

"I'm impressed with your speed," Rachel, my literary agent, tells me when I inform her I've finished the rough draft for a new manuscript. "Send it over, I'll read it and we'll have a lunch meeting to discuss it. I'm already hearing good things about your last one from publishers so I have hope we'll close a deal shortly."

"That's great news." If I can do well on this book and have a few others lined up for editing and so on, then maybe I can make enough to live off.

I try not to let my hopes get too high as I make my way to the literary agency offices for lunch. Rachel's got a great client list but she's been kind enough to be realistic with me. She's not filling my head up with pie-in-the-sky dreams. Most authors make only a modest income, and I need to be smart about my finances. But I can make a modest income work. Goodness knows my family has never been made of money, so...

I enter the lobby and stop cold, my thoughts screeching to a halt.

Travis is leaning against the receptionist's desk. "Hey, Sam."

Holy shit. How did he find me?

Chapter 24

Travis

I'm frantic with worry.

Samantha is extremely responsible and reliable. It's part of why Oscar was able to convince me to hire her even when I didn't like her. She's not the type to do reckless things or just vanish like this.

Oscar's worried too. He begs me not to tell their parents just yet, so we don't worry them unnecessarily if it turns out to be nothing. I really don't think it's "nothing," but I understand not wanting to raise alarm bells too soon, and it's not my family, so I don't think I have the right to protest.

I just really, really want to find her.

There's no sign of where she could've gone. My Human Resources staff at my company don't know anything. They're directly depositing her paychecks into her bank account like usual, and I can't get into her banking information without authorization, and neither can Oscar. She took her laptop so he can't try getting into her accounts through there, and none of her friends know where she could've gone.

Her whole life is here in Texas. Where else could she possibly go?

My mind jumps to kidnapping, but I know that doesn't really make sense. What kidnapper would clean out the apartment?

My work is slipping. I honestly feel bad for my new assistant for once. It's not her fault I'm a mess and can't keep track of anything. At least she's not trying to flirt with me.

Something's seriously wrong with Samantha. I don't know what, but there has to be. She wouldn't disappear on her brother like this without a very, very good reason. On me? Yeah, sure she would. Especially after our

last conversation.

I can't stop wondering if she might have feelings for me. If I might not be alone in how I feel. But even if I'm not, it's clear the rodeo riding is a hard limit for her, a line she can't cross.

But I don't want to give it up. I can't ask that of myself. I'd never ask that of her with her writing career.

I don't know what to do, but ultimately, I just hope that she's safe.

My new assistant clears her throat. "Um. Mr. Ray?"

I wince. I'm fretting at my desk again, not actually getting work done. I try to remember my assistant's name and I can't. Crap. "Yes?"

"I was going through older emails for that contract you asked for, and I don't mean to be a tattletale or anything, but I think your old assistant made a mistake?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I think she linked her personal and business email." My new assistant turns her laptop around to face me and sets it on the desk. "See? She probably did it so she wouldn't miss a work email while out of the office or at home, but it means that her work email gets all of her personal emails, too. My email address is the same as hers for work, the assistant email, so I have all her old personal emails, too. What would you like me to do with them? Just delete them? I'm worried that will delete them for her too."

I lean forward, and I can feel my eyes going wide. There are Samantha's personal emails. All of them.

Normally, I wouldn't even consider going through the private correspondence of someone, even someone I love, but this could give Oscar and me a clue as to where she's gone and if she's in trouble.

"Thanks." I wince internally, still not sure what my assistant's name is. Damn, I've been distracted. "I'll look through these. I think we'll have to ask her about it, but in the meantime, I'll just move all these to a separate folder so you don't have to deal with them."

I move everything to a new folder and quickly skim the emails. There's nothing that sends off alarm bells in my head, not that I really expected an email from "badguy07" telling Samantha to pack her bags and flee or else. But everything seems mundane. There are a lot of emails to literary agents and a few from literary agents in response. One agent has picked her up as a client. That's great, says she thinks...

She thinks Samantha should move to New York, and Samantha says yes.

I copy down the name of the literary agent and find where her offices are located in NYC. This is fucking insane, but if Samantha's gone to New York, then this literary agent is the only way I can find out where she is.

"Cancel all my meetings," I tell my new assistant. "And book me a flight to NYC. Now. I'm going to head to the airport."

I call Oscar on the way. "I found her, kind of. She's in New York City. I'm headed there now."

"Does she seem okay?"

"As far as I can tell, she's not there with a gun to her head."

"Just... don't push her buttons, okay? I want my sister home and safe, not on trial for murdering my best friend."

"I'll do my best."

I'm agitated the entire flight. My new assistant did prove herself—she got a hold of a colleague of mine with a private jet who owes me, and I've chartered it, so at least I don't have to worry about bothering anyone else as I pace up and down the aisle of the plane.

When I land in New York, I get a text from my new assistant saying she booked me a suite at the Plaza. I didn't think about a hotel room, so desperate to get here and find Samantha. Maybe I will keep this assistant on after all.

I head to the hotel room, order a new suit to be delivered, and take a quick shower to freshen up so I don't smell like an airport. Then I head to the literary agency office.

My heart is pounding as I arrive. I haven't felt this nervous since I was a teenager and trying to ask girls out. I walk up to the receptionist at the front desk in the lobby. "Hi, I'm looking for a Rachel Liebowitz. She's one of your literary agents?"

The receptionist nods, eyes not leaving her computer. "She'll be down in just a second. You can wait for her here."

The elevator dings open as if on cue and a brunette woman in a business suit bustles over. "Has she arrived yet?" she asks the receptionist, ignoring me.

"Hi, are you Rachel?"

Rachel frowns. "I'm sorry, who are you?"

"Hi, I'm Travis. I'm a friend of Samantha Davis."

Rachel's eyes light up with understanding even as she tries to maintain a neutral expression on her face. Aha. So this *is* Samantha's literary agent. "I'm sorry, but why are you here?"

“I’m here because she’s disappeared, and this is the only place I know of where she might be. Her brother and I are worried. She left in the middle of the night with no warning.”

Rachel’s eyes go a bit wide, and I know she didn’t know that. Samantha must not have told her, and honestly, why would she? “I’m sorry, but I can’t help you.”

“Please, just tell me where she is so we can make sure she’s okay.”

“Even if you are who you say you are, and you’re not some creep who’s just trying to tug on my heartstrings to get information, I can’t give you private information about the people who work with us.”

“So she does work with you.”

“You can’t call her like a normal person?”

“She won’t answer.”

“Well, maybe she’s got a good reason for not answering.”

The front doors open and someone enters the lobby. I can only see out of the corner of my eye, and yet, the figure strikes me as familiar.

I turn, and sure enough, there she is. Samantha.

She stumbles to a halt as she sees me, freezing like a deer in the headlights.

I lean back against the receptionist’s desk and give her my most charming grin, unable to keep myself from bringing a bit of flirtation even after everything, like it’s a shield. “Hey, Sam.”

Sam stares at me. “What are you doing here?”

Rachel looks back and forth between us, eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Is everything okay, Samantha?”

“Everything’s fine.”

“No,” I counter. “Everything is not fine. You scared the shit out of us. We had no idea where you’d gone.”

“I told you, I quit, and I was fine.”

“With a note? And then dropping off the face of the earth? Yeah, forgive me if your brother and I didn’t really think that was enough to convince us you were okay. For all we knew, you could’ve written that note with a gun to your head.”

Samantha snorts. “I made a life change, I didn’t get kidnapped. This isn’t an action novel.”

“You sure? Because we’ve been following a romance novel pretty well so far.”

