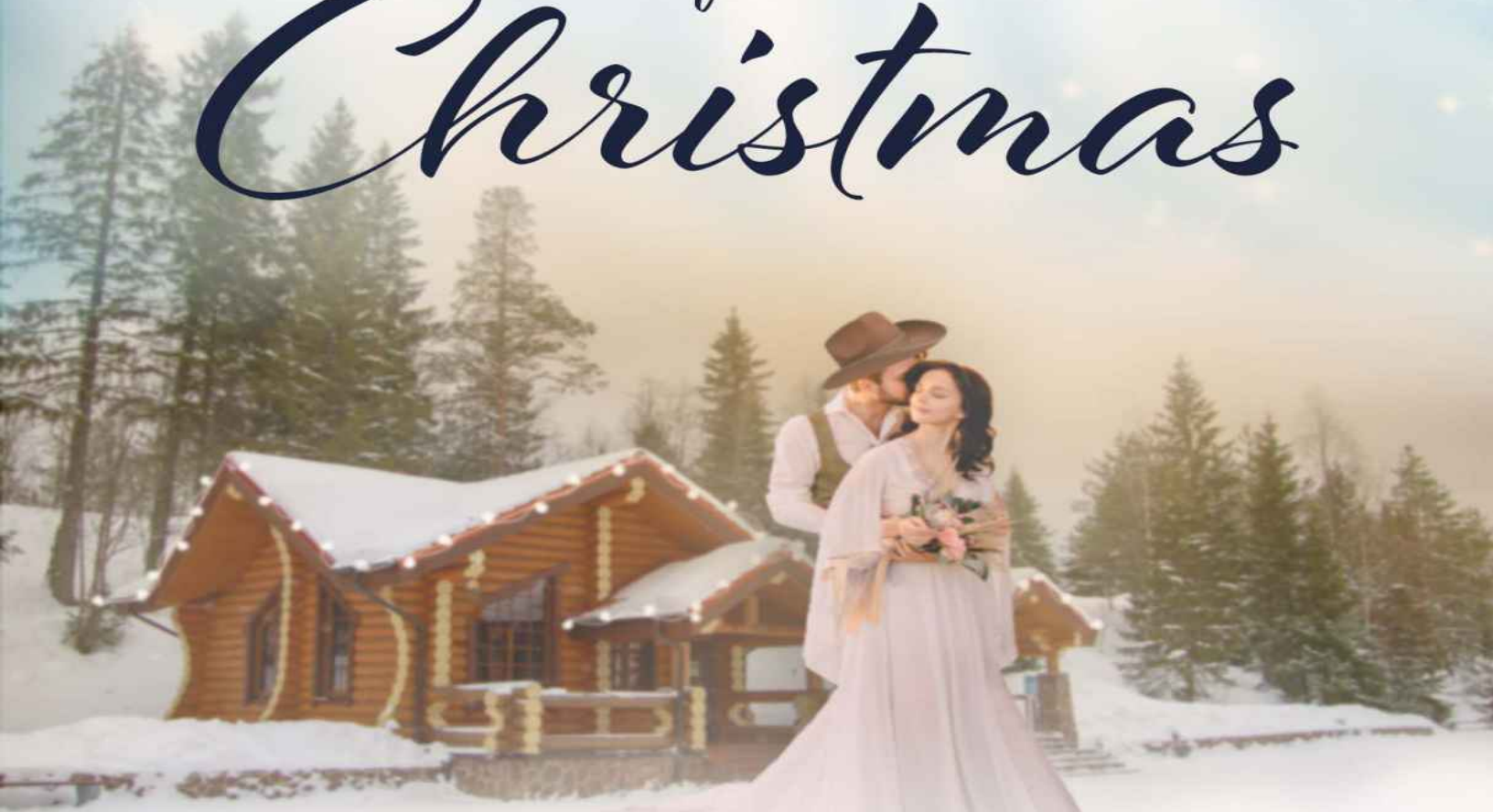




Cowboy Grumpy Boss
for
Christmas



JO GRAFFORD
BESTSELLING CHRISTIAN ROMANCE

COWBOY GRUMPY BOSS FOR CHRISTMAS

A Very Country Christmas Wish #6

JO GRAFFORD



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CHAPTER 1: BITTERSWEET ENCOUNTER BRADY

*S*he's not coming.

Brady McGrath flicked a look of disgust at his watch. He should've known Adeline Carver wouldn't show up for their first grilling practice session. It was just his luck to have been randomly chosen to serve as her partner in Pinetop's Annual Grill Master Contest. He doubted the woman knew how to light a pile of charcoal, much less how to turn a ribeye into a slice of medium rare perfection. Knowing her, she'd forgotten all about the contest and left town again without bothering to tell him.

You'd think by now, I would've learned my lesson where she's concerned.

He gave himself a mental kick as he swung away from the living room window that overlooked his front yard. One thing he'd proven to be really good at was getting his hopes up in her direction. Unfortunately, she was equally skilled at shattering his hopes.

Every. Single. Time.

Continuing to watch for her arrival in his driveway was nothing short of foolish. There was no telling what kind of vehicle she owned these days. She'd driven out of Pinetop in a rusty red Chevy pickup, but that was five years ago.

Five achingly long and lonely years.

He stomped across the cowhide area rug anchored to the hardwood floor by his sofa. The brown leather recliner sofa was the only stick of furniture in the room. Yeah, he wasn't much on decorating. He didn't have so much as a single painting or picture frame hanging on the walls.

That was kind of Adeline's fault, too. He'd built the farmhouse with her in mind, fully expecting her to decorate it someday.

After becoming my wife.

Sadly, he'd never gotten the opportunity to ask her to marry him, since she'd high-tailed it out of town without a forwarding address. She hadn't even taken the time to properly break things off with him.

Does that mean we're technically still dating?

He scrubbed a hand over his goatee, not entirely sure how that stuff worked. Adeline was the only girl he'd ever dated. The fact that there'd been no one special in his life before or after her was a very sore topic between him and his sister, Shelly. She was so happy being a wife and a mother that she couldn't imagine why everyone else on the planet wasn't lined up to get married and start a family of their own.

Including me.

Brady grimaced at the thought, knowing that it wasn't that easy. A guy couldn't just snap his fingers and make the perfect woman appear out of thin air. In his case, he'd failed to keep the one girlfriend he'd ever had. It wasn't exactly a stellar reputation in the romance department.

As he stepped into the kitchen, the rooster in the pen behind the main barn crowed so loudly that he could hear the creature clean through the window over the sink. He flicked another glance at his watch. It was eight o'clock. The rooster had been crowing since sunrise, which was when he and Adeline had agreed to meet.

That was a full forty-five minutes ago. It was time to accept the fact that she was leaving him hanging again.

Figuring he might as well get back to his regular duties as ranch manager, he squared his shoulders and headed for the coffee pot. Slapping a cardboard cup beneath the spigot, he pushed the brew button. While he waited for the cup to fill, he picked up the black remote control on the cabinet and turned on the television mounted beneath the overhead cabinets. Unfortunately, the weatherman had nothing to say to make his day better.

"Thanks to a northern wind," he announced in a far more cheerful voice than Brady thought the news justified, "it'll dip down to a frigid nineteen degrees by tonight. And that's not all, folks. We've got a storm front headed our way that'll bring another two to three inches of accumulation. If you peek out your window, you might see a few snow flurries coming down already. It's starting to really look like winter out there!"

“I think you mean it’s starting to look like Christmas,” the local news anchor chimed in, as she came back on the air. The camera zoomed in on her and her peppermint striped blazer as she began the daily rundown of Pinetop’s holiday festivities. “By now, you’ve probably seen the list of this year’s holiday grill master contestants. It’s shaping up to be the fiercest competition Pinetop has ever seen. Two teams have issued public promises to unseat the reigning champion, Brady McGrath. Our beloved manager of Bear Mountain Ranch has held the title for three years straight, so you can rest assured he’s not going to simply hand over the golden spatula. His randomly chosen grilling partner is none other than Adeline Carver, who arrived back into town in the nick of time to join this year’s lineup of contestants. She—”

Brady’s doorbell chimed, dragging his attention away from the television screen. He quickly hit the mute button and glanced toward the front door. Could it be the same person the newscaster was talking about? He certainly wasn’t expecting any other visitors.

His heart thumped in anticipation as he strode toward the entry foyer. Like the living room, the foyer walls were bare and uninviting. Nothing but a hall tree stood there. His coat and Stetson were tossed on one of the hooks. Both were hanging crookedly.

Not that it mattered. If Adeline was the person on the other side of the door, she hadn’t shown up to be impressed. She’d come for one reason only — to start practicing for the grill master competition. A woman who lived on frozen dinners and take-out food, she could seriously use the practice.

He lived on a gated ranch, so he rarely bothered locking the door. All it took was a twist of the handle to pull it open.

His tardy grilling partner was standing there with her white quilted coat unzipped and no hat. It looked as if she’d left the last place she’d been in a hurry. The strands of dark hair tumbling past her shoulders whipped in the breeze, fluttering against her forehead and cheeks. Here and there, snow flurries were sticking to her hair and coat. They were also sticking to the top of her purple cowgirl boots.

He shook his head, hating the way her eclectic wardrobe was stirring such painful memories. Once upon a time, her zany taste in clothing had been something he adored. Now, it just hurt to look at her.

“Hey, partner. Are you ready to get started?” Though a brilliant smile was plastered across her gloss-covered lips, there was an indescribable edge to her stance that told him she was as uncomfortable around him as he was around

her these days.

Good. At least, he wasn't alone in his misery.

"I've been ready." He pushed the front door wider and gestured for her to enter. "You're late."

A flash of something else — distress maybe — momentarily clouded her midnight blue eyes. It was gone by the time she breezed past him, smelling like sunflowers and bubbling with her usual unquenchable optimism.

"I take it being late still isn't fashionable here in the mountains," she joked.

"Nope." He shut the door behind her, more than a little irritated by her attitude. As the daughter of a legendary bull rider, a man now retired, she was well aware that most cowboys rose before daybreak. She was also well aware that daybreak typically occurred around a quarter past seven this time of year in Pinetop.

Which led to one conclusion only — she'd marched up to his farmhouse late for the sole purpose of getting under his skin, something she was apparently still very good at.

Her sunny smile slipped a fraction as she studied his expression. "Listen, I'm sorry about letting the time get away from me like that. I truly am." She pulled off her gloves and reached over to lightly touch his arm. "The thing is, I got held up by something, um...important."

My time is important, too, darling. "You could've shot me a text or something." He glanced down at her hand on his arm, wishing her purple and white-striped fingernails didn't look so good against the black flannel shirt he'd half-tucked into his jeans.

"Right." She hastily dropped her hand. "I assume that means you haven't changed your number since, ah..."

Since you left town without looking back? "Nope. It's the same." He pivoted away from her and started walking toward the kitchen. "I've got our supplies laid out in the kitchen. The grill's out back."

When he didn't hear her following him, he slowed his steps and glanced over his shoulder.

She was still standing at the entrance of the living room, gazing in wonder around her. "Oh, wow!" Her head tipped back, allowing her gaze to travel up, up, up the two-and-a-half story fireplace to the cathedral ceiling. "This is the first time I've seen your place, well...finished."

He could tell she liked what she saw, which inordinately pleased him.

“It’s Wisconsin Prairie Stone. Not something I would’ve picked out on my own, but the builder talked me into it, and I like how it turned out.” He especially liked the random-sized field stones scattered throughout it, which gave it a homier, more rustic touch.

“It’s absolutely stunning,” she breathed. “Not,” she added in a rueful voice, “that you brought me here to drool over your gorgeous home.”

Her words were a brutal reminder that she’d chosen to walk away from it all — both him and the home he was building for her. He hadn’t precisely told her he was doing any of it for her. However, with all the advice he’d solicited from her about paint colors, cabinetry, and countertop options, she had to have figured it out.

He’d bought an engagement ring for her, too. The black velvet box had been collecting dust on an empty shelf in his master bedroom for the past five years.

Bitterness swept through his mouth as he waved her toward the kitchen. “Since we’re getting a late start, how about you do the rest of your drooling in here?”

This time, the fall of her cowgirl boots on the hardwood floor echoed off the beams lining the cathedral ceiling. However, she stopped again before entering the kitchen.

“Oh, Brady!” She stood riveted in the doorway.

Now what? He shot another irritated look at her over his shoulder and found her gazing in awe at the wall of arched stone that sheltered the vent over the stovetop.

“More prairie stone, I see.” She eagerly drank in the oak cabinetry, tinted concrete countertops, and butcher block island. “Your kitchen belongs in a magazine. Or maybe on a cooking show.”

He’d planned it that way. It was his favorite room in the house. However, he kept his voice bland as he drawled, “I do enjoy stirring up a home-style meal now and then.” Despite his sister’s many other domestic skills, everyone in the family agreed that he was the one who’d inherited the cooking gene. His mother and grandmother had taught him all their secret recipes. Digging his hands into a mound of bread dough felt downright therapeutic after a long day of work on the ranch.

“So, you still cook, huh?” She stepped farther into the room, spinning in a full circle to take it all in.

He waited until she twirled back in his direction before spreading his

hands. “In case you haven’t heard, you’re looking at the reigning Pinetop Grill Master Champion. Three years straight.” He probably sounded as smug as he felt, but he didn’t care. If she hadn’t been absent for the past five years, she would’ve already known this stuff.

“Yeah, I think I remember hearing my dad say something about that.” Humor twinkled in her eyes. “No wonder you were so cranky about finding out I was your partner! You’re probably trying to figure out if I’m going to help you or hinder you in your quest to defend your title.”

His smug feeling was replaced by anger.

Nope. That’s not the only reason I’m upset with you, darling. Far from it!

However, all he did was shrug offhandedly as he stomped to the island. “Have you ever even turned on a grill?” He could feel her laughing gaze on him as he unstacked four aluminum trays and rowed them up in front of four different flavors of marinade. Then he turned to yank open the doors of his oversized sub-zero fridge.

“Does heating up a leftover hamburger on a George Foreman grill count?”

“It does not.” He reached for the long straps of pork tenderloin thawing in plastic bags on the center shelf. Returning to the island, he slapped the bags on the cabinet. Drawing a heavy breath, he leaned both hands on the counter as he faced her. “It’s not too late to drop out, you know.”

She placed her hand on her jean-clad hip, meeting his gaze squarely. “Who said anything about dropping out?” Though she sounded surprised, she also managed to turn the words into a challenge.

“I believe I just did.” He saw no point in sugar-coating the situation. If she didn’t know the first thing about grilling, she had no business serving as the partner of a three-time champion.

“I didn’t see anything about experience in the requirements.” Her voice was deceptively mild as she moved around the island to stand beside him.

“It’s generally understood that the contestants know how to grill a slab of meat.” He gritted his teeth as he caught another whiff of her flowery body spray. It was funny how something as simple as the scent of sunflowers could bring so many painful memories tumbling back. Like the way she’d thrown her arms around his sweaty neck after he’d scored the winning touchdown at their homecoming football game during their senior year of high school. And the way she’d always leaned forward to grip his shoulders when he was helping her down from a horse. And the way she’d felt in his arms when

they'd danced in the moonlight all those years ago.

It was during that dance that he'd realized he could no longer picture a future where she didn't stand center stage in every one of his dreams and aspirations. Unfortunately, she'd left town the next morning without saying another word to him. No calls. No texts. No emails. Nothing but the bleakest silence that had left a canyon-sized crack in his heart.

The quilted sleeve of Adeline's coat brushed his hand, yanking his attention back to the slender cowgirl at his side. She was leaning past him to lift one of the bottles of marinade. "Cherry habanero. It sounds delicious," she sighed, turning the bottle around to read the ingredients. After a moment, she returned the bottle to its spot in front of the empty aluminum tray on the far left.

She leaned a hip against the island and faced him. "I'm going to go out on a limb here and say you have enough cooking skills for both of us."

He folded his arms and stared her down. "That's not how this is supposed to work."

"I'm not a quitter, Brady. You, of all people, should know that."

Oh, really? It was all he could do not to say something he would regret later. Instead, he glared darkly at her, swallowing hard as he fought to control his anger.

Her shoulders seemed to wilt a little as she took in his expression. However, she still didn't drop his gaze. "Teach me," she demanded softly.

He clenched his jaw. "This isn't a cooking class, Adeline. This is a grill master championship, the key word being *master*."

She raised and lowered her shoulders. "If I honestly believed I would hurt your chances of winning, I'd drop out right now."

He raised his eyebrows at her, not liking where their conversation seemed to be headed.

"But I think we both know that your randomly assigned grilling *partner* was never going to be more than your lowly *assistant*." She treated him to a sunny smile that made him grind his teeth. "And I'm perfectly alright with that arrangement. I'll wash the marinade trays after you throw the meat on the grill, cart around supplies, refill your basting bottle brushes, or whatever else you need done. Just tell me what to do, and I'll make it happen."

He was grudgingly impressed with how easily she'd read his intentions. "For someone who's never before turned on a grill, you sound oddly familiar with the process."

Her smile widened. “Believe me, I’ve visited some of the best BBQ restaurants in the west, Brady McGrath. The best ones were mom-and-pop operations, where I got to sit up at the bar and watch them do their thing.”

He would’ve never described the intricate process of grilling and smoking meat as *doing one’s thing*, but he let her comment slide. For now. “Well, at least you know what a basting bottle brush is. That’s something.”

“Thank you.” She sounded supremely proud of herself, drawing herself up to her full five feet three inches. *Correction. Five feet and three-and-a-half inches.* She’d set him straight on that extra half inch more times than he could count.

“It would still be better for all parties involved if you’d just resign and allow an actual grill master to take your spot.” He had it on good account that Flash Billings had missed the deadline for the first time in decades. The aging postmaster was champing at the bit for someone to drop out so he could take their place.

“Not for me, it wouldn’t.” Adeline folded her arms in imitation of his stance. “Something tells me that serving as your grilling assistant is as close as I may get to an interview for the job I applied for.”

“Not true.” He jutted his chin at her. “Shelly said she could work a short interview into my schedule before lunch today.”

Surprise wafted across Adeline’s creamy oval features. “Oh?”

His mouth twisted. “She was supposed to call you about it yesterday.”

Looking alarmed, she straightened and dove for her cell phone, pulling it from the back pocket of her jeans. As she scrolled through her messages, a guilty look stole across her face. “It looks like I missed her call. I’m so sorry!”

Since she didn’t say anything about a message waiting in her inbox, he made a mental note to take that up with Shelly later. If she’d failed to leave a message for Adeline, then she must still be steamed about the fact that he was giving Adeline an interview at all. Though he understood her sentiments on the topic, he was less than thrilled about her lapse in professionalism.

“Thank you for the interview. I’ll be there.” After a brief pause, Adeline hastily added, “What time?”

“Eleven-thirty.”

Her smile returned to its full wattage. “Hopefully, we’ll be finished with our first grill practice by then.”

“If I promise to get you out of here in time, will you drop out of the

contest?”

“I already answered that question.” She glanced away from him as she pocketed her phone and reached for another bottle of marinade. “Pretty sure you’re too professional to miss such an important appointment, Mr. Ranch Manager.”

“Since you’re getting your interview, asking you to bow out of the contest is a reasonable request,” he countered in a harsher voice than he intended to use.

“Is it?” Her gaze flew questioningly back to his. “How can I be sure you’re not just checking the boxes to appease your conscience about giving every job applicant a fair shake?”

The fact that her guess was so close to the truth rankled all the more.

“Just to play it safe,” she concluded, “I’ll keep my interview *and* my position as your grill master partner, thank you very much. It’s my only real chance at getting enough face time with you to convince you of the merits of hiring me.”

He bit back a snort. Though he wasn’t foolish enough to say it out loud, she had zero chance of being hired to work at Bear Mountain Ranch. She was right about one thing. He *was* just checking the boxes where she was concerned. It was more out of respect for her father than anything else. If she hadn’t figured that out yet, well, he didn’t consider it his place to enlighten her.

Birch Carver had been friends with his dad for years. It was a friendship that had lasted even after things had failed to work out between him and Adeline.

His cell phone vibrated with an incoming call. Since he’d left it on the concrete countertop, it made a much louder rattle than it normally would have. Taking a few steps back, he snatched it up and scanned the caller ID. It was Shelly. Though Saturday was one of her days off as office manager, she often worked remotely throughout the weekend.

He held up a finger to Adeline. “I’ve gotta take this.” Without waiting for her to answer, he lifted the phone to his ear and stepped out of the kitchen.

“Hey! What’s up?”

Shelly gave an indignant gasp. “I’ll tell you what’s up! She’s roughly three feet tall and asking where her favorite uncle is.”

He inwardly groaned. “I’ll, uh...be right there.” He’d forgotten all about his promise to babysit Suzy for a few hours this morning. Otherwise, he

would've never double-booked a grill practice with Adeline.

"You forgot, didn't you?" his sister demanded.

"I got tied up with something." Technically, it was *someone*. However, he knew his sister had no interest in hearing that Adeline Carver was currently standing in his kitchen.

Stony silence met his ears.

"Sorry about that." His apology sounded lame, even to his own ears. "I hope I didn't make you guys late for Gentry's appointment." His nephew was due for another set of well-baby vaccinations, and the clinic in town was only open on Saturday once per month. Since he'd been born prematurely, both of his parents made a point of attending his doctors appointments together. It was easier to do that on the weekend.

"Not at all." Her voice grew sly. "Knowing how easy it is for you to get distracted by work, I built some extra time into the front end of your playdate with Suzy."

"You're the best."

"Yes, I am."

He was already striding back through the kitchen toward the entry foyer. "You know how much I look forward to spending time with my favorite niece."

"Your only niece," his sister corrected, "and we've totally used up the extra time I allotted you, so you need to get here pronto. By here, I mean the office. I had to run to my desk to get something ready for your interviews this afternoon. Sorry I forgot to do it yesterday. The phones were ringing off the hook, and...you know how it is."

That explained why she hadn't left a message for Adeline. She'd probably been slammed with calls and gotten distracted.

While he had her on the phone, he figured he might as well tell her one more thing. "Hey, I ran into Adeline and told her about the interview today. She said she'll be there."

His sister grew quiet. After a pregnant pause, she muttered, "Before you yell at me, I did try calling her."

"Next time, try leaving a message." His voice was dry.

"I really hate it when you yell at me without raising your voice," she sighed.

He wasn't in the mood to joke about it. "I love you, Shells, but you've gotta let me do my job."

“Just be careful,” she pleaded.

“I’m always careful.”

“No, you’re not,” she snapped. “That’s the reason I’ve been dragging my heels about this particular interview. You have no idea what it’s like to stand by and watch your sibling hurt the way I had to watch you hurt after she left you. I don’t think I have it in me to watch you go through something like that again.”

That makes two of us. He was pretty sure his heart couldn’t handle another such pummeling.

“Okay, Shells. I’ll be *more* careful this time.”

“I wish I could believe you,” she sighed.

Apparently, there was no pleasing her. “I’m on my way.” He disconnected the line.

He returned to the kitchen and found Adeline fiddling through one of his recipe books. She’d finally removed her coat and draped it across one of his bar stools. She’d also twisted her hair up into a ponytail. It was dangling over one of the shoulders of her pine green sweater.

When she glanced up at him, her gaze settled on the hard set to his mouth. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes and no.” He watched her closely for her reaction to what he was about to say. “I forgot that I’d offered to watch my niece this morning. I’m heading over to the barn to pick her up.”

Adeline straightened. “Want me to come along?”

“Nah, I’ve got this.” At the flash of disappointment in her eyes, he added, “It’s just a quick snatch and grab. I’ll be right back.”

She snapped out a salute. “Aye, aye, Grill Master McGrath.” Her expression was no longer readable.

He snorted as he headed for the garage. In the past, her antics had always made him smile. However, he didn’t feel much like smiling these days.

Most of his driving involved ranch business, so he didn’t see any point in driving something new. Instead, he’d refurbished an old Ford F-350 Ranger Lariat. It had a fresh, two-tone paint job — burgundy on the top and bottom with gun-metal gray in the middle. It also had a rebuilt V8 engine and new woodgrain trim. He’d additionally invested in extra-wide tires to allow for better off-road tracking. The shiny silver rims and raised axle were just for the fun of it.

For reasons he didn’t wish to delve too deeply into, he kind of hoped

Adeline was peeking out the kitchen window when he backed down his long driveway. He was insanely proud of his truck.

He had to carefully maneuver his truck around the old red Chevy pickup parked just outside his garage door. Apparently, Adeline was still driving the same set of wheels she'd left town in. The only thing missing from the truck was all the rust he remembered.

It took less than a minute for him to traverse the gravel road separating the row of farmhouses his family lived in to the big white horse barn where their ranch office was located. As he drove up, Shelly hustled Suzy out the front double doors. She had his niece bundled up like the abominable snowman. A bright red backpack was hitched over the shoulders of her powder blue coat.

Before Brady could leap out of his truck to assist her, Shelly yanked open the passenger door. "Up you go, sweet stuff. Behave for your uncle and have fun, both of you!"

"We always do," Brady assured with a wink at his niece.

"He lets me eat cookies," Suzy bragged as her mother buckled her into her seatbelt. She was a freckled-faced youngster with dark pigtails and two missing front teeth.

"Don't spill all of our secrets, kid," he warned, wagging his eyebrows at her, "or we'll be in trouble before we hit the road."

"Okay." She giggled and leaned his way to give him a noisy high five. He pretended she'd broken his hand and cradled it against his chest, which made her laugh harder.

Shelly rolled her eyes at them as she shut the door. Chad arrived in his brand spanking new silver Land Rover, which he proudly referred to as their family vehicle. He nosed in behind Brady and greeted him with a quick toot of his horn. Brady waved two-fingers through the back window before taking off.

"Hey, kiddo. I have company at the house," Brady announced casually as he headed back toward his farmhouse.

"Who?" Suzy hugged her backpack against her chest. The head of her favorite Barbie doll was poking through the half-unzipped pocket on top.

"Her name is Adeline."

To his surprise, Suzy's pert button nose wrinkled in distaste. "She's a mean girl."

His eyebrows flew upward. "Who told you that?"

“Nobody.” Flushing with embarrassment, she dropped her chin on her backpack and stared straight ahead.

“Suzy!” The reprimand in his voice made her turn even redder.

“I heard Mama tell Daddy that Adeline hurted you.”

“Ah.” *That’s unfortunate.* He wasn’t one hundred percent sure how to respond to that. All he knew was that he’d better think of something quick since his niece was about to meet Adeline face to face.

Suzy peeked around her Barbie doll at him. “Did she punch you in the nose?”

Brady guffawed. “Nah, it was nothing like that. It was something she did that hurt my feelings. But she apologized for it,” he amended quickly, “and I forgave her.” Okay, maybe that was stretching the truth a bit, since he was still working on that last item. However, his beef was with Adeline alone. He didn’t need his family getting involved.

Suzy nodded sagely, looking older than her five years. “Danny at school hurted my feelings, too.” Distress edged her voice at the memory. “He pulled my hair and called me toothless.”

Brady hid a smile. “That wasn’t very nice, was it?”

“It was mean!” Her voice turned venomous. “But his mama told my mama, and they made him say sorry, so I *had* to forgive him.” The long-suffering note in her voice made him choke back a laugh. “I wanted to kick him in the shins, but then my mama woulda made *me* say sorry.” She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “And Daddy woulda spanked me.”

Brady shot her a merry look as he pulled into the garage. “I thought Danny was your best friend?” When had that changed?

She pursed her lips. “He was until Luke moved into town. Now Luke’s my best friend.” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “We’re gonna get married someday.”

A wave of pity shot through Brady on Danny’s behalf. He very much understood what it felt like to lose the girl one loved. *Poor kid.* As he killed his motor, he leaned over to unlatch Suzy’s seatbelt. “I want you to be on your best behavior in front of Miss Adeline. She’s a professional horse trainer. If you’re nice, she might show you some pictures of the famous horses she’s worked with.” According to her resume, she’d been working for some big-shot ranch in Dallas. It was run by a trio of brothers who were champion bronc riders.

Suzy shivered. “But I don’t like horses. They’re mean.”

Brady ruffled her hair, knowing she was referring to getting her foot stepped on by a pony at her fourth birthday party. More than a year later, she still refused to go anywhere near another horse. It was something her parents were trying very hard to change. So far, they hadn't had any luck.

"Some horses are mean," he clarified carefully, "just like some people are mean, but you still have people you like, right?"

She bobbed her head up and down. "I like lots and lots of people!"

"Well, there are some very nice horses out there, too, kid." He tapped his palms against his steering wheel for emphasis. "You understand what I'm saying, right?"

Though she dutifully nodded again, she didn't look too convinced.

Before he could think of anything else to say, his phone vibrated with another incoming call. He reached out to remove it from its mount on the dashboard and frowned. The call was from Noelle Ward. She was the only horse trainer left in their employ after their head trainer had relocated to a bigger ranch on the outskirts of Phoenix.

"Sorry, kid," he apologized as he accepted her call. "Sit tight while I take this." He lifted the phone to his ear. "What's up, Noelle?"

A keening wail wafted across the line. "Got kicked by that new gelding," she panted. "Can...barely breathe."

His hand tightened on the phone. "Where are you?" He honked the horn on his steering wheel a few times in the hopes of getting Adeline's attention.

"By the riding ring." Her voice grew fainter. "Rolled under the fence...to get out."

"I'm coming." He honked the truck horn frenziedly as he dialed 911.

A young male voice droned across the line, "911, what's your emergency?"

While Brady told the guy what little he knew about Noelle's accident, the door leading to his utility room opened. Adeline's head poked out.

Brady rolled down his window to wave her forward.

She approached his side of the truck.

He pushed open the door and leaped down to make room for her to squeeze past him. "Get in! I'll explain on the way."

Though she looked astonished, she wasted no time hopping on the running board and shimmying her way to the middle of the truck seat.

The moment she was belted in, Brady skidded back down the gravel road. "Here's the deal." His voice was grim. "I've got an injured horse trainer

behind the barn and an ambulance on the way.”

“Oh, boy!” Adeline sucked in a breath. “How bad off is he?”

“Noelle’s a she. All I know is she was kicked by one of the new horses.”

“I tried to tell you, Uncle Brady,” Suzy piped up from the far side of the cab. “Horses are mean!”

“Oh, no, honey! They’re not mean.” Adeline spun impulsively toward his niece. “But they’re big and strong and can injure us by accident if we’re not extra careful around them.”

Suzy’s lower lip came out. “One of them stepped on my foot. It hurted really bad!”

“Aw! I bet it did.” Adeline’s voice was laced with sympathy. “That happened to me once, too. It was very scary.”

Suzy studied her in fascination. “Did you go to the hospital, too?”

“No. My foot was only bruised.” Adeline wagged a finger at Suzy. “But that was the last time I walked up behind a horse. I was so short at the time that he didn’t see me. He would’ve never stepped on me on purpose, because he loved me very, very much.”

“Oh.” Suzy lapsed into contemplative silence as Brady parked beside the barn. Turning to Adeline, he dropped his truck keys into her hand. “I assume you remember where my office is?”

“Of course.” She worriedly scanned his face. “What can I do to help?”

“Just keep an eye on Suzy, please. She’s got some toys in my closet, and there are drinks in the fridge beneath my desk.”

“I’ve got this,” she assured.

Realizing that she’d gotten into the truck without her coat on, he shrugged out of his the moment his boots hit the ground. “Here. Put this on.” He held it out to her as she climbed down after him.

She shook her head and tried to wave it away. “What about you?”

“I’ve got another coat in the barn. Just take it. I’ve gotta go.” He draped it around her shoulders and took off running.



CHAPTER 2: IMPROMPTU RIDING LESSON ADELINE

Adeline watched Brady's broad shoulders until he disappeared around the back corner of the barn. He might have another coat inside, but he sure hadn't taken the time to retrieve it.