Rachel's eyebrows climb. She seems pretty interested now. "Mr..."
"Ray."

"Mr. Ray, why are you here?"

Funny, this whole time, I've never really thought about what I would say to Samantha. I was so busy worrying about her and trying to find her that I didn't think about what I'd do once I found her.

Now that she's here, I feel like... like all my reasons not to say how I feel are ridiculous. I know that she'll probably turn me down. But I haven't gotten anywhere in life, in business or the rodeo, by playing it safe. At least if I tell her, I can walk away knowing I was honest and gave it a fair shot.

"I'm here," I say, "because I'm in love with this woman, and I'm trying to tell her."

The receptionist makes a choking noise and Samantha's face flushes. "What?" she blurts out, voice strangled.

I take a deep breath. I'd literally feel less terrified riding a mad bull with a burr under the saddle right now. But no risk, no reward, and Samantha is a hell of a reward.

"I'm in love with you," I tell her honestly. "And I know that you've got a lot of sensible reasons for us not to be together. They make sense. But I know that you and I are both stubborn enough that there's nothing we can't work out if we want to. You're smart, you hold me to a high standard, and call me out—my new assistant actually isn't scared of me because of you. I might end up keeping the damn woman for longer than two weeks. You don't let me get away with shit, you care about me, and you support me when I need it. You're honest with me, and because you're so honest, I know that any kindness you give me is genuine and not just placation because I'm rich or charming.

"You're smart, confident, and so sexy it drives me insane. I don't care about logic or plans. Screw my plans. I'll move them around and I'll make it work. You're worth that."

The receptionist is gaping at us and Rachel's eyes are wide. I clear my throat. "I didn't really plan to have an audience when I said this."

Samantha looks like she might laugh or cry, and she's not sure which way it's going to go. She takes my hand and pulls me away. "Rachel, could you give us a moment?"

"Of course," Rachel replies.

Samantha leads me across the lobby to a waiting area with chairs and

couches. She sits me down on a couch and takes my other hand.

“I mean it. I didn’t come here to do some grand declaration in front of other people and make you feel pressured because there’s an audience. I just wanted to talk about it and tell you how I felt. Because maybe there is no chance for us, maybe we are dead in the water, but we don’t know until we discuss it, and so here I am.”

Samantha nods, biting her lip. Her dark hair is falling into her face again, and I tuck it behind her ear.

“I love that you came here,” she admits. Her eyes are wet. “It means a lot to me. I didn’t think you would ever do something like that. I didn’t think you would ever want something like that with me.”

“Well, I do. I mean it. I’d like to give us a chance. I know you’re all dead set against it but...”

“Not necessarily,” she admits. “I... I feel like we couldn’t, but...”

“How do we really know until we try?” I point out.

She shakes her head. Then takes a deep breath. “Travis, there’s something I have to tell you. If you really are serious.”

“I am.”

“Then...” Samantha draws herself up and looks me in the eyes. “I’m pregnant.”

Holy fuck.

Chapter 25

Samantha

I can see Travis' face morph from gentle affection and concern to shock, and I brace myself.

Having Travis come here was something I never would've expected. I know I should have told Oscar where I was, but I figured he would let me have my space. I didn't think he would panic. I certainly didn't think that Travis, of all people, would try and hunt me down to make sure I was okay. He managed to find my literary agency, I don't know how, and showed up to tell me he loved me?

What kind of novel am I living in?

Not one of my own, that's for sure. Because nothing about our relationship has gone the way that it would've if I were writing it.

The temptation to fall into his arms and beg him to keep praising me is strong. So is the desire to snap at him and tell him untrue, hurtful things so that he leaves.

I could lie to him. I could be mean. I could send him away. In a way, it might be the kinder thing to do, to spare him from being chained to me as a father when he doesn't want that.

But Travis deserves the truth. And if he's serious about wanting to be with me, then he should know what's going on and be allowed to decide if he's ready for this next step.

And, okay, yes, it means a lot to me that he flew out here and tracked me down. I never imagined that he would ever do anything like that for me, or possibly for any woman.

He went out on a limb for me. It makes me want to go out on a limb for

him.

“I’m pregnant.”

The shock sinks into Travis’ face and I wince. “I didn’t know how to tell you. I didn’t think you would care or want anything to do with the baby, but that you’d—you’d do the right thing anyway because that’s what you do. And you’d be miserable. I couldn’t stand it if I was the reason you were miserable.”

Travis nods, his face turning thoughtful. He takes my hands. “I’m sorry that I did anything to make you feel like you couldn’t tell me the truth, no matter what it was.”

An apology is the last thing I expected. It makes tears spring into my eyes again. “I’m sorry I just left like that. I was panicked, I wasn’t thinking straight. And I never meant for you or Oscar to panic.”

“I know.” Travis’ thumb rubs back and forth across the back of my hand. “So here’s what we’re going to do. You’re going to have your meeting with your literary agent because it’s amazing that you got one, and I’m going to go on a walk and think about what you told me.”

I nod, swallowing my tears. “Okay.”

He smiles at me gently. “I just need some time to wrap my head around this, okay?”

He leans in and kisses my forehead, then gets up and leaves.

Rachel, my agent, walks over. “You okay?”

“I’m good.” I wipe my eyes. “It was just a lot. I had no idea. I mean, I knew how I felt and I thought maybe I might mean more to him than just a one-night stand but...”

Rachel smiles and sits down next to me. “Honestly? That was one of the most romantic things I’ve ever seen.”

“It wasn’t exactly a grand speech.”

“Why would you trust a grand speech? In real life, people don’t have these amazing monologues ready. He cared enough to track you down and tell you publicly he loves you. It was simple, but it was honest and heartfelt. That’s real romance to me.” Rachel smiles. “I think it’s clear where you got the inspiration for your novel.”

“Oh.” I laugh nervously. “Travis isn’t... he wasn’t my inspiration. Travis is nothing like my hero in my novel.”

Even as I say the words out loud, they ring hollow. It’s true that my novels don’t follow how my life with Travis has gone. But at the same time,

my emotions over Travis were what fueled a lot of my writing. When I was concerned on his behalf, upset about him, or fantasizing about him, I would go to my novel and write. Maybe the circumstances of the novel aren't true, but the emotions are.

I clear my throat. "All right, so maybe, without realizing it, I was... inspired by my own emotions for this novel."

"I could feel it. The emotions of the characters felt raw and real to me. It's why I took you on as an author."

"But I'm serious, Travis isn't anything like—nothing about our relationship has been like what I write."

Rachel chuckles. "So? Real life often isn't like what we write."

"For me, I wanted it to be. I wrote what I wanted to have for myself, I wanted a romance like that."

"Well, it doesn't make you a fraud if that's not how it goes. We often write things that are different from our real lives." Rachel smiles kindly. "I have a writer who does dark, edgy mafia romances. You'd never know it from her novels, but she's the sweetest lady you'll ever meet. She's a grandmother, happily married for fifty years."

A surprised little "oh" leaves me.

Rachel nods. "It's okay if real life isn't how you planned it, and it's okay if what you thought you wanted out of a romance goes differently. For me, that's part of what makes real life so wonderfully messy. I think what matters most is if the love is there and if you want to be with him and he wants to be with you."

I admit, that is reassuring to hear. I think about what it would be like if I gave Travis a chance. I've been shutting down even the possibility of us being together, but Travis seems to really want it. I know he supports my writing, and that means a lot to me. It didn't feel like a big ask when I first started out, but now that I've dealt with my parents and others acting like I'm crazy, it's come to mean a lot more to me.