A wave of wonder rippled through her, warming her all the way to her toes. Despite all his blustering yesterday and this morning, he hadn't hesitated to share his coat with her. It meant that somewhere beneath all that blind rage, he still cared whether she lived or died.

Which in no way explained the way he'd ghosted out on her for the past five years.

As Adeline silently helped Brady's niece down from his truck, she couldn't help wondering why the man she'd once loved and dated had completely ignored the letter she'd written to him before leaving town. His ensuing radio silence had shattered her heart. To this day, she wasn't sure how she'd found the strength to leave town for college without the encouragement and support from him that she'd enjoyed up to that point — not that leaving had ever truly been a choice. If she hadn't accepted the college scholarship and used her degree to secure a better job, her parents might've lost their home and everything in it. They might still lose it, if she didn't land another job soon. Her dad's mounting medical bills were no joke.

She sighed as she shut the passenger door firmly behind Brady's niece and locked it. Her sweet daddy had a mile-high deductible on his private health insurance plan to keep the monthly premiums down. Unfortunately, that meant his co-pays and out-of-pocket expenses for his frequent doctor's

visits were staggering.

It was always something with his poor bull-rider knees, shoulders, and neck. Years of competing on the rodeo circuit had taken its toll on his body. In his own words, he was like a broken down truck in constant need of repairs. His hips had gotten so bad lately that he'd been forced to take an indefinite leave of absence from his job as a ranch hand on the other side of town. He was looking at two hip replacements just as soon as they could come up with the money, and they wanted her in town before the surgeries.

So, here she was, hoping and praying for a job from the one man in the world who couldn't look at her without having steam come out of his ears. If she'd known that confessing her love to him would turn him into such an ogre, she would've happily kept the information to herself for the rest of her life!

"Um, Miss Adeline?" Suzy's sharp tug on her hand brought her focus back to the present. "Can we go inside?" She shivered. "It's cold out here."

"Of course, honey." Adeline reached out to straighten Suzy's lopsided red backpack and settle it more evenly against her shoulders.

"Why do you keep calling me honey? My name is Suzy." The girl skipped through the barn door that Adeline held open for her.

"Because I think you're as sweet as honey." Adeline gazed around them, breathing in the familiar scent of hay and horses.

Suzy stopped short and spun around to make a face at her. "Then why does my dad always tell me I'm as sour as a pickle?"

Adeline snickered as she ushered the girl toward the offices beyond the reception booth. She halted in front of the one marked *Ranch Manager*. "Probably because he thinks you're cute. Sometimes, boys say silly things to girls when they're teasing."

Suzy's grimace turned into a full-blown scowl. "Like when Danny at school called me toothless?"

"Exactly like that." Adeline pointed both forefingers at her for emphasis. Then she bent closer to the girl to speak in a loud hiss. "I'm gonna let you in on a little secret. Boys only tease girls that they like."

Suzy's eyes grew round. "But I don't *like* being called toothless."

"Eh, I wouldn't worry about it too much." Adeline reached for the door handle and found it unlocked. "You're so pretty without your two front teeth that I can only imagine how nice you're going to look when your permanent teeth come in."

Suzy drenched her with such a grateful smile that it tugged at her heartstrings. “I think your purple boots are pretty, too.”

“Thanks, kid.” Adeline wiggled her toes happily. Wearing bright colors always put her in a better mood.

Sirens sounded in the distance. Wanting Suzy out of the way when the paramedics arrived, she pushed the door open and brushed her hand up and down the wall in search of a light switch. She found it and turned it on. A pair of long fluorescent bulbs overhead flooded the room with light.

Suzy trotted into Brady’s office and got settled in with a familiar air that indicated she was a frequent visitor there. She tossed her backpack on a comfy-looking suede sofa against one wall and unzipped her jacket. It soon joined her backpack on the sofa.

As the blare of sirens grew louder, she ran to a side window to watch the ambulance approach. Only after the sirens switched off did she spin back in Adeline’s direction. “Wanna see me do a cartwheel?”

Adeline eyed the dark blue area rug that stretched across most of the room. What a coincidence that it was nearly a perfect match to the color of her eyes! “How about you let me move the coffee table out of the way first?”

“Okay.” Suzy eagerly grabbed one end of it and helped her scoot it to the far side of the room. She hitched up one of the straps of her denim overalls, then took a running leap into a cartwheel. It wasn’t half bad for a kid her size.

“Wow!” Adeline clapped loudly. “That was excellent.”

“Want me to do another one?” Suzy held both hands high over her head and kicked out her right foot, preparing to take another running leap.

“Sure. Then maybe after that, I can draw you a picture of the horse I’ve been training. His name is Icicle.”

“That’s a cool name!”

“No pun intended, eh?” Adeline joked.

There was no answering grin from Suzy. Apparently, no one had educated her yet on what a pun was.

Abandoning her plan to do a second cartwheel, Suzy followed Adeline to Brady’s massive desk. Like it had been the last time she was in town, it was still pushed flush against the wall, facing the window. It overlooked one of the fenced-in pastures.

The cedar desk was full of even more nicks and dings than it had been when he’d first purchased it at a second-hand shop in town. He’d applied a fresh coat of cherry wood stain and replaced the mismatched drawer pulls

with black iron ones, but those were the only changes. The rustic old desk held so many memories for her that she paused to draw a ragged breath.

“Whatcha looking for?” Suzy’s head momentarily tipped against Adeline’s arm.

“A pen and a sheet of paper.” Adeline was almost afraid to touch anything. Brady had always been such a neat freak. Every item had its place. There was a black wire basket marked “In,” where folks could drop stuff off — everything from memos to invoices. There was another black wire basket marked “Out” for paid invoices and completed projects ready to be filed. His pens and highlighters were tucked into a matching black wire cup. Even his keyboard and mouse pad were perfectly aligned with each other.

Her hand crept to the hidden compartment beneath his center desk drawer, a spot where they’d traded secret messages once upon a time. It was where she’d left her final love letter to him — the one he’d never responded to. Finding the drawer locked, she dropped her hand back to her side. Her copy of the key was still on her key ring. For all she knew, though, he’d long since had the drawer rekeyed.

“Over here, Miss Adeline.” With a sly grin, Suzy pointed toward a door to the right of the desk.

Presuming it led to the storage closet Brady had mentioned, Adeline followed her. Sure enough, a walk-in closet was on the other side of the door. Everything in it was arranged as neatly as the items on his desk. There were boxes of envelopes in a variety of sizes, extra reams of copy paper, and spare ink cartridges.

With a squeal of excitement, Suzy dropped to her knees in front of a basket of toys on the floor of the closet. “These are mine,” she announced gleefully.

Adeline was charmed to discover the basket was full of farm animals and connectible fence panels. There were plastic chickens, pigs, goats, cows, and horses.

Adeline smiled as she watched Suzy get to work building a barnyard.

Not sure you dislike horses as much as you pretend to, kid.

Browsing through the shelves lining the walls around them, Adeline didn’t see anything that resembled a sketch pad. She settled for a piece of copy paper. Securing it to an empty clipboard, she returned to Brady’s desk to borrow an ink pen.

She carried it back to the closet and sat on the floor beside Suzy, twisting

her legs like a pretzel beneath her.

“Can I watch?” The girl paused her building to peer around Adeline’s elbow.

“You sure can, kiddo.” She drew a few wide, sweeping lines to form the outline of the horse’s head. She sketched out the rest of his body before returning to the head to add more details — eyes, ears, and nostrils.

“It’s a horse!” Suzy hitched one of the straps of her overalls higher over her shoulder. It was at least the third time she’d done so in the space of a few minutes.

“Is your strap loose?” Adeline eyed the front of Suzy’s overalls. It didn’t look like it would be too hard to tighten the little metal buckle.

“A little. Mama loosened it this morning, ‘cause she said I’m gettin’ taller.”

“She’s giving you plenty of room to grow.” Adeline reached for the buckle. “Want me tighten it just a little so it’ll quit slipping off your shoulder?”

“Yes, please.” Suzy leaned closer to make it easier for Adeline to reach the buckle. Afterward, she rocked back with a sigh of satisfaction, rolling her shoulders a few times.

“Better?” Adeline arched an eyebrow at her.

Suzy nodded eagerly. “I think so.”

Adeline chuckled. “Guess we’ll find out for sure the next time you do a cartwheel.”

Suzy didn’t react to that comment. She was too busy watching the horse take shape on the piece of copy paper in front of them. “You’re very good at drawing, Miss Adeline.”

“Thank you. I mostly draw horses.” She added a long, silky tail to the creature. “It’s because I love working with them so much.”

Suzy made a face. “I’m scared of horses,” she confided in a low voice.

“That’s understandable.” Adeline paused her drawing. “Getting stepped on by a horse is a big deal.”

“Mama and daddy took me to the hospital.” Affection rang in Suzy’s voice. It was clear she adored her parents.

“That was very wise of them.” Adeline gave a decided nod. “I hope you weren’t injured too badly.” An idea struck her, making her curl to her feet.

“Hey! How about we go pay a visit to the horses?”

“Can’t.” Suzy’s face fell. “I’m not allowed to.”

Bummer. Adeline reached for her cell phone, certain that she was on to something. Now that she'd given Suzy something to think about besides her fear of horses, she was anxious to see how she behaved around them up close.

"How about I ask your uncle for permission?"

"Okay." Suzy watched her, wide-eyed, while she texted Brady.

Mind if Suzy and I take a walk around the barn to see the horses?

It was a full minute before he texted back. *Knock yourself out.*

Adeline held out a hand to Suzy. "He said yes!"

With a muffled chortle of delight, she leaped to her feet. "Let's go!" She stuck her hand in Adeline's, and they left the office together. Instead of stopping at the first stall like Adeline had initially planned to do, Suzy tugged on her hand. "This way." She led Adeline all the way to the last stall on the left.

"Well, what have we here?" Adeline peeked over the door of the stall and was amazed to see a beautiful brown Shetland pony on the other side. She nickered a greeting at them and tossed her fluffy black mane as she trotted up to the door.

"She's my horse," Suzy announced. In a much duller voice, she added, "She doesn't like me very much."

Perceiving that they were in the presence of the same horse that had stepped on Suzy's foot, Adeline was quick to offer assurances. "I don't believe that for a second. How about you get up here and say hi to her?" She patted the fence slats, beckoning the girl to climb up and peer over the top.

Suzy hesitated before silently doing as she was bid. She held her shoulders stiffly as she stared down at the pony.

"What's her name?" Adeline asked softly as she reached past Suzy to run a hand down the horse's long, sleek nose.

"Jingle." Suzy watched Adeline's movements in awe.

"That's a festive name."

"I was born on Christmas," the young girl confided, "so Mama said I could name her after the Jingle Bells song."

"Cute! I love it." As Adeline continued to pet the horse, she watched Suzy from the corner of her eye.

The girl's hand crept closer to the horse. When they were finally close enough for Jingle to reach, the pony nuzzled her fingers.

A breathless chuckle eased out of Suzy. She petted the pony, tentatively

at first, then with more energy. Out of the blue, she abruptly announced, “I think we’re friends again.”

“I’m pretty sure you never stopped being friends.” Adeline informed her warmly.

“Even when I was afraid of her?” Suzy sounded dubious.

“Even then, kid.”

“Maybe I should try it again,” Suzy declared quietly.

Adeline’s eyes widened in excitement. “You mean ride her?” This was exactly the result she’d been hoping for.

Though the girl nodded, Adeline’s heart sank. Putting her on her pony was definitely not something she should do without her family’s permission. “Let me ask your uncle if it’s okay first.”

“Tell him I said please, please, please, please, please,” Suzy begged.

Adeline smiled. “I can do that.” She texted Brady a much shorter version of the kid’s question. *Mind if I saddle up Jingle for Suzy?*

The same as before, it took him the better part of a minute to respond. *Yeah, sure.*

His answer was so vague that Adeline worried he might not have fully read her request. Regardless, he *had* given his permission. She had it in writing in the event what she was about to do came under scrutiny.

“Your uncle gave us a thumbs up,” she reported to the kid clinging anxiously to the stall door.

“Woohooooo!” Suzy hopped down with a squeal of delight and broke into a happy dance.

Adeline wasted no time in getting the beautiful little Shetland pony out of her stall and leading her up to Suzy.

Suzy stopped dancing and took a nervous step back. “I, um...”

“Pet her again,” Adeline urged. “Just like you were doing earlier.”

Suzy stiffly stuck out a hand and closed her eyes.

“Huh-uh.” Adeline snapped her fingers a few times to get her attention.

Suzy’s eyelids flew open. “Did I do it wrong?”

“Yep.” Adeline wagged a warning finger at her. “You should never close your eyes around a horse. It’s not safe.”

“Oh.” Suzy stuck her hand out again, this time with her eyes open.

“Talk to her,” Adeline suggested.

“What should I say?” Suzy whispered, sounding unnerved.

“Just treat her like you would any of your other friends.”

“Um. Okay. Hi, Jingle.” Suzy wiggled her hand some more. “You’re my horse. You know that, right?”

Jingle nickered and took a step toward her.

Suzy quickly hopped back.

Adeline cocked her head at the kid, urging her toward the horse. “I think she wants you to pet her.”

“But I’m scared,” Suzy protested in a squeaky voice.

“I know, honey, but there’s no reason to be. I’m right here, remember?” Adeline boldly stepped up to the pony and slid her arms around her neck, holding her captive. “Behave,” she muttered in her ear. “This might be your only chance at making things right with your owner.”

Jingle nickered again and walked restlessly in place, clearly ready for more action.

“Easy,” Adeline breathed in her ear. Still holding the pony, she raised her voice a little. “Okay. I think she’s ready for you to try it again. Are you ready, kiddo?”

Suzy nodded warily. Then she stuck out her hand and scrunched up her face, cringing a little as she waited. It wasn’t an ideal response, but it was all they were probably going to get out of her today.

“Alright, Jingle Berries,” Adeline crooned to the pony. “The rest is up to you.” She gently nudged her forward.

Suzy giggled uncontrollably. “You called her Jingle Berries!”

“It’s pretty silly, isn’t it?” Adeline grinned. “I think she likes it, though.”

After a pause, Suzy confided, “My dad calls me silly names, too.”

“Like what? Adeline continued to inch the horse toward her.

“Suzy Q like the cupcakes. Snoozy Suzy when I’m tired. Suzy Paloozy when he’s chasing me around the house.”

In that exact moment, Jingle stepped close enough to push her nose against the little girl’s hand.

Suzy gasped and watched wide-eyed as the pony snuffled up one side of her hand and down the other. Then she pushed her nose more firmly against Suzy’s palm.

Instead of hopping back like she had the last time, Suzy beamed a beautiful smile at the pony.

Adeline gave them a couple of minutes to test the water with each other. Then she hugged Jingle’s neck in wordless congratulations. *You did it, girl!*

To Suzy, she said, “I don’t think Jingle has been outside yet today.” Like

a frisky kitten, the pony was vibrating with suppressed energy. “Want to come outside with me while I let her run off some steam in the riding ring?” From the looks of things, not much had changed around the Bear Mountain Ranch facilities. The saddles, lead ropes, and other gear were still neatly arranged on wall hooks within easy reaching distance.

Adeline swiftly saddled the pony. Suzy bounced along beside her, peppering the air with endless questions and comments.

Are you going to ride her, too, Miss Adeline?

Did you grow up on a ranch?

Do you own a horse of your own?

Adeline’s hands flew over the saddle blanket and saddle, straightening it just so and adjusting the stirrups to what felt like the right length for one very talkative little girl. “Hey, kid! How about you run and get your coat on while I finish up here?”

Suzy raced down the hallway. Seconds later, she raced back with her coat on, zipping it as she ran.

Only when Adeline started leading the pony toward the exit did she begin answering the kid’s long list of questions.

“I did not grow up on a ranch, though I wish I did. And I do not own a horse of my own, though I hope to someday.” The kid had no idea how amazing it was that she already owned one at her age. “And no. I do not plan on riding Jingle. I’m a little too big to hop on a pony, don’t you think?”

Suzy trailed slowly behind them. “I’m not too big, am I?”

“No, I think you’re the perfect size.” Adeline rolled open the barn door and led Jingle into the riding ring. She waited until Suzy stepped up to the gate so she could nudge her through it before shutting it. “I think Jingle would love to have someone Suzy Paloozy’s size to ride around the ring.” Like most frisky ponies, Jingle could really use the exercise.

Without waiting for an answer, she walked Jingle in a circle around the ring, keeping a firm hand on her lead rope. Then she broke into a jog, urging the little pony to trot behind her. The Shetland pony tossed her head in the breeze, whinnying in delight.

Suzy giggled and climbed up on the fence to get a better look. After Jingle’s third trip around the ring, she announced, “I know someone Suzy Paloozy’s size. Me!”

Adeline glanced up with a smile. “I think you’re right. It would probably be hard to find anyone more Suzy Paloozy sized than the one and only Suzy

Paloozy, huh?”

Suzy nodded her head frenziedly, clinging to her perch and waiting expectantly.

Adeline slowed Jingle back to a walk, patting her neck. “Good girl! Are you ready to give our favorite Suzy Paloozy a ride?”

The pony was wiggling with excitement as they approached Suzy together.

When Suzy started to hop down, Adeline shook her head. “How about you stay right where you are? It’ll be easier to hop right on Jingle’s back from there.”

Using Adeline’s hand for leverage, Suzy did exactly that. She was so intent on the task at hand that she didn’t even hesitate to slide into the saddle. The moment she was seated, though, she adopted a deer-in-the-headlights look, as if just then realizing what she’d done.

Adeline didn’t give her time to melt into a puddle of anxiety. She hurriedly started talking again. “Yep, you’re just the right size for Jingle. Isn’t that right, girl?”

Jingle nickered a horsey answer.

Suzy snickered breathlessly. “I think she said yes.” She had a death grip on the pommel.

“Back straight,” Adeline ordered firmly. “Relax your knees, kid. Let’s show Jingle how a real cowgirl rides.”

Suzy was soon so busy following Adeline’s commands that she forgot to be nervous. She relaxed in slow degrees and got into the swing of things.

Adeline added in a few easy lessons for things like how to make the pony halt and how to get her walking again. “Nice going, Suzy Paloozy. You look as pretty as a postcard on Jingle.” She whipped out her cell phone. “Mind if I take a picture to show your uncle?”

Suzy nodded eagerly. “Can I say pickles instead of cheese?”

“If you want.” Adeline shrugged. “I was going to have you say Jingle.”

“Okay.” Suzy gave her a wide, toothless grin and crowed, “Jingle Berries!”

Adeline quickly snapped several pictures and a few super short video clips. She shot the best clip and snapshots off to Brady. Then she pocketed her phone, knowing there was a good chance she was going to receive a tongue lashing when he returned. It wasn’t as if he could fire her, though, since she wasn’t employed by him.

Yet.

All her life, Adeline had been a go-big-or-go-home kind of gal. If helping Suzy over her fear of horses didn't get her pitched right off Bear Mountain Ranch, it might actually help her application for the horse trainer position they had open.

Maybe.

She wasn't holding her breath. No, that wasn't true. She was totally holding her breath.



CHAPTER 3: AN UNWELCOME PROPOSAL

BRADY

Brady stared at the picture that popped up on his phone. Since Adeline had texted it in full action mode, it was like staring at a miracle in motion. She'd even managed to capture Suzy's little sassy head toss right before she shouted, "Jingle Berries!"

He was lounged in one of the chairs in the emergency room waiting area, hoping for an update soon on Noelle's condition. He'd contacted her parents on the ambulance ride to the hospital. They'd dropped everything and rushed over to be with their daughter. They were with her now in her emergency room bay.

"Hey!"

He glanced up at the familiar voice and discovered Chad Hofstetter approaching. His brother-in-law was tall, dark, bearded, and built like a lumberjack — a humorously accurate image for a guy who owned his own timber business and sawmill.

Brady stood, glancing around Chad in concern. He was alone. "What are you doing here? Thought you and Shelly were taking Gentry to his doctor's appointment."

"We did, and we're done." Chad waved a large hand. "The clinic is in the same building, you know. Only a hop, skip, and a jump from where we're standing."

"How did it go?"

"Kid's still small for his age, but he's progressing nicely."

Brady glanced around his brother-in-law again. "Where's Shelly?"

“Changing Gentry’s diaper. He’s a little cranky after getting his round of shots. Not that I blame him.” Chad scowled in concern at him and changed the subject. “Got your message about Noelle. How bad is she?”

“Don’t know. I’m still waiting for an update.” Brady glanced toward the door leading to the treatment area. “During the ride over, the paramedics gave her an I.V. and spent a lot of time looking at her right leg. Pretty sure it’s broken below the kneecap.” He shook his head grimly. “Her parents met us at the door. They’re with her now.”

Chad whistled beneath his breath as he took a seat. “Not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing. Think they’ll try to sue us?”

It was a fair question since the Wards were known for being on the outspoken and contentious side.

“Who knows?” Brady, who’d been wondering the same thing, took a seat beside his brother-in-law. “If they do, I doubt it’ll go anywhere. We provide good health insurance to our employees. Plus, Noelle can file a worker’s comp claim if she wants.” Either way, her medical expenses would be fully covered.

“True. I just know how the Wards can be.” Chad grimaced and unbuttoned his red and black plaid shirt. He shrugged out of it and tossed it on top of his coat in the next seat over, leaving him in a short-sleeved black t-shirt. He sighed and laced his fingers behind his head, stretching his long legs in front of him. “Shelly made me layer up this morning since it was snowing,” he grumbled. “Spent the last hour trying not to incinerate.”

Brady chuckled, well aware of how much his sister fretted and fussed over everyone she loved. “Have I told you yet today how happy I am that she’s your problem now?”

“You’re just jealous.” Chad pretended to yawn loudly.

Brady nudged him with his shoulder. “Not about how little sleep you got last night, daddy-o.”

“Yeah, you are.” Chad yawned again, this time for real. “I got the perfect life, bro, and you know it.”

“How can I forget? You rub my nose in it every chance you get.” Brady curled his upper lip at him.

Shelly sailed into the waiting room with an enormous quilted diaper bag on one slender shoulder. Baby Gentry was perched on her hip with one tiny hand entangled in her hair. She took one look at the two men seated side-by-side and sailed in their direction.

“Not sure what you guys are looking so cheerful about,” she chided. “You do realize we’re down another horse trainer, leaving us with...oh, right! None!”

Though her hair was twisted up in a messy bun and there was a spot of something on her beige turtleneck sweater, she managed to make motherhood look red carpet-worthy in her stone-washed jeans and leather ankle boots. Though Brady had grown up squabbling mercilessly with her, even he couldn’t deny that she was beautiful.

Chad’s gaze roved possessively over her as he reached for their son. “Sounds like you have several qualified applicants to interview. It’ll all work out, babe.”

“You can’t *babe* me into believing everything is alright when I know it isn’t.” She leaned in to kiss his forehead as she transferred Gentry to his arms. In soft undertones, she added, “Even if you do look like a magazine advertisement in your snug t-shirt.”

“I was hot.” He reached up to palm the back of her neck and drag her lips to his for a more thorough kiss.

“Yeah, you are.” She chuckled against his mouth. “That’s why I had you covered up this morning. Where’s your other shirt?”

“It burst into flames, babe.”

She kissed him again. “We’ll circle back to that later.” Straightening, she faced her brother, slapping her hands down on her hips. “Seriously, Brady. It could be weeks before we can hire a new horse trainer and get them on board. What are we going to do in the meantime? We’ve got the Bailey’s contract to fill, and their geldings aren’t even close to ready for sending on trail rides.” She waved a hand in frustration toward the emergency room treatment area. “I think Noelle’s injury is proof of just how not-ready they are.”

Knowing he was treading on dangerous territory, Brady pulled up the picture of Suzy on her pony and handed his cell phone to his sister. “This might be a temporary solution.”

Her eyebrows furrowed ominously as she stared at the picture. “I don’t understand.” She glanced back at him. “If you’re here, and our daughter is there, then who is with her right now?”

Brady abruptly stood and pointed her toward his chair. “Sit!”

She sat, still blinking at the photo on his phone. After a pause, she held it up for Chad to see. “Come on, Brady! Tell us who’s responsible for this miracle.”

He drew a deep breath. "You're not going to like my answer."

She frowned up at him. "Why?"

"Because I was in the middle of a training session with my grill master partner when you called to remind me that I was supposed to babysit Suzy this morning."

Shelly gasped and lunged forward in her seat. "So help me, Brady, if you actually left our daughter in the care of Adeline Carver, I..." She stopped to drag in another breath. "I might never forgive you!"

He spread his hands. "Sorry. I didn't have a lot of other options. With Mom and Dad out of town and you and Chad at the doctor's office..." He scrubbed a hand over the lower half of his face. "I wasn't sure how bad Noelle was hurt, so it didn't feel right to send her alone in the ambulance."

Chad reached for Shelly's hand. "We understand, don't we, babe?"

"We do?" Shelly was bubbling with rage.

Chad shrugged. "I'd be lying if I said I was unhappy to see Suzy on her pony."

"In the care of a certified horse trainer," Brady reminded.

"That doesn't make this right," Shelly gasped. "You know it doesn't. Not after what she—"

Chad squeezed her hand to silence her. "You mentioned a temporary solution, Brady. What exactly do you have in mind?"

Though Shelly gave a warning whimper, she remained silent while Brady laid out his plan.

"We already know Adeline, so a standard interview won't be necessary."

"Not true," his sister gritted out. "We *thought* we knew her."

"Instead of the standard interview," Brady ignored her comment, "I'm thinking more along the lines of an audition."

"Ah." Chad nodded. "Put her in the ring and see what she can do."

"With Blue Lightning," Brady added grimly.

Chad's eyebrows flew upward at the mention of the gelding's name that had put Noelle in the hospital. "Are you sure that's wise?"

Brady held his gaze. "I think we can all agree that Bear Mountain Ranch could use another seasoned horse trainer. Noelle is too new at this stuff. I should've never let her take on Blue Lightning's training alone."

"Then we'll speed up the interviews," Shelly blustered, "We'll find someone else."

"Or we could give Adeline a shot," Brady reiterated firmly. "She's

already in town and available to start right away. If we're nice about it, she might even be willing to serve in an interim capacity while we continue with the other interviews."

"I really, really, really don't think this is a good idea." Shelly's voice was pleading. "If it was anyone besides her, and I mean anyone..."

"Exactly." Brady pointed solemnly at her. "The fact that she and I have history is your only objection to her, isn't it?"

"It's a pretty big objection!"

"Yet she got Suzy on a horse," he reminded. "What if she can bring Blue Lightning up to speed just as quickly?"

"That's a pretty big if."

"I agree it's a long shot." He sensed that his sister was weakening. "Like you keep saying, though, we're in desperate need of a new horse trainer."

The door to the emergency room treatment area opened, and a doctor stepped out. Noelle's parents flanked him, battering him with questions.

"How soon will she be able to ride again?"

"You do realize she's a professional horse trainer?"

"What about the Christmas rodeo she's registered to compete in? It's only a few weeks away!"

Shelly stood as they approached, stepping closer to Brady.

The doctor shot them a harried look when Mrs. Ward hurried to Brady's side. She was dolled up in a designer navy pantsuit, reeking of way too much perfume. He had to breathe through his mouth to keep from choking.

Tipping her heavily painted features up to him, she informed the doctor, "Anything you say to us, you can say in front of Brady. Not only is he our daughter's employer, he's practically family." She gave him a simpering look.

"How's Noelle?" Brady gave Mrs. Ward a wary smile, thankful that she didn't sound like she was preparing to launch a lawsuit for negligence against Bear Mountain Ranch and its leadership.

"Resting." Mrs. Ward laid a hand on his arm. "It was a clean break, so no surgery will be required."

The doctor explained that Noelle's leg was splinted and would soon go in a cast. "She'll be on crutches until after Christmas, and there's absolutely no horseback riding until then. Noelle has already tried to convince me otherwise, but grounding her is the only way she's going to heal."

"Understood, sir." Brady glanced at his sister. "The health and safety of

our employees comes first. We'll make do on the ranch until she's back on her feet."

Shelly gave him a desperate head shake, but he plowed onward. "Mrs. Ward, please let Noelle know she's officially on Christmas vacation. She can come back as soon as the doctor says she can and not a day before that."

Noelle's mother squeezed his arm again. "Thank you, Brady. I know you care for our daughter as much as we do."

"My pleasure, ma'am. Keep me posted," he requested quietly, "and let me know if there's anything I can do for you or Noelle between now and Christmas."

For an answer, she slid her arms around his neck and tugged his head down for a kiss on the cheek.

After they said their goodbyes to the Wards, Brady followed Chad and Shelly to the parking lot. Since he'd arrived there in an ambulance, he was going to have to bum a ride home with them.

"Practically family?" Shelly swiveled around as soon as she was buckled in the front passenger seat. "Do you have something to tell us, Brady?" Her expression was hopeful.

He gave her a hard look. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Oh, really? Because I can think of only one reason why Beatrice Ward would consider my brother to be practically family! You've been holding out on us, haven't you?"

He shook his head at her. "Still not following you," he lied, not liking where this was going.

"Oh, for crying out loud," she exploded. "I'm talking about you and Noelle. You finally asked her out, didn't you?"

"Uh...no." He glared at his sister. "Noelle is an employee of ours, in case you've forgotten that very important fact. Nothing more. Nothing less."

"But you're such good friends," she protested.

"Yup. Just friends," he affirmed. "And a great employee. End of story."

"So..." Shelly steeped her hands, looking sly. "I take it you're not a big fan of dating people who work for you?"

"From my understanding, it's generally frowned upon," he returned, still not liking where their conversation was heading.

"In that case, I'm officially removing my objections to you interviewing Adeline Carver."

"Good." He glanced at his watch. "Because it's roughly half an hour from

her scheduled interview. If Chad drives fast enough, we might still make it back to the ranch in time.”



CHAPTER 4: DANGEROUS AUDITION BRADY

The moment Chad parked, Brady leaned over to give his sniveling nephew a kiss on the top of his head. “Get well soon, buddy.” He’d whimpered the entire drive home.

While Shelly unbuckled Gentry from his car seat and did her best to stop his tears, Brady pushed open his door and stepped out. Instead of heading inside to his office, he jogged alongside the barn and rounded the corner to the riding ring. It was empty.

He drew in a breath of relief, knowing it was probably best for Shelly *not* to see Adeline leading Suzy around on her pony right now. He trudged through the rear entrance to the barn and found Jingle tethered to the cleaning station.

Adeline was instructing Suzy how to brush down the little pony. “That’s right, kiddo,” she encouraged cheerfully. “All the way down to her belly. She’s loving it.”

Brady wasn’t sure his niece was listening. She was too busy chattering. “We’re best friends now. I’ve never had a horse for a best friend. I bet Luke is gonna be jealous, because he’s my other best friend, and we’re gonna get married—”

“Hey there, stinker!” Brady stepped forward, earning a startled look from Adeline. Her white coat was unzipped, providing a striking contrast to the pine green sweater beneath it. She was so lovely with her windblown dark hair waving against her cheeks and throat that all he could do was stare for a moment.

“Uncle Brady!” Dropping her brush, Suzy came flying in his direction to throw her arms around him. “Miss Adeline helped me not be scared of Jingle Berries anymore. She—”

“Jingle Berries, huh?” He unwound her arms from around his legs so he could squat down beside her.

“It’s Miss Adeline’s nickname for her, and she likes it,” she babbled breathlessly.

“Oh, does she?” Brady shot an inquiring look up at Adeline.

A flush swept her cheeks. “She sure does.” She looked like she was trying not to laugh. “She told me herself.”

“She’s a horse whisperer,” Suzy hissed loudly. “It doesn’t mean you have to whisper, though.”

He tickled her neck, making her giggle and tuck her chin against her collarbone. “Then why are you whispering?” He spoke in a stage whisper.

“I don’t know,” she stage whispered back, then dissolved into laughter.

Shelly stalked their way from the front entrance of the barn. Gentry was hiked against one hip. “Are you ready for your interview, Adeline?” There was a crisp edge to her voice.

Adeline’s expression grew cautious. “I am. Thank you for the opportunity to—”

“It’s not a typical interview,” Shelly interrupted sharply. “It’s more of an audition. Brady’s words, not mine.” She compressed her lips, shooting him a disapproving look.

As he stood, Suzy stuck her tiny paw in his hand. “You wanna see me ride again, Uncle Brady?”

“Yes, I do,” he assured her with an affectionate look, “but not right this second. It’s Miss Adeline’s turn to get into the ring and show off a little.”

Adeline’s startled gaze flew to his. “What exactly do you want to see?”

“A seasoned horse trainer in action.” Shelly answered before he could. “One of our trainers left last month to take a job in a bigger city. He only gave us a one-week notice, which I suppose is better than nothing.” Her thinly veiled reference to Adeline’s abrupt departure from town five years ago wasn’t lost on Brady.

With a warning look at his sister, he jumped back into the conversation. “The only trainer we have left is the one who got injured this morning. Unfortunately, she doesn’t have anywhere near his kind of experience.” He paused a beat, fearing what he was about to say next would set his sister off

again. "Or yours."

"Which she'll acquire in time." Shelly glared at him. "She's been a wonderful employee in every other respect. Reliable and dependable. Someone we've always been able to count on."

He glared back. So help him, if she didn't back down and let him do his job, they were going to have a serious talk about this.

Adeline delicately cleared her throat. "Do you mind me asking what happened between your trainer and the horse that injured her?"

"He kicked her," Shelly snapped without looking her way.

"He's a spirited gelding named Blue Lightning." Brady clenched his jaw as he returned his gaze to Adeline. He was fighting to maintain control of his temper. "We don't have the whole story yet...about what actually happened."

Concern flashed in Adeline's eyes. "Would you like me to take a look at him?"

Shelly's mouth turned down at the corners. "In case anybody's wondering, our trainer suffered a broken leg."

Brady's head jerked in her direction at the censure in her voice. She was all but accusing Adeline of being more concerned about the horse than the trainer.

"I'm sorry to hear it," Adeline sighed. "Though it's probably little comfort to her at the moment, there are worse outcomes to getting kicked." She added beneath her breath. "Far worse outcomes than a broken leg."

For once, Shelly remained silent.

Brady took advantage of the lull in the conversation to address Adeline. "I'd like to take you up on your offer to have a look at Blue Lightning. If he's not injured, I wouldn't mind seeing you take a run at him in the ring, as well."

"Ah. That's what you meant about seeing me in action."

"Yep, if you're willing." He honestly couldn't wait to see her in action again. Before she'd left town, she'd been a wizard with horses. He could only imagine how much better she'd gotten after working with a bunch of prize horses and rodeo champs in Texas. Jealously twisted his gut at the realization that she'd been rubbing shoulders with some of the most renowned riders on the rodeo circuit. Young and good-looking guys. Rich and single guys.

"It's kind of the whole idea behind auditions," Shelly added.

Adeline sucked in a breath, presumably in response to his sister's sharp tone. "I'm ready," she said simply. Her dark lashes momentarily fluttered

against her cheeks, hiding her gaze from him.

Something jolted inside his chest. He'd witnessed her flutter her eyelashes a thousand different ways in the past not to recognize what she was doing. She was irritated, but she was choosing to hide her reaction to Shelly's bad attitude instead of jabbing back. She was taking the high road, which was typical of her and her sunshiny personality.

Gentry started to cry, and Shelly muttered something about taking the kids home. Chad followed her, leaving Brady alone with Adeline.

He blew out a breath and faced her squarely. "Sorry about that. My sister is, uh...tired. The baby's been sick."

She nodded, not quite meeting his gaze.

He angled his head at her to follow him to Blue Lightning's stall.

She took her time approaching the horse, holding her gloved hand out for him to approach and sniff at his leisure. "He appears to be alright." She stooped over to examine his hooves more closely, careful to keep out of easy striking range. "I see no visible marks or swelling. He's putting his full weight on his legs. No obvious signs of tenderness."

She straightened. "I think he's good to go." As she slowly backed away from Blue Lightning, he lunged forward and attempted to butt her with his head.

She danced out of the way, nearly plowing into Brady. He caught her shoulders to steady her, and she shot him a grateful look.

"My voice and scent are unfamiliar to him." She sounded more apologetic than anything else, and not the least bit fearful. "It'll take time for us to bond."

He kept a firm hand on her elbow as he escorted her from the stall. Though she remained blissfully calm, he was anything but. Just watching the half-wild horse lunge at her like that had unnerved him.

"Let me be very clear." He spoke in a terse undertone, not wanting to alarm the horse any more than he already was. "Blue Lightning does not have a good track record. My trainer is the second person he's injured in the past two weeks. Depending on what I report back to his owner, he could easily end up in the slaughter house."

Adeline shook off his hand, looking horrified. "That's a little harsh, even for you, Brady McGrath!"

He was oddly pleased with her response. "He just kicked a woman and broke her leg."

She threw her hands into the air. “Like you said earlier, none of us saw what happened.”

“Noelle Ward is a certified horse trainer, the same as you.” He spoke in a harder voice than necessary so he could watch her reaction.

As she’d done when Shelly had needled her, Adeline fluttered her eyelashes downward. “True, but no two trainers are the same. Our experience is different. Our styles are different. Our reaction times are different.” When he didn’t answer, she shot him a hooded look. “I’m not saying she did anything wrong, Brady.”

“You implied it.”

Her lashes fluttered against her cheeks again. “All I said was that you and I weren’t there, so we don’t have the whole story.” She lifted her chin and faced him squarely. “That is the truth. If we’re going to work together, you’d better get used to hearing it.” Her voice was the perfect balance of respectfulness and firmness. “I don’t play games when it comes to the safety of people or horses. You can take that to the bank.”

He nodded, unable to find any fault with her answer. On the contrary, he was having a difficult time viewing the bluntly honest woman in front of him as the same one who’d left town five years ago without a backward glance. If only she’d been half as committed to their relationship back then as she was about her career now.

“Alright, then. Let’s see what you can do.” Though she had no way of knowing it, he was no longer just going through the motions with their interview. Her words and actions during the past fifteen minutes or so had convinced him to give her fair consideration for the job opening. His hiring decision now hinged solely on what happened in the riding ring outside.

Brushing aside Adeline’s offer to help, he led Blue Lightning to the ring himself.

With a sigh of resignation, she reached for a coil of rope hanging from the wall in the hallway and looped it over her shoulder as she followed him. At the gate, she placed her hands over his on the horse’s reins. “This is the point where you let me do my job, Brady.”

He stubbornly held on. “I’m going in there with you.”

She drew herself up to her full five feet three inches. “Only if you’re that bent on seeing another injury today.” Despite Blue Lightning’s impatient prancing beside them, her voice remained calm.

He gritted his teeth, hating the thought of her being alone with a horse as

dangerous as Blue Lightning. However, Adeline's stance indicated she had no intention of backing down. With a grunt of disapproval, he opened the gate and allowed the horse to bolt into the ring.

Adeline stepped into the ring and firmly shut the gate behind her without looking back. She walked to the dead center of the hard-packed dirt ring and paused with her legs slightly spread. She pivoted slowly as Blue Lightning ran, continuously facing him. After he'd made a few laps around the ring, she issued her first command to him. She didn't use any actual words. It sounded more like, "Hep! Hep!" She also made some clicking sounds with her tongue.

The blue-black beast snorted and tossed his head belligerently at her. It was a clear challenge to her authority.

She uncoiled the rope from her shoulder and started swinging the end of it, keeping him in front of her at all times.

Trumpeting out a protest, he increased his speed.

"That's it, boy," she called in an encouraging voice. She continued swinging the rope and making clicking sounds with her tongue as she drove the horse harder and faster.

Brady stood outside the ring, unable to fill his lungs with enough air. The muscles in his shoulders bunched as he watched the movements of the two figures in front of him.

At some point, Chad joined him at the fence. Fortunately, he knew better than to say anything that might startle the temperamental creature in the ring with Adeline. He didn't so much as lean on the fence.

Brady found himself mouthing a prayer. *Please, God. Keep her safe.* He repeated the words again and again until Chad took a step nearer to him.

"Think He heard you, bro." His voice was a low growl for Brady's ears alone.

Brady didn't answer and didn't take his eyes off what was happening inside the ring. Time passed. He had no idea how much. It might've been minutes. It might've been hours. He found himself wishing like crazy that he'd never decided to put Adeline through such an audition. He should've stuck to a standard interview like he was going to do with all the other candidates.

What was I thinking?

If anything happened to her out there today, he would never forgive himself. Yeah, she'd broken his heart into a million pieces, but he had zero interest in seeing her break her neck in a million pieces in return.

“Please, God. Protect her.” He whispered the prayer again, no longer caring who heard him. His only comfort was that the horse seemed to be wearing down.

Finally!

Brady had no idea how long Adeline had kept him running. It felt like hours, though. Years even.

Without warning, Adeline stopped moving and stopped speaking. She just stood there in the center of the ring. The horse took a few more weary strides, then stopped as well.

Brady tensed and leaned their way, wondering what was happening. He was forced to watch in agonized silence as Adeline slowly turned her back on the heaving creature. He wasn't sure if she intended for it to happen, but her change of direction brought her face to face with him and Chad.

Though she was gazing in their direction, she seemed to be looking through them instead of directly at them.

He watched the rapid rise and fall of her chest through her jacket, realizing her nerves were coiled every bit as tight as his while she waited.

She kept so still that the only sound besides the horse's heavy breathing was the whoosh of the cold mountain breeze around them.

Blue Lightning abruptly shuffled into motion. He took a few steps in Adeline's direction, then stopped. Then he took another step.

Brady stopped breathing altogether. His right hand inched toward the pistol strapped in his holster. For safety reasons, he nearly always buckled it on before leaving the barn.

Blue Lightning continued to advance on Adeline, but she still didn't move. Didn't turn around. Didn't so much as look over her shoulder to gauge his movement.

Their gazes finally clashed.

When she didn't look away, he nearly choked to realize she was one hundred percent focused on him now. The only reason he could think of was that she was using his expression as a mirror for what was happening behind her.

Despite how hard his heart was pounding, he strove to give her an accurate picture. Flicking his gaze between her and Blue Lightning, he continued to watch the horse's advance.

The most difficult part was when Blue Lightning slowly dipped his long black head toward Adeline. Brady was terrified that the spirited beast was

preparing to butt her or kick her. All he did, though, was press his nose to the back of her shoulder.

Brady watched the breath leave Adeline's lungs in a silent whoosh. Then she reached up to lightly stroke his nose. "Good boy." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Unless Brady was mistaken, her voice shook a little. He released his grip on his pistol and returned his arm to his side. He ducked his head in a quick prayer of thanksgiving.

"She did good." Chad's hand on his shoulder brought his head back up. "Looks like we got ourselves a new horse trainer."

"Yeah. Shelly's going to be thrilled." Brady's voice was dry.

"It's just business." Chad didn't sound too worried. "She knows that." He lightly elbowed Brady in the ribs. "Pretty sure your policy about not dating employees went a long way toward calming her down some."

"Don't recall stating that precisely, but okay." Brady shot an annoyed look at his brother-in-law, wishing he could explain that he'd only pulled that excuse out of the air as a reason for not dating Noelle. He could tell Shelly was growing more and more hopeful in that direction. And though he agreed she was a very nice person, he didn't feel that way about her. He just didn't.

"It's a story you might want to stick to for a while." A world of understanding reverberated in Chad's voice. "Just until Shelly comes around. Which she will. Eventually."

"Yeah, in a good fifty years or so." Brady swung away from the fence. Without waiting for permission from Adeline, he let himself inside the gate and met her in the center of the ring.

He wordlessly reached for Blue Lightning, intending to lead him from the ring. The horse rudely pushed his hand away and went back to nuzzling Adeline's shoulder.

Brady shook his head in disbelief. "Audition's over." He couldn't have been more relieved. "Let's get you back inside, big guy."

"I'll do it." Adeline had no trouble leading Blue Lightning through the gate. She nodded at Chad as she walked him back to the barn. The moment they were indoors, she inquired softly, "Would you have really shot him?"

Brady fell into step beside her. "Only if I felt your safety was in question."

"I was watching you." She bit her lower lip. "Fully prepared to duck, roll, or run if you so much as twitched."

“I was aware.” It was why he’d tried so hard not to twitch.

“Thank you, by the way. Things might not have gone as smoothly out there without you.” She drew a deep breath as she reached up to stroke Blue Lightning’s nose again. “Horses are incredible creatures, aren’t they? They can sense our every emotion.”

“Yeah.” He cast a sideways glance at her, not daring to say more. He liked the way she and Blue Lightning looked together — so much that he was having trouble tearing his gaze away from them. Both of them were panting. Her cheeks were flushed. With every huff the horse gave, his breath moved the glossy strands of hair against her shoulder. Never before had she been so lovely.

She caught his gaze. “Whether you meant to or not, your presence bolstered my courage.” Her voice was breathless. “I think it made a difference with him.”

Though her words pleased Brady immeasurably, the only answer he could scrape up at the moment was short and gruff. “You’re welcome.”

They reached the cleaning station. She efficiently tethered Blue Lightning to it. Removing her coat and pushing up her sleeves, she sponged him down with warm, sudsy water.

Not wanting to interfere with their bonding time, Brady leaned against the wall, watching them.

She squatted to run the sponge down the horse’s legs. “So...did I pass my audition?” Her voice was tinged with anxiety as it wafted up to him.

“I think you already know the answer to that.” He decided on the spot that there was nothing in the world more beautiful than Adeline Carver bathing a horse. Droplets of water spattered her jeans, and soap suds spattered her slender arms. Though she’d pushed the sleeves of her sweater up over her elbows, the bunched fabric was growing damp.

It wasn’t just her physical beauty that affected him, though she was undeniably lovely with her wind-reddened cheeks and tousled ponytail. It was more than that. It was her kindhearted way of handling Blue Lightning that drove her appeal to aching levels for him. To have won over such a difficult gelding, and to have done it so quickly, was a real gift.

Adeline tossed an inscrutable look over her shoulder at him while he continued to study her. “I really need this job, Brady.” She didn’t say why, and he didn’t ask.

“Well, it’s yours, if you want it.”

“I do.” Her eyes glowed with gratitude as she resumed washing the horse. “I know you probably have questions, so I’m just going to say one thing outright. I’m back in town for good.”

“Okay.” His heart thumped a little harder at her words. “My biggest question is, when can you start?”

“Right away.” The next time she looked his way, a tremulous smile was riding her lips. “And I’m still not quitting the grill master contest.”

He resisted the urge to throw his Stetson in the air and catch it. “I’m a little less steamed about that since you’ve proven to be such a quick study.”

“I don’t like to lose any more than you do.”

Her admission made his chest tighten painfully.

Then why’d you give up on us?

He wanted so badly to ask her, but now didn’t feel like the right time.

He straightened with a grimace, shoving his hands in his pockets. “When you’re done with Blue Lightning, meet me in my office and we’ll hash out the details of your contract.”



Adeline resisted the urge to stare, but she felt each strong footfall as Brady strode away from her down the long hallway.

I did it.

Hot tears stung her eyes. “Correction,” she whispered to Blue Lightning. “We did it, boy.”

He tossed his head and whinnied, as if understanding every word she said.

She didn’t have the heart to tell him that his part in her audition outside had probably saved him a trip to the slaughter house. As she finished washing him down, she made a fervent promise to both herself and him.

“We’re gonna get you trained up, Blue. You’re going to blow everyone away with your trail riding skills by the time we’re done working together. I promise.” She punctuated the words with a gentle pat on his neck.

He whinnied again, more loudly this time.

Brady’s head popped around the door of his office. “Everything okay

down there?” He kept the volume of his voice down.

“We’re good.” She sent him a thumbs up, awash with appreciation for the way he kept checking on her. “Be there in a sec.” She gave Blue Lightning a good brush down before returning him to his stall. Then she topped off his food and water and forked some hay onto the floor.

Shutting the door, she remained standing on the other side of it. “You did good today, boy. I’m so proud of you.” He whinnied as he snuffled through the fresh hay.

Blowing him a kiss, she walked down the hallway toward Brady’s office. Her steps slowed as she got closer. Though she was exhausted after her work in the ring outside, a sense of exhilaration welled inside her. She still didn’t know why Brady had so cruelly cut off all communication with her five years ago, but it felt like they’d made a few strides in re-establishing that link between them today.

Shelly was another story entirely. Her gut told her that she and Brady’s sister might never be friends again. Sadly, she had no idea what she’d done wrong to incur the woman’s wrath.

What in the world did Brady say to you about me?

Unfortunately, the progress they’d made in re-establishing some modicum of communication between them hadn’t reached anywhere near the point of asking him something that personal. They might never reach that point again.

Adeline swallowed a sigh as she paused outside his office. Though his door was open, she wasn’t comfortable simply barging in on him like old times. Instead, she gave a tentative knock on the door frame.

“Come in.” There was no hesitation in his response.

She stepped inside his office and waited for more direction.

“Please.” He waved at the pair of black vinyl chairs perched crookedly in front of his desk. “Have a seat.” He typed something on his keyboard. “I’ve got your personnel file started. Shelly will scan your resume in on Monday and get your benefits activated.” His dark gaze glinted with humor. “That’s when your medical insurance will kick in, so don’t get sick before then, okay?”

“Wasn’t planning on it.” She felt like she was drowning in the dark, penetrating depths of his eyes. She could read the longing in them, along with the questions and the ever present anger lurking just beneath the surface. His anger was what puzzled her the most. Why was he angry with *her* when *he*

was the one who'd broken things off between them? Maybe not with words, but certainly by his silence.

Being with him again like this made her more curious than ever as to why he'd stonewalled her after reading her letter. She'd poured her heart out to him. She'd told him things she'd never told him before, like the fact that she was in love with him.

Maybe it had been too soon to use the L word on him. Maybe it was something she should've told him in person. Or maybe it wouldn't have done any good. Maybe he still would've been angry when she told him she was leaving town. Regardless, his complete and utter silence was not the response she'd been expecting on the topic. Not in a million years. A heated argument, perhaps, but not...*nothing*.

He was the first to look away. Returning his gaze to his computer screen, he drawled, "Let me know what you're looking for in terms of a salary."

Oh, this is awkward!

She studied the firm line of his jaw and the cocky tilt of his Stetson, kind of surprised he hadn't taken it off yet, probably because he was still warming up from outside. Either that, or he was using it as a shield, since he could more easily hide his gaze from her, depending on how he moved his head.

"I, um...listed my most recent salary on my resume. Maybe we could start there?"

His eyebrows rose. "Start there? That was Dallas, and this is Pinetop, darlin'."

The endearment rolled so easily from him that she wasn't sure he'd realized he'd even called her that. She was aware of it, though. A warm flush worked its way across her face, no doubt staining her cheeks a holly berry red. Why, oh, why was he still so appealing to her, even when he was being sarcastic?

Or grumpy.

Or angry.

Or distant.

It was impossible not to notice how well his muscular frame filled his long-sleeved black shirt. The Bear Mountain Ranch logo was emblazoned in gold thread across the left side of his chest — a mountain with a bear paw print overlapping the center of it.

"I just meant we could start the conversation there." She bit the inside of her lip. "As badly as I need this job, I've always hated talking about money."

She'd grown up dirt poor. He knew that. She had no idea why he was putting her on the spot like this.

He scowled at his computer screen. "I have no doubt you're worth every penny of what you made in Dallas, Adeline. Wasn't trying to imply otherwise. I just can't justify going that high from the get-go."

She couldn't believe he was considering going that high *ever*. She waved a hand helplessly, hoping to bring the painful conversation to the quickest conclusion possible. "I'm going to accept any reasonable offer you make, so just get it over with."

Despite how badly he'd trampled her heart five years ago, there was a part of her that still trusted him to do the right thing. How could she not trust him after the lengths he'd been willing to go to protect her in the riding ring earlier?

His expression was deadpan as he named an amount higher than what she'd been expecting — quite a bit higher, actually.

Her shoulders relaxed. "I accept. Thank you. Where do I sign?" The words rushed out of her so quickly that they drew a smirk from him.

"Hold your horses. I'm getting to that part."

"I can't help it." She knew she was babbling, but she couldn't seem to stop. "You just offered me a really good job." One that would allow her to continue helping out with her dad's medical expenses. "Plus, working for Bear Mountain Ranch has always been my—"

At his astounded look, she stopped short of admitting it was her biggest dream come true. "It's, um...just so great to be home," she amended.

For some reason, her words made his expression grow hooded again. "I'm going to print out a bunch of stuff that you can read over the weekend. Bring it back signed on Monday, and Shelly will finish getting you set up. Because of what we do here at the ranch, I can't guarantee you'll have off federal holidays, though we try to protect Thanksgiving and Christmas at all costs. You'll get comp time for any other holidays we ask you to work. We also offer a retirement savings account with matching contributions, if you're interested in that." He pushed a button, and the printer whirred into action, spitting out page after page.

He stood and angled his head toward the doorway. "While all that stuff is printing, how about I show you your office?"

My office? She blinked at him as she stood. She hadn't been expecting an office.

He snorted at her expression and ushered her out the door ahead of him. “It’s next door to me. Makes it easier for us to communicate, since we’ll be doing a lot of that in the coming days. I keep very close tabs on the progress of our horses.” He jiggled the door handle, as if unsure if it would be locked or not. It wasn’t. He opened the door for her and waved her inside ahead of him.

She could’ve sworn she felt the body heat radiating off him as she stepped past him.

He didn’t seem to notice her discomfort. Flipping on a light, he mused, “Not sure how well our last head trainer cleaned up after himself, but you’re welcome to keep or toss whatever he left behind.”

Head trainer? She choked and tried to cover the sound with a cough.

He gave her a searching look. “You okay over there?”

“Did you say head trainer?” She wondered if she’d heard right.

He shrugged. “You gentled the beast that nearly kicked my other trainer into Kingdom Come. Seems to me that you have more to offer her than what she has to offer you.”

She dragged in a breath, nodding. For the life of her, she couldn’t think of a single thing to say in response.

He cast another curious glance at her. “You sure you’re okay?”

Would you care if I wasn’t?

She met his gaze, swallowing hard. “This morning, I was jobless. Now I’m the head trainer at Bear Mountain Ranch. It’s still sinking in.”

Something warm flashed in his gaze, something she couldn’t quite define. “Take all the time you want. I’ll be next door if you need anything.” He tipped his hat at her and backed toward the door. Digging in his pocket, he produced a set of keys and tossed them her way.

After a short hesitation, she managed to catch them.

“Your keys to this room and the front entrance.” He pointed a thumb at the wall that separated their two offices. “Don’t forget to grab your paperwork from the printer on your way out.” He turned to leave, then paused in the doorway. “We’ll be sharing the printer in my office. Makes no sense to invest in another one for you, since we don’t print out that much stuff around here.”

“Works for me.” Her voice came out more breathless than she intended. “Thanks. For everything.”

“Enjoy the rest of your weekend, because we’re going to hit the ground

running on Monday.” He tapped a fist against her doorframe. “And by running, I mean running hard.” The steel was back in his voice.

Oka-a-a-ay.

She was too happy about his job offer to let his grumpiness get in the way of it. However, it would’ve been nice if he’d shared the teensiest bit of her joy. Someday, she was going to get to the bottom of whatever she’d done to him to make him so angry.

For a few seconds, at least, she intended to seriously revel in the fact she’d been given her very first office. She gave a giddy twirl before pressing her hands to her heart. It was racing like a whole herd of galloping horses.

This is really happening.

She was about to start working for her ex-boyfriend, a guy she’d been unable to stop thinking about for the past five years. Or regretting the way they’d parted. Or missing him even though he was no longer hers to miss.

Maybe if she worked really hard for him and his family, they could at least be friends again. Not that she’d ever be satisfied with that. After knowing what it felt like to be held by him and kissed by him, she was pretty sure that nothing less than that would ever be enough.

Tears misted her eyes as she spun back toward her new desk and dizzily took a seat.

I can’t believe this is mine.

Oh, what a cost it had come with, though! Her eyes finished filling, and the first tears slid down her cheeks.



When Brady retired to his office, a thick stack of paper was waiting on the printer. He scooped the stack up and tapped it against his desk a few times to straighten it. Then he moved toward the door. Though he’d made up his mind to keep things strictly professional between him and Adeline — absolutely no talk about the history they’d shared — there was nothing overly personal about delivering her new employee paperwork to her. It wasn’t as if he could print anything else before removing her stuff from the landing tray.

As he moved to her door, he was surprised to find her eyes closed and an

expression of bliss covering her features as she spun in a circle. She wasn't simply celebrating landing a new job. She was overjoyed about it. There was a distinctive difference — one that wasn't lost on him.

She was more than half turned away from him when she opened her eyes. However, he could see the sheen of tears glistening on her face.

He quickly backed out of sight, not wanting to intrude on such a private moment. Before returning to his office, he heard a damp snuffle. *Man!* She was crying! Why was she crying? He'd just given her a job, for pity's sake! She'd won.

Once upon a time, he would've stormed in on her and demanded to know what was wrong so he could fix it. However, she wasn't his to storm in on anymore. Or to hold. Or to offer comfort.

He returned to his desk with a heavy heart, wishing like crazy he knew what was going on inside her head. What had he done wrong when they were together? Why had she left town for five stinking years afterward? And now that he had her back, what in the world was he supposed to do to keep it from happening again?

Before he could take a seat, his cell phone vibrated with an incoming text message. It was Shelly, and she sounded beside herself.

Need to talk to you. NOW!!!

No doubt she'd read the email he'd forwarded to her and their parents, along with a copy of Adeline's employment contract. It was time to face the dragons.

He shot back a quick message. *Where are you?*

She sent a one-word response. *Home.*



He drove straight there.

She met him at the door. “What were you thinking?” She grabbed two handfuls of his shirt and pulled him the rest of the way inside the foyer. “You had no right to hire her without the rest of us having a say in the decision. No right!”

He covered her hands with his. “As ranch manager, I actually do.”

Tears gushed from her eyes. “Brady, we’re on the same team here. I’m only trying to protect you from—”

“I know,” he interrupted, pulling her close and tucking her head beneath his chin.

“What about Noelle?” she sobbed against his shirt.

His shoulders stiffened. *Not her again.* “What about her?”

“She cares for you, Brady. A lot!” His sister fisted her hand against his chest and gave it a not-so-gentle tap.

“If you’re saying what I think you’re saying—”

“I’m saying it, Brady. You should ask her on a date. She adores you to pieces.”

He held his sister at arm’s length, so she could look at him while he said what needed to be said. “I don’t feel that way about her.”

“Why not?” she cried. “She’s been a loyal employee for two years straight. Someone you can trust!”

“Every employee on our payroll is loyal and trustworthy. Doesn’t make me more inclined to date any one of them.”

“You know what I mean,” she stormed.

“Not really.”

“Noelle is so amazing,” she protested.

“Agreed.” Albeit not as talented as Adeline in the riding ring.

“And sweet.”

“Very.”

“I’m pretty sure she has a crush on you.”

“I’m flattered.” *Still not interested.*

“She’s going to be devastated when she finds out you hired Adeline.”

“Why?” He couldn’t imagine why. “She was well aware we were advertising for a new head trainer.”

“Because you just hired your ex-girlfriend to oversee a woman who wants to date you, that’s why!” Shelly looked at him like he was stupid.

He shrugged. “Adeline and I never officially broke up, so technically she’s not even my ex.”

Shelly gave a bleat of distress. “That’s not helping.”

Wasn’t trying to. “That was my way of telling you stay out of my personal life, sis.”

She pointed at the door, eyes welling again. “Just...go!”

“I’m going.” On his way out, he tweaked a strand of hair dangling against

her cheek. “You’re still my favorite sister.”

“Well, you’re not my favorite brother at the moment.” She sounded close to breaking down again altogether.

Deciding he’d teased her enough for now, he let himself out and quietly shut the door behind him.



CHAPTER 5: BIG HINTS

ADELINE

Monday

Though Adeline rose before daybreak, her father was already in the kitchen, hunkered over the coffeemaker. He was meticulously measuring out their favorite brand of ground coffee into the paper-lined filter basket. A carton of spring water rested on the cabinet beside the bag of coffee, ready to pour in.

“Old habits die hard, huh?” She eyed the silver walker he was standing behind and gripping with one hand. It was hard seeing her formerly tall, powerful, and strong daddy all broken down like this.

He made a grunting sound as he finished preparing the coffee one-handed. Pouring in the water, he set the glass decanter beneath the spigot and pushed the brew button. Only then did he turn around to face her.

“Couldn’t let my baby girl start her first day on the job without a proper cup of joe.” Though stooped over with pain, Birch Carver was every bit as handsome in his jeans and untucked plaid shirt as he had been during his bull riding days. His shirt was hanging open over a comfortably faded navy t-shirt.

He was still in his sock feet, something she’d warned him about again and again. It was a tripping hazard on the shiny hardwood floor. He grinned and wiggled his toes for her benefit as he followed her gaze. “Come here, you.” He beckoned her closer.

She went to him and allowed him to hook his long arm around her and

pull her close. He smelled like woodsy aftershave lotion and eucalyptus soap. It was something else that made her sad. He was too clean these days. Once upon a time, he'd smelled like rodeo dust and sweat.

"Love you, kiddo." He hitched her closer.

"Love you, too, Dad," she mumbled against his shoulder. "Please assure me those are non-skid socks you're wearing."

"They are, worrywart."

"I can worry about you if I want to."

"Your mama does more than enough of that, so you can take a break."

"She's not the only worrywart around here. Look who's up making coffee before sunrise."

"I'm always up before sunrise. Even if I wasn't in the habit of getting up early, I wouldn't have missed your strut to your truck for the world."

She snickered. "Chickens strut. I don't strut."

"When you're wearing your red boots, you do."

"Do not." Her red boots simply put her in a better mood. So did her pink ones and purple ones. They were too beautiful not to.

"Do," he repeated firmly.

She sighed, realizing it was pointless to continue arguing with the man. He always won. "Is Mom still in bed?"

"Of course." He reached up to tug the end of her French braid. "Melody's gotta get her beauty sleep. She's not ninety-five percent cowgirl and five percent orneriness like my other favorite female." He hugged her again.

"Only five percent orneriness, huh?"

"I was being nice."

"Ha ha."

"Plus, you're too short to hold much more orneriness than that."

"You just had to say that," she groaned. They both knew that her petite mother was the reason for her own measly five feet three inches.

"I did, just so I could tell you again that you're the perfect height for you." There was no point in arguing with him about that, either. He'd always claimed that she and her mother were the perfect size.

Melody Carver was a library mouse in both size and vocation. She'd worked part time at the front desk of Pinetop Library for over twenty years. The rest of her time she spent at home — cooking, cleaning, decorating, and making sure their cozy mountain chalet continued to feel like home. She and Adeline's father had saved for years in order to buy a place of their own.

It was a place that Adeline was determined to help them keep. There was no way she was going to stand around and do nothing while they liquidated everything they owned to pay for his medical expenses. They'd poured themselves into her upbringing as well as her college education. It was her turn to lend them a little assistance.

Adeline kept her head on her father's shoulder while the coffee was brewing. "It's so good to be home," she sighed.

"It's so good to have you home." He hugged her tighter. "Sorry that money's a little tight right now, but we're no stranger to tough times. We'll get through it like we always do."

"I've never doubted it." Hearing the coffeemaker going through its final trickling sounds, she slid from his embrace to pour two steaming cups for them. She handed him one. "Black as the tar on the highway leading down the mountain."

"Thank you." He dipped his head in appreciation before taking a sip.

She added her favorite vanilla dairy creamer to hers, along with a few pumps of the cinnamon bun syrup she'd brought with her from Dallas.

Her father shook his head at her as he watched her doctor her cup to delicious perfection. "Your taste in coffee is pretty pinkies up these days."