Travis turns me on, too, that's for sure. It's not something I really thought about as much when I was picturing my ideal man. I was thinking of his other qualities. But Travis makes me feel like I'm on fire. I lose all reason when I'm with him and he turns on that charm. All it takes for me to go crazy is a simple touch. And I admit I want that. I need that in a relationship.

And he's so much more responsible and mature than I ever used to give him credit for being. He would take good care of me, the way I want to be

taken care of, and still respect my independence and opinion.

I take a deep breath, the air rattling out of me shakily. “I guess I never gave him enough credit,” I admit. “I’m stubborn. I think that’s a good thing, most of the time. It means I succeed in my goals. But I think maybe I was too stubborn on this one. I couldn’t see what was right in front of me.” I wince. “Sorry, you’re my agent, not my therapist.”

Rachel laughs lightly. “Don’t apologize! You did just get a declaration right in front of me. I don’t mind. I’m a literary agent for romance novels. I love romance, real or fictional.” She leans in and says, conspiratorially, “I think you should get your man.”

“After this meeting. I gave him some big news, so he’s on a walk, thinking it over.”

Rachel looks like she might ask, but whatever expression is on my face makes her change her mind. “Okay then. Let’s talk about the new manuscript you sent me and what kind of schedule we want to set up for feedback and edits. I also have some potential offers on your first manuscript.”

Rachel did reassure me, at least about my role in all of this, and I’m able to mostly focus on the meeting. I can feel the idea settle into my heart as our meeting goes on. Being with Travis would be... it would be good. Great. Amazing, even. I just have to stop fighting it.

We finish the lunch meeting and head back from the sandwich shop around the corner. In the lobby, through the glass doors, I see Travis.

My heart picks up, and my nerves return.

What if he loves me but isn’t ready for fatherhood? What if he doesn’t want the baby?

I walk into the lobby, leaving Rachel behind. Travis stands up. I take a deep breath and walk over to him. “Did you have a nice walk?”

“I did. Central Park is nice.”

“I’m glad.”

“How was your meeting?”

“It went really well. Some publishers are interested in my manuscript and we worked out a schedule for my other drafts.”

“Great.”

I try not to fidget. Travis’ face is unreadable. That’s bad, right? That means he’s going to tell me he doesn’t want the baby, right? He’s going to try and let me down easy?

Travis takes my hand in his, then reaches up to push my hair out of my

face and behind my ear. “I needed to take some time to think. But... I love you. I want to be with you. And any baby I have with you, even if it’s earlier than planned, is a blessing because it’s ours.”

My heart swells, and before I know it, I’m bursting into tears of relief and joy, and Travis is kissing me.

I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy in my life.

Chapter 26

Travis

Seeing the look of joy on Samantha's face tells me I made the right decision.

My first response was fear. Not because I don't want to be a father and not because I don't want to be with Samantha, but because of that instinctive terror that I'll be just as bad as my father was.

My father was never abusive. He never hit me or anything like that. He just never really cared. He was too selfish to be a parent. It was all about him and what he wanted, just like his marriage was. He resents me now, I know, for taking the company from him, and he'll make whatever little jabs he can, but growing up, he just wasn't really there. My mother did all the work of raising me.

I don't want to be like that for my kid. I don't want to be like my father. And that old fear grips me, telling me that I can't possibly be a good parent when that was my example.

But then I go out into the fresh air and walk through Central Park, taking in the greenery. I think about my mother and how much she would love to be a grandparent. She was the one who really raised me, as I'm happy to tell anyone who will listen. Couldn't I just follow her example instead of my father's?

Samantha's assured me that I'm not like my father, at least not in business or in how I treat women, and I trust her. I trust her to know what she's talking about. And I know that I'm better at running the company than he is, that's for damn sure. If I can do that, then I can be better at fatherhood than he is, as well, right?

I'm still nervous. But I want Samantha, and I want this with her. I didn't think I would get a serious relationship and a family until after I ended my rodeo career, when I would have time for it. But Samantha has her own goals and dreams too. She's going to make it work with motherhood, and she's not going to be the type to sit around at home twiddling her thumbs wishing I was there when I've got a meeting to attend with the shareholders. She's going to be living her own life and pursuing her own career.

If she's willing to make this work, then I am too. And the look of happy disbelief on her face seals it for me. Above all, I want Samantha to be happy, and being a mother is one of the big things she wants in life. And making her happy makes me happy.

"Let's go," I tell her, taking her hand and leading her out of the building.

"Go where?"

"To get you a ring."

Samantha stops walking and I glance back at her. "What, you didn't think I was going to just have a baby with you and not marry you, did you? I want to make you my wife, baby or no baby, but if you think we're going to have a kid and not have me put a ring on your finger, you're crazy."

Samantha laughs, the sound bubbling up out of her like she can't help it, and she wipes her eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Am I sure?" I roll my eyes fondly and wrap an arm around her waist to pull her in, kissing her. "I'm sure that I love you. Everything else is just icing on the cake."

Samantha kisses me back, and I can taste both her smile and her happy tears.

I know that she's not one for being spoiled. She's a simple girl from a small town who grew up getting her hands (and everything else, honestly, rodeos are mud pits) dirty helping out at the rodeos while her brother rode. She likes to earn her way.

But I'm determined to spoil her in this. Getting an engagement ring and getting married are two of the most important things in someone's life, especially for a romantic like Samantha. I'm going to give her the best of the best and throw my money around a little for once.

So I take her to 5th Avenue.

"Any shop," I tell her. "Cartier? Tiffany? Harry Winston?"

Samantha laughs a little incredulously. "You're serious?"

"Dead serious. Whatever you want. Don't even bother looking at the

price tag.”

She bites her lip. “I’ve actually... diamonds are nice and I know they’re traditional. But I’ve always preferred pearls. I know it’s unconventional, but...”

“You’re an unconventional girl. Even if you pretend you’re not.” I wink at her and squeeze her hand. “Okay. I know just the place.”

We go to Mikomoto, and I let Samantha peruse the rings. She takes her time, her brow puckered in serious thought, examining them from every angle. “May I try them on?” she asks the salesperson.

The salesperson sends me a quick, amused look. “Yes, of course.”

She tries on a few, and I think they all look lovely on her, but then she puts on one with a silver metal band lined in diamonds that wraps around the large white pearl in the center, and I see her eyes light up.

I grin. “I think that’s the one.”

“I agree,” the salesperson says. She’s just been standing quietly, apparently sensing that Samantha isn’t the type of client who wants to be flattered and chatted with. “It suits you.”

The diamonds frame the pearl almost like leaves or petals. It’s classic and elegant without being too overwhelming or flashy. Samantha smiles up at me. “You sure?”

“I told you, get anything you want. If you really want this one, then it’s yours.”

Samantha grabs me and kisses me. I can’t stop grinning as she turns and holds the ring out. “This one, please.”

The moment I finish paying for it, I slide the ring onto her finger. The salesperson doesn’t even bother offering to gift wrap it, just smiling as I put the ring on Samantha’s finger. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” Samantha gushes. “We’re engaged!” She immediately blushes. “Uh. In case that wasn’t obvious.”

“Don’t worry,” the salesperson replies. “We get it all the time.”

I take Samantha’s ring-laden hand and lead her out into the sunshine. I can’t stop staring at it on her finger. It looks beautiful, nestled on her hand, and more than that—it shows the world that she’s really mine. She said yes. She wants to be with me.

It gives me a thrill, a joy, that I truly never expected. I knew that I’d want to be a husband someday, but it wasn’t something I dwelled on too much. Now, knowing that I’m a fiancée and I’m about to be a husband, knowing that

Samantha is going to be my *wife*, it makes me so damn happy I don't even have words for it.