She drenched him with a happy smile. "You do realize you're speaking to the head horse trainer of Bear Mountain Ranch? Going forward, the Carver family can afford to lift our pinkies as high as we want."

He scowled at her over the top of his cup. "Sweetheart, we didn't send you to college so you could come back here and support us for the rest of our lives."

She innocently lifted her eyebrows. "I never said you did."

"Then why'd your mother tell me you went down to the hospital last night and paid off the balance on our account?"

"Because it's almost Christmas." She gave him her sweetest smile, wondering who at the hospital had ratted her out. "Merry Christmas, Dad!"

"Adeline!" There was a warning note in his voice.

"It was supposed to be a surprise. I can't believe Mom spoiled it," she teased, lifting her cup to take another sip. She closed her eyes as she swallowed the mouth-watering blend of her favorite flavors.

"All grown up and still a brat," he sighed. "In case your mother hasn't told you yet, she asked if she could work full time at the library, and they said yes. Plus, they're giving her a raise."

Adeline lowered her coffee cup. “Why would she do a thing like that?” To her knowledge, her mother had never worked more than part time after getting married.

“Because we need the money. It’s only temporary, of course, until I can get back on my feet.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “Please, please, please assure me you’re not referring to bull riding!”

“I wish.” He gave a grunt of disgust. “It’s nothing that exciting, though. Okay, maybe it’s a little exciting.” His expression brightened. “I’ve been in negotiations with Angel down at the dinner theater. He’d like to bring me on board as a riding coach for his indoor rodeo team. I’d mostly work summers. He’d need me some during the Christmas season, too, for their holiday rodeo.”

Her interest was thoroughly piqued. “It sounds like a perfect fit for you.” Since their small mountain community celebrated the holidays year round, she suspected he could work as many or as few hours as he wanted. She was going to hug Angel Castellano the next time she ran into him.

“It’s a good fit indeed.” He set down his cup on the countertop so he could wag a finger at her. “That means no more sticking your nose into my medical bills, ya hear?”

“It was a Christmas gift.” She wagged a finger back at him. “No need to get your britches in a wad over it.” She intended to visit the hospital again soon to see what it would take to reroute his medical bills to the post office box she’d reserved a few days ago.

“So long as we understand each other, consider my britches unwadded.” He continued to glare at her. Or tried to. After a few more seconds of staring each other down, they burst into simultaneous laughter.

“I love you so much, Dad,” Adeline sighed between giggles.

“You’d better never stop.” He winked at her. “Now go straighten out Brady McGrath’s horses for him. He’s been having a rough time ever since —”

“Don’t. Please.” She held up a hand, in no mood to hear another tirade about how brokenhearted his best friend’s son had been ever since she’d left for college.

He cleared his throat. “If you’d let me finish, you’d know I was only gonna say he’s been having a rough time whipping his new horses into shape ever since his head trainer quit.”

“Well, I’ll have that covered from now on.” She was able to take a bigger swig of her coffee now that it was cooling down.

“He sure didn’t waste any time offering you a job.” Her father searched her features.

She wasn’t about to satisfy his curiosity in that direction. “On the contrary,” she informed him loftily, “he’s been completely blowing me off. I applied for the job weeks ago and got no response whatsoever until I threw my hat into the ring for the grill master contest.”

“That’s really something about you getting paired off with him, huh?”

“It feels like more than a coincidence. So, yes. It’s something alright.” She cast a suspicious look in his direction. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about how we ended up as partners, would you?”

“That’s impossible.” Though he looked taken aback, her father had always possessed excellent showmanship. It was impossible to tell when he was acting. “You know how it works. Random partner assignments and—”

“No swapping,” she interrupted, rolling her eyes at him. “Yes, I know the drill.”

“In case you were wondering, Brady hasn’t gone on a single date the whole time you’ve been away,” her father announced for no particular reason.

His abrupt change of subject was jarring. “I wasn’t wondering.” She shook her head at him. Not right this second, at any rate. She’d thought about it plenty over the past five years, though. “Think I’ll hit the road before we get any further off topic.” She snatched her coat off the back of one of the kitchen chairs.

“You haven’t managed to replace Brady yet, either,” her father noted in a sly voice.

His teasing shouldn’t have stung as much as it did. “I’m close with Nash Carson,” she huffed as she shrugged on her coat. Since her father followed the rodeo rankings, he surely knew that Nash’s name was splashed across the biggest headlines on the bronc riding circuit. He’d just finished securing the national title for the second year in a row, and it was on his family’s ranch that she’d spent the last four years learning the latest and greatest horse training techniques.

“Are you dating him?” Her father’s eyebrows rose in challenge.

“Well, no, but—”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about.” He pointed knowingly at her.

Okay, it's definitely time for me to go.

She hastily downed the rest of her coffee. "Bye, Dad. Thanks again for the coffee."

"Nice chat, sugar," he called after her in a laughing voice.



Adeline parallel parked behind Brady's truck beside the barn, then headed to the front entrance.

Brady's sister was sitting behind the reception booth, frowning at her computer screen.

Adeline approached the booth and set her stack of signed new-hire forms on it. "Hi, Shelly."

"I'll be right with you," she intoned in a bored voice.

So, they weren't going to exchange niceties. Adeline swallowed a sigh.

Shelly punched a few buttons on her computer. The printer behind her whirred into motion, spitting out two pieces of paper. She removed them from the copier and set them on the counter without meeting Adeline's gaze. "We'll need you to sign these."

"No problem. What am I signing?"

"More new hire paperwork. Brady always forgets to print the last two pages."

Adeline was surprised to find herself looking at a request for a drug test and a background check. *Wow! Okay.* She flicked a startled glance at Shelly as her pen hovered over the first signature line. They'd known each other all their lives, so this was a little over the top and not in a good way.

"It's standard procedure," Shelly muttered, ducking her head over her keyboard.

I bet it's not for a ranch this size.

So far, Adeline had only seen two ranch hands scurrying around. She signed the forms anyway. "Is this for the lab at the hospital?"

"Yes." Shelly collected the two forms from her and added them to the stack Adeline had given her. "Did Brady give you a start time?"

"Yes. Today." Adeline hoped that wasn't a problem.

“I meant a check-in-to-work time.”

“He did not.” Her heart sank at the resentment behind the question. “What time does your family want me to show up?”

Shelly was silent for so long that Adeline’s heart sank even lower. *You don’t want me here at all. Got it.* She slowly turned away from the reception booth.

Only then did Shelly start speaking again. “Brady’s been at work since daybreak.” There was a hitch of emotion in her voice that twisted Adeline’s insides.

She felt a little like weeping herself at the realization that Shelly wasn’t simply angry with her. She was hurt — deeply hurt from the sound of things. Adeline wanted so badly to spin around and apologize for the way she’d left town five years ago. Not only should she have informed Brady in person about her college scholarship and internship in Dallas, she should have also informed the rest of his family before she’d left. Once upon a time, their two families had been friends. However, she doubted that apologizing at this juncture would do any good. The damage was already done.

“I’ll be here at sunup tomorrow,” she promised without turning around. As she made her way to her office, she heard voices. They were coming from Brady’s office.

She fluttered a hand in the open doorway and paused to greet him. “Morning, boss!”

He was perched on the edge of his desk, arms folded as he conversed with the woman sitting in front of him. Adeline immediately wondered if he had a special meeting to attend today, since he was a little more dressed up than usual. Instead of a plaid shirt and jeans, he had on a white button-up shirt and a brown leather vest. He’d gotten a fresh haircut, too. It was shorter on the sides and less wavy on the top.

“Oh, hey, Adeline! There you are.” His dark gaze searched hers as he waved her into the room. “Come on in so I can introduce you two.”

From the pair of crutches propped against the woman’s chair, Adeline could only surmise she was about to meet Bear Mountain Ranch’s junior horse trainer.

She stepped inside the doorway, waiting politely. “I just finished turning in my new-hire paperwork to Shelly. Oh, and signing the last two forms she said you forgot to print.”

His dark eyes twinkled. “What did I forget this time?”

“The drug test and background check.”

His startled look told her everything she needed to know. He had not, in fact, forgotten to print the forms. He’d purposely not done so.

“Kind of important, don’t you think?” She stepped farther into the room. “For all you know, I could be rustling cattle on the side or...” She spread her hands grandly as she approached the guest chairs in front of his desk. “A candy thief, which would be far worse in the eyes of the old-timers in Pinetop.”

An attractive strawberry blonde with cat green eyes and braids stared curiously back at her. A smile tugged at her lips as she agreed with Adeline’s assertion. “Far worse, I agree.” She held out a hand. “I’m Noelle Ward. Sorry for not standing.” She gestured ruefully at the crutches propped beside her. “Battle wound.”

“No apology necessary. Adeline Carver, here.” She shook the woman’s hand.

“Nice nails.” Noelle’s eyes widened at Adeline’s peppermint-swirl fingernails. Her gaze dropped to her red boots next. “Oh, wow! They match your boots.”

“It’s an old habit. Bright colors cheer me up.” Adeline lightly propped her hands on her hips. “I’m glad to see you’re up and about. Hope you’re not in too much pain.”

“I’m on the mend, thank you.” Noelle tossed a playful look at Brady. “Be assured I intend to be a frequent visitor during my convalescence. I don’t want anyone getting any bright ideas about replacing me.”

Though the woman’s tone was teasing, Adeline couldn’t help feeling like the comment was directed at her. Brady’s expression was impossible to read, though he seemed to be waiting for her to respond.

Catching Noelle’s eye, she jumped back into the conversation. “Do you feel up to briefing me on where we stand with the training regimen for each horse?”

“Absolutely!” Noelle fluttered her lashes at Brady.

He stood and moved back around his desk. “That would be great, Noelle, if you could bring Adeline up to speed on that. I’ve gotta run to a meeting with a potential buyer.”

Noelle mournfully eyed his retreat. “Oh! You mean by myself?”

Adeline smiled encouragingly at her. “I imagine you’re the best person to fill me in on stuff. I’ll take whatever you have time to give me. We can even

do it over the phone, if you prefer.” She eyed the woman’s crutches, wondering if she was feeling worse than she was letting on. It had only been two days since her accident. “I know you’re supposed to be convalescing.”

Noelle gave a short titter. “Yes, I am, but please don’t send me home yet. I’m, uh…” She shot a pleading look in Brady’s direction. “Not ready to go.”

Adeline detected a glint of sympathy in his eyes as he returned his gaze to her. “Promise me you won’t let her leave your office.”

“Yes, sir!” Adeline snapped a playful salute at him.

There was no answering humor in his expression. He grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair and lifted his Stetson from his desk. Clapping it on, he angled his head at her to follow him to the door. “She’ll be right back, Noelle,” he promised. “And I’d prefer *not* to see *you* here when I return from my appointment.”

“Ouch!” She pretended to be hurt.

“I mean it,” he growled. “Bear Mountain Ranch needs you healed and rested up.”

Her pout grew more pronounced. “Fine! I’ll be outta here by the time you get back, Mr. Bossy Man!”

Adeline could tell they had a close working relationship. What she couldn’t tell yet was if there was anything more to it. Brady was as hard to read as ever, but Noelle was not. She liked him and not just in an employer-employee way. If the two of them were not yet dating, it was probably only a matter of time.

It was a depressing thought that Adeline tried to push from her mind as she faced Brady in the hallway. “Hey, I’m sorry about showing up so late this morning. Shelly set me straight on your expectations about start times.”

“I’m sure she did.” His voice was dry as he pulled his jacket on. “Listen. Sometimes my sister gets a little carried away with her job, but there’s no need to put you through a drug test or a background check.”

“I don’t mind,” she assured quickly. Though it wasn’t standard procedure for families that went as far back as theirs did, it was certainly standard procedure for most small businesses.

“I mind. It costs us extra money to run those kinds of tests. In your case, we already know they’re going to come back clean.”

She shrugged. “You’re the boss.” She hated knowing that his cancellation of the tests would probably end up being another bone of contention between her and Shelly.

“Quit calling me that.” He glared at her.

Okaaaay.

It took an effort to keep her smile pasted on. “Pretend like it never happened.” It irked her that he hadn’t objected to being called Mr. Bossy Pants by Noelle. Maybe because it was *their* thing?

“And be careful with the horses.” He ducked his head a little to pin her with a firm look. “It’s your first day on the job and—”

“I’m always careful, Brady.” She caught herself in the nick of time from calling him *boss* again.

“Good. Because I don’t need to be down another trainer.” He spun away from her and stomped down the hallway toward the reception area.

Is that seriously your only reason?

She stared drearily after him.

Seconds later, she heard him inform his sister in a no-nonsense growl, “Cancel her drug test and background check. I mean it.” Then he pushed open the door and stepped outside in a swirl of cold air.

Adeline sighed as she moved around the corner to rejoin Noelle.

“Did he take a bite out of your backside?” Giving her a sly once-over, Noelle stood and reached for her crutches.

“Brady likes things done Brady’s way. You know how it is.” Adeline hurried across the room with an upraised hand. “Hey, if it’s easier on you for us to talk in here...”

“Not at all.” Noelle pushed herself to her feet and hobbled around the chair. “I’m actually sort of dying to see your office.”

Adeline snorted. “It’s not much to look at.” She waited until Noelle hobbled past her before she glanced back at Brady’s desk. It was the same desk, so it had to still contain the hidden drawer they’d once used to trade love letters. It made her heart ache to know that their letter-trading days were over.

My fault entirely.

She’d single-handedly put an end to their sweet tradition by writing a letter that had scared him away for good. If she could do it again, she wouldn’t dramatically confess her love for him right before leaving for college. She would wait until the time was right, then do it in person. He’d deserved no less. She could see that now. Unfortunately, she’d destroyed something very special between them the day she’d jumped the gun and tried to pile all her feelings at once into a single letter.

“Are you coming?” Noelle called merrily over her shoulder.

“Yes.” Forcing a smile back to her lips, Adeline followed the young horse trainer into her office. “I, um...don’t have much in the way of furnishings yet, so you can just take my chair.” She hurried to wheel it out from behind her desk. Then, much like Brady had been doing, she hiked a leg on the edge of her desk and faced her coworker.

Unlike his, hers was a new plexiglass and chrome L-shaped workstation. It was parked on a beautiful southwestern rug that hadn’t been in the room during her first tour of it on Saturday. The maze of diamonds and triangles was intricately woven with brown, beige, and cream threads.

Noelle frowned at the rug as she took a seat. “Isn’t that the rug from Brady’s den?”

Adeline shook her head in puzzlement. “I have no idea.” She tried not to let it bother her that Noelle had been at Brady’s house.

Noelle made a humming sound in the back of her throat. “Figured you would’ve already been over to his place by now since you’re his grilling partner.”

Adeline didn’t consider it anyone’s business that she had, in fact, paid a visit to Brady’s farmhouse. She certainly hadn’t been given the grand tour while she was there, like Noelle clearly had been.

She cleared her throat and changed the subject. “I’m not sure how much time you have to spare, so let’s jump right into business.”

“I’m ready.” Noelle wiggled her hips to get more comfortable in Adeline’s chair. “What would you like to know?”

“Everything. How many horses the McGraths have in their stables. Their names and breeds. The type of training they need.” Adeline briefly scanned the young woman’s designer jeans and form-fitting turtleneck sweater. If that was what she typically wore to work, her white sweater certainly wouldn’t remain white for long. A cluster of gold necklaces cascaded down the front of her shirt, glinting with miniature gold Christmas tree charms. Her fingers were freshly manicured, with a simple coat of clear polish. Like her jeans, the boot on her uninjured leg was also pretty high end. Ostrich leather was some of the most expensive western footwear on the market.

There was only one logical conclusion to draw from her appearance. Noelle Ward was from a wealthy family. Since Adeline had no memory of her from high school, she could only presume that Noelle was new in town. Or newish.

You must've arrived after I left.

“Let’s see.” Noelle appeared to be analyzing Adeline’s appearance and sizing her up in return. “On the obedience school side of things, Brady and I have been training three different horses this week. Blue Lightning, whom I hear you’ve already met.” Her lips tightened a fraction, indicating that she wasn’t too pleased with Adeline’s success with the creature. “And a brother-sister duo named Dasher and Vixen. They’re unbroken Mustangs that their owners insist they didn’t capture in the wild, though I have my doubts. They’re exactly what their names sound like. Dasher is forever trying to jump the fence and run away. Vixen is a devious little diva with a Santa-sized bag of tricks up her sleeve.”

“Wow!” The Mustangs sounded utterly adorable to Adeline. Though she refrained from saying so, she couldn’t wait to get in the ring with them.

Noelle gave a snort of laughter as she watched Adeline’s expression. “You can’t wait to take a run at them, can you?”

“It’s what we do for a living, right?” Adeline shrugged offhandedly. “What about the ones Brady buys to train and sell?”

Noelle shook her head soberly. “He has a handful of geldings, but they’re already saddle-broke. He hasn’t bought any new horses to train since the last guy left for greener pastures. That was over a month ago.”

Adeline nodded. “Sounds like that’s about to change.” She sensed that Noelle had felt a little overwhelmed while running solo.

“Maybe. He’s never stopped meeting with clients. He just hasn’t brought any horses back to the ranch in a while.” Noelle’s gaze narrowed on her. “But you’re here now.”

“Which makes two of us.” Adeline had no doubt Noelle was capable of holding up her end of the workload. Otherwise, Brady would’ve never hired her. She stood and started pacing the room. “We can do this. As soon as you’re well enough to tag-team, we’ll have Bear Mountain Ranch back in the game.” Her mind was already racing with too many ideas to count.

Noelle’s breath whooshed out of her. “You’re not even a little daunted about the task in front of us?”

Adeline spun back in her direction. “Should I be?”

Noelle waved ruefully at the cast on her leg.

Adeline smiled in sympathy. “Yeah, you’ve got me beat there. So far, I’ve only broken a pinky finger and one of my big toes.”

“Ouch! They don’t do much for broken toes, do they?”

“Very little.” Breaking her toe wasn’t her favorite memory. “You just get back to work and limp around for a few weeks.”

“Not if you work for Brady.” Noelle made a sound of disgust. “You so much as show up with a headache, and he has you popping pills and dropping back to light duty. Run a fever, and it’s an instant ticket home.”

Adeline was glad to hear it. Despite the grumpiness he’d displayed with her so far, Noelle’s description of him sounded more like the Brady she remembered. “We’re fortunate to have such a compassionate employer. Trust me when I say it’s not like that on every ranch.” The first place she’d interned at while in college was where she’d suffered both of her broken bones.

“That’s what I keep hearing.” Noelle’s lips twisted ruefully. “That’s why I have no plans to leave here anytime soon. Even when Brady is in full boss man mode, he’s great to work with. I truly have no idea why the last head trainer jumped ship.”

“There’s no telling.” It felt like Noelle was fishing for information, but Adeline had none to give. Her best guess was that the guy had left for a bigger opportunity and more pay. That’s why most people in the business chose to move around.

“I can’t imagine why anyone would ever want to leave here. Like I said, Brady is so great to work with,” Noelle gushed. “And Pinetop is such a sweet little town. A truly wonderful place to live and raise a family, if you ask me.”

I didn’t ask.

But Adeline let that slide. It was clear that Noelle was attempting to stake her claim on Brady. “I agree,” she said in the warmest voice she could muster. “I’m not sure what the McGraths have told you about me, but I was born and raised here in Pinetop. I couldn’t wait to return home as soon as I got my degree and some experience under my belt.”

Noelle’s expression chilled a few degrees. “So, you’re here to stay as well?”

It felt like a loaded question — as if Noelle was trying to figure out if Adeline was going to compete with her for Brady’s attention. The romantic kind of attention.

“For as long as my parents need me,” she answered lightly, hoping to reroute the conversation to a safer topic.

It worked. Noelle’s eyes widened with curiosity. “Is everything okay with them?”

“My dad is having a lot of trouble getting around.” The gulp of air

Adeline took in was no act. “Thanks to a very successful bull riding career, he’s looking at two hip replacements in the near future.”

“Oh, nooooo!” Noelle used her crutches to push herself to her feet. “Okay. Now I feel guilty for how much I’ve whined about my broken leg over the last few days.”

“You’re entitled to a little whining,” Adeline assured with a grin. “Blue Lightning is a real handful. You could’ve been hurt a lot worse. I’m glad you weren’t.”

“Yet you had no trouble handling him.” Noelle’s voice took on a bitter edge.

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Shelly said you were fearless.” Noelle bit her lip as she realized she’d given away the fact that she and Brady’s sister had been talking about Adeline behind her back.

“Shelly wasn’t there. Otherwise, she might’ve picked up on the fact that I was pretty terrified.”

“Really?”

“Of course, I was terrified! The last trainer in the ring with him had been rolled away on a stretcher.”

Noelle looked slightly mollified. “So, how’d you get through to him?”

“Sheer determination, because of how badly I needed the job. And I was praying the entire time.” She didn’t dare tell the woman how closely she’d also been watching Brady’s expression. She might not have had the courage to remain in the ring without his steadying presence. That, and the hand he’d kept on his pistol. Knowing he had her back had helped her dig deeper than she’d ever dug before — to the outermost reaches of her abilities.

It had been worth it in the end. Not only had she saved a difficult horse from the slaughter house, she’d ultimately landed her dream job.

She hoped she didn’t regret the last item in the coming days. She’d always known that seeing Brady McGrath again would be tough. What she hadn’t counted on was having to watch him fall in love with someone else.



CHAPTER 6: A FRIEND BEARING GIFTS

ADELINE

Two weeks later

Adeline waited excitedly in front of the barn, shading her eyes with her hand. She had the doors thrown wide open since Brady was on his way back from Willcox. He'd completed his first purchase of horses in months — six young American Quarter Horses. He already had a buyer lined up for them, too, just as soon as Adeline could get them in decent riding condition. Their new owner had high hopes of racing them.

She jogged back down the hallway, peering inside each of the stalls one last time to ensure they were ready to receive their new occupants. The troughs were filled with water. *Check.* The feed bags were topped off with Bear Mountain Ranch's proprietary mix of oats and barley. *Check.* A fresh blanket of hay covered the floor of each stall. *Check.*

She returned to the reception area to find Shelly behind her computer, huddled beneath a fuzzy green blanket. It was pulled up to her chin. She looked like a Christmas elf with her red beanie and pompom poking out the top of it.

"Oh, my goodness! I'm so sorry." Adeline started to pull the entrance doors shut. "Guess I could've waited longer before propping open the doors."

"No, it's all alright." Shelly shot her the ghost of a smile. "Getting a delivery of new horses is worth shivering for."

"I know, right?" Adeline was so excited that she could hardly stand it. This was the first big project Brady was entrusting her with. It was her

chance to finally prove herself. Yes, she'd done a little obedience training one-on-one with Blue Lightning, Dasher, and Vixen, but this was her first bulk order of horses to train for Bear Mountain Ranch.

She couldn't wait to roll up her sleeves and get started. Unable to contain her exhilaration a moment longer, she broke into a celebratory dance right there in the waiting area. The heels of her pink boots clattered a fun little beat against the hardwood floor.

"You're really stoked about this, aren't you?" Shelly pursed her lips thoughtfully at Adeline.

"Yes!" Adeline moved in her direction. "Working with horses is all I've ever wanted to do. I've trained night and day for this for the past five years." The moment she spoke, she realized her error.

Shelly's expression shut down like a television whose cord had been pulled. She probably assumed that Adeline meant her career was more important than her relationship with Brady had been.

"Well, you're very good at what you do," she intoned politely. She caught her lower lip between her teeth. "Our daughter is proof of that." She went back to shivering and typing.

The drone of a truck engine had Adeline whirling back toward the open doors. "They're here!" She remained in the doorway, watching Brady back his sharp looking older pickup and horse trailer ever closer. He braked a few feet away from her and killed the motor.

To her dismay, the passenger door swung open first, and a pair of crutches appeared. Realizing Noelle was in the truck cab, Adeline hurried forward to assist her.

"What are you doing here?" She eyed the injured horse trainer with concern. "Aren't you supposed to be resting?" It was one thing for Brady to be unable to spend a few hours without his cute little crush; it was another thing entirely to put a woman on crutches in harm's way again. There was no way Noelle was up to helping them herd a new crop of horses into the barn!

"Resting is an impossible task when you have a mother who texts you, calls you, or stops by to check on you every five minutes," the slender cowgirl fumed. "She and Dad cancelled their holiday cruise the same day I broke my leg, and now they're micromanaging my recovery. I'm about to lose it, Adeline! I seriously am. If I hadn't walked out on them in my own apartment, I might've committed a felony."

Adeline tamped down on her jealousy over the young woman's

unexpected presence. It sounded like she'd really needed to get out of the house. The genuine distress on her features tugged at Adeline's heart.

Irritation flashed in Brady's gaze as he joined them beside the passenger door. "I caught her hitchhiking down Main Street." The look he gave Noelle was none too pleased.

"Are you serious?" Adeline gaped at their junior horse trainer. Clearly, she hadn't been joking about her unhealthy relationship with her parents. Though Adeline sensed there was more to the story, it wasn't her business to ferret it out.

"Wish I wasn't." Brady glanced down the length of the horse trailer, looking anxious to unload the horses.

Noelle's face was mottled with frustration. "I promise I'll stay out of the way. You guys will never know I'm here."

"Actually, I'm glad you're here," Adeline said quickly. "I've been testing out a new tracking system for the horses' training progress. It allows us to update our notes electronically from any e-device that's logged into our corporate account. We can share files and everything."

Noelle's green eyes sparkled with interest. "Mind if I give it a test drive?"

"I was hoping you'd ask. Come on." Adeline waved at her to come inside. "I'll get you set up at my desk." She caught Brady's eye. "I'll be right back to help you unload the horses."

As Noelle hobbled past Brady on her crutches, her left crutch seemed to get caught on something. She pitched sideways in his direction. It was unclear if she'd slid in the gravel or what.

All Adeline knew for sure was that Noelle ended up in her boss's arms.

"Nice save! Thanks!" Noelle tipped her head against his shoulder, laughing.

Unable to bear watching their canoodling, Adeline glided ahead of them into her office. She had her computer booted up and the program in question running by the time Noelle joined her.

She was still chuckling breathlessly as she moved around Adeline's desk. "Pretty sure the boss man just saved me from a second broken leg."

Adeline flicked an assessing look at her, wondering if they'd kissed after she'd left them alone outside. "Are you okay?"

"Other than slowly dying of embarrassment inside my head? Yes." Noelle gave a pretty little pout. "Brady must think I'm the world's biggest klutz."

Despite her words, she looked unaccountably pleased with herself. It

made Adeline suspect she'd staged the entire mishap in order to land in Brady's arms.

Not that it's any of my business.

Couples were allowed to cuddle. She swallowed a sigh as she quickly talked her assistant trainer through the various screens of the new record keeping system.

Noelle reached for the stack of file folders containing all the information they had about the new horses — their names, birthdates, and medical records. "I can get all this stuff entered for us, if you want."

Adeline was tickled to death by her offer. "Yes, please. Holler if you need anything. I'll be just outside my office." She headed out the door.

Brady was already leading two of the horses down the hallway toward their stalls. One was reddish brown with a splash of white on its forehead. The other was black with cream spots.

"Oh, you beautiful things," Adeline crooned, stepping their way.

Brady halted so she could get a closer look at the horses. "What do you think?"

She reached up to run a hand down the nose of the reddish-brown quarter horse. "They're perfect," she sighed. "You did good, Brady."

Their gloves fingers brushed. Though they had two layers of leather between them, she felt his touch all the way to her soul.

"Have you named them yet?" Her voice came out breathless and strained.

"Nope. You got any ideas?"

Her eyes widened in amazement to be asked for her input on something like that. "Well, uh...we live in a Christmas town. It might be kind of fun to play that up as part of the ranch's brand."

"Nothing edible, please." He curled his upper lip at her. "I'm not printing name plates on the stalls for Cupcake, Sprinkles, or Strudel."

"How about Comet for the red one? That splash of white on his forehead gives him a bit of an interstellar flair, don't you think?"

"If you say so." Brady's grin took the sting out of his words.

"And Dancer for the spotted one. Look at him," she coaxed. "He's practically doing the foxtrot."

Brady nodded. "Yeah. Comet and Dancer have been cooped up for a few hours. As soon as the ranch hands get them processed in, we're putting them out in the back pasture to run off some steam."

Hearing him use the names she'd given his horses made a warm and

wonderful feeling wash over her. The fact that he'd given her that kind of liberty felt personal and intimate, like they shared something special that nobody else was part of.

Just stop.

She forced her thoughts back to the task of weighing, brushing down, and feeding the new horses. The two ranch hands rushed forward to assist them.

Esteban and Mateo Herrera were brothers in their mid-forties. They looked enough alike to pass for twins, though Brady insisted that Esteban was the oldest by a year. The only way Adeline could tell them apart was by the scar streaking down the left side of Mateo's neck. It looked like a knife wound, but he'd been pretty close-lipped about it so far. Both were slightly bow-legged from how much time they spent in the saddle — first as range riders for a big cattle farm on the border, and now as the cowboys who regularly cared for and exercised the horses at Bear Mountain Ranch.

“Nice horse.” Esteban grabbed a brush and started scraping it across the flanks of the reddish-brown quarter horse.

“This one is Comet.” Still basking in the thrill of being allowed to name them, she reached up to stroke a hand down the glossy white spot on his nose.

“Come on, Ad.” Brady's sharp command pulled her from her haze of happy thoughts back to the present. “Let's go bring the others in.”

Ad. She caught her breath at his use of her old nickname. He was the only one who'd ever called her that, and it was the first time he'd done it since her return to Pinetop. A quick glance at the determined line of his jaw told her he probably didn't even know he'd done it.

“Aye, aye, captain.” She pretended to snap to attention.

He angled his head impatiently for her to follow him. When she fell into step beside him, he muttered, “I really wish you'd cut out all the boss and captain stuff.”

She cast a curious look up at him. “You *are* my employer.”

“I prefer to think of us as a team.” He gave her an inscrutable look. “You've got more college education under your belt now than I do.”

She frowned. “Does that bother you?” As she passed her open office door, she could feel Noelle's gaze on them. She kept her eyes straight ahead.

Brady's eyebrows rose. “Does it look like it bothers me?” They reached the reception area. Shelly was no longer seated behind the welcome booth, probably because it was too cold for her.

“Honestly?” Adeline wrinkled her nose at him, feeling like she could

speak more freely since his sister wasn't around. "You're so cranky sometimes that it's impossible to read you."

With a jerky wave, he ushered her outside ahead of him. "Maybe because you're the best thing that's happened to Bear Mountain Ranch in a long time, and I don't want to wake up and find you gone again."

Guilt stabbed her, knowing he was referring to the last time she'd left town. "I don't have any plans to leave again, but if I did..." They reached the back of the horse trailer.

He faced her. "If you did," he repeated in a rough voice, prompting her to finish the sentence.

"I'd tell you in person this time." At the flash of anger in his eyes, she hastily added, "but I'm not going anywhere again. I mean it. Even if I did want to explore opportunities elsewhere, I couldn't possibly do it anytime soon. My parents need me here right now."

"Why? What's going on?"

The concern in his voice made her glance away, blinking rapidly. "My dad is looking at a double hip replacement."

"Man! I didn't know." He yanked the back doors of the horse trailer open with a grunt of irritation. "Can't believe my dad didn't tell me."

"I don't think he knows. I don't think my parents want anyone to know," she admitted ruefully. "I'll probably get my backside scalded when they find out I spilled the beans to you, so I'd appreciate you keeping the information close to your chest. They're both, um...proud." *Poor but proud.*

There were so many things she and her mother needed to do to get the house ready for her dad's back-to-back surgeries — everything from the installation of a ramp in the garage to adding a chair lift to the stairs. She had no idea where the money was going to come from to cover all of it, but she was saving every penny she could to help out when the time came. Living at home with her parents was certainly keeping her overhead expenses down.

Brady leaped inside the trailer to lead the next pair of horses out. "Any more suggestions for names?"

"Oh, wow!" She helped him lead a lovely golden mare and speckled gelding down the ramp. "How serious were you about the no-food names?"

"Why? What do you have in mind this time?"

She patted the mare's neck. "This one looks like a Ginger to me."

"I can live with that."

She cocked her head at the other horse. His coat was one of pale gray

with a dusting of white speckles that reminded her of snowflakes. “What about Frost for him? Jack Frost, if you want to get fancy.”

“I don’t do fancy.” He glanced back at the remaining horses. “What about the other two?”

A jingling sound made her lean into the trailer to take a closer peek at where the sound was coming from. Her gaze landed on a lovely brown pony. “Oh, my goodness! Is he wearing bells?”

“Yep. Apparently, he likes the sound. The couple who sold him to us thought they’d have a calming effect on him during the drive to his new home.”

“Bells is a festive name,” she suggested. “As long as you don’t consider it to be too sprinkly or too sparkly.”

He smirked at her. “It sort of fits him, doesn’t it?”

“Hey, Bells,” she called softly to the pony.

He tossed his head and nickered back at her.

“Bells, it is.” Brady gave her an indulgent look. “You’re good at this naming stuff.”

“Guess it’s a Pinetop thing,” she joked. “I have Christmas in my blood, mister.”

“And the last one?” He waited until she followed his gaze to the tiny Clydesdale.

“Oh, Brady,” she breathed. It was one of the most beautiful horses she’d ever seen. A caramel colored creature, all frothy white and fluffy around the ankles like he was stepping through clouds. “I thought you’d purchased six American Quarter Horses.”

“That was my cover story. This last one is a present for Gentry. It’s a surprise. Even Shelly doesn’t know about him yet.”

She gasped. “You’re getting your nephew a pony for Christmas?”

“Something like that.”

“He’s just a baby.” A breathy chuckle escaped her.

“He’ll grow into it.”

She studied him in awe. “If there’s an Uncle Hall of Fame, you’d be instantly inducted into it.”

“That’s the idea.” He waggled his eyebrows at her. “About his name...”

“Oh, I probably shouldn’t.” She shook her head. “Let Shelly and Chad do the honors. Or Suzy.” She could only imagine how excited the girl would be to help name her brother’s horse.

“That’s not a bad idea.” He nudged her with his shoulder. “Thanks for weighing in on it.”

“Thanks for letting me,” she returned softly.

His gaze dropped to her mouth and grew hooded, making her breath clog in her throat. She stopped breathing altogether when he slowly dipped his head over hers.

The rumble of a truck motor made him scowl and swivel toward the sound. “Wasn’t expecting any visitors. Were you?”

“No.”

They stood together on the ramp with the horses while a glossy red pickup rolled into view. It was an older Chevy, probably late 60s, with two fat black racing stripes painted across the hood. The chrome bumper caught the sunlight and flashed like fire for a split second before the driver brought the truck to a halt. Due to its raised suspension and lack of a running board, the owner had to leap to the ground.

Adeline’s gaze zeroed in on the tall, lanky cowboy as he stepped away from the truck and spun in a circle to survey his surroundings.

“What’s he doing here?” Her heart raced with confusion.

“You know the guy?” Brady’s expression had grown hard again.

“It’s Nash Carson,” she informed him faintly. “He rides broncs.” What in the world was her former employer doing here? He’d given her no heads up about his arrival.

Brady’s gaze narrowed on the cowboy as he caught sight of Adeline and broke into a crooked grin. “Sounds familiar.”

“Probably because he clinched the national title two years straight.” Which still didn’t explain what he was doing hundreds of miles from the ranch where she’d spent the last four years working for him and his brothers.

Nash jogged their way and paused beside the ramp. The wind whipped at the longish blonde hair dragging against the collar of his black leather jacket. “Bear Mountain Ranch has an incredible view, just like you said it did, Adeline.” After a polite nod at Brady, he held out his arms to her.

“Best view in the west.” She hesitated only a second or two before leaning his way and allowing him to envelop her in a hug. Though his timing couldn’t have been worse — she was pretty sure she and Brady had been having a moment there — it was good to see him again.

He swung her in a full circle before setting her on her feet and kissing her cheek. “So, this is my competition.”

It was a poor choice of words. She hoped like mad that Brady didn't mistakenly assume Nash was referring to him.

"A pretty enough town that I'm gonna have my work cut out to convince you to come back to Texas."

"Nash, we talked about this," she protested softly.

"We did, but there's plenty of room in Dallas for a retired bull rider like your dad. I plan to invite him for a visit as soon as I meet him."

She shook her head. "There's not a crowbar big enough to pry him out of Pinetop. This is his home." *And mine.* She thought she'd made that clear to him.

Brady moved down the ramp with Ginger and Frost. He paused when they reached the ground to rake her with an accusing look.

"Nash," she tried to step away from him, but he kept one arm hooked securely around her middle, "this is my ranch manager, Brady McGrath. Brady, this is the last guy I worked for, Nash Carson. He and his brothers own Canyon Creek Ranch on the outskirts of Dallas."

"I've heard of it." Brady briefly shook the hand Nash held out to him. "Congratulations on your national title. Two years in a row, right?"

"Yep." Nash pointed upward to give God the credit for his success. "Lord willing, I've got a few more titles in me before I get back to ranching full time." His striking blue gaze returned to Adeline, eagerly drinking her in. "Any chance I can steal you away for lunch?"

Adeline was about to tell him that now wasn't a good time to break away, but Brady answered for her. "Yep."

He paused by her ear to growl irritably, "Need you back in an hour to help me process in these horses."

"I'm not going to take off in the middle of a big delivery," she protested. "Nash and I can catch up over dinner. Right, Nash?"

The cocky bronc rider winked at her. "I'll take you any way I can get you, darling. Now, later—"

"She can go now," Brady interrupted harshly.

When Adeline started to protest again, he stopped her with a glare. "You've been working since sunrise. I was about to make you take a break, anyway." Without waiting for an answer, he stomped off with the two horses.

Nash gave a low whistle beneath his breath as Brady disappeared inside the barn. "And you claimed I was a tough task master!"

"You totally were. I traded one grump for another," she teased. "Lucky

me!”

“At least, this grump came bearing gifts.” He playfully guided her toward the open door of his truck. Instead of immediately lifting her inside, he reached into the cab and pulled out an enormous bouquet of red roses.

“Nash! What’s this for?” She accepted them with a chuckle of surprise. “It’s not my birthday or anything.”

“Figured this was as good a way as any to tell you how much I’ve missed you.” His angular features softened as she lifted the flowers to give them an appreciative sniff.

“They’re absolutely beautiful, but you totally didn’t need to do this.” She gave them another sniff. “You could’ve just told me that you and your brothers missed me.” She missed them, too. It had been hard to leave such a great job with such a great boss and such great coworkers. They’d taught her so much about horses and ranching. She would be forever grateful for the start they’d given her as a college intern and eventually as a full-time horse trainer for them. However, it had been time to come home.

“We have.” He propped his hand on the panel above the door, hemming her in. “More than you can imagine. But it’s more than that. We want you back. Just name your price. My brothers already gave me the green light to pay whatever salary you want to get you back with the Canyon Creek cowboys where you belong.”

Where I belong? Though Nash meant well, his words served as a blunt reminder that she was already where she belonged. It was too bad that it had taken a double hip replacement to give her the courage to hop in her truck and start driving toward Pinetop. And Brady. Toward all the things she’d been needing to face. She’d done the right thing. She was sure of it.

She was less sure of how to explain any of those things to Nash. However, she’d made the mistake of failing to communicate before, and it had cost her a few very precious friendships. She had no intention of making that mistake again. Since Nash had driven so far to secure some face time with her, she intended to give it to him, if for no other reason than to grant him the closure he needed.

Debating how to even begin trying to make him understand, she turned around to climb into his truck. She wasn’t surprised when his large hands closed around her waist to give her a lift into the cab.



Feeling like he was losing Adeline all over again, Brady gnashed his teeth as he turned the next two horses over to Esteban. “This is Ginger and Frost,” he growled.

Esteban’s eyebrow rose at his tone.

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to yell.” Brady stepped back and lifted his Stetson to run the sleeve of his jacket over his eyes. Though it was freezing outside, he was sweating.

“You comin’ down with somethin’, hoss?” Esteban eyed him worriedly.

“Probably.” Brady mashed his hat back on his head. “Not feeling so great all of a sudden.” No way was he going to admit that Adeline Carver was ripping his heart in a half-dozen different directions at the same time. The fact that he had no right to feel that way didn’t make him feel any better.

Clearly, she hadn’t spent the last five years mourning the loss of the country boy she’d left behind in lowly Pinetop, Arizona. She’d moved on with her life. Moved on to a bigger city where bright and shiny rodeo stars like Nash Carson lived.

There was no way he could compete with a guy like that, and Nash probably knew it. Brady wouldn’t be surprised if Adeline had her bags packed again before nightfall. He might as well tell Shelly to re-post the job opening for head horse trainer at Bear Mountain Ranch right now and be done with it. She’d be thrilled, of course.

He strode back to the front office area and found both Shelly and Noelle standing in the doorway, huddled together beneath Shelly’s blanket.

His sister’s chuckle was bitter. “She wasted no time calling her big-city boyfriend into town. Even I thought she’d last more than a few weeks in Pinetop this go around.”

“He got her flowers and everything,” Noelle sighed dreamily. “The biggest bouquet of red roses I’ve ever seen. It’s so romantic!”

Brady snapped a look of irritation her way. “Don’t worry. Romeo is under strict orders to have her back in an hour. We’ve got horses to train, and it’s her job to do it.” For now, anyway. His only consolation was that she’d promised to tell him in person before she took off again. *Shoot!* He would’ve appreciated being told anything at all last time!

“That’s assuming she still wants a job here,” his sister muttered.

After the last of the horses were unloaded, Brady retreated to his office. Or tried to.

Noelle followed him. “I got everything entered into Adeline’s record system for the new horses, just like she showed me. Love their new names, by the way. Whose idea was it to go all Kris Kringle with them?”

“The same employee in red cowgirl boots and peppermint twist fingernails.” He couldn’t believe Noelle felt the need to ask. “Who else?” He stomped back outside to shut the horse trailer and drive it to the equipment garage to unhitch it.

Since he had no appetite, he worked through lunch, helping Esteban and Mateo lead the new horses to the back pasture. They stood outside the fence with their boots propped on the lowest rung, watching the dynamics of the newest additions to Bear Mountain Ranch.

The nip in the air kept the horses moving. The trio of cowboys watched as Comet and Frost trotted around the outer perimeter of the field, looking like they were already accustomed to being on a track. Without warning, Comet broke away from his companion, broke into a gallop, and headed directly for a pile of timber. It was all that was left of an old storage shed.

Brady tensed and straightened, wishing he’d gotten around to removing the old boards. The other animals had done no more than sniff around them.

“What in the—?” Esteban fisted his hands on the fence and leaned forward as Comet flew through the air and sailed right over the pile of timber.

Brady could hardly believe what he’d just witnessed. Esteban and his brother let out a whoop and gave each other a high-five.

“Shooting straight through the air, just like his name,” Mateo exclaimed excitedly. “You got yourself a jumper there, hoss!”

The three men were still high-five-ing each other as they herded the horses back into the barn an hour later. The veterinarian was scheduled to arrive soon to give them their first medical exams.

Brady strode toward his office, wondering if Adeline was going to make it back within the requested time. He glanced at his watch. There were only five minutes left until she was officially late.

He shook his head, feeling such a strong sweep of despair that it nearly bent him double.

“Brady?”

Adeline’s musical alto made him halt in his tracks and pivot toward her

doorway. “You’re back?”

“I said I’d be.” She was seated at her desk, fiddling with her computer. She quickly finished typing whatever she was working on and stood. Lifting two red-and-white striped cups off her desk, she hurried his way.

“I come bearing gifts.” She handed one of the cups to him.

He bent his head over it and gave it a sniff. “Well, it’s not roses, but I never turn down coffee.”

She blushed and glanced away. “I don’t know why Nash brought me flowers.”

“I can think of one good reason.”

“He and I are not dating.”

Brady’s heart felt instantly lighter, though he kept his expression bland. “Something tells me he’d like to change that.”

She lifted her chin. “I told him the same thing over lunch that I told you earlier. I’m home for good.”

“I don’t think he got the memo, *darling*.” He bent closer to her as he repeated the endearment Nash had used on her earlier, right down to the guy’s slow Texas drawl.

Her blush deepened.

“So what did he offer you to leave here?” he pressed. “A pay raise? Big signing bonus? Marriage?”

She abruptly paled. “Can we, um...get back to talking about the horses, please?”

It was as good as an admission that Nash had come to town armed with an offer of some sort.

To take you away from me.

For a moment, Brady’s vision flashed to solid red. “It might interest you to know,” he grated out when he found his voice again, “we’ve got a jumper.”

“Really?” Adeline’s midnight blue gaze sparkled entrancingly. “Which one?”

“Comet. You picked the right name for him.”

“Details, details,” she pleaded, impulsively placing a hand on his arm.

The gesture reminded him so much of old times that it made his heart pound erratically. He lifted the red-and-white striped cup of coffee to take a bracing swig and promptly scalded his tongue.

“He jumped a pile of timber in the back pasture. It was quite a show.

Sorry you missed it.”

“Me, too,” she said softly. “Maybe I’ll get to see his next performance.”

“Maybe.” He wanted to believe her. “You’ll have to stick around for it. With all the flowers and fanfare coming from Mr. Rodeo Champ, somehow I doubt you will.”

He hated the flash of hurt his words put in her eyes and hated himself for being the one to put it there. It was the truth, though. He was tired of dancing around it.



CHAPTER 7: THE LETTER

BRADY

Next Saturday

Every minute or two, Brady glanced at his watch. He was standing in his kitchen by the window overlooking the sink. Alone. The first glow of the sun was blooming faintly on the horizon, but Adeline had yet to make an appearance.

Guess I'm going to be on my own for the grill master competition.

The two of them had yet to work in a decent-sized practice together. Something always came up to prevent it — first Noelle's injury, then Nash Carson's surprise visit, and now the fact that he was still in town.

After a full week of putting up with the guy claiming every spare moment of Adeline's time, Brady felt starved for some alone time with her. He could no longer pop his head into her office for a simple work-related conversation without seeing some reminder of Nash's presence in her life. He either sent or personally delivered a gift to her every stinking day — enough flowers to fill a florist's showroom floor, one decadent dessert after another from Castellano's, brightly wrapped packages of fudge and popcorn from The North Pole Candy Depot, and an intricately carved horse paper weight from some other boutique in town.

Though Adeline continued to claim she and Nash weren't romantically involved, Brady was having a hard time believing that the guy was courting her attention like that over a mere job offer. There had to be more to it, at least on Nash's part.

Seven-thirty rolled around, then eight o'clock. It was finally time to face the fact that she wasn't meeting him yet again for their next scheduled grill practice. Brady wasn't angry. How could he be? He'd spent the last few weeks watching her burn the candle at both ends. Between the long hours she put in at Bear Mountain Ranch and commuting her dad to and from his many doctor's appointments, she had to be exhausted.

Maybe she'd accidentally slept in. He kind of hoped she had. The truth was he was worried about her. He wished there was something he could do to make her life easier. Unfortunately, he wasn't capable of making Noelle's broken leg heal faster, so her work schedule wasn't going to ease up until after Christmas.

Leaving his grilling utensils, dry rubs, and trays laid out on the island, he reached for his coat and headed for his truck. On the short drive to the office, he sent up a prayer that everything was alright with Adeline. As he approached the barn, he was dismayed to see that her truck was nowhere in sight. Yeah, she'd either slept in, or something else had come up.

A sick feeling rolled through his gut as the thought crossed his mind that maybe Nash Carson had finally convinced her to take the job promotion in Dallas. Though she'd promised to inform Brady in person if that happened, she'd left town once before without telling him. Who's to say she wasn't capable of doing it again?

He stared blindly through the windshield, unable to bear the thought of never seeing her again. Then his common sense kicked in. He was still her employer, for crying out loud! If she was going to miss a day of work, she owed him an explanation.

I'm going to call her and tell her exactly that!

Gritting his teeth, he whipped out his cell phone and dialed her number. It rang five or six times and eventually went to voicemail.

You have got to be kidding me!

Anger curdled in his chest. How dare she ignore his phone call! It was one thing to fall ill or get tied up with something urgent. It was another thing entirely to completely blow off her job. Bear Mountain Ranch depended on her, and he flat-out needed her in his life.

It was sad, but true. Despite the way she'd left him five years ago, he was even more in love with her now than he had been back then. Working the last several weeks with her had made him all too aware of that painful fact.

He looked forward to their morning meetings like a starving man

salivating over his next meal. He reveled in every moment they got to spend together throughout the work day. After she left for home each evening, he counted the hours until he could wake up and do it all over again. He craved her presence like he craved air.

It was with a very heavy heart that he left his truck and headed inside the barn. The reception booth was empty.

“Shelly?” He peeked around the corner into their small employee lounge. It was empty. That was odd. Usually, his sister had the coffee pot brewing by now.

“Where is everyone?” he muttered, stepping down the hallway.

Esteban was leading Comet into his stall. The horse looked freshly brushed down, which meant he’d already been taken for his morning run.

The ranch hand waved two fingers at him. “Morning, hoss!”

He lifted a hand in return. “Have you seen Adeline or Shelly around?”

“Nope.” Esteban shoved back his hat to get a better look at him. His bronze cheeks were pink-chapped from the bitter wind outside. “Think I saw Noelle, though.” He jammed his thumb in the direction of Adeline’s office. Though she wasn’t present, her door was propped wide open.

“Thanks. As soon as I locate my missing sister and head trainer, I’ll help you and Mateo out with the morning chores.” He strode to Adeline’s office and found Noelle frowning at her computer screen.

He propped a hand on the door frame. “Have you seen Shelly or Adeline?”

Noelle glanced up from the computer and made a face at him. “Good morning to you, too!” She sounded miffed that he’d skipped greeting her.

“Still trying to decide if it’s good or not, since we seem to be missing so many employees,” he grumbled.

She sobered. “I haven’t heard from Adeline, but Shelly said the baby was running a fever and...”

What? He dove for his cell phone, wondering if he’d missed a call from her. He hadn’t. She’d texted, though. He hastily scanned her message.

Sorry I’m running late. Gentry is sick. Chad is taking over baby duty at 9:00.

“Thanks.” He nodded his gratitude to Noelle and backed from the office with his cell phone pressed to his ear.

It rang several times. Shelly picked up right as he was stepping into his office. He closed the door behind him.

“First of all, how’s my favorite nephew?” he demanded.

“He’s got a low-grade fever.” She sounded tired. “At first, we thought he was just teething, but he started coughing and getting all snotty. The doc says he has some winter virus and gave us some medicine to treat it.”

Brady tossed his hat on his desk. “Listen, you don’t need to come in today.” He fisted a hand in his hair. “Just focus on being a mom. We’ll make do here.”

“No way!” His sister’s voice was adamant. “I know how shorthanded we are with Mom and Dad out of town and Noelle down for the count. I’ll be there around quarter after nine, and there’s nothing you can say to talk me out of it.”

“Roger dodger.” He knew better than to keep arguing with her. “Tell Chad I said thanks.”

“Will do.”

“So, uh...any chance you’ve heard from Adeline?” He couldn’t hide the hoarse edge to his voice. The sense that something was wrong was growing by the minute.

“As a matter of fact, yes.” Her voice grew hushed.

His gut twisted painfully. “What’s going on, Shelly?”

“You mean she hasn’t called you yet?”

“Nope.” His voice was bleak. “I tried calling her. It went to voicemail.”

“Oh, boy,” she sighed. “It’s her dad, Brady. I don’t have all the details, but he fell last night and shattered his hip. I ran into her in the emergency room early this morning.”

He’d reached his desk and had been about to take a seat. He abruptly swiveled around and headed for the door. “I’m on my way there now.”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea.”

“Why?” he demanded, slowing his steps.

“Nash is with her.”

“So? I’m her employer. I have every right to check on her.”

“Please don’t do this to yourself, Brady. I’m begging you.” Shelly’s voice was soft and pleading. “I know what this is really about. I see how you look at her, and you don’t know how badly I wish things had turned out differently between you.”

He snorted as he reached for the doorknob. “Really? I thought you were hoping she’d pack her bags and head back to Dallas.”

“Not anymore. We need her brand of talent here at Bear Mountain Ranch,

and we need it desperately.”

“Why the change of heart?” Shelly certainly hadn’t been in Adeline’s court the day he’d hired her.

“Watching her in action, I guess. She does an amazing job with our horses. More than amazing. Also the fact that she’s still in Pinetop. I honestly expected her to have taken Nash up on his offer by now, but she hasn’t. Apparently, the woman is incapable of being swayed by flowers, balloons, chocolate, cheesecake, or hand-carved horses. That’s kind of impressive.”

“Or a salary I can all but guarantee is twice what we’re paying her,” he groused.

“No kidding,” Shelly sighed. “Hey, I’ve gotta run. Gentry’s squawking again. I’ll see you in a few.” She hurriedly disconnected the line.

Brady turned to face his desk, wondering what was the right thing to do. As badly as he wanted to rush to Adeline’s side, maybe Shelly had a point. Maybe Adeline already had all the comfort she wanted or needed in the form of Nash Carson — a guy who was playing every trick in the book to convince her to return with him to Dallas.

Brady couldn’t blame the guy for trying. Adeline Carver was, quite simply, a woman worth fighting for. Until Nash succeeded in getting a ring on her finger, however, Brady considered it within his right to do whatever it took to keep her at Bear Mountain Ranch. As soon as his parents returned to town, he was going to have a serious talk with his dad about offering her some sort of retention bonus, one that could be renewed annually or something.

A flash of red outside his office window made him squint into the morning sunlight. Unless he was imagining things, Adeline’s old red truck had just pulled around the side of the barn. What in the world was she doing here instead of remaining at the hospital with her dad?

He strode across his office, yanked open the door, and hurried toward the reception area.

No sooner did he reach the double front doors than Adeline stepped across the threshold. She stumbled straight into him.

His arms came around her. “How’s your dad?”

“Stable,” she mumbled against his shirt. “If he remains stable, they’ll take him into surgery later today. They’re moving up the hip replacement to, er... now.” She gave a gigantic yawn. “Sorry I didn’t call. I know I said I’d do a better job of communicating going forward. Guess I’m an epic failure in that

department.”

He ignored her apology. “Why are you here instead of at the hospital?”

She slid from his embrace and took an unsteady step away from him. “I have a job to do.”

“Yeah. It’s called being there for your dad.” He reached for her shoulders, intending to spin her back toward the door, but she eluded his grasp.

Shuffling tiredly down the hallway toward her office, she informed him airily, “Mom is with him right now. I’m just going to get a few things done at my desk before — ow!” She stumbled and grazed her hip against the wall.

“That’s it.” He caught up to her and grimly steered her into his office.

“What are you doing?” She tried to shake his hands off her shoulders.

“Ordering you to take a power nap.” He jammed a thumb in the direction of his sofa. “No way am I going to allow you anywhere near the horses in your current condition.”

“You’re such a grump,” she complained, moving to the sofa and taking a grudging seat.

“Boots off and feet up.” He snapped his fingers for emphasis.

“You did *not* just snap your fingers at me!” She gave a jaw-cracking yawn as she tugged at her boots.

Since she seemed to be having trouble getting them off, he took a knee beside her and helped her. Removing his jacket, he rolled it up and placed it on the sofa for her to use as a pillow.

“I can’t believe you’re making me do this,” she mumbled as she toppled against it.

“Believe it or not, it’s because I care about you.” The words tore out of him.

She turned her back on him, shivering. “You have a funny way of showing it, Brady McGrath.”

“How so?” He reached for the red sherpa throw blanket draped across the back of his sofa and shook it out. It was one Suzy had left lying around and he hadn’t yet taken the time to return it. He spread it over Adeline’s tiny frame and tucked it around her chin.

“You didn’t say one word to me after my last letter. Not a single word!” Her voice grew slurred. “I know I should’ve told you in person, but I was... afraid.” Her last word was so faint he could hardly make it out. Then her breathing evened into sleep.

Last letter? What did she mean by that? His head whipped in the

direction of his desk. Was it possible she was referring to the secret drawer they'd once used to exchange messages?

Violent hope leaped in his chest at the possibility that she had not simply left town five years ago without attempting to inform him of her plans. Curling to his feet, he reached inside his pocket for his copy of the key to the hidden drawer. He'd carried it around with him every stinking day since she'd been gone. What he'd not been able to do was use it to open the drawer again. He'd been unable to bear the thought of looking down at the empty drawer, knowing there'd never again be another love letter from the sunshiny cowgirl who'd stolen his heart.

But what if he'd been wrong? What if the drawer hadn't been empty all this time?

Moving to his desk, he took a heavy seat in his chair. Then he reached under the center drawer to insert his key in the lock of the hidden compartment. It sprung open as easily as it had five years earlier. Reaching inside it, his heart thudded as his hands closed around an envelope.

He pulled it out to read what was written on the outside.

To Brady From Adeline

He'd recognize her handwriting anywhere. No one else made a curlycue out of the end of their small e's the way she did.

He reverently pushed a finger beneath the seal to slide it open. Drawing out the single sheet of paper it held, he started to read.

Dear Brady,

I don't know how to tell you this, so I'm going to write it down instead.

1.) I love you. I've always loved you. I don't know why it's been so hard to admit it, but you deserve to know before you read what I have to say next.

2.) I'm leaving Pinetop. By the time you get this letter, I'll be on my way to Dallas to accept a scholarship for one of the top horse trainer programs in the nation.

I still can't believe they offered it to a nobody like me, but that's their problem. I'm going to earn a college degree while serving as an intern at Canyon Creek Ranch. Then I'm coming home. I don't know how long I'll be gone. A few years probably.

Please understand that I have to do this. For my family, who's

never had anyone go to college. For me, so I can become more than someone who loves horses but can't ever afford one of my own. For you, because you deserve so much more than to be stuck with a girl who came from nothing and will amount to nothing if I don't accept this scholarship. I'm going to miss you like crazy, so please-please-please call or text me as soon as you read this to tell me I haven't just made the biggest mistake of my life.

*Yours forever,
Adeline*

Brady sat there, gripping the letter as wave after wave of emotion crashed over him. Remorse. Guilt. Regret. Anger. Self-loathing. Sadness. And love. His heart was swelling with it nearly to the bursting point.

He glanced across the room at the sleeping woman on his sofa, wanting to run to her and assure her that he loved her, too — completely and desperately. She wouldn't hear him, though, since she crashed out from exhaustion.

He hated the fact that she'd lived the last five years of her life under the horribly mistaken assumption that he didn't love her in return. His sweet, beautiful Adeline. He could only imagine how crushed she'd been by his silence. If she was half as hurt as he'd been over his equally mistaken assumption that she'd left town without telling him, her pain had been unbearable.

A light rap of knuckles sounded on his door. He glanced up, half tempted to ignore whoever it was. However, the knock sounded again, a little louder this time. Afraid the sound might wake Adeline, he rolled his chair back from his desk and stood. Hurrying to the door, he cracked it open.

"Who's there?" he called in a hushed voice.

"Son?" His father's voice sounded surprised.

"Dad?" Brady pushed the door wider, still keeping his voice down. "When did you get back?"

Payton McGrath was standing there in a suede blazer, button-up shirt, and jeans. He was more dressed up than usual. "Bout an hour ago." There was more frost than Brady remembered at the temples of his dark, wavy hair.

"Is everything okay? We weren't expecting you back for another week." Brady cast a worried look over his shoulder to make sure Adeline was still asleep. She wasn't moving.

The lines around his dad's eyes seemed to deepen. "We heard about Birch's fall and caught the next flight home." He glanced past his son, frowning. "Is that Adeline asleep on your sofa?"

"Yep." Brady stepped out of his office, shut the door, and remained standing in front of it. "She came straight here after being up all night at the hospital. I made her take a power nap."

His father's expression brightened. "Does this mean that you and she are back together?"

I wish. "Actually, we haven't talked much about the past."

"Why not?" His father looked incredulous.

"Because I completely blew it with her," he groaned, leaning back against the door, "and now she's got Nash Carson in her life."

"How'd you blow it?"

Brady waved a hand helplessly. "I just found the letter she wrote to me before she left. All this time I thought she'd given up on us..." He shook his head. "I was wrong. The shoe's on the other foot. Guess I'm the one who gave up in the end." There was a new ache in his chest that he was pretty sure was never going away. "I let my temper get the best of me. Instead of going after her and telling her how I felt about her, I just...let her go."

"How about you tell her now?" Payton McGrath's voice was uncharacteristically gentle.

"Didn't you hear the part about how she's got Nash Carson in her life now?" Bitterness gripped Brady. "Big-time rodeo champ. Really nice guy. Filthy rich." He was everything Adeline deserved.

"Understood, but I still think you should tell her, son."

Brady shook his head. "You know I've always had a temper, but this time I really screwed up." He shared the highlights from the letter Adeline had written him that he'd read five years too late. "It destroyed me when she left, but that was no excuse to cut off communication altogether with the woman I love."

"True. But if she *had* left without telling you, which — from your perspective — she did, your reaction would be more understandable."

"I'm no longer so sure about that, Dad." In light of everything that had happened, Brady was having a hard time justifying what he'd done. "Every couple has their disagreements, but I didn't give her a chance. Not even a shadow of a doubt. I went straight from being madly in love with her to assuming the absolute worst about her."

His father made a rueful sound. “Like they say, love is blind.”

“I don’t deserve her.” Brady shook his head. “Not even a little.”

“Love isn’t something you deserve, son.”

“Maybe she’s better off without a guy with a temper like mine.”

“I’m not sure she agrees.”

Brady frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“She came home, son. In her own way, she came back to you. And despite the brutal misunderstanding still festering between you, you hired her. From where I stand, you’ve been given a second chance. Are you ready to make things right with her?”

“Honestly? No.” Brady shook his head vehemently. “I’m terrified of making things worse than they were before.”

“You might not get another chance, son.”

“I know.”

“Can you live with that?”

“No.” Brady glanced over his shoulder at the closed door. “I just can’t stand the thought of going in there and botching things.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t do it alone this time.”

Brady felt like the weight of the world was on his shoulders. “What do you have in mind?”

His father reached out to rest his hands on his shoulders. “I think we should pray about it first.”

“Good idea.” Brady bowed his head and closed his eyes. *Help me and Ad, Lord.* Something inside of him cracked at the realization that he should’ve done this a long time ago. Sadly, he’d held on to his hurt and anger for so many years that it had become a part of him. It was a darkness that had spread and tainted everything else in his life — ultimately turning him into the family grump.

I don’t want to be that guy anymore.

Not only did Adeline deserve better, his family also deserved better. So did his employees and friends.

His father’s prayer filled the hall, surrounding Brady with love, compassion, and forgiveness. When it was over, he pinned Brady with a look of infinite understanding. “Don’t think you’re the only person in the family who was born with a temper.”

Brady snorted. “Pretty sure I hold the biggest trophy in that department.”

“Where do you think you got your temper from, son?”

“No idea.” Brady’s voice was scoffing. “Was I adopted or what?”

“Nope. You weren’t adopted.” His father gave his shoulders another affectionate pat before dropping his arms back to his sides. “As much as I hate to admit it, I was born with a shorter fuse than you were. It’s something I’ve been working on my entire life.”

“I never would’ve guessed.” Brady stared in disbelief at him. “Thanks for praying with me.” He grimaced. “Bet you wish you had a son that wasn’t still in so much need of guidance.”

“That’s what fathers are for.” Payton McGrath barked out a laugh. “Believe or not, it makes us feel needed.”

“Glad I could help,” Brady joked wryly.

“I mean it, son.” Payton held his gaze steadily. “You’ve done such an incredible job running the ranch that sometimes I worry I’m only in your way when I’m in town.”