"Where have you been staying?" I ask.

"Just this motel." She shrugs.

"Not anymore. You're staying with me. I'll have someone go to your room and bring your stuff over."

"Over where?"

I lead her back up 5th Avenue toward Central Park. "The Plaza suite."

Samantha's eyes go wide. "Travis. Don't spoil me."

I shake my head. "That's where you're wrong. You're my future wife. I get to spoil you however much I want, and I already got the room, anyway. Now I get the pleasure of watching you enjoy it."

Samantha blushes—and then her eyes go a bit wide in horror. I stop walking, worried something's wrong. Maybe she's changed her mind. Maybe she's realized I can't give her what she really needs.

"Travis." She looks at me. "My parents *hate* you."

Oh. Right. That.

Chapter 27

Samantha

Travis tugs me back along the street. “We’ll worry about your parents when we get back to Austin.”

My gut twists nervously. My parents are stubborn people. The fact that they went behind my back to try and set me up with a guy and then that guy showed up at my damn apartment proves that. They don’t like Travis and never have. I can’t see them agreeing easily to the idea of me marrying him.

Travis squeezes my hand. “Don’t think about them, baby. Okay? They’ll still be there when we go back to Austin. Right now, just think about us. Are you happy? About us?”

He’s called me pet names before, but only while we were having sex, when it felt like something he would say to anyone to make it sound good and feel better, more intimate. But this is the first time it’s outside of that, the first time it feels like it really means something.

I melt a little. “I am. I am happy.”

I’m going to be a mom and a wife, like I’ve always wanted, but it’s with a man who will respect my career. My career is even going somewhere. It’s all happening at once, instead of my careful step-by-step plan, but for the first time, I don’t care. All that matters is how I feel.

“Then let’s focus on that.” Travis leads me down the street. “C’mon.”

I let him lead me to the Plaza Hotel, his hand caught up in mine the whole time. Austin is really growing on me as a city. It feels so young, so vibrant, growing and changing right in front of my very eyes.

But I have to admit, Austin or NYC, I’ve never been in a building this fancy before. I try not to gape a little as Travis leads me through confidently,

my hand still caught up in his. I'm glad that I dressed nicely for my lunch meeting with Rachel, and the ring on my finger is a special comfort. I do belong in a fancy place like this, because Travis belongs here, and I belong with Travis.

I try not to stare too much at my ring, either, but I find my eye drawn to it again and again. It's just so beautiful, and I'm sure it cost a fortune. Travis told me not to bother about price tags so I didn't, partially to save my sanity. I knew if I looked at what they cost, it would be all I could think about, and I might not be able to bring myself to pick one out without guilt.

But I really do love this ring. I don't care what it cost. I care that I picked it out, and Travis got it for me because he wants to marry me. And now the whole world will know I'm his and he's mine every time they see this ring on my finger.

We get up to the floor where Travis has a massive split-level suite overlooking Central Park. I can feel him grinning at me as I wander through the space, taking it all in. "I can't wait to move you into the penthouse back home."

My face flushes. I do like his penthouse, with its big windows and its views. And the guest bedroom. "You sure you're okay with little toddler hands getting all over those big windows?"

"That's what a cleaning service is for, right? And we can do up the guest bedroom as the nursery."

I turn and stare at him. Travis stares right back at me. "What?"

"Just—" It's really sinking in for me. "You really want this."

Travis doesn't make a quip, roll his eyes, smirk, or do anything to lighten the mood or tease me. He nods, his face warm and open but serious. "Yes. I do."

I have no words, so I stride forward and kiss him instead.

Travis groans deep in his chest and his hands fall to my hips, kissing me back. We kiss slowly, without any rush, and it feels like the opposite of when we last had sex, when it was frantic and desperate and I was out of my mind with fear and the realization that I loved him. Now the love is still there, but all the fear and rush is gone.

There's only joy, and satisfaction.

Travis slides his hands all over my body, slowly, exploring, like this is our first time and he's trying to map out my body. And in a way, it does feel like that. It's the first time we're not rushing, fueled by anger or adrenaline or

some combination. We can take our time.

It might seem silly, but it feels like we're making love.

Travis' hands slide up under my blouse, his fingers skimming over my skin, making me shiver. He slowly pushes my blouse up and off, tossing it to the side, then undoes my bra, kissing down my neck to between my breasts, sucking at my nipples as the bra falls away. I run my hands through his hair, scratching lightly at his scalp. "Travis."

He doesn't pull his mouth away from my breast. Instead, he wraps his arms around the backs of my thighs and lifts me in one fluid motion as he stands straight again. I squeak in surprise, holding onto him. "Travis!"

He carries me up to the second floor of the hotel suite, my legs wrapped around him. I can feel how hard he's getting against my thigh and I grind against him a little, not wanting to make him lose balance, just hoping to tease him a little.

Travis groans, flicking his tongue over my nipple and making me shiver. He gets me up the stairs and carries me to the bedroom, setting me down on the bed and planting kisses all over my skin. I sigh into it, arching up toward his mouth, wanting more.

Travis doesn't seem inclined to rush to the main event, though. He keeps kissing me all over, undoing my skirt and slowly pushing it off me as he nips and sucks at my skin. I wonder if I'll have marks from his mouth, small light bruises, and the idea makes me shiver.

He pauses over my stomach, his hand smoothing over the still-flat planes. I have a bit of a tummy, just naturally, but there's definitely no baby bump yet. Travis drops a kiss there. "Hi," he murmurs, like he's talking to the baby.

I laugh. "There's no way they can hear you."

"Yet," Travis points out. "I gotta get into the habit."

My eyes feel a bit wet and my heart swells. He's so into the idea of our baby, so on board with it, and I didn't think that would be possible. I was so scared, and it turned out there was no reason to be. Travis seems lit up with joy as he talks about our future baby. It makes warmth spread through me, and I feel so safe and reassured.

Travis pulls up and kisses his way to my mouth. I part my lips and let him kiss me slick and deep, his tongue stroking against mine. His body presses down against mine, and I shiver at the contrast between his clothed body and my naked one. It makes me feel vulnerable in a delicious, naughty way.

My fingers pluck at his button-up shirt. "Off," I whisper, kissing along his

jaw as he strokes my thigh. I can feel myself getting wet, shivering as I feel the bulge of his cock through his jeans, but as much as I want him, I want him naked more, his warm skin against mine.

Travis pushes up and lets me help him undo his shirt while he undoes his pants, pushing them down and kicking them out of the way. I push his shirt off, my mouth watering at the sight of his hard cock.

He's had his mouth on me, but so far, I've really let Travis take the lead on everything, except the last time when I pushed him down and rode him.

I lean in and lick at his cock.

Travis groans softly. "Sam..."

I wrap my hand around the base, keeping it positioned so I can lick all over the shaft and lap at the head. Travis' hands slide into my hair, and he shivers and twitches as I keep exploring his cock with my lips and tongue.

Finally, I take the head of his cock into my mouth, sucking on it while swirling my tongue around it. Travis groans again. "Samantha, seriously—fuck—you're doing so well, sweetheart, but if you keep that up..."

I bob my head up and down, taking more of him into me. I can only get down about halfway, needing more practice to take all of his thick length, my jaw aching—but it still feels so good to use my mouth on him, to feel so intimate with every twitch and leak of his cock and just how badly he wants me. It makes me feel dirty and naughty but also powerful, and there's a part of me that wants to keep going, to bob up and down on his cock until he spills into my mouth.

But that's for another time. The rest of me wants too badly for him to be inside me.

I pull off, licking my lips, and Travis groans again. "Ugh, you're gonna kill me."