Brady’s eyebrows flew upward. “Nothing could be farther from the truth!” He decided on the spot that he would make more of an effort going forward to show his appreciation — not just for dad, but for everyone else he loved. Starting now. “I’m proud to be part of the family business. Proud that you entrusted me with this kind of responsibility. It’s my greatest honor to carry on our family legacy. Most of all, I’m grateful to have you in my life.” Payton McGrath was no longer just his father. He was also his biggest mentor and dearest friend.

“Yeah, well, I’m mighty proud to be your dad.” His father’s dark gaze glinted with emotion as he gestured for Brady to turn around. “Now go make things right with your girl before it’s too late.”

“Yes, sir.” Before he could come up with any more excuses for delaying the inevitable, Brady twisted the door handle and backed inside his office.

“Brady?” Adeline’s soft and hesitant voice wafted his way from the sofa. “May we talk, please?”

He slowly turned around and found her sitting up, hugging her knees to her chest.

Her face was flaming with too many emotions to name. “That’s my letter, isn’t it?” She waved uncertainly at the envelope on his desk that he’d torn open five years too late.

“Yeah. I’m sorry for not reading it sooner.” He took a step closer to her. “I just couldn’t bring myself to open that drawer again after you left. The thought of finding it empty was more than I could handle. The only reason I

finally opened it again today was because nothing that's happened between us since your return to Pinetop has made sense to me. And now I know why. You weren't the one who gave up on us. I was."

Astonishment stained her features. "Are you trying to tell me that you only just now read it?" Her voice rose to a squeak. "As in today?"

"Yeah." He took another step toward her. "I don't know if you can find it in your heart to forgive me after all this time." He shook his head. "I'm not sure I'm ever going to forgive myself for letting you go."

She scrunched up her nose at him. "It's as much my fault as yours for not finding the courage to tell you what I needed to tell you in person. If I had, there wouldn't have been any room for this kind of misunderstanding between us." Her voice dwindled as he approached the sofa to stand directly in front of her.

"Is it too late for us, Adeline?" He took a knee in front of her. "Have you already moved on with someone else?" *Like Nash Carson?*

"Moved on?" Her voice rose to a squeak as her knees came down on the floor between them. "How could I move on with my life when you and I never even officially broke up?"

Her words made his heart pound with hope. He reached for her hands. "Does this mean we're still dating?"

"As long as there's no one else in your life, either." Her voice was barely above a whisper as her fingers curled around his.

"There's never been anyone besides you, Adeline."

She caught her breath. "What about Noelle?" She scanned his face.

His jaw tightened. "What about her?"

"I guess I just assumed that you and she—"

"Nope. There's only one woman in the world who's ever made me feel that way."

"Brady," she whispered. "What are you saying?"

"Something I should've told you five years ago." He stood and tugged her to her feet so he could take her in his arms. "I love you, too, Adeline, and I'm never gonna stop."

With a strangled sound of surrender, she wrenched her hands from his to slide her arms around his neck.



CHAPTER 8: SPINNING OUT ADELINE

Brady's hard mouth came down on hers and immediately gentled, caressing hers with reverent longing. His touch was both achingly familiar and breathtakingly new.

"Tell me again, Ad," he begged

"I love you, Brady." It was so good to be back in his arms. "And I've missed you. So, so, so much!"

"I've missed you more." His next kiss took them deeper — much deeper, making her even more lightheaded for an entirely different reason than her lack of sleep.

She clung to him, since her knees no longer seemed to be working. How could she have ever doubted the capacity of his big, beautiful heart to love her in return?

When he finally let her come up for air, he pressed his cheek against hers, just holding her and breathing her in. "My family said I was like a raging bear after you left, and maybe I was. You'd stirred feelings in me I didn't know what to do with after you were gone. There was nowhere to put them and no way to turn them off."

"I wasn't in any better shape." She was one step away from weeping out a poignant mixture of happiness and regret. "When you didn't respond to my letter, I wanted to die."

He hitched her closer as he listened to the words tumbling out of her.

"For months afterward, it felt like I was only going through the motions." She wasn't trying to make him feel any worse that he already did. She just

needed him to understand. “Getting out of bed, going to school, serving my intern hours, then going back to bed and hitting the repeat button the next morning. I couldn’t even visit home, because you were here and I couldn’t face you again, especially if you were with someone else.”

She felt him flinch. “Never gonna happen,” he rasped against her hairline.

Turning her face to him, she spoke against his cheek. “A future without you in it wasn’t something even my supply of optimism could recolor. It was a dark time in my life.” That was when she’d met Nash. Though she’d refused to talk about her hometown and why she was staying away from it, he’d surely picked up on some hint of her heartache. He’d helped her re-channel it in the practice ring with the horses — his horses. In the process, they’d grown closer.

What she’d never intended was for him to develop romantic feelings for her along the way, something she was very worried was currently in play. She had no wish to toy with his kind and generous heart. He deserved better than that — better than any false hope she’d inadvertently allowed him to harbor during his extended visit to Pinetop. It was time for him to understand, for the sake of everyone involved, that she wasn’t returning with him to Dallas.

It was a long time before Brady spoke again. “Ad, I’m sorry I didn’t read your letter sooner. Thinking you were never going to love me the way I love you was the only reason I’ve been acting the way I have. I honestly thought I’d lost you.”

“Yet you hired me, anyway.” She hugged him tighter.

“I knew you needed the job. I also knew you were the best person for it.” He found her lips again, nuzzling them tenderly. “I also couldn’t say no to the opportunity to have you back in my life. My sister thought I’d lost my mind, but I took what I could get.”

She brushed her lips against his. “And became the grumpiest boss I’ve ever worked for.”

“Only because of how miserable I was working alongside you and not being able to do this.” He sealed his mouth hungrily over hers.

It was a long time before they spoke again.

She reached up to cup his face in her hands. “How about we come up with some ground rules to avoid losing each other like that again? I might not survive it.” Her voice broke.

“I guarantee you my heart won’t survive another day without you.” He

returned his mouth to hers in another heart-stopping kiss.

“Ground rules,” she reminded softly.

“Count me in,” he assured in such a fervent voice that she smiled. “I think the most obvious one is this.” He frowned in concentration. “We need to discuss all major career or life-altering decisions in advance.”

“For sure.” That was a given. “And from now on, no more jumping to the worst possible conclusions without first giving each other a chance to explain ourselves.”

He nodded, looking satisfied. “I think that about covers it.”

“Actually, I’d like to add one more.” Her voice grew shy.

His eyebrows rose. “You really think we need another one?”

“I do.” She threaded her fingers through the silky hair dragging against his collar. “Let’s move forward with a clean slate. If we retrace our steps, no doubt we both did something to contribute to our miserably long, long, long separation. But playing the blame game doesn’t take into consideration God’s perfect timing. Maybe today is when you and I were supposed to find our way back to each other. Maybe now is exactly when we were meant to be together.”

He rested his forehead against hers. “Only you could find a way to bleed so much sunshine into a situation like ours.”

“Is that a yes?” She couldn’t bear to spend the rest of her life watching him beat himself up over what could’ve, should’ve, might’ve been between them. She wanted nothing to cloud their enjoyment of what they had together now.

“Yep.” He cuddled her close, pressing a kiss to the side of her neck.

A sudden thought struck her. “Hey! What time is it?” She leaned back in his arms to blink in alarm at him.

“A few minutes past ten. Why?”

“I need to check on my mom.” She hastily felt her pockets for her cell phone, but came back empty-handed. “I must have left my phone in the truck. I’d better go get it.”

“Go.” He abruptly dropped his arms from around her. “While you do that, I’ll go see if Dad minds covering for me for a while. He probably wants to take his time inspecting the new horses, anyway. That would free me up to drive you back to the hospital if you’d like.”

“Yes, please! That would be so wonderful!” She would feel much safer with him behind the wheel. Though she’d squeezed in a decent-sized catnap,

she was far from rested up. There was a snowstorm rolling in, and it probably wasn't wise to drive through it on fumes.

He reached for her hand. "As much as I hate to leave you for even a few minutes, let's split up and meet back here in five, okay?"

"I'll be here," she promised.

He used their joined hands to tug her close again, dipping his head over hers. "How about one more kiss to fortify me for the coming separation, please?"

She chuckled at the way he was treating the next five minutes like they were five hours. However, she had no problem indulging him in another kiss. The way she saw it, they had a lot of lost time to make up for. Five years' worth of lost time.

He retrieved her coat and held it up for her while she slipped her arms into it. "Thanks," she murmured.

With an affectionate wink, he parted ways with her at the door. He turned right to search the barn for his father. She turned left to the front of the building.

Shelly was standing behind the reception booth, peeling off her hat and gloves.

"Oh, hey! Did you just get back from lunch?" Adeline's stomach growled at the thought of food. She couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten. It was yesterday, for sure. Not dinnertime, though. She'd worked too late for that. Then she'd done some Christmas shopping on the way home. She'd specifically turned down an invitation to meet Nash for dinner in lieu of her shopping spree. It was something she was still feeling a little guilty about.

"No, I ate before I left home. I'm just now getting to work." Shelly's voice was clipped with worry. "Gentry is still under the weather, so Chad and I are tag-teaming on baby duty today."

"I'm so sorry he's still sick." Adeline slapped her forehead at the memory of running into them at the hospital last night. "I should've asked for an update on him when I first walked in. My brain is just..." *Not working very well today.*

"It's alright. You have a lot on your plate right now." Shelly's frown deepened to one of wrenching concern. "How's your dad?"

"Stable when I left the hospital earlier." Adeline wished she had a better report to give. "I'm about to..." Her voice dwindled as a truck rumbled up the gravel lane leading to the barn — a sporty red one with two black racing

stripes emblazoned across its hood. She blinked at the realization that it was Nash.

What was he doing here in the middle of the day? She'd made it clear she had a job to do. She hastily stepped outside since she was already headed to her truck. Though she needed to get back inside to meet up with Brady, maybe she could spare a minute or two for the long-overdue conversation she and Nash had coming.

He pulled abreast of her and leaned across the seat to push open the passenger door. His tanned features were set in grave lines. "There you are. We've been looking all over for you." He gestured for her to hop in.

Her heart thumped sickeningly. "Who's we?"

"Your mom mostly. She asked me to find you since you weren't answering your phone."

"I'm so sorry about that." She glanced toward her pickup. "I think I left it in my truck. I'm headed there now to get it."

"There's no time. Your mom needs you at the hospital now!"

"Why? What's going on?"

"It's your dad. He's taken a turn for the worse."

Her heart raced with apprehension as she gripped the door with one hand, glancing over her shoulder toward the barn. She couldn't just hightail it off Bear Mountain Ranch without saying anything to Brady — not after everything they'd been through, and certainly not after the new ground rules they'd just established between them.

"Come on, Adeline," Nash urged. "There may not be much time left."

His words made her heart go numb. She mechanically climbed inside the truck with a dozen questions trembling on her lips. Slamming the door shut, she ordered in a low, tight voice, "Drive!"

He hit the gas pedal.

Adeline fumbled with the buckle of her seatbelt. "I'm sorry about being so hard to reach." If her mother had gone to this much trouble to reach her, she must be frantic.

Nash cast a sideways glance at her as he skidded down the driveway. "If you don't mind me asking, what are you doing at work at a time like this?"

The gentle censure in his voice grated on her last nerve. "Keeping my job." She twisted his way. "Dad's medical expenses have been snowballing for months, and not all of us are made of money." The moment the words left her mouth, shame slammed into her. "I'm sorry. That was totally uncalled

for.” Not only had Nash driven out of his way to fetch her to the hospital, she was about to beg another favor and borrow his phone to call Brady. Only a fool would alienate a friend like him in the middle of a crisis.

“It’s alright.” He hung a left, staring straight ahead as he drove.

“No, it’s not. All you’ve ever been is kind and generous with me. I don’t know what made me spout off at you like that. You deserve better.” Her emotions welled in her like a stewpot about to overflow on the stove.

“I said it’s okay.” He reached across the seat for her hand. “I know you’re exhausted and worried out of your mind right now. And part of it’s my fault for hounding you about the job back in Dallas.”

“I’m so flattered that you’ve tried so hard to recruit me back to your ranch, Nash. More than you’ll ever know.” She squeezed his hand gratefully before trying to withdraw it, but he held on, lacing their gloved fingers together.

“How about we just focus on your dad right now?” Snow was starting to fall. In no time, a thin layer of whiteness was coating the windshield. Nash reluctantly let go of her hand to turn on his wipers.

“How bad are things with him?” As soon as he provided an update, she’d borrow his phone and fill Brady in on what was going on.

Nash’s angular features contorted with anxiousness. “Your mom said his blood pressure shot through the roof while they were prepping him for surgery. According to the doc, his condition is critical.”

“Oh, no!” Her heart pounded sickeningly. While she’d been napping, her tall, powerful daddy had been lying all limp and hooked to cords in a hospital bed, fighting for his life.

“Just breathe, Adeline.”

She fought for air, but it wasn’t easy. She couldn’t imagine losing her dad now. He was too young, and they were still working to make up all the father-daughter time they’d forfeited during her college and intern years.

“We’ve gotta keep the faith, darling. Believe me, I was praying the entire drive here.” Nash reached for her hand again.

“Both hands on the wheel, please,” she snapped without thinking.

“Yes, ma’am.” He quickly obliged.

“I’m sorry,” she said again. “I don’t know why I keep tearing into you like that.” She clapped a hand over her mouth and started to weep. “I’m the world’s worst friend and, apparently, the world’s worst daughter, too.”

“Just stop.” He shot a harried look at her. “Don’t do that to yourself.”

“It’s true,” she cried hoarsely. “I was napping while my sweet daddy was —”

“You’d been up all night,” Nash interrupted in a reasonable voice. “Nobody can keep their eyelids open forever.

“I’ve also kind of been avoiding you,” she admitted in a choked voice.

“No kidding?” His voice was dry. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“It’s because I, um...need to tell you something, and I’ve been dragging my heels because I didn’t want to hurt your feelings.” She lowered her hand from her mouth, sniffing damply. He was such a great guy. He deserved to know that she didn’t feel the same way about him as he felt about her. He deserved to know that she wasn’t going to accept his job offer no matter how long he hoped and waited and lingered in Pinetop.

“Listening.” His shoulders tensed as he gripped the wheel.

“I’m in love with Brady McGrath. That’s the real reason I can’t return to Dallas with you.”

“Kind of figured that.” His voice was glum.

An animal shot across the road in front of them, something large with antlers. It happened so fast that Adeline didn’t get a good look at the creature.

Nash tapped his brakes a few times. Even though he was being careful, his truck fish-tailed on the slick pavement. Then something heavy slammed into the truck bed, throwing them into a slide.

She could hear him praying for Divine protection as his truck spun to the edge of the mountain. Like so many of the winding roads in Pinetop, there was no shoulder. No extra few feet of grace. Nothing more than a short, metal guard rail that would never stop his oversized tires and raised bed.

His front right tire slammed into the tiny guard rail and bumped over it, making the front of the truck lurch downward. Though the impact finally brought them to a halt, they teetered precariously over the steep edge of the mountain. Nothing but a scattering of boulders and evergreens separated them from the valley below.

“Don’t move.” Nash’s voice was terse with warning.

Adeline bit her lower lip hard as she watched a startled squirrel leap down the branches of the tall evergreen beside them. As he tensed to spring onto the hood of the truck, she breathed, “Please, no!”

The squirrel wiggled his nose and clutched the burden in his front paws a little more securely. Her overwrought brain barely registered the fact that he was holding a tiny acorn before the furry little animal sprang into motion.

He landed on the hood of Nash's truck, skidded a little, then bounded off the other side.

Unfortunately, it was just enough extra weight to teeter the entire vehicle in the wrong direction. Nash's hand shot out to grip her shoulder as they plummeted over the edge.

She heard screaming, then felt a horrific thud as they crashed into something. An airbag deployed, catching her bruisingly in the face. For a moment, she couldn't breathe.

Is it over? Are we dead?

An icy wind swirled through the truck cab, biting at her neck and cheeks. She slowly pushed herself upright. It wasn't easy since her whole body was hunched forward over the airbag. She managed to lift her head enough to see that there were tree limbs sticking through the windshield. Glass shards were dripping from their branches and sliding across the hood of the truck like hard ice chips.

It took a moment for her brain to register the fact that the truck was facing almost completely downward.

"Nash?" Her voice came out scratchy and strained. "Can you hear me?" Fear shuddered through her as she waited for him to answer. She couldn't see the driver's seat for all the branches poking between them. *Please be alive!*

A faint male groan met her ears.

"Nash?" She pushed aside the nearest branch and stared in horror.

Her favorite bronc rider was still alive, but just barely. One of the tree branches had impaled his shoulder. Or crushed it. Or something. All she could tell for sure was that it was badly mangled. His hat was missing, and his left cheek was pressed against the airbag. Thankfully, his position had left enough room for him to breathe. He appeared to be unconscious, which was probably for the best.

He was bleeding, though. Badly. If she didn't do something, she was still going to lose him. Forcing her numb thoughts back into motion, she twisted her body sideways so she could unbuckle the leather belt from around her waist. Then she shimmied closer to him and wrapped it around his upper arm — above his crushed elbow.

The world suddenly tilted. For a split second, she thought the truck was falling again. But the tilting feeling stopped as quickly as it had begun. It was just her. She was no stranger to blood. It was an inevitable part of ranch life. She'd even helped deliver a baby horse once. But this was different. Nash

was a close friend. Someone she adored even though she wasn't in love with him.

"Lord, give me strength." Hoping she wouldn't pass out from everything she was seeing and smelling, she braced her knee against the seat for leverage and pulled the belt as tight as she could around his upper arm. She wished she wasn't so tired. Otherwise, she might've been able to pull the makeshift tourniquet even tighter.

There was no hole that high up in the leather, but she managed to jam the pin of the belt into its beveled design. Thankfully, it was a reversible belt, so an intricate pattern was etched on both sides of it. When she let the belt go, the pin held. She slumped back against her airbag, knowing she'd bought them a little time.

Since they remained stuck somewhere on the side of the mountain, she did the only other thing she could do. She prayed for help to come before it was too late.



Five minutes earlier

After a minute or so of searching, Brady found his father inside Comet's stall. He approached the open door, smiling as he realized Payton McGrath was having a full-blown conversation with the quarter horse.

"I hear you like to jump."

Comet trumped out an affirmative answer. Then the distinct sound of munching filled the air.

"Quickest way to a horse's heart," Brady noted quietly, not wanting to startle either his dad or the horse with his presence.

His father glanced his way as he unashamedly fed the handsome reddish-brown horse another handful of carrots. Reaching up, he lightly stroked a hand down the splash of white hair between his eyes. "Have you given any thought to keeping this one, son?"

"Nope. I've already found a buyer for all five of the quarter horses." Brady was sure he'd told his father that, so the question surprised him.

“I am aware. Shelly was quick to brandish the purchase order under my nose. There’s nothing in the contract that states we have to deliver this particular horse, though. There are plenty of other quarter horses to be had out there. It wouldn’t be hard to acquire another one. We could do it this afternoon, if we wanted to.” His voice warmed to the topic.

“Can’t deal with this right now. I’m sorry, Dad.” Brady shook his head. He wished he had time to delve further into his father’s sudden interest in keeping Comet on Bear Mountain Ranch, but that would have to wait. “I need to get Adeline back to the hospital.”

His father nodded, frowning. “Yeah, it’s way too bad about Birch Carver’s hips. Rodeo life has a way of using you up and spitting you out.”

Brady searched his dad’s face. “You want to come with us?” He and Birch had been close friends for years.

“Nah. I’d best hold down the fort here while you drive your girl into town. Your Mom and I will pay a visit to Birch later on today.” He stepped closer to his son. “You look a lot happier than you did earlier. I take it your long-overdue confession to Adeline went as hoped?”

“Yeah.” Brady couldn’t quit smiling. “She knows I love her now.”

“So, the two of you are good?”

“You could say that.” He was still absorbing the miracle. “She loves me, too. She told me so.” At his father’s curious look, he added, “Again.” He still couldn’t believe it had taken him five years to open the secret drawer beneath his desk. Five long, miserable years to finally receive the heartfelt message the woman of his dreams had written to him.

His father briefly gripped his shoulder. “I’m happy for you. Really happy.” Comet nudged his hand, seeking more carrots. With a chuckle, he returned his attention to the greedy horse.

“Thanks again for your prayers, Dad. And thanks for covering for me here while I go, er…” He pointed toward his office.

“While you start making up for lost time, eh?” A world of understanding echoed in his father’s voice.

“Yeah.” Brady backed from the stall and took off down the hallway at a jog. He eagerly rounded the doorway to his office and found it empty.

That was odd. He’d been talking to his father long enough for Adeline to easily have made the trip to her truck and back. He strode across the room to the window. Sure enough, her truck was still in its spot behind his truck.

“She’s gone.” Shelly’s voice wafted his way from the doorway.

Brady swung away from the window. “What do you mean, she’s gone?” He didn’t bother asking who his sister was referring to. She only used that tone when she was speaking about Adeline.

“She left with Nash. Sorry I had to be the one to tell you,” she muttered as she spun around.

Brady stomped after her. “You can’t just say something like that and walk away.”

She threw her hands into the air and continued marching toward the reception area. “Adeline Carver is incredibly talented when it comes to working with horses. Plus, she’s super nice and bubblier than a fountain soda. But she’s a rolling stone, Brady. I think it’s time we all accepted that.”

“I don’t,” he retorted flatly. “I can’t,” he added in a strained voice. *I love her too much.*

“Oh, Brady,” his sister sighed. “I tried to warn you—”

“Did she say anything to you before she took off?” he interrupted as they reached the receptionist’s booth.

“Not much. Just small talk, and she asked how Gentry was doing. Then Nash drove up, and she left.” She moved behind her computer and slammed a few things down on her desk. “With him.”

“Yeah, I got that part loud and clear.” Brady lifted his hat to run a hand through his hair. It made no sense for Adeline to leave so suddenly like that, not even to get back to the hospital to check on her dad. He’d already offered to drive her there, and she’d already said yes. Unfortunately, he couldn’t just call her and ask about her change of plans. Since she’d left with Nash the moment she’d exited the building, then she still didn’t have her cell phone with her.

He fished out his phone and dialed her anyway, just in case. He got her voicemail and disconnected the call without leaving a message. “Where are you, Ad?”

He didn’t realize he’d spoken the question aloud until Shelly answered. “Maybe she finally accepted the job offer in Dallas.”

He stared aghast at her. “She wouldn’t leave town without telling me, Shells.”

“It’s not like she hasn’t done it before!”

“She promised me she wouldn’t do it again,” he insisted, “and I believe her.”

Shelly’s pitying look told him that she didn’t share his belief.

Turning his back on her, he lifted his phone to his ear again. Though it had been years since he'd dialed Adeline's mother, he was hoping she hadn't changed her number.

Melody Carver picked up on the first ring. "Brady? Is it really you?" she gasped.

"Yep. How's Birch?"

"Not good." She drew a shuddery breath. "He's barely hanging on. I, er... did Adeline make it in to work?"

"Yes, ma'am, she did. But Shelly said she drove off with Nash a few minutes ago."

"Oh, good!" A strangled sob worked its way out of her. "When I couldn't reach her, he said he'd find her for me."

Brady's shoulders slumped with relief at the confirmation that Adeline was headed to the hospital. It still didn't explain why she hadn't waited for him. Or why she hadn't called him yet to let him know where she was. Surely, Nash had a phone she could borrow!

"Listen, Melody, if there's anything my family or I can do for you, just give us a holler." He didn't want to keep her on the phone long.

"Just pray," she choked. "And maybe give your dad the update. He called earlier to let me know he was going to stop by later on today, but..." She paused to drag in a breath. "I don't know if Birch has that long."

"I will," he promised. It was with great reluctance that he ended their call.

"What's going on?" Shelly asked quickly.

"Birch Carver is dying." His chest felt hollow as he spoke the words aloud. Nothing felt right about losing the town's most beloved bull rider.

"No," his sister gasped.

"I've gotta tell Dad. Then I'm heading to the hospital."

"Me, too." She swallowed hard. "If you'll please forget everything I said a few minutes ago about Adeline being a rolling stone..."

"Done." There was no point in staying mad at his sister. She'd only been trying to protect him. "There's something else you should know about her. I love her, Shells. I love her with everything in me."

She rolled her eyes. "I am all too aware. Why else do you think I tried so hard to keep you from hiring her? You're a fool, Brady McGrath."

A fool for her, I reckon. He shrugged ruefully. "I saw a chance to get her back in my life, so I went for it."

"Yep, you're the biggest fool in Arizona!"

Only where Adeline Carver was concerned. She meant everything to him. As the wind picked up, it made a howling sound that drew his gaze to the front door. His gut tightened with apprehension on Adeline's behalf. He hated the thought of her being out there on the mountain in a storm. He tried to take comfort in the fact that Nash Carson was behind the wheel. The guy not only rode bucking broncos for a living, but he cared for Adeline, too.

Actually, there was nothing comforting about that. Brady wished more than anything that he was the one driving Adeline to the hospital. He tracked down his father again to let him know what was going on. The horses were stamping their hooves and tossing their manes restlessly in their stalls. They didn't like the ominous feeling in the air from the coming storm any more than he did.

His dad and the ranch hands were roaming the barn, doing what they could to calm the horses — tossing fresh hay over the doors of the stalls and topping off feed bags.

A clap of thunder made Brady's steps grind to a halt. It was so loud that it shook the floor beneath his feet. Ginger was directly in front of him. Her head whipped back, and a whinny of terror erupted from her long throat.

He spun crazily back toward the reception booth and found Shelly staring wild-eyed at the front doors. Clearly, she was thinking the same thing he was. Thunder like that could cause a rock slide on the mountain. It could also send wild animals running, and heaven only knew what else.

He whipped out his cell phone and dialed Adeline's mom again.

As she'd done the first time he'd called, she picked up right away. "Have you heard from Adeline yet?" Her voice was high-pitched with worry.

"No." His chest felt like it was imploding. "I was calling to ask you the same thing. She and Nash took off a good twenty minutes ago." They should've made it to the hospital by now.

"Brady!" There was a desperate note to Melody Carver's voice. "I can't lose them both at the same time."

"You won't," he promised, "because I'm going after them."

As he ended their call, Shelly flew out from behind the receptionist booth to throw herself into his arms. "You can't, Brady. It's too dangerous out there."

He gave her a swift hug, then set her aside. "I just got her back, Shells. I'm not losing her again." He rattled his way around the room, grabbing whatever supplies he could find — a coil of rope, an extra flashlight, and the

big first-aid kit they kept handy for emergencies.

“Wait a few minutes,” Shelly pleaded. “Just until the storm blows over a little.”

He gave her a hard look, not bothering to answer. They both knew there was nothing she could say to stop him.

Before leaving the barn, he strode her way to give her one last hug. “There’s only one route to the hospital. No way I can miss them.” If they’d run into trouble, he’d find them.

“I’ll let Dad know.” Her voice shook.

“And pray.”

“I will,” she assured fervently. “I still believe in Christmas miracles.”



CHAPTER 9: WHAT THE HEART WANTS

BRADY

Brady leaped into his truck and tossed the supplies he'd gathered into the passenger seat. Revving his motor, he turned on his windshield wipers. So much snow was coating the glass that he pushed open his door and reached around to use his glove to knock it off.

When he slid back behind the wheel, he could finally see through his side of the windshield. "Better."

He rolled cautiously down the driveway, wishing he could drive faster. However, it wasn't wise to rush into the eye of any storm. If Adeline and Nash had run into trouble, the best thing he could do for them right now was to stay in one piece himself.

It was snowing in earnest now. He had to crawl through the sheeting whiteness.

"Where are you, Adeline?" He reached a scattering of stones across the road. A few of them were football sized. He braked and leaped out of his truck to move them. That's when he noticed the deep skid marks in the snow.

His gaze followed them to a startlingly rounded patch of snow. Beyond it, the guardrail was smashed as flat as a pancake in a couple of tire-sized spots.

"Adeline!" He ran to the edge of the road and peered down the side of the mountain.

The sight that met him made his heart pound with horror. Nash's shiny red truck was wedged nose-down into a copse of evergreen trees. Their stalwart trunks were the only reason the vehicle hadn't plunged to the valley below.

He could see no movement through the splintered passenger truck window. Dropping to his hands and knees, he shouted Adeline's name at the top of his lungs.

A gloved hand pressed against the glass for a second or two. Then it was gone.

"Adeline," he shouted again.

A boot kicked out the glass — a very familiar red leather boot. When its owner started to climb out the window, he stopped her with his voice.

"Stay right where you are, Ad! I'm coming down to you."

"Brady?" Her tear-stained face popped into view next. "I heard your voice and thought I was dreaming."

"Nope. You're awake. It's me, babe!" He was so thankful she was alive. "Stay in the truck," he pleaded. "It's a steep drop-off."

"Okay." Sounding a little dazed, she disappeared from view again.

He whipped out his phone as he rose to his feet and dashed back to his truck. Dialing 911, he impatiently waited for the attendant to answer.

"911," a woman intoned. "What's your emergency?"

"Got a truck off the road," he informed her grimly. "It's wedged into some trees about fifteen to twenty feet down the side of the mountain. Two passengers. One is awake and in shock. Not sure about the driver's condition." His gut told him that Nash must be in bad shape. Otherwise, he would already be working to get Adeline out of there. "As soon as I hang up the phone, I'm climbing down there to help out, but we're gonna need an ambulance."

He gave her the location, and the woman said something about seeing what she could do. She stopped short of making any promises, mumbling something about the weather getting worse.

Are you kidding me? Brady hung up on her in mid-sentence to dial his father. While the phone rang, he reached for the coil of rope he'd brought with him.

Payton McGrath's voice blared across the line, "Where are you, son?"

"Only about a quarter mile from the ranch. I found them, Dad. They didn't make it far." He described the precarious location of Nash's truck. "The 911 operator sounded pretty noncommittal. Not sure if we've got any help coming our way or not."

"Of course, you do," his father growled. "Esteban, Mateo, and I will be there in nothing flat. Wait for us."

“You know I can’t do that, Dad.” Brady was already securing the rope to his trailer hitch. He knotted the other end around his waist.

“Eh, it was worth a try.” His father’s voice grew winded, as if he was running. “We’re on our way.”

“Thanks.” Brady disconnected the call and pocketed his phone. Then he jogged to the edge of the road again and climbed over the rail. It was a slippery climb because of the falling snow, but he made it to the passenger door pretty quickly and reached inside.

Adeline practically fell into his arms. “Brady!” She clung tightly to his neck as he eased her carefully through the broken window. “Nash is hurt,” she babbled as he began the climb back to the road. It was much tougher with her added weight.

A rumble of a motor met his ears before they reached the halfway point. Moments later, hands tugged on the rope, allowing him to hook an arm around Adeline and let Esteban and Mateo do the heavy lifting.

His father was waiting for them on the other side of the rail with blankets. Though Brady helped wrap Adeline in a snug cocoon, he waved away any blankets for himself.

“We’ve gotta go back down there for Nash.” He eyed the white big rig his father had driven down the mountain, several tons of metal beast. It was what they used to pull their biggest horse trailer.

“It’s bad.” Adeline’s teeth chattered as he carried her to the front seat of his pickup. “His right arm is pinned to the seat. I managed to get a tourniquet around it, but...”

Brady stopped her with a hard kiss. “We’re gonna get him out of there, you hear?”

She nodded against his shoulder.

“I love you, Ad.” He deposited her on the seat, hating the necessity of leaving her again. “Just stay put for a few minutes. As soon as we have Nash, we’ll get you to the hospital so you can see your dad.” *Hopefully, before it’s too late.*

More tears spilled down her cheeks. “Thank you, Brady,” she choked.

He started the motor and turned on the heater before taking off. “I love you,” he repeated, wanting her to focus on that and nothing else while they were apart.

Esteban was coiling a second rope around his waist when Brady returned to the side of the road. “I’m going down with you this time, hoss.” His

expression told Brady the matter wasn't up for negotiation.

"Thanks." He reattached his own rope and started the climb back down. Nash's side of the truck was locked, so Brady had no choice but to kick out the window. He reached inside to unlock and open the door.

"Sorry, man." Hopefully, the guy had good insurance. The sight that met him inside the truck turned his stomach. Adeline hadn't been kidding. Nash was in really bad shape.

Esteban clambered like a monkey through the passenger window and worked in tandem with Brady to help shove back the jagged limb pinning Nash inside the truck. As Brady maneuvered Nash's tall frame out the door, Nash's mangled arm fell limply against his side.

He'd lost so much blood that it was a miracle he was still breathing. He was as pale as a ghost, but he was hanging on.

The moment they reached the road, Payton McGrath covered Nash with yet more blankets. "Put him in the sleeper berth," he ordered. Esteban and Mateo hurried to relieve Brady of his burden and transfer Nash to the back compartment of the semi-truck.

"I'm staying with him," Esteban called.

Nodding, Mr. McGrath leaped behind the steering wheel and started the motor.

Mateo climbed up beside him to ride shotgun. "I cleared the stones off the road," he affirmed.

Brady gave him a thumbs up as he hurried back to his pickup.

With the big rig leading the way, the two trucks made their way slowly down the mountain toward town.

Brady dialed Melody Carver again and put her on speaker phone for Adeline's benefit.

"Brady!" Her mother's sobbing voice filled the cab. "Did you find my baby girl?"

"I'm here, Mom." Adeline wept as she assured her mother that she was okay. "We're on our way to the hospital right now." She drew a shaky breath. "How's Dad?"

"Better. Much, much better, sweetie." It was a few seconds before her mother could get her emotions under control enough to speak again. "The doctors are calling it a Christmas miracle. His blood pressure has finally stabilized, and they're prepping him for surgery. In a few hours, your daddy is gonna have a brand new hip."

“It’s been a long time coming, hasn’t it?” Adeline sniffled, clutching the blankets tighter around her.

“He’s so ready.” Her mother’s voice was fervent. “He’s so tired of dragging himself around with a walker. If all goes well, the doc says they can replace his other hip in another six to eight weeks. He’ll be in physical therapy for a good long while, but my understanding is that he *will* walk again.”

Adeline smiled through her tears. “As happy as I am to hear the good news about Dad, there’s one more very special guy who could use a Christmas miracle.”

“Nash,” her mother said quickly. “How bad is he?”

“Very bad, Mom. He might lose an arm.”

“Oh, honey!”

Brady had been afraid to voice such concerns, but it sounded like Adeline already understood that her friend might never ride broncs again. Short of that miracle folks were praying for on his behalf, Nash Carson’s rodeo days were over.

His dad must have called ahead to the hospital, because an air ambulance was waiting for them when they arrived. Nash was immediately transferred to a stretcher to be flown toward a bigger medical center in Phoenix. Medical personnel swarmed the helicopter, preparing their patient for departure.

Though Adeline could walk, Brady didn’t let her. He was so thankful she was alive that he carried her into the emergency room waiting area. Her mother ran forward to greet them.

“Oh, sweetie!” Her short dark hair was tousled and her clothes were rumpled, but a grateful smile stretched her tired features.

As he set Adeline back on her feet, she was caught up in her mother’s tearful embrace.

Out of the corner of his eye, he thought he caught a glimpse of Noelle. However, he might’ve been mistaken. Whoever it was had disappeared into the crowded room and was gone.



I've lost him.

Noelle limped blindly down the hospital hallway on her crutches, unable to see clearly through the tears welling in her eyes. The sight of Brady carrying Adeline through the waiting room would be forever etched in her mind. The look in his eyes when he gazed down at the woman in his arms was the kind of stuff fairytales were made of. It was plain for anyone to see that he was madly in love with Adeline Carver.

A wave of self-pity shook Noelle at the realization that no guy had ever looked at her that way.

She stumbled into the back of someone. "I'm so sorry," she gasped, flailing her crutches to steady herself.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" A man in a white smock gripped her shoulders to help her regain her balance. "Were you part of the accident on the mountain?"

"I, er...no." She could hear the deep rumble of the air ambulance on the helipad outside. "If you don't mind me asking, where are they taking Nash Carson?"

"To Phoenix, more than likely." The man was a blurry blob as he walked away.

Because it was a small town, word had quickly spread about Nash and Adeline's accident on the mountain. And in true McGrath style, Brady and his dad hadn't waited for an ambulance. They'd taken things into their own hands and created no small stir by pulling into the hospital parking lot with their big rig in the lead, honking to wake the dead.

"The McGraths are the only reason that cowboy is still alive," a woman declared nearby. Noelle didn't see who it was, but she completely agreed with the statement.

"He might lose his right arm, though," another woman chimed in. Her voice was thick with sympathy.

"It's gonna be hard for him to keep riding broncs, that's for sure," a man answered.

Noelle's eyes widened. Nash Carson was at risk of losing his arm? That was news to her. Sympathy tightened her throat at the realization that he was about to be air-lifted to Phoenix in such a vulnerable state with no family or friends to accompany him.

She glanced over her shoulder, blinking rapidly to clear her vision. Adeline was still clasped in her mother's arms, and Brady was hovering

nearby. It didn't look like they had any intention of leaving the hospital before Birch Carver made it out of surgery. Not that she could blame them for that.

I'll go with Nash.

Now that Brady and Adeline were back together, there was nothing left for her in Pinetop. Noelle lifted her chin and doggedly finished pushing her way through the crowd. It was slow going on crutches, but she persevered. Making her way to the parking lot, she edged closer to the medical team swarming the chopper. Its blades were already spinning.

Though there were some clear drawbacks to living in a small town, the fact that Noelle knew just about everybody who lived there wasn't one of them. She used that to her advantage as she elbowed her way closer.

"Excuse me. Pardon me, please." The various medical personnel glanced her way, recognized her, and allowed her through.

A red-headed nurse stopped her at the rear of the helicopter. It was Mary Skelton, the sheriff's wife. "What are you doing here, Noelle?"

"I'm here on behalf of Bear Mountain Ranch." It wasn't entirely true, of course. Yes, she worked at Bear Mountain Ranch, but nobody in any official capacity had requested her presence at the hospital today. "I'm to accompany Nash to Phoenix." It was a decision she'd made on the spot. Her heart couldn't handle returning to work to watch the man she loved drool over the woman who'd spent the last five years breaking his heart.

And she certainly wasn't going home to hear the I-told-you-so speech her mother was sure to deliver. She'd decided months ago that Brady would make the perfect son-in-law. No doubt she would blame Noelle for failing to make that dream of hers happen.

Mary Skelton assessed Noelle, from her red-rimmed eyes to her crutches, before giving a huff of acquiescence. "If you say so." She didn't sound one hundred percent convinced as she moved aside to allow her to climb into the aircraft. "It's probably best that he's not traveling alone in his condition. I assume you have a way of contacting his family?"

"Yes, ma'am." Hoping she could find that information online, Noelle gave Mary a mock salute and backed farther into the chopper. Since there was no co-pilot present, she slid into the seat beside the pilot and propped her crutches in front of her. She kept her head down as she buckled her seatbelt.

"You family?" The pilot's voice was infused with compassion as his hands flew across the control panel in front of them.

“Close friend, actually.” Skating so close to the edge of the truth was proving to be exhausting. Thankfully, he was an out-of-towner, so he wasn’t likely to question her answer. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she tipped her head back against the seat. She almost didn’t care where she went next, so long as she left her heartache behind.

As much as she’d enjoyed shopping up and down the Christmassy streets of Pinetop, the tiny mountain community was now filled with as many unhappy memories as happy ones. She would miss the horses at Bear Mountain Ranch, and she would miss the sweet shopkeepers and citizens who celebrated Christmas year round. She would *not* miss being stuck beneath the thumb of her overbearing parents. Nor would she miss having the crack in her heart pushed a little wider each time she showed up to work.

The next couple of hours passed in a nightmarish blur. Since Noelle had used Nash’s medical evacuation as a means to leave town, she felt obligated to hang around after they arrived at the hospital.

That wasn’t her only reason, of course. She liked the guy. Despite his hopeless crush on Adeline, he’d always been super nice to her. They’d chatted about horses a few times and even grabbed coffee together once.

She’d seen the words *Canyon Creek* embroidered on a few of his button-up shirts. When she’d asked him about it, he’d told her it was the name of his family’s ranch in Dallas.

Two tall, blonde cowboys converged on her in the waiting room around midnight. Though she’d never before met either of them in person, she instantly recognized Nash’s younger brothers from their paparazzi photos. Both were bronc riders like him.

They swaggered right up to her. The tallest one thrust a hand out. “I’m Ames Carson. The doc said you rode here with our brother in the chopper.”

“I did.” She used her crutches for leverage to pull herself to her feet and instantly felt smaller next to the two giant cowboys. “How is he?” She scanned their handsome features.

“Who’s asking?” Ames pushed back his Stetson, arching a single eyebrow at her. “For a woman who was officially assigned to the transport, everyone else on board had precious little information about you.”

“I’m Noelle Ward, and I wasn’t officially assigned to the transport.” She bit her lower lip, wondering why he felt the need to cross-examine her.

“Interesting.” His striking blue gaze raked across her wrinkled jeans and plaid shirt. His own jeans weren’t in much better condition. A black duffle

bag was looped over one shoulder, suggesting he'd caught a red-eye flight to get here. "I take it you're dating Nash, then?"

"What?" She frowned up at him in confusion. "No!"

"My bad. When the medical team said you'd arrived with him from Pinetop, we just assumed..." He let his unfinished sentence dangle between them, looking expectant. He was tall, tan, and blonde like Nash, but the resemblance stopped there. Instead of Nash's easy going twinkle, his eyes were much harder and more assessing. A hint of suspicion prickled in their depths.

"I didn't think he should have to fly alone," she mumbled, glancing away from him. She was so tired that she inadvertently turned her gaze to the other brother instead of looking away from both men like she'd intended.

"I'm Flint Carson," he informed her in a gentler voice. "The youngest brother."

"And the meanest." Ames raised a fist to pound his shoulder.

Flint waggled his eyebrows at her. "He meant the best looking and the funnest to hang around."

She flicked a glance between the two of them and sighed, "Listen, I don't want to be in your way. Now that Nash has family in town, I should probably get going." She tried to push her crutches forward, but the two men moved shoulder to shoulder, barring her path.

"Are you in love with him?" Flint's gaze scoured her face.

She gaped in astonishment at him. "I think Ames was right. You *are* the meanest."

"It's a simple question." He folded his arms, lips twitching at her words. "All you've gotta say is yes or no."

"Actually, I don't have to say anything." Her voice was flat. "Unless you have an update on your brother's condition to share with me, then I'm leaving." *And there's not one blessed thing you can do about it, other than physically blocking my path like you're currently doing.*

"Not until you explain your presence on that flight to our satisfaction." His jaw hardened. "I already reached out to the hospital in Pinetop, and they told me you're a horse trainer on a ranch near there. Not sure why you'd be required to accompany our brother during an emergency air-lift."

"Fine. I wasn't," she sighed. "I basically stuck out my thumb and hitchhiked out of town on your brother's medical flight. If that makes me an awful person, then I'll admit it. I'm an awful person. Are you satisfied now?"

Her heart shuddered with self-loathing.

“No, we’re not satisfied yet. And no, we don’t think you’re an awful person.” His expression softened. “We’re grateful you accompanied Nash to the hospital.” He held out a hand to her. “How about you let us thank you properly over a cup of coffee?”

She stared at his hand. “Only if you tell me if Nash got to keep his arm.”

“No.” Flint’s expression grew bleak. “They removed his right arm an inch or so above the elbow.

She burst into tears. “I’m so, so, so sorry to hear it.” She swayed dizzily on her crutches.

Flint stepped forward to hook an arm around her waist. She leaned into him, her shoulders shaking with silent sobs. When she found her voice again, she choked, “Is he going to pull through?”

“Yeah. Like the rest of us, he’s too mean to die.” Flint’s other arm came around her.

Noelle’s chuckle of relief had a damp echo to it. “Guess he had me fooled. I’ve always considered him to be one of the nicest guys I’ve ever met.”

“Yep. He definitely had you fooled.” Flint shifted her to one arm, pivoted to face in the same direction, and continued holding on to her until she adjusted her crutches to walk beside him. “When was the last time you had something to eat?”

She shrugged. “Don’t know. I’m not hungry. I wouldn’t mind that coffee you mentioned, though.”

She was soon seated in a twenty-four-hour coffee bistro in the medical center’s massive front foyer.

She took a slow, bracing sip of the hot brew. “How soon will Nash be able to have visitors?” She wanted to at least say goodbye to him.

Flint waved a hand. “Tomorrow, I reckon. Not sure how with-it he’ll be. They have him on some pretty heavy painkillers.”

She nodded. That made sense. “How long will he be in the hospital?”

“A few days. Maybe a week. We’ve started the paperwork to have him transferred to Dallas. What’s next for you?” He eyed her curiously. “Didn’t see a purse or suitcase around.”

She made a face at him. “It was a spur-of-the-moment hitchhiking decision. I came with my wallet and the clothes on my back.” She yawned, more than ready to find a hotel and crash for the night. “I’ll have a friend

terminate my lease and ship the rest of my things once I figure out where I'm going." At Ames and Flint's upraised eyebrows, she wished she'd kept that information to herself.

"Did you rob a bank or something?" Ames' voice was much gentler than before.

"Why?" Her voice was dry. "Are you planning on turning me in?"

"Nope. Just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"We feel kind of responsible for you since you've been serving as our brother's keeper," Flint chimed in. He winked at her.

"Very funny."

"I'm hilarious. Tried to warn you."

She yawned in his face.

"Seriously, Noelle." Ames leaned across the table in her direction. "If you need anything from us."

She yawned again. "Unless you have a job opening for a horse trainer..."

"We do, actually." Ames shot a speaking glance at her crutches. "How soon will you be available?"

An amazed chuckle escaped her. "Three or four weeks, give or take a few days in either direction." Though she was on convalescent leave, she still intended to give Brady a proper two-week notice — in writing since she'd already left town, something he didn't precisely have to know.

"You're hired," he said calmly.

Her lips parted. "I was kind of joking, cowboy."

"Do you or do you not need a job?"

"I do, but that's not your problem." She lifted her chin. "And neither am I."

"I wasn't joking about the job."

She stared at him in disbelief.

He stared back. "Surely Nash said something to you about us being down a trainer."

"Well, yes, but—"

"She said yes," Ames crowed, pointing gleefully at her as he caught his brother's eye. "You heard her."

"That I did," Flint drawled, reaching up to scratch the back his neck.

"What's wrong?" she taunted. "You got fleas?" She loved how easy it was to chat and joke with them. She hadn't been this relaxed around, well, anyone in a very long time.

Flint lowered his hand and pointed at her, grinning. “You’re so hired! Just accept it, and prepare to hitchhike on to Dallas.”

“Easier said than done.” She still wasn’t convinced they were serious about the offer.

“It might be easier than you think.” Flint jammed a thumb in Ames’ direction. “He’s a pilot. We flew our own jet here.”

“Oh, my goodness!” Hope tugged so strongly on her heart that it ached. “If it’s a real job offer, then yes.”

“Welcome to the team, Miss Ward.”

As Ames and Flint took turns fist bumping her, she tried to imagine how Nash was going to feel when he woke up and found out his brothers had hired her to take the job he’d been hoping to give Adeline.

In a way, leaving Brady McGrath down a horse trainer felt like poetic justice. Plus, she would be getting to work for a really great guy whom Adeline had never appreciated the way he deserved.

Flint tipped up his coffee cup and took a long swig. “Fair warning. You’ll probably be seeing a lot more of Nash since he won’t be riding broncs anymore.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that!” She spoke with alacrity, setting her coffee cup down on the table with a bang.

Nash’s brothers’ eyebrows flew upward.

She scowled at them. “He rides with his left hand and uses his right arm for balance.” It was like that in every picture she’d ever seen of him. She wasn’t sure why she’d even noticed, but she had.

Flint opened and closed his mouth without saying anything. Ames looked equally bumfuzzled.

“There’s no reason he can’t ride again.” She wasn’t sure why his brothers were looking at her like that. She tried to muffle another yawn, but didn’t succeed.

“Come on.” Flint stood and held out a hand to her. “Let’s get you to your room before you fall over.”

Ames snorted as he stood and held out her crutches for her. “I can’t wait to see Nash’s face tomorrow when you tell him he’s gonna still ride broncs.”

She ignored Flint’s offer of assistance and used her crutches to pull herself to her feet. “I haven’t called a hotel yet.” She was half-tempted to crash right where she was in the booth at the coffee shop. Either that, or go push some chairs together in the waiting room.

“There’s no need for that.” He kept his hand outstretched. “Since we’re gonna be in town for a week or so, we rented a house. You’re more than welcome to the third bedroom.”

Unbelievable! She was way too tired to turn down such a kind offer. “Sold. Gals on crutches without suitcases can’t be too picky.”

The next morning, they drove her in a rented SUV to a nearby mall so she could do a little shopping. She was in a new outfit by the time visiting hours at the hospital began.

Ames and Flint stepped ahead of her into Nash’s room. She hung back in the doorway, shocked to see how pale he was and how many cords he was hooked up to. The hard look in his eyes was even more painful to witness. She’d expected him to be sedated and loopy, less aware of his tremendous loss for another day or two.

Since he hadn’t noticed her presence yet, it gave her more time to think of something to say that might bring a little of the light back to his eyes.



“Morning.” Flint’s voice was hushed as he rested a hand on Nash’s foot.

“Hey.” Nash wished he had the energy to kick his hand away, but he didn’t. Whatever painkillers his team of surgeons had prescribed were too powerful. He could barely feel the bed beneath him. It almost felt like he was floating on top of it. On the upside, the medical staff had removed his breathing tube shortly after he’d awakened. His only souvenir from that contraption was a mild sore throat.

Ames came to stand on the other side of his bed. “Now that you’re on this side of your surgery, we’ve started the paperwork to get you transferred to Dallas.”

“Good.” Nash gave him a short up-down nod. “Get me home, bro.” He wasn’t interested in some long, drawn-out hospital stay.

“Will do. Promise.” Flint squeezed his foot again.

Nash could hardly stand watching his brothers’ eyes darken with various shades of sympathy, concern, and sadness. He could tell that neither of them was sure what to say or do around him at the moment. The missing part of his

arm was like the proverbial elephant in the room.

Though he wasn't feeling up to much, he realized he was the only one who could break the ice forming between them. Arm or no arm, he wasn't about to give up his place in their lives as their oldest brother.

"Caress my toes one more time," he growled, "and I will kick you. Hard. Just not today."

Flint stared at him for a moment, open-mouthed, then burst out laughing. He raised both hands in surrender. "He's back!" There was a hitch to his voice that underscored just how worried he'd been.

"Since my bronc riding days are over, I'll be around like a tick on a dog. Better brace yourselves."

Ames and Flint exchanged a glance and started to grin like they knew something he didn't know.

"What?" he demanded. Thanks to the oxygen tube clipped to his nose, his voice sounded a little winded. Reaching up with the only hand he had left, he yanked the cord from his face and tossed it aside.

Good riddance! It was one less thing tying him down.

Ames glanced toward the door of his room. "Who says your bronc riding days have to be over?"

Nash stared daggers at him. "In case you've forgotten, I'm missing a piece of my arm."

"Not your riding arm, though."

The familiar female voice made his head jerk toward the door. "Noelle? What are you doing here?"

The slender horse trainer hobbled her way across the room on her crutches. "You know what? None of my half-truths yesterday worked on your brothers, so I'm just going to be flat out honest with you. No, I'm going to be even more honest with you." Her voice trembled.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his younger brothers backing from the room. Then he heard the click of the door closing behind them.

His gaze narrowed on her. "Is everything okay with you?"

"No, Nash. Everything is not okay in the World of Ward, but I didn't come here to unload on you. You've got enough on your very broad, very hunky, rodeo-champion shoulders right now."

"Whatever." His lips twitched. Shaking his head at her, he patted the empty spot on the mattress beside him. "I've got time to listen." So long as she didn't need longer than a week to tell him what was wrong.

She moved to the side of his bed and very gingerly took a seat on the edge of it. “You sound better than you look.” She frowned at him. “I was pretty scared for you on the flight over.”

His eyebrows rose. “You were on the chopper with me?”

“Yeah. I used it to hitchhike out of Pinetop.” She wrinkled her nose at him. “Also, because it didn’t feel right leaving you alone like that.”

“Thanks.” He lightly tapped her knee with his fist. “But why the sudden need to get out of Dodge?”

She burst into tears. “Because I love somebody who doesn’t love me back.”

He eyed her with concern. “Brady?”

As she nodded, a few tears jostled loose and trickled down her cheeks. “I had to get away when I found out he and Adeline were back together.” She sniffled loudly. “Not just from him, but from my parents. They’ll blame me for failing to *reel him in*.” She raised her hands and put air quotes around the fishing statement. In the process, she let go of her crutches. They slid to the floor with a clatter.

She bent to pick them up, but he stopped her by reaching for her hand. “Leave them.”

She wiped her cheeks with the back of her other hand and shimmied a little closer to him on the bed. “Sorry for the meltdown. I said I wasn’t going to unload on you, but here I am.”

“It’s okay.” He pointed at the box of tissues on the silver cart beside his bed. It was resting next to a pitcher of water and an empty glass. “Help yourself.”

She leaned forward to snatch a handful of tissues and used them to dab her cheeks dry.

“I get it,” he informed her quietly. “You’re talking to the guy who lost his arm and his girl. Not,” he added glumly, “that she was ever really mine.”

“I’m sorry, Nash. For everything you’re going through.” She seemed to be debating something inside her head. “Listen, I know I’m sloppy seconds, but your brothers offered to bring me on board as your new horse trainer. If you have any objections, though, I’ll tell them no.”

He was silent for a moment. “Why would I object?”

“I’m not her, Nash. I’m never going to be her. I’m never going to be a wizard with horses like she is. I—”

His expression darkened at the despair ringing in her voice. “Who says

you're not as good with horses?"

She shrugged. "No one, I guess, but I never even got a shot at the head trainer position Brady gave Adeline. That sort of speaks for itself."

His jaw tightened. "Adeline interned at one of the biggest ranches in Texas. Who's to say you won't soar just as far in your career, given the same opportunity?"

Noelle bit her lower lip. "If you're truly okay with me taking the job, then I'm totally going to do it."

"Have you given notice at your other job yet?"

"No." Her voice was thready. "But I'm on con leave, so nobody's expecting me back for another month or so. I have plenty of time to type up my two-week notice."

"You should call him and tell him yourself." He reached over to give her fingers a light tug. "He's not a bad person, you know."

She gave a damp chuckle. "He's the best. Why else do you think I fell for him?"

"I owe him my life. Him and Adeline both. She put the tourniquet on my arm, and he carried me up the side of the mountain." He only had snatches of memories of those moments as he'd drifted in and out of consciousness. "So I'd just as soon not steal one of his two horse trainers without saying anything. He deserves better than that."

She drew a shuddery breath. "Okay." She peeked at him from beneath her lashes. "Wanna make the phone call together?"

"Sure." His hand slid away from hers as he sank more heavily against his pillow. "Just not today." He grimaced as the pain in his right arm billowed anew like fire. He reached for the remote control mounted by velcro to the side of his bed and mashed the button.

He felt a surge of relief as he pumped more painkiller into his I.V.

"I'm gonna let you rest now." She stood and bent to retrieve her crutches.

His eyelids grew heavy, but he had to ask. His words came out slurred from the medication that was fast taking effect. "Do you...really believe...I can ride again?"



“With everything in me,” Noelle assured firmly, unsure if Nash had fallen asleep. During months of physical therapy for a shoulder injury, she’d seen all sorts of miracles taking place in the treatment room. In most cases, it boiled down to willpower. If someone truly wanted to walk, run, or lift things again, they could. They just needed to want it badly enough.

On impulse, she leaned over his bed to plant a light kiss on his forehead. “Nash Carson will ride again. Mark my words.”

Since he and his brothers had been kind enough to offer her a job at Canyon Creek Ranch, she would be in the position to help make sure that happened.

“Don’t...go.” Nash’s voice came out as a hoarse croak.

“I’ll stay,” she promised softly.

He didn’t answer. The even cadence of his breathing told her he was finally asleep.

She gazed down at him for a moment before taking a seat again, this time on the vinyl chair beside his bed. It struck her that they had an awful lot in common. Both were coping with broken hearts, and both were facing medical rehabilitation. His injury was far worse than hers and would take far longer to heal, but still.

She might be a broken version of her former self, but she was sick to death of being told what she couldn’t do. He would soon grow tired of it, too. Maybe if they worked hard enough and wanted it badly enough, they could help each other forge something beautiful together at Canyon Creek Ranch.

As the old saying went, *when you hit rock bottom, the only way to go is up!*



CHAPTER 10: MAY THE BEST TEAM WIN BRADY

Christmas Eve

The morning of Pinetop's Annual Grill Master Contest blew in with a mountain breeze swirling with flurries. The sun was doing its best to peek out between a cluster of puffy white clouds.

Brady shielded his eyes with one gloved hand to squint up at them. "Looks like we've got another snowstorm blowing in."

"Looks like." Adeline stepped up behind him to rest her cheek against the sleeve of his jacket. "It's a good thing we have all these grills fired up." She raised her head and gazed around them. "This has to be the warmest spot in town."

There were six enormous grills circling the gazebo in Town Square. A swirl of smoke rose here and there from their black hoods. The scents of hickory, mesquite, and apple wood were making Brady's mouth water. Each team of contestants already had their top-secret blend of fuel smoking. Some were using charcoal, some wood chips, and others pellets. In less than ten minutes, they'd be allowed to toss their first slabs of meat on their grills.

Verbal challenges and barbs were already flying thick around the interior of the gazebo.

"The circus isn't scheduled to perform until next spring," Chad Hofstetter called laughingly to Dean Isaacson, who was juggling three fat red spatulas in the air. "You sure you're in the right place?"

For an answer, Dean snatched one of the spatulas out of the air and

zinged it at the tall, bearded cowboy.

Chad neatly caught it and held it up like a sword, ready to start sparring. Dean tossed another spatula at Brady, and the three of them hunkered down, inching toward each other with their spatulas raised.

“Boys never grow up.” Chad’s partner, Ethel Carnegie, confided that piece of home-style wisdom in a loud whisper behind one hand to Dean’s girlfriend, Ruby. The white-headed widow’s words were guaranteed to carry to everyone standing nearby. “They just get taller, and their toys get more expensive.” She was dressed like Mrs. Santa, right down to the round silver spectacles perched on the end of her nose. There were no lenses in them, since her eyesight was as sharp as it had ever been. She was serious about grilling and wasn’t about to risk picking up the salt bottle by mistake instead of the sugar bottle.

A small but growing audience was gathering around the gazebo, pointing and chuckling at the antics taking place in front of them.

Despite the nip in the air, there were a lot of familiar faces present. Angel and Willa Castellano were present with a dozen or more of their dinner theater employees clustered around them. Hope and Roman Rios were with them. Their entire crew was wearing bright red aprons over their coats and jackets in support of two of their sous chefs who were competing in today’s contest.

Wes Wakefield was proudly leading Christie around the square. She was perched on the back of a horse wearing red-and-white striped socks that matched her own candy cane bodysuit. They paused here and there so people could huddle closer to snap a picture of themselves standing beside his famous trick-riding wife. She struck various poses for the photos — everything from hanging sideways off the saddle to arching her lithe frame into a perfect handstand over the pommel.

Not to be left out, Tess and Emilio Navarro were present with a bunch of their farm hands and their families from Christmas Tree Farm. To the delight of those standing around them, they were wearing matching green felt hats shaped like Christmas trees.

A special row of seats had been placed in a semi-circle at the front of the viewing area. They were for Pastor Jonah and his family who were present on behalf of The First Church of Pinetop. His wife, Eve, was seated on his right, and his daughter, Carol, was seated on his left. Carol’s new husband, Shane, was holding her hand. Their adopted son, Luke, was wiggling on his knee

— no doubt impatient to take off and play with the other kids who were sledding down the hill behind The North Pole Candy Depot.

There was no way his parents were letting him run off before the beginning of the ceremony, however, since 100% of the proceeds from this year's grill master competition would be going toward the newly expanded church sanctuary. They were the guests of honor at today's event. Their wide smiles were brimming with gratitude.

As the mayor mounted the platform in front of the gazebo, Brady tossed the red spatula back to Dean. He tipped open the red cooler at his feet to peek at the bags of steak and ribs marinating there. The whistle would soon be blown to begin the contest.

"We're ready. We've got this," Adeline assured in a soft voice. "And by we, I mean you," she added with a chuckle.

Brady cast an amused glance at her upturned face. "I can't believe we didn't manage to squeeze in a single grill practice." Even with insulated leggings under her jeans, she wasn't much bigger than a kitten sopping wet. She had on her favorite red cowgirl boots, which added what she always referred to as a "much-needed" inch or two to her petite frame. Though she never stopped moaning about how short she was, he considered her the perfect height for kissing and told her that often...and usually wrangled a kiss out of his teasing.

"We tried." She shrugged at him, not looking too worried about their lack of practice runs before today's event. Life had gotten in the way — between her dad's surgery and the fact that they were still down a horse trainer.

"Yeah. We did." He gave up trying to resist temptation and swooped in to plant a tender kiss on her. "Have you heard anything from Noelle yet?" He hadn't been able to get in touch with their junior horse trainer for the better part of a week. He frowned. Not since Adeline and Nash's accident, come to think of it.

"I have not." Adeline pulled her phone from her coat pocket and started scrolling through her messages. "I take that back." Her expression brightened. "It looks like she texted me a few minutes ago."

"No kidding?" Brady dipped his head closer to hers, trying to read over her shoulder. "Did she say where she is?" He'd run into her parents at church yesterday, but they'd been close-lipped concerning her whereabouts.

"No. All she wrote is that she hopes we win today. Wait a sec!" An image flashed across the screen.

Brady was surprised to see Noelle and Nash together in the picture. He was mounted on a dark stallion pawing the air, and she was pretending to coax the horse back to the ground. Her expression was one of classic comedy as she smiled into the camera. It was clear they were having fun.

“Back on a horse already,” he mused, shaking his head. “No way is that loco cowboy following doctor’s orders.” Half of the guy’s arm had just been amputated, for crying out loud! He was canted in such a way in the photo, however, that his wounded limb wasn’t visible.

“I’m pretty sure it’s photoshopped.” Adeline stared in amazement at it. “It’s very clever, don’t you think, to put such a beautiful spin on such a tragic injury?”

“What I’m thinking,” Brady retorted darkly, “is that my other horse trainer is in Dallas with a guy who traveled to Pinetop for the sole purpose of recruiting *you* away from me.”

“He didn’t succeed.” Adeline reached up to touch his cheek.

“He might have in her case.” His cell phone vibrated with an incoming text message. He kissed her fingers before removing it from the back pocket of his jeans. “It’s from her.” He scowled at the message.

We need to talk, please. I know today might not be a good time. Just let me know when.

He silently handed his phone to Adeline so she could read the message. “Is it just me, or do you also feel like I’m still about to be down a horse trainer?”

“Oh, Brady,” Adeline sighed, handing the phone back. “It was inevitable, don’t you think?”

He pocketed his phone. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

“She cares for you.” Her voice grew softer. “A lot.”

Brady bent his head to nuzzle her cheek. “You’re the only woman for me, Adeline.” He hated that he was losing a good horse trainer over that fact, but it didn’t change the way he felt.

She tipped her head back against his shoulder, melting into his embrace. “I love you too much to fault her for her taste in men. If there’s any chance she can find happiness with him...”

“Agreed.” Like her, he very much hoped that the photo meant Noelle’s longtime crush on him had ended. He’d never encouraged her. He was sure of it. “Pretty sure the bronc rider in the picture has the hots for you, though. Not her.”