"About time I started giving as good as I'm getting," I point out.

"You always do." Travis grins. "It's why I love you."

He says it so easily and simply, like he's always thinking it and is finally just now voicing it, and it means the world to me, the words fluttering like butterflies to lodge into my chest.

Travis kisses me, then picks me up a little and carries me farther up the bed so that I'm supported by the frankly obscene amount of pillows that are arranged artfully at the head of the mattress.

He presses me down into the pillows and I wrap my arms around him, spreading my legs to take him between my thighs, cradling his body as it

sinks against mine. His weight, firm muscles, and warm skin all feel so good. I touch every single one of his scars from rodeo riding, the proof of exactly how strong and determined of a man he is.

Travis kisses me again and again, grinding his cock slowly against my wet clit. Normally, I would accuse him of teasing me, but it doesn't feel like that right now. It just feels like enjoying the build-up, the foreplay, and every step of connection between our bodies.

I scratch my nails lightly down his back and rock up into his movements, enjoying the way he just naturally pins me down like this, enjoying every single one of his deep, hungry kisses.

Finally, the head of his cock slips inside, and I moan. It feels so *good*. I dig my heels into his back and encourage him to push further inside of me, gasping in pleasure at the stretch.

Travis groans, his forehead resting against my shoulder, and he thrusts into me with deep, rocking movements. It feels so unbelievably good because we're savoring it. Because we're able to enjoy every single moment without guilt or pretense.

I have no idea how long we have sex like this—both of us running our hands all over each other while he fucks me, kissing over and over. It doesn't matter how long it is. I honestly don't even care if I orgasm. I just care about feeling the pleasure of my connection with Travis and being as close to him as it's possible to be with another person.

Eventually, though, as the warm golden afternoon light spills across our bodies on the bed, Travis speeds up, finally chasing our orgasms.

The glide of his cock inside of me feels so fucking good, and I find myself letting out little noises as I rock up into him. Oh, yes, it feels so good, so very good. I gasp and moan into his mouth as I feel my orgasm building up inside of me. I'm so—I'm so—

“Travis,” I gasp out. “Travis, I'm—I'm going to—oh—”

I shudder and my vision blurs as my orgasm rolls through me, long and powerful. It takes its time leaving me, drawn out like a piece of taffy. Travis growls and speeds up, losing his rhythm, and a few moments later, I feel him come inside of me.

The hot, possessive feeling of it makes my body pulse with pleasure. Travis drops frantic kisses all over my face. “Feels so good, being inside you like that.”

Even after everything, I can feel myself blushing. “I... when we had sex

at your penthouse and you came inside of me, I was... I was a little disappointed.”

“Oh?”

“I imagined... I kind of wanted you to knock me up.”

Travis smirks. “Glad I could make that happen for you.”

I laugh, and he kisses me. “Let’s try out the fancy tub they’ve got in there.”

“Mmm. Yes, please.”

Travis isn’t anything like what I thought I would find in a partner or what I dreamed about. But I find, as he spoils me in our luxurious hotel room, that he does actually give me the sweet, romantic side that I had daydreamed about so often growing up.

It feels like a little honeymoon bubble, although, of course, we aren’t even married yet. I’m floating on cloud nine, wrapped up in joy and excitement—until it’s time to go home.

Then I remember my parents.

I call Oscar as we head to the airport. He’s relieved to hear that I’m okay and excited about the baby and the engagement. “Have you told Mom and Dad?”

“That’s what we plan to do when we get back home,” I admit. “I... I don’t know how they’re going to handle it.”

“You’re getting married and you’re pregnant; what more could they possibly want, y’know?”

“To Travis. With Travis’ baby.”

“They’re not going to care, not at the end of the day.”

I admire my brother’s optimism, even if I can’t share in it. I hope he’s right.

We touch down in Austin, and Travis takes me to his penthouse so we can freshen up and I can give my parents a call. They’re surprised to hear from me, which isn’t all that shocking. I haven’t spoken to them since that whole debacle with the family dinner that was secretly a damn date setup.

I tell them I have some important news, that I’d love to stop by, and that I’ll be bringing someone with me. I can hear the suspicion in their voices, but they agree.

And then there’s nothing to do but go and see them.

I look at Travis as he parks the car in my parents’ driveway. I take a deep breath. “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

Travis takes my hand. “Sam, I don’t care if your parents love me or hate me. I don’t give a damn if they ever like me. I only care that I get to be with you and help you raise our child. All right? Everything else, we have time to figure out.”

I nod. He’s right. If my parents need time or space, that’s okay. What matters is that they know this is my choice and that I’m not changing my mind. I’m going to be with Travis. He’s who makes me happy.

I step out of the car and head in to see whatever mess awaits us.

Chapter 28

Travis

I don't want Samantha to know, but I am a little nervous about confronting her parents and telling them about us.

I mean what I say to her as we pull up to her parents' house. I don't care if they love me or hate me, I don't need their approval. I have what I need to make me happy, and that's Samantha and our baby.

But I do worry, because I know that if her parents put up a fuss and are angry with her, that will make Samantha upset, and I don't want her to be upset going into our marriage. I don't want this strain with her parents to cast a pall over the beginning of our life together.

There's only one way to handle this, though, and that's to go in and face it head-on, just like a steer in a rodeo.

Samantha lets herself into the house with her key, and I follow. "Mom, Dad, we're here!"

"We're in the living room!"

We go in and I see her parents' faces go from tentatively pleased to outright disbelieving and angry. "Samantha? What's the meaning of this?" her mother asks. "What's going on?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Davis." I smile. "It's good to see you."

Mr. Davis stands. "Travis. What are you doing here?"

Samantha takes a deep breath. "We're here to tell you about our engagement."

She holds out her left hand, showing off her beautiful ring. My heart thumps loudly in my chest. Every time I see that ring on her finger, I melt all over again.

Her father's eyes go wide. Her mother looks like she's choking. "Why?"

"Because we want to?" Samantha says, her voice going up like it's a question. "That's usually why people get engaged."

"But honey, you don't like him! You've never liked him!"

Samantha shrugged. "We ended up spending a lot of time together while I was working for him. I changed my mind."

"And you're content to be, what, the trophy wife of some rich, spoiled..."

"I'm not going to be a trophy wife. Travis supports my writing career. He's happy for me and my success." Samantha pauses. "Oh, yes, I have a literary agent and my novel is being sold to publishers. No need to pretend to congratulate me."

"Well..." Her father seems to be scrambling for what to say. "Of course, we are genuinely happy for your career, Samantha, it's..." He glances at me.

"There's one more thing." Samantha seems to be adopting a 'rip the bandage off' approach. "I'm pregnant."

Her parents both start talking at once over each other, erupting into questions. I step forward and clear my throat. "Okay, okay, one at a time, please."

"Is this why you're marrying him?" Mrs. Davis asks. "Honey, you don't have to, you know—it's the 21st Century. We'll help you raise the baby, you have no obligation to marry him just because of a—broken condom or a one-night stand. We all make mistakes."

"Don't hold her to this," Mr. Davis orders me like I'm a child. "She doesn't have to do a damn thing. You can provide child support without having to marry her. And that's if she even wants your support. She has us, she doesn't need whatever scraps of money you care to throw her."

"What the hell?" Samantha sounds and looks genuinely thrown for a loop. "You think I'm marrying him just because I'm pregnant?"

"Why else would you marry him?" her mother pleads.

"Because he's a good man who makes me a better person and takes care of me?"

"Okay, that's enough." I raise my voice, but I don't snap.

I need to treat this like I treat the animals in the rodeo. Not an enemy to overcome, but someone who's already on my side; they just don't know it yet. I keep my voice calm.

"Samantha is one of the most stubborn and self-aware people I know. She

knows her mind, what she wants, and who she wants to be. She challenges me and doesn't put up with my crap. And you're acting like she's being bullied into a marriage she doesn't want with a man she doesn't like, just because she's pregnant?

"I can't picture Samantha being in a marriage that makes her unhappy. She wasn't even going to tell me about the baby because she thought I wouldn't want to be a father. She went off to New York on her own. I had to chase her down and tell her I loved her. She was going to raise the baby on her own, possibly with your help, just as you're suggesting.

"But I love her. Truly. And she loves me. That's why we're getting married. Not because of any obligation or because she's spineless or stupid. Your daughter is smart, independent, and bold, and you need to appreciate her and her choices. I'm marrying your daughter whether you like it or not, and if you don't want to accept that, fine. I don't care if you like me. But I do care that you respect your daughter. I care that you accept Samantha for who she is and what she wants, instead of who you've decided she should be."

There's dead silence in the room for a moment—and then Samantha bursts into tears.

Chapter 29

Samantha

I can't help it. I burst into tears.

They're not upset tears, although I am upset at how little faith my parents have in me. They really think that I would marry someone I didn't love just for his money and to save my reputation like we're in the Regency era? Like I have to marry the father of my child or I'll be labeled a disgrace?

It makes me so angry and has me in disbelief. I didn't realize that my parents really thought so little of who I am. It hurts—a pain deep in my chest. I love my parents. I don't want them to be out of my life. But I also can't put up with this dismissal of what I want and what makes me happy.

And then Travis swoops in.

I recognize his tone of voice, even though I've never heard this tone before. It's like the vocal version of his body language when he steps into the ring and swings onto the bull. He's in control, and he doesn't need to prove it. He's not trying to argue with my parents; he's just stating facts.

And he defends me. He stands up for me. He praises me.

My gratitude rises in me and I can't stop myself from crying. It just means so much to me how Travis is ready to defend me and support me; the way he loves my fire, my career goals, and my passion, and he appreciates that I don't make it easy for him and demand the best in him.

Travis looks alarmed. "Sam..."

I shake my head. "I'm okay, I'm okay, sorry, I'm just—I love you."

I feel stupid saying it like that, but Travis melts and pulls me into his arms, kissing my head. "Hey, I love you too, sweetheart, it's okay."

My mother, ever a conscientious hostess, finds some tissues and passes

them to me. “Honey...”

“I’m okay, Mom. Really. I just... I’ve found someone who wants me to be who I want to be, not who he thinks I should be. I wish you could love me like that.”

Mom and Dad both look guilty. “We just want what will make you happy,” Dad protests weakly.

“Travis makes me happy. Writing my novels makes me happy. I know being a mom will make me happy. I know that none of this went how you wanted. Honestly, it didn’t go how I thought I wanted it or how I expected it. But I’m happy. I’m going to have everything I want in life: I’m going to be a wife to a man I love, a mother, and an author. I don’t understand how you can’t be happy for me.”

Mom bites her lip. “Does he really make you happy?”

I nod. “Yes. More than I thought possible.”

My parents both look at Travis. Neither of them looks suddenly ecstatic about him, but they no longer look angry, either. Just thoughtful.

“Travis has been there for Oscar through everything,” I point out. “I didn’t like him either. But then I gave him a chance, and the moment I did, I fell in love with him. This is the man I want to marry. Can you please give him a chance too? For me?”

After a moment of heavy silence, Dad sighs. He looks at me. “Yes, honey. For you, we can do that.”

“All we want is for you to be happy, and if you are, then, well.” Mom shrugs. “Our work as parents is done, I suppose.”

She sounds like she might tear up, and I decide it’s time to be generous. I walk over and hug her.

Mom jolts, probably surprised at the affection after the argument we just had, but then she wraps her arms around me tightly and holds me.

I rest my head on her shoulder and hug her back, sagging with relief. When it’s been a long moment, I pull away and hug Dad too.

When Dad pulls away, he sticks his hand out to Travis. “You take good care of her,” he warns. “Or you’ll have to answer to me.”

“I’d expect nothing less, sir,” Travis replies, shaking Dad’s hand.

Tears prick my eyes again. My parents have given their blessing.

Finally, everything is right in my world.

Chapter 30

Travis

S ometimes, being a billionaire has its perks.

Like when your wife-to-be wants to get married before she's heavily pregnant, so you pull out all the stops—and all the dollar bills—to get a wedding put together in just a couple of months.

It's amazing how people will tell you something can't be done and then suddenly change their tune once you pay them enough money. It helps that Samantha's had a Pinterest board and a scrapbook full of ideas for her dream wedding since she was a kid, so she knows what she wants and is able to pick out venues, food, and other things quickly. Then it's my job to get it for her.

I'm not a man afraid of taking charge to get things done—it's my job as CEO of my family's company—so the way Samantha lights up whenever I tell her I got her something she wants makes it all that much more worth it.

There's pressure from my father to make it this big grand affair. He wants us to show off and he loves having a party. Samantha and I want something simpler, though. We're not going to invite people just because they're rich or influential, and we're not making our guest list based on the politics of our upper-class society. We're inviting the people we actually like and care about.

That means some of my employees, a few business people who've known me since I was young, and mostly people from the rodeo circuit—men and women who've gotten into the mud and dust with me and worked with Samantha behind the scenes. People whose potlucks and barbecues we've been going to since we were kids.

Samantha chooses a classic, princess-style dress for her wedding gown

with a cathedral-length veil and a large, beautiful bouquet. She won't let me see it, or her, before the wedding, and I admit it's harder than I expected to spend the night without her. We've also been spending the last couple of months living together. And while we haven't had time, with all the wedding plans, to start on things like the nursery for the baby, it's been on my mind—a delightful thing to look forward to once we get back from our honeymoon.

I'm taking her to Paris. She's a traditional romantic and has always wanted to go, and I'm more than happy to give her the trip of her dreams. It'll be good to go now before the later term of pregnancy sets in and she needs a lot of rest, which would prevent her from wandering around the city all day.

But I miss her the night before the wedding and all day as we prepare for it, so seeing her walk down the aisle in her dress for the first time...

I'm not ashamed to admit it. I tear up.

Oscar smiles and nudges me. "You need tissues."

"You're not funny." He's my best man, obviously.

"I'm hilarious."

I wipe my eyes as Samantha reaches me, and I help her arrange her skirt so she can stand next to me. She smiles, and I see she's got tears in her eyes, too.

"You look beautiful," I whisper.

She blushes. "Thank you."

She really does. She's always beautiful, of course, but seeing her in her dress and knowing she's about to become my wife... it gets to me. Of course, it does.

The priest begins the usual speech as I take Samantha's hands. "Dearly beloved..."

It's a bit of a blur after that. Our vows make us both tear up again; then, our wedding photos are taken while the guests make their way over to the reception; then, dinner and speeches; then, our first dance where I get to hold my wife in my arms; and then partying with everyone long into the night.

Finally, it all slows down, and we find ourselves back in the penthouse. Samantha stands in the middle of the bedroom while I carefully undo all the tiny buttons on the back of her wedding gown. "There we go."

I hold the gown up while she steps out of it, just about swallowing my tongue as I see the lacey lingerie she's wearing. "Wow."

Samantha winks at me and takes the dress. "Let me hang this up, I'll be right back."

I undo my tie and take off my jacket, getting myself undressed for when she returns. But when she does, I see that she has a box in her hands. A fairly big one. “What’s this?”

“Sit down.”