Adeline's lashes fluttered against her cheeks. "Maybe he thinks that right now, but I'm a firm believer that there's someone out there for everyone. He'll find his perfect someone, just like you and I did. Wouldn't it be the greatest plot twist if she's already standing right in front of him?"

"Guess that's something they'll have to figure out." Regardless of those watching, Brady drew her mouth back to his for one more peppermint-sized peck on the lips. "Just like you and I had to. I don't know what I'd do without you, Ad." She was the missing piece of his heart and soul, the one woman in the universe who completed him.

She made a face at him. "You might've had a better chance of winning this contest, for one thing. I just couldn't find it in my heart to give up our partnership. Sorry."

"I'm not." He reached for her hand and twirled her in an impromptu dance. "I'd much rather win with you by my side, babe." He raised his voice to ensure his statement carried to Dean and Ruby on the other side of the gazebo. They were conferring in whispers behind their grill — no doubt discussing their winning strategy.

Dean shot him a bored look. "May the best team win, cowboy. Oh, wait!" He pretended to have a lightbulb thought. "That's us!" He grinned at his partner, and they exchanged a high-five.

The mayor's voice blared across the sound system, interrupting their jibes. "Are you folks ready for some master grilling?"

Applause broke out and blanketed the square.

"Taste-testing *will* be involved," he added cheerfully.

The cheering escalated.

"And now for a quick reminder of who our randomly selected contestants are. As we draw each team's name out of the hat, they'll be given exactly thirty seconds to greet the fine citizens of Pinetop, who got out of bed bright and early this morning to cheer them on."

Someone produced an upturned black top hat with a red velvet ribbon and held it up for him. On the mayor's signal, the high school band broke into an impressive drum roll. He dipped his gloved hand into the hat and withdrew a folded white slip of paper. The air around them grew abruptly silent.

As Brady waited to hear which team would give the first speech, he reached for another slip of paper — the one folded in his pocket. He had no interest in giving a speech, and he was very sure Adeline didn't either, so he'd taken the liberty of doing something else with their allotted time.

“Team Three!” The mayor waved a hand at them. “You get to go first.”

One of the contest coordinators produced a wireless microphone and passed it over the railing of the gazebo.

Brady accepted the microphone and unfolded his letter. “Dear Adeline.” The look he gave her could’ve easily started simmering the steaks that would soon be resting on their grill. “You wrote me a letter five years ago that I didn’t find and read until a few days ago.”

She gasped as it dawned on her what he was about to do.

“I just thought you deserved a letter back, so here you go. I love you, too.”

Their audience squealed in delight.

“I love you wider than the streets of Pinetop and taller than Bear Mountain.”

A collective sigh rose around them.

“I’m so thankful the Lord gave us another chance to be together, and I don’t want to spend another second of it without knowing your answer to this question.” He dropped to a knee in front of her.

“Brady!” Adeline’s gasp was caught by the microphone he was holding between them.

“Will you marry me?” He produced the small black box holding the ring he’d purchased five years earlier. Popping open the lid, he waited with a pounding heart for her answer.

“Yes!” Happy tears spilled down her cheeks. She tugged off her glove and held out her hand, fingers splayed, so he could slide the ring on for her.

“Time!” The mayor crowed out the end to their thirty seconds. He waited until the clapping and cheering died down before speaking again. “That may very well be the finest speech ever given at Pinetop’s Annual Grill Master Contest.”

Grinning, Brady pointed gleefully in Dean Isaacson’s direction, silently taunting him to top his “speech”. He drew Adeline to her feet to seal their new engagement the only way that made sense to him — with a kiss.

She chuckled against his lips. “Did you seriously just start another verbal duel with Dean and Ruby?”

“Yep.” He brushed his mouth across hers. “After an entire year of making headlines with the biggest piece of gossip in town, they had it coming.”

“You’re something else, Brady McGrath!” She drew his head down for another kiss that generated more claps, cheers, and sighs.

“What I am is the guy you just agreed to marry.” He was so happy about that fact that he almost didn’t care how the contest ended.

Almost.

Someone had to stay in the game to challenge Dean Isaacson’s incessant bragging.

“Our next speech will come from...” The mayor pointed merrily at the high school band, who indulged him in another drum roll.

“Team One! Brady, if you’ll pass the microphone to Dean and Ruby, please.”

There were a few chuckles as the mic made its way to the other side of the gazebo.

Dean pretended that the handle of it was sticky, to the amusement of those watching. “Look what they did to it,” he joked, wiping his glove on his pants. Then he threw the mic into the air and started juggling it with two of his red spatulas, proving it wasn’t the least bit sticky.

He used up about ten seconds of their allotted time with his performance. Then he slid an arm around Ruby’s shoulders and held the mic to his mouth. “For those who were hoping for another marriage proposal, we’re terribly sorry. It’s not gonna happen.”

The audience sent up a mock groan.

“Because Ruby and I just this morning returned from our honeymoon in the mountains!” He held the microphone high over his head like a trophy.

His words were met with gasps of amazement.

“Yep. You heard that right. We eloped a week ago, because we didn’t want to spend another Christmas apart.” He reached for his bride’s hand and held it up for everyone to see. The diamond on her finger flashed in the morning sunlight. “I love you, Mrs. Isaacson.” He dipped his head over hers to capture her lips in a sweetly poignant kiss.

His mouth was still sealed against hers as he relinquished the microphone. When he finally raised his head, he pointed at Brady and winked.

Brady shot him a thumbs up, then returned to clapping as loudly as those around them. He had to hand it to the guy. The kindhearted painter had thrown his verbal gauntlet back in style. Dean Isaacson had more class in his pinkie finger than a lot of folks did in their entire bodies.

When Team Two was called, Chad proudly snatched up the microphone. “Shelly and I just found out that Team Hofstetter is about to add another

player to our batting lineup. Yep, baby number three will soon be stepping to the plate. Or crawling.” He grinned at his wife. “I love you, Short Stop,” he shouted into the mic.

Laughter and more cheering erupted.

The rest of the speeches flew past, and the starting whistle blew. The six grills in the gazebo were soon smoking in earnest as the twelve contestants gave them a full workout.

“Tongs.” Brady held out his hand. Adeline pressed his favorite silver tongs into his glove.

“Marinade brush,” he announced only seconds later.

“I feel like a surgical assistant,” she joked.

“We could take a grilling class together,” he offered as he flipped steaks and brushed on the next layer of BBQ sauce. “Or you could watch some training videos with me.” That’s where he’d gotten some of his best tips.

“I’m more of a taste tester kind of gal.” Her smile was pure sass. “The only reason I joined the contest was to get your attention, cowboy.”

His gaze dropped to the white gold band circling her ring finger. “As Chad would say, you knocked that one out of the ballpark, babe.”

The lunch hour approached, and the contest drew to a close. The judges made their final rounds to sample the ever-growing pile of steaks, ribs, and roasts.

“This has been a really close competition, folks.” The mayor took the stand again and leaned into his mic. “Really close! Like the Olympics, there’s only a fraction of a point separating most of the teams.”

The audience ooh’d and aah’d over his announcement.

“But first, we have a special presentation from Pastor Jonah Gilman from The First Church of Pinetop.” He gestured for the head pastor to join him behind the podium.

Pastor Jonah spread his hands as he gazed out across the audience. “There are no words to adequately express how grateful my family and church staff are to you for helping us fund the new church sanctuary. We couldn’t have done this without you. The ladies’ auxiliary can only bake so many pies.”

He got a chuckle from that comment. He waited until it grew quiet again before continuing. “Another great need has been brought to our attention, and it wouldn’t feel like Christmas if we didn’t do what we’ve always done in this town. In Pinetop, we share in the good times and the bad times. The smiles and the tears. In sickness and in health. In this case, we wanted to

make sure that our beloved bull riding champion, Birch Carver, has the cost of his two new hips paid for. So we took up a special collection, and your generosity has made another miracle possible.” A few church members hurried forward with a life-sized check raised high in the air.

“We know there’s at least one Carver family member present at today’s event.” He smiled warmly in Adeline’s direction. “If you’d please come accept this gift from our entire town.” Amid another thunderous round of applause, he relinquished the microphone back to the mayor.

Gaping at Brady in disbelief, Adeline grabbed his hand and towed him after her down the steps of the gazebo. Cameras flashed as they accepted the life-sized check on behalf of her father. Her eyes grew damp when Pastor Jonah reached over to stuff a white envelope in her hand, containing the real check.

“Thank you so much!” She threw her arms around his neck, laughing and crying at the same time.

Out of the corner of his eye, Brady noted the other contestants forming a huddle in the gazebo and putting their heads together. Whatever they discussed didn’t take long. They disbanded, leaving Dean Isaacson in the center of the gazebo, scribbling on a piece of paper.

With a smirk in Brady’s direction, he jogged down the steps of the gazebo and hurried to the podium to hand it to the mayor.

As he read what it contained, he pushed his reading glasses higher on his nose. “Hoh, boy!” He shook his head. “In the history of Pinetop, I can safely say this has never, ever happened before.” He whipped the red velvet ribbon off the black top hat and pretended to mop his forehead with it.

A wave of chuckles worked its way across the square.

“I know you’re probably dying to know what’s in this note from this year’s grilling contestants.” He waved the slip of paper in the air that Dean had handed to him. “How about I just cut to the chase and read it to you?”

He received a volley of loud yeses to his suggestion.

He dramatically shook and smoothed out the paper, ensuring that the crinkly sounds made it into the microphone. “As a wedding gift to Adeline Carver and Brady McGrath, all the other teams hereby withdraw from the contest.” He glanced up from the paper. “Wow, folks! That means the generous gift card to our lovely gift shops on Main Street will go to Team Threeeeeeeeeee!”

Adeline gave a shriek of delight and launched herself into Brady’s arms.

He caught her in mid-air, twirling her around and around.

The mayor spoke into the microphone one last time. “Just for the record, Dean Isaacson has already issued a challenge for a rematch on the back patio of the new home he and Ruby just purchased together. You’ll be playing, I mean grilling, for bragging rights only! The real gift that keeps on giving, eh?”



EPILOGUE

Brady walked hand-in-hand with Adeline up the porch steps to the front door of his farmhouse. He'd waited so long for this day to come.

The lacy white folds of her train were secured in the back with a silk ribbon so she wouldn't trip on the hem of her wedding gown. He still wasn't sure how the dressmakers on Main Street had managed to alter the gown so perfectly to her petite frame on such short notice, but this was Pinetop.

She was the most beautiful bride in all of Arizona. Most importantly, she was his. He reached forward to twist open the door handle. As usual, it swung right open since it wasn't locked. Then he bent to hook an arm beneath her knees.

Swinging her up into his embrace, he carried her over the threshold. "Welcome home, Mrs. McGrath!" Yeah, he was never going to get tired of calling her that.

He gazed into her gorgeous midnight blue eyes as he dipped his head closer, eyes wide open, to seal their first homecoming together with a kiss.

"I love you, Brady." The petals of the roses in her bridal bouquet tickled the back of his neck as she clasped her arms around him.

"I love you, Ad." He spun with her in his arms to face the prairie stone fireplace. "You know what would look perfect in this room?"

Her chuckle caressed his ear. "A Christmas tree?"

He lazily raised an eyebrow at her. "In January?" If that's what she really wanted, he'd make it happen pronto, but...

She tapped the back of his head with her bouquet. "We live in Pinetop,

remember? It's kind of expected of us."

"In that case..." He grinned as he swooped in for another kiss. "I hate to break it to you, darling, but we're gonna have to establish one more ground rule. Any Christmas trees we bring home can stand absolutely, positively no more than thirty feet tall. That's all that'll fit under this cathedral ceiling."

"Oh, *now* you tell me!" She drew back in mock horror. "Is there anything else in the fine writing that I missed during my promenade to the altar?"

Technically, they'd gotten married on stage at Castellano's, but the backdrop had been designed to resemble a church building. Pastor Jonah's son-in-law, Shane, had even mounted one of his masterpiece stained glass windows behind the rose trellis they'd stood beneath to exchange their vows.

"Look who's talking." He cuddled her closer. "You socked me with a pretty big surprise of your own this morning. That was really something watching your dad escort you down the aisle."

There hadn't been a dry eye in the dinner theater when the town's most beloved bull rider appeared to be standing on his new hip. It had been a clever stunt with overhead theater cords and special effects, of course. It wasn't until that very moment that Brady understood why his bride had insisted on being married at Castellano's instead of The First Church of Pinetop.

"It'll be at least another four to five months before he's truly back on his feet." Adeline bumped noses with him. "I didn't want you growing impatient and finding someone else to marry."

He snorted. "You're the only woman for me, Ad. Always have been. Always will be."

She brushed her lips against his. "The only one who'll put up with all your growling and snarling, you mean."

"That, too." He deepened their kiss, pulling a soft, breathless sound out of her. "You like me the way I am. Just admit it already."

"Make me," she teased.

So he did.



Ready to find out if Noelle succeeds in helping Nash battle his way back to the bronc riding championship? And how much friendship, fun, and holiday plus one-ing it takes along the way?

And the unexpected chemistry it sparks?

Keep turning for a peek at

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a sweet-as-icing, just friends romance!



SNEAK PREVIEW: COWBOY FRIEND ZONE FOR CHRISTMAS

A *wounded rodeo champion and a lovely horse trainer make a friendship pact to protect each other's broken hearts from rebound relationships.*

Their ground rules are simple:

1. Need a plus one at a holiday get-together? Ask each other.
2. Feeling bored or lonely? Call or text each other.
3. Accidentally step beneath the mistletoe? Um...

Okay, it's kind of impossible to make a rule for every situation, so their feelings soon get a little tangled up with each other. But that's okay, right? Because friends are supposed to care for friends. What they didn't count on was just how easily two broken halves might fit together to form a new whole.

Should they bend the ground rules a little to explore their unexpected chemistry or stick to the original plan of playing it safe in the friend zone?



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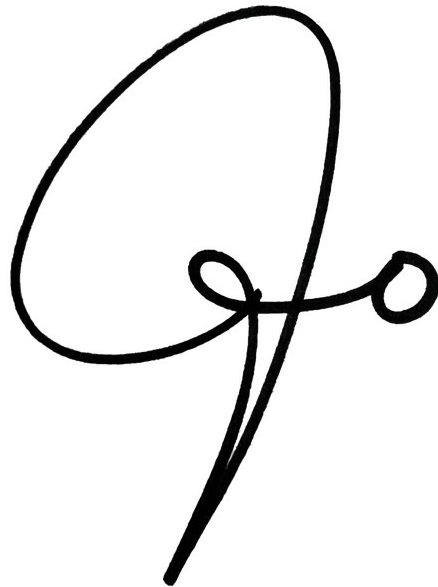
NOTE FROM JO



Guess what? I have some Bonus Content for you. Read more about the swoony cowboy heroes in my books (more first kisses, more weddings, more babies...) by signing up for my [mailing list](#).

There will be a special Bonus Content chapter for each new book I write, exclusively for my subscribers. Plus, you get a FREE book just for signing up!

Thank you for reading and loving my books.



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SNEAK PREVIEW: MR. NOT RIGHT FOR HER

A *scarred cowboy determined to remain single and the klutzy new ranch hand who trips up his carefully laid plans.*

Asher Cassidy doesn't see himself getting hitched at a big church wedding anytime soon. Make that never. The freak fire that scarred one side of his face is a one-way ticket out of the dating game — something his interfering relatives don't seem to understand. Their endless matchmaking attempts keep him in a cranky mood.

He hires Bella Johnson as a ranch hand because she's so desperate for money that she'll have no choice but to put up with his grumpiness, the dirtiest chores, and whatever else he chooses to assign her. By some miracle, she even agrees to pose as his fake girlfriend at an upcoming hoedown, where his family plans to dangle him in front of yet more single ladies.

Sensing her new boss's gruff exterior is hiding a heart as broken as her own, Bella works extra hard to please him...or at least not get fired for her many mistakes while tackling her new job. Her biggest mistake of all turns out to be serving as his fake girlfriend. After tripping and falling into the cocky, sarcastic cowboy a half dozen or so times, she discovers that she enjoys being in his arms a little too much.

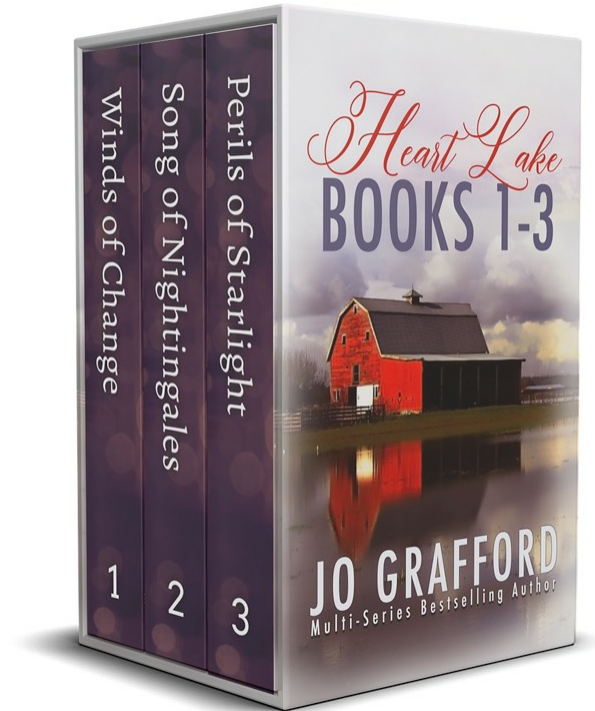
A sweet and inspirational, small-town romance with a few Texas-sized detours into humor!

COWBOY CONFESSIONS

[Mr. Not Right for Her](#)

Mr. Maybe Right for Her
Mr. Right But She Doesn't Know It
Mr. Right Again for Her
Mr. Yeah, Right. As If...

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Much love,

Jo

**SNEAK PREVIEW: HER
BILLIONAIRE BOSS**

BLACK TIE BILLIONAIRES, BOOK #1

Jacey Maddox didn't bother straightening her navy pencil skirt or smoothing her hand over the sleek lines of her creamy silk blouse. She already knew she looked her best. She knew her makeup was flawless, each dash of color accentuating her sun kissed skin and classical features. She knew this, because she'd spent way too many of her twenty-five years facing the paparazzi; and after her trust fund had run dry, posing for an occasional glossy centerfold — something she wasn't entirely proud of.

Unfortunately, not one drop of that experience lent her any confidence as she mounted the cold, marble stairs of Genesis & Sons. It towered more than twenty stories over the Alaskan Gulf waters, a stalwart high-rise of white and gray stone with tinted windows, a fortress that housed one of the world's most brilliant think tanks. For generations, the sons of Genesis had ridden the cutting edge of industrial design, developing the concepts behind some of the nation's most profitable inventions, products, and manufacturing processes.

It was the one place on earth Jacey was least welcome.

Not just because of how many of her escapades had hit the presses during her rebel teen years. Not just because she'd possessed the audacity to marry their youngest son against their wishes. Not just because she had encouraged him to pursue his dreams instead of their hallowed corporate mission — a decision that had ultimately gotten him killed. No. The biggest reason Genesis & Sons hated her was because of her last name. The one piece of herself she'd refused to give up when she'd married Easton Calcagni.

Maddox.

The name might as well have been stamped across her forehead like the mark of the beast, as she moved into the crosshairs of their first security camera. It flashed an intermittent red warning light and gave a low electronic whirring sound as it swiveled to direct its lens on her.

Her palms grew damp and her breathing quickened as she stepped into the entry foyer of her family's greatest corporate rival.

Recessed mahogany panels lined the walls above a mosaic tiled floor, and an intricately carved booth anchored the center of the room. A woman with silver hair waving past her shoulders lowered her reading glasses to dangle from a pearlized chain. "May I help you?"

Jacey's heartbeat stuttered and resumed at a much faster pace. The woman was no ordinary receptionist. Her arresting blue gaze and porcelain features had graced the tabloids for years. She was Waverly, matriarch of the Calcagni family, grandmother to the three surviving Calcagni brothers. She was the one who'd voiced the greatest protests to Easton's elopement. She'd also wept in silence throughout his interment into the family mausoleum, while Jacey had stood at the edge of their gathering, dry-eyed and numb of soul behind a lacy veil.

The funeral had taken place exactly two months earlier.

"I have a one o'clock appointment with Mr. Luca Calcagni."

Waverly's gaze narrowed to twin icy points. "Not just any appointment, Ms. Maddox. You are here for an interview, I believe?"

Time to don her boxing gloves. "Yes." She could feel the veins pulsing through her temples now. She'd prepared for a rigorous cross-examination but had not expected it to begin in the entry foyer.

"Why are you really here?"

Five simple words, yet they carried the force of a full frontal attack. Beneath the myriad of accusations shooting from Waverly's eyes, Jacey wanted to spin on her peep-toe stiletto pumps and run. Instead, she focused on regulating her breathing. It was a fair question. Her late husband's laughing face swam before her, both taunting and encouraging, as her mind ran over all the responses she'd rehearsed. None of them seemed adequate.

"I'm here because of Easton." It was the truth stripped of every excuse. She was here to atone for her debt to the family she'd wronged.

Pain lanced through the aging woman's gaze, twisting her fine-boned features with lines. Raw fury followed. "Do you want something from us, Ms. Maddox?" Condescension infused her drawling alto.

Not what you're thinking, that's for sure. I'm no gold-digger. "Yes. Very much. I want a job at Genesis." She could never restore Easton to his family, but she would offer herself in his place. She would spend the rest of her career serving their company in whatever capacity they would permit. It was the penance she'd chosen for herself.

The muscles around Waverly's mouth tightened a few degrees more. "Why not return to DRAW Corporation? To your own family?"

She refused to drop the elder woman's gaze as she absorbed each question, knowing they were shot like bullets to shatter her resolve, to remind her how unwelcome her presence was. She'd expected no other reception from the Calcagni dynasty; some would even argue she deserved this woman's scorn. However, she'd never been easily intimidated, a trait that was at times a strength and other times a curse. "With all due respect, Mrs. Calcagni, this *is* my family now."

Waverly's lips parted as if she would protest. Something akin to fear joined the choleric emotions churning across her countenance. She clamped her lips together, while her chest rose and fell several times. "You may take a seat now." She waved a heavily be-ringed hand to indicate the lounge area to her right. Lips pursed the skin around her mouth into papery creases, as she punched a few buttons on the call panel. "Ms. Maddox has arrived." Her frigid tone transformed each word into ice picks.

Jacey expelled the two painful clumps of air her lungs had been holding prisoner in a silent, drawn-out whoosh as she eased past the reception booth. She'd survived the first round of interrogations, a small triumph that yielded her no satisfaction. She knew the worst was yet to come. Waverly Calcagni was no more than a guard dog; Luca Calcagni was the one they sent into the boxing ring to finish off their opponents.

Luca apparently saw fit to allow her to marinate in her uneasiness past their appointment time. Not a surprise. He had the upper hand today and would do everything in his power to squash her with it. A full hour cranked away on the complicated maze of copper gears and chains on the wall. There was nothing ordinary about the interior of Genesis & Sons. Even their clocks were remarkable feats of architecture.

"Ms. Maddox? Mr. Calcagni is ready to see you."

She had to remind herself to breathe as she stood. At first she could see nothing but Luca's tall silhouette in the shadowed archway leading to the inner sanctum of Genesis & Sons. Then he took a step forward into a beam of

sunlight and beckoned her to follow him. She stopped breathing again but somehow forced her feet to move in his direction.

He was everything she remembered and more from their few brief encounters. Much more. Up close, he seemed taller, broader, infinitely more intimidating, and so wickedly gorgeous it made her dizzy. That her parents had labeled him and his brothers as forbidden fruit made them all the more appealing to her during her teen years. It took her fascinated brain less than five seconds to recognize Luca had lost none of his allure.

The blue-black sheen of his hair, clipped short on the sides and longer on top, lent a deceptive innocence that didn't fool her one bit. Nor did the errant lock slipping to his forehead on one side. The expensive weave of his suit and complex twists of his tie far better illustrated his famed unpredictable temperament. His movements were controlled but fluid, bringing to her mind the restless prowl of a panther as she followed him down the hall and into an elevator. It shimmered with mirrored glass and recessed mahogany panels.

They rode in tense silence to the top floor.

Arrogance rolled off Luca Calcagni from his crisply pressed white shirt, to his winking diamond and white gold cuff links, down to his designer leather shoes. In some ways, his arrogance was understandable. He guided the helm of one of the world's most profitable companies, after all. And his eyes! They were as beautiful and dangerous as the rest of him. Tawny with flecks of gold, they regarded her with open contempt as he ushered her from the elevator.

They entered a room surrounded by glass. One wall of windows overlooked the gulf waters. The other three framed varying angles of the Anchorage skyline. Gone was the old-world elegance of the first floor. This room was all Luca. A statement of power in chrome and glass. Sheer contemporary minimalism with no frills.

"Have a seat." It was an order, not an offer. A call to battle.

It was a battle she planned to win. She didn't want to consider the alternative — slinking back to her humble apartment in defeat.

He flicked one darkly tanned hand at the pair of Chinese Chippendale chairs resting before his expansive chrome desk. The chairs were stained black like the heart of their owner. No cushions. They were not designed for comfort, only as a place to park guests whom the CEO did not intend to linger.

Jacey planned to change his mind on that subject before her allotted hour

was up. "Thank you." Without hesitation, she took the chair on the right, making no pretense of being in the driver's seat. This was his domain. Given the chance, she planned to mold herself into the indispensable right hand to whoever in the firm he was willing to assign her. On paper, she might not look like she had much to offer, but there was a whole pack of demons driving her. An asset he wouldn't hesitate to exploit once he recognized its unique value. Or so she hoped.

To her surprise, he didn't seat himself behind his executive throne. Instead, he positioned himself between her and his desk, hiking one hip on the edge and folding his arms. It was a deliberate invasion of her personal space with all six feet two of his darkly arresting half-Hispanic features and commanding presence.

Most women would have swooned.

Jacey wasn't most women. She refused to give him the satisfaction of either fidgeting or being the first to break the silence. Silence was a powerful weapon, something she'd learned at the knees of her parents. Prepared to use whatever it took to get what she'd come for, she allowed it to stretch well past the point of politeness.

Luca finally unfolded his arms and reached for the file sitting on the edge of his desk. "I read your application and resume. It didn't take long."

According to her mental tally, the first point belonged to her. She nodded to acknowledge his insult and await the next.

He dangled her file above the trash canister beside his desk and released it. It dropped and settled with a papery flutter.

"I fail to see how singing in nightclubs the past five years qualifies you for any position at Genesis & Sons."

The attack was so predictable she wanted to smile, but didn't dare. Too much was at stake. She'd made the mistake of taunting him with a smile once before. Nine years earlier. Hopefully, he'd long forgotten the ill-advised lark.

Or not. His golden gaze fixed itself with such intensity on her mouth that her insides quaked with uneasiness. Nine years later, he'd become harder and exponentially more ruthless. She'd be wise to remember it.

"Singing is one of art's most beautiful forms," she countered softly. "According to recent studies, scientists believe it releases endorphins and oxytocin while reducing cortisol." *There*. He wasn't the only one who'd been raised in a tank swimming with intellectual minds.

The tightening of his jaw was the only indication her answer had caught

him by surprise. Luca was a man of facts and numbers. Her answer couldn't have possibly displeased him, yet his upper lip curled. "If you came to sing for me, Ms. Maddox, I'm all ears."

The smile burgeoning inside her mouth vanished. Every note of music in her had died with her husband. That part of her life was over. "We both know I did not submit my employment application in the hopes of landing a singing audition." She started to rise, a calculated risk. "If you don't have any interest in conducting the interview you agreed to, I'll just excuse my—"

"Have a seat, Ms. Maddox." Her veiled suggestion of his inability to keep his word clearly stung.

She sat.

"Remind me what other qualifications you disclosed on your application. There were so few, they seem to have slipped my mind."

Nothing slipped his mind. She would bet all the money she no longer possessed on it. "A little forgetfulness is understandable, Mr. Calcagni. You're a very busy man."

Her dig hit home. This time the clench of his jaw was more perceptible.

Now that she had his full attention, she plunged on. "My strengths are in behind-the-scenes marketing as well as personal presentations. As you are well aware, I cut my teeth on DRAW Corporation's drafting tables. I'm proficient in an exhaustive list of software programs and a whiz at compiling slides, notes, memes, video clips, animated graphics, and most types of printed materials. My family just this morning offered to return me to my former position in marketing."

"Why would they do that?"

"They hoped to crown me Vice President of Communications in the next year or two. I believe their exact words were *it's my rightful place*." As much as she tried to mask it, a hint of derision crept into Jacey's voice. There were plenty of employees on her family's staff who were far more qualified and deserving of the promotion.

Luca Calcagni's lynx eyes narrowed to slits. "You speak in the past tense, Ms. Maddox. After recalling what a flight risk you are, I presume your family withdrew their offer?"

It was a slap at her elopement with his brother. She'd figured he'd work his way around to it, eventually. "No." She deliberately bit her lower lip, testing him with another ploy that rarely failed in her dealings with men. "I turned them down."

His gaze locked on her mouth once more. Male interest flashed across his face and was gone. "Why?"

He was primed for the kill. She spread her hands and went for the money shot. "To throw myself at your complete mercy, Mr. Calcagni." The beauty of it was that the trembling in her voice wasn't faked; the request she was about to make was utterly genuine. "As your sister by marriage, I am not here to debate my qualifications or lack of them. I am begging you to give me a job. I need the income. I need to be busy. I'll take whatever position you are willing to offer, so long as it allows me to come to work in this particular building." She whipped her face aside, no longer able to meet his gaze. "Here," she reiterated fiercely, "where *he* doesn't feel as far away as he does outside these walls."

Because of the number of moments it took to compose herself, she missed his initial reaction to her words. When she tipped her face up to his once more, his expression was unreadable.

"Assuming everything you say is true, Ms. Maddox, and you're not simply up to another one of your games," he paused, his tone indicating he thought she was guilty of the latter, "we do not currently have any job openings."

"That's not what your publicist claims, and it's certainly not what you have posted on your website." She dug through her memory to resurrect a segment of the Genesis creed. "Where innovation and vision collide. Where the world's most introspective minds are ever welcome—"

"Believe me, Ms. Maddox, I am familiar with our corporate creed. There is no need to repeat it. Especially since I have already made my decision concerning your employment."

Fear sliced through her. They were only five minutes into her interview, and he was shutting her down. "Mr. Calcagni, I—"

He stopped her with an upraised hand. "You may start your two-week trial in the morning. Eight o'clock sharp."

He was actually offering her a job? Or, in this case, a ticket to the next round? According to her inner points tally, she hadn't yet accumulated enough to win. It didn't feel like a victory, either. She had either failed to read some of his cues, or he was better at hiding them than anyone else she'd ever encountered. She no longer had any idea where they stood with each other in their banter of words, who was winning and who was losing. It made her insides weaken to the consistency of jelly.

"Since we have no vacancies in the vice presidency category," he infused an ocean-sized dose of sarcasm into his words, "you'll be serving as my personal assistant. Like every other position on our payroll, it amounts to long hours, hard work, and no coddling. You're under no obligation to accept my offer, of course."

"I accept." She couldn't contain her smile this time. She didn't understand his game, but she'd achieved what she'd come for. Employment. No matter how humble the position. Sometimes it was best not to overthink things. "Thank you, Mr. Calcagni."

There was no answering warmth in him. "You won't be thanking me tomorrow."

"A risk I will gladly take." She rose to seal her commitment with a handshake and immediately realized her mistake.

Standing brought her nearly flush with her new boss. Close enough to catch a whiff of his aftershave — a woody musk with a hint of cobra slithering her way. Every organ in her body suffered a tremor beneath the full blast of his scrutiny.

When his long fingers closed over hers, her insides radiated with the same intrinsic awareness of him she'd experienced nine years ago — the day they first met.

It was a complication she hadn't counted on.



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Much love,
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