I sit on the bed, still curious. Samantha smiles and places the box in my lap. She’s carefully wrapped it, and I have no idea what’s inside. It can’t be baby news since I already know she’s pregnant. I don’t think it’s something sexy since she’s already got the lingerie on. I’m at a loss.

I open the package carefully. It takes me a second to realize what I’m looking at just because it catches me off-guard. It’s a pair of beautiful silver spurs. They’ll fit me, but they’re clearly for show and not for riding.

I pull them out of the box and inspect them. “These are fantastic.”

“You like them?” Samantha asks nervously.

“Of course I do. Can’t wait to show ‘em off. But what are they for? Was I supposed to get you something?”

She laughs and sits down next to me on the bed. “You’re taking me to Paris and paid an obscene amount of money to get this wedding taken care of in just a few months. I think you’ve gotten me plenty already.”

“Then, what are they for?”

Samantha takes the box and spurs and sets them aside, then takes my hands. “I know that we never really... we haven’t finished our talk about the rodeo thing.”

It’s true. Everything’s been a whirlwind with the wedding, moving Samantha and her things in with me, and her writing career taking off. Her first book will be hitting the shelves soon since she got an amazing deal with a publisher, and when she wasn’t helping with the wedding, she was working on another manuscript since the publisher wants to see more from her.

I’m so proud of her that I could burst. But it does mean that some things have fallen by the wayside. It’s not rodeo season right now, so it hasn’t come up, but... “Yeah, we do need to talk about it.”

I don’t want to give up the rodeo. I know that I have an expiration date, just like any athlete. Rodeo is a sport, at the end of the day, and like any sport, it’s a young man’s game. I won’t be one of those men who pushes himself past his prime and keeps going at it even though all it’s doing is breaking his body further. Everyone feels sympathy for those men, especially other riders; we get it—we understand the addicting draw, the adrenaline rush, and the challenge. It’s almost like gambling, in a way, except you have

more of a legitimate chance of winning since it's not a game of chance with an illusion of choice. It's all up to you and your actions.

But I don't want sympathy. I don't want people muttering sadly behind my back about how I need to hang up the hat. That means I only have a couple of years left in me, and I'm at peace with that. But I don't plan on leaving until those years are up. I'm not backing out early.

And I worry that will be a breaking point for Samantha.

Samantha smiles gently at me. "I've given it a lot of thought. And I can't say that I won't worry. I love you. That moment when I thought the bull was really going to hurt you... it was the scariest moment of my life. But I also know that if you or anyone tried to stop me from my writing dreams and told me to give up my career, I would be furious. It would make me unhappy to let it go. And because I love you, I want you to be happy. That's more important to me. So I wanted to... to give you something that showed I support you."

Relief floods me. I pull her into my arms and hug her tightly, then kiss her. "I know we can't promise *no* injuries in our profession," I admit, "but I can promise that I'll do my best to come out on top and be safe."

"You're the best," Samantha replies, saying it so nonchalantly as a statement of fact that my heart skips a beat. "If anyone can ride while being safe because the animal doesn't get the best of him, it's you. And..." She shrugs, blushing. "It is hot. I won't lie. I've always had a thing for the rodeo cowboys."

"I noticed," I tease her.

"I just needed time to think about it. And I have when we weren't busy with the wedding. I'm still scared, I won't deny that, but now that I've had time, I don't think I'm too scared to make you give this up. And I don't think I should be, if that makes sense. I... I would never want to make you give up something you love so much like that, especially not when I know you've already sacrificed a lot taking over the company sooner than you planned."

I kiss her again to reassure her. "I know. And it's okay that you needed time. I'm just... I'm really happy."

"Yeah?" Samantha smiles, her eyes damp. "You are?"

"I have the woman I love, I have the career I want, my family's company is more profitable than ever, and we're going to have a baby." I put my hand over her stomach where our child is growing. I'm more excited than I thought I would be. I can't wait to meet our child and give them all the damn love and

support in the world. “Of course I’m happy. Are you happy?”

Samantha wipes her eyes. “I’ve never been happier.”

I pull her into my lap and kiss her again; and this time, when I start, I don’t stop.

After all, I would hate to let that beautiful lingerie she’s wearing go to waste.

There’s so much for us to look forward to: our honeymoon, the nursery, our baby’s birth, and the launch of Samantha’s first novel. But in the meantime, there’s just the two of us, in love, together, on our wedding night.

Just like Samantha, I’ve never been happier.

THE END

Thank you for reading *Nanny for the Bossy Daddy*! If you loved this book, then you’ll love [*Grumpy Billionaire Playboy*](#)!

Continue on the next page to read the first chapter of *Grumpy Billionaire Playboy*!

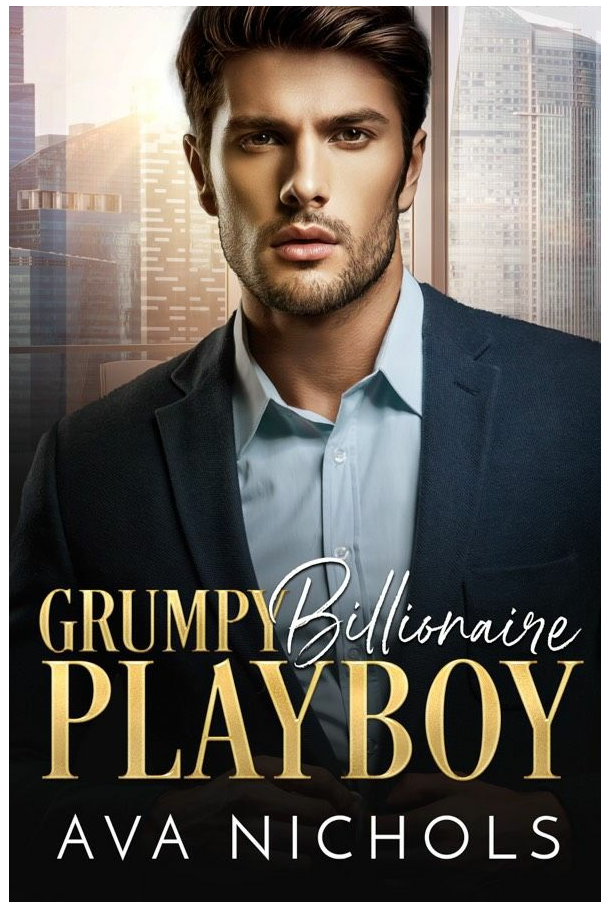
★★★★★ “OMG! A must-read. I could not put this book down. The beginning of the book started a little slow, but once I got to Chapter 3 it got better & better. Even though they were enemies, their sexual compatibility was amazing. They were so great together & the chapter when Drake met Leila’s parents was intense. The way he stuck up for Leila was so sweet! Will they have a happily ever after? Read this amazing book & find out.”

★★★★★ “I’ve been getting tired of the grumpy billionaire friends to lovers brothers best friend trope but when I started this book I could not put it down. It blew me away. All the characters are well-developed, it is well-written and fast-paced. The protagonists Drake and Leila are steamy and sexy together. They learn about each other and are unafraid to admit when they are wrong. It is such a well-written novel I just loved it, even with all the tropes. Could not stop once I started it.”

★★★★★ “OMG!!! This was another fantastic book and it was a page-turner and the suspense was WOW!!! It was addictive and I was at the edge of my seat and I could not even stop reading it or put it down for a minute.

Leila and Drake's chemistry was like fireworks and their attraction was smoking hot. They could not keep their hands off one another they gave into their lust. They were falling in love with each other and how could they keep it a secret from her best friend? And how would her best friend feel about their romantic relationship? Could they have a happily after ending after all? I guess you will have to read it for yourself. I highly recommend this book and you will not be disappointed at all."

Sneak Peek - Grumpy Billionaire Playboy



My brother's best friend is my worst enemy... Now, he's also my fake fiancé who just took my v-card.

Drake Bennet is a handsome, arrogant, Real Estate shark who always has women throwing themselves at him.

But I can't stand him; we've always fought and bickered growing up.

His mom has been badgering him to settle down, so he asked me to be his fake fiancé.

And I only agreed as long as he made me his plus one at exclusive events I needed to attend for my journalist job.

But while we're "pretending" to be engaged, Drake takes care of me in more ways than one.
His touch brings me to ecstasy for the first time and makes my body quiver from head to toe.

He's been caring for and protecting me in ways I've never seen before.
I'm falling for him, hard.

And if things couldn't get more complicated — **I'm pregnant.**

But this can't work. My new singing career is taking off and I'll be in the public eye.
And our fake engagement has to come to an end.

Or will Drake finally be ready for a "real" happily ever after?

Click here and get it now: [Grumpy Billionaire Playboy](#) - A Fake Fiance, Enemies to Lovers Romance

Chapter One - Leila

I clutch the folder of files in my hands as I walk along the office floor, trying to project confidence.
It's not that my story isn't good. I know it is. It's well-researched and timely, and I think I did a good job of being entertaining while also educating people in laymen's terms on the subject.

It's more that my boss is a stubborn jackass.

I reach her office and knock on the doorframe. "I'm here."

"Leila." My boss, Deirdre, smiles at me. "Come in. You said you had an article for the next issue?"

"Yes." I hold out the folder for her to take, watching as she flips it open. "It's a piece on independent musicians and how they're struggling in the streaming—"

Deirdre holds up a hand, cutting me off. "Leila." Her voice is stern. "How many times do we have to have this conversation? This is a lifestyle magazine, not the *New York Times*. We are here to give our readers the glamour and glitz that they pay for."

"But people want to make informed decisions about their lifestyle choices, like how they get their music and what musicians they listen to."

"Let me be even clearer." Deirdre hands me back the folder. "You are here to cover social events. You are in an enviable position, with your connections...."

Ah, yes, my "connections." My parents are rich, just like their parents were, and their parents before them. I grew up among the affluent, so Deirdre exclusively gives me assignments covering the social events of the wealthy. I'm either already invited out of politeness, or I can score an invitation fairly easily, and it's better than sending in an "outsider."

Deirdre's also aware how much I hate these assignments.

I don't want to do fluff pieces, and I especially don't like going in and writing articles about who wore what and what was on the menu at social events held by people who trust me as one of them. It makes me feel kind of dirty. And what's the point, anyway? Who cares if we had mussels or escargot as the first course, and if the bride wore Vera Wang or Sebastian Paolo?

"This is what you're here to do," Deirdre finishes. "That's it. If I ever want something different from you, then I'll tell you. But until then, you do as you're told and cover the stories I tell you to cover. Is that understood?"

"Yes," I say, because I have no damn choice.

I need this job. It was difficult enough to get it in the first place, and while it doesn't pay a ton, it keeps all of my bills in order so I can live completely independent from my parents. I know they don't

approve of my work, but honestly, that's the one part of my job that I enjoy: knowing how much they hate it.

But I can't afford to put my foot down and demand I be given more serious articles. This lifestyle magazine was the only place hiring a newbie like me, and it was a relief to have a regular gig instead of being an independent contractor for various online sites that got barely a dozen hits per article. Unless I want to go crawling back to my parents for money, I have to swallow my pride and do as I'm told.

Deirdre smiles at me. "Great. Now go and give the people what they want." She taps away on her computer. "Elizabeth Garner is getting married this weekend. I expect you to be there."

Elizabeth is one of the girls that I had to spend time with growing up because her father is a billionaire, and I got the invite to her wedding ages ago. I said yes, because I didn't know how to get out of it without a bunch of people making it a big deal and my parents throwing a conniption. But the fact that Deirdre just *expects* me to be able to go to this thing, last minute? What if I wasn't invited?

I know what she'd say. *Just make it work.*

Ugh.

"Sure thing," I say out loud, and I head out again. I know when it's okay to argue with Deirdre, and the answer is never.

On my way to the wedding over the weekend, I try not to get too damn depressed about my life. I'm independent from my parents, and that's the most important thing, or so I tell myself.

The wedding's upstate, a couple of hours from Manhattan where I live and work, and I pass the time by singing along with the radio. If I could actually go after any career I wanted, I'd be a singer, but I knew that was too big of a risk. If I failed, my parents would never let me hear the end of it. The likelihood of me actually being good enough to find success in the music industry? Slim to none.

Being a journalist isn't my first choice, but at least it's something I have a bigger chance in, and maybe I can actually find something about it that'll bring me a sense of success if I could just write about something more serious than the weddings of spoiled billionaire brats.

I finally get to the venue and pull into the parking lot. By that point, I'm rocking out to the radio, belting at the top of my lungs, fully lost in the moment. Nothing makes me feel better than when I'm singing. The whole world fades away and it's just me and whatever emotion the song is bringing me, whether that's joy, or anger, or heartbreak.

I hit the high note on the song, pumping my fist in excitement that I did it, keeping up with the crescendo and then ending the song with the performer, grinning in triumph.

The song ends and I turn off the car and the music, taking a deep breath. Okay. Time to stop enjoying myself and actually go in to face the music and deal with this.

This is what you're paid to do, I remind myself as I get up and leave my car. I just hope that it's all relatively painless and I can leave early after I get enough information for the article.

I walk through the parking lot and up the little path carved out through the grass. There are several archways set up, covered in fairy lights and flowers, announcing that we're entering the wedding of Elizabeth and Cayden.

I sigh inwardly. I wonder how much Cayden got to contribute to the wedding plans or if he just let Elizabeth do everything. When I get married, or rather if, because at this point who knows if a man will ever like me enough to marry me, I want my future husband to participate too. I want to make sure we have a wedding that is what he wants and not just what I want.

Or what my mom wants, but that's a whole other issue I'm not even going to consider in my imagination right now.

I get up to the front, where I'm not surprised to see a couple of men in black ties and suits standing at the entrance, checking people's invitations as they walk in.

This is why Deirdre has me go to these things. I'm actually invited, or at least theoretically I am. People in our social circle quickly get used to being papped, and having their private lives more or less plastered online, but sometimes they don't want that. Not because they care about privacy—if they did they could've managed to avoid being papped at all, as I have—but because they care about

exclusivity.

You can't necessarily brag about your exclusive, amazing, showstopping wedding if everyone and their mother was invited. You need to show off by not showing off.

That's why I'm here. I give the people what they want, because anyone else would be turned away if they're not a part of the inner circle.

I get up to the security guards. "Invitation?"

"One sec." I dig into my purse....

Oh no.

The guy sighs. "Ma'am...."

"No, I had it. Don't you have a guest list? I should be on there. Leila Douglas?"

"I'm sorry, but we can't let you in without an invitation," the security guard tells me, and my heart sinks.

I'm fucked if I can't get in there. My boss will kill me. As much as I gripe to myself about my job, I really need this and if I can't deliver on stories, then Deirdre will find someone who can and drop me.

What am I supposed to do?

"Any reason you're holding up my date?" someone says from behind me, and I jolt like I've been struck with electricity.

I turn around, hoping against hope that I got the voice wrong, but I know this voice. I've had to suffer through hearing that sexy baritone for most of my life.

Sure enough, there he is, and my heart sinks. Drake Bennet.

My mortal enemy.

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