

PROSPECT SHIFTER DADDY MATES



DADDY
WOLF'S

Reluctant Blind Date

SERENA MEADOWS

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BLIND DATE

(PROSPECT SHIFTER DADDY
MATES)



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PROLOGUE



Amy woke abruptly from a deep sleep but didn't open her eyes, too accustomed to waking at the slightest noise since Paul started making her life a living nightmare even to bother. If she kept her eyes closed, she might be able to go back to sleep instead of pacing her empty apartment, cowering at every noise she heard and praying for daylight. She was just about to drift off again, doing her best not to think about the nightmare her life had become over the last few months, wishing that she could forget what a huge mistake she'd made becoming involved with Paul for just a few hours.

Everything had seemed so perfect. She'd taken her time getting to know him, given the relationship time to evolve before giving him her heart, then waited two years before agreeing to marry him. For the first time in her life, she'd been sure that she'd chosen the right man, the man who would give her everything she wanted: a home and a family. But it had gone wrong so quickly; even all these months later, it was hard to believe she was lying in the dark, single, and alone once again.

Not that she still wanted Paul; the slap across the face he'd given her had seen to that, a before and after moment that would mark her life forever. Now she was convinced that she was meant to be alone. That was the only explanation for the cruel joke the universe had played on her, and she'd promised herself that she'd never be tricked again. She was done with men, done wishing for something she couldn't have. Love was beyond her grasp, and she was slowly coming to terms with what that meant for the future.

With a sigh, she settled down to go back to sleep, but a noise on the fire escape outside her window jolted her fully awake. She didn't move until she heard the scrape of a shoe on the metal steps, then slowly slid her hand under her pillow, reassured when she felt the cool metal of the gun. After wrapping her hand around the butt of the gun, she slowly opened her eyes but still didn't move, hoping she was just being paranoid.

A second later, the shadow of a man appeared on her bedroom wall, and she gripped the gun tighter, mentally picturing where the safety was, then threw back the covers and jumped out of bed. She had to hold back a scream when she saw Paul on the other side of the window, a big smile on his face, but recovered quickly and aimed the gun at him. He shook his head and pointed to himself, then to her as if to say, I'm not inside, so you can't hurt me. It took every ounce of control not to pull the trigger, not to put an end to the torture the man on the other side of the glass had put her through.

Instead, she picked up her phone and dialed 911, then watched as Paul laughed at her before turning and slipping back down the fire escape. Defeated, she ended the call, then dropped the phone on the floor before sinking onto the end of her bed and bursting into tears. A knock on the door a few minutes later forced her to get to her feet, and she opened it to find two police officers with annoyed looks on their faces.

"Lady, you've got to stop calling and hanging up, we have to respond when that happens," one of them said. "If this happens again, we're going to have to give you a ticket."

She opened her mouth to explain, then changed her mind. She'd given up on the cops helping her a long time ago, "I'm sorry, sir," she said. "I had a bad dream, and sometimes I sleepwalk. I won't let it happen again."

He gave her a dirty look, then saw the gun in her hand, "You'd better put that thing away before someone gets hurt," he said, shaking his head. "Don't know why you women always think that's going to protect you. I could have had that out of your hands in seconds."

“Thank you for coming,” she said, slowly closing the door.
“Have a good night, officer.”

CHAPTER 1



GRANT

Grant stood watching the other wedding guests making their way to the backyard, the late autumn sun beginning to make him sweat in the suit and tie he'd been forced to wear. Getting dressed up wasn't exactly his idea of fun, but out of respect for Grayson and Quinn, he'd dug the formal clothes out of the back of his closet and put them on. It was a small concession to make for his friends, and even if he felt like his tie was about to choke him, he'd put up with it for a few hours.

What he wasn't willing to put up with was his date being late. Just thinking about the word date made him begin to sweat a little more, and he began looking around for some shade. He still couldn't believe that he'd let Bridget talk him into a blind date, and to the wedding no less, but the woman could be very persuasive when she wanted to be, and she was the best babysitter he'd ever had.

Unable to say no when she'd called it a personal favor, he just wanted to get it over with, and hoped that the woman Bridget was so anxious for him to meet would understand that he wasn't interested in romance. It had been six years since he'd stood devastated and full of guilt, scattering Lyndsay's ashes, six years since he'd promised himself that he'd never get involved with a woman again. In all those years, he'd never broken his promise, never been tempted to risk fate's cruel hand again, and it wasn't about to happen today.

Tugging on his tie again, he started to get frustrated when there was still no sign of Bridget and his date, but then he heard a voice through the crowd, "Grant Beckett, if you don't

stop pulling on that silk tie, you're going to ruin it," Bridget called, pushing her way through the crowd heading for the backyard. "I'm sorry we're late. Amy couldn't find anything to wear; she hasn't had time to unpack."

"Then maybe she should have stayed home," he snapped, then let out a long sigh. "Sorry, I'm hot and miserable. I don't know why you insisted I wear this suit."

"Because you look good in it," Bridget said, straightening his tie. "Stop being such a grumpy butt, this is supposed to be a happy occasion."

"I would have been perfectly happy to come alone," he said. "I don't know why I let you talk me into this. I'm not dating, nor do I plan to be any time in the future, if ever."

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard it all before," Bridget said, rolling her eyes at him and waving her hand in the air. "I'm not going to lecture you about how unhealthy it is to be alone right now; I'm just going to ask you to be nice. That shouldn't be too hard. Amy just got into town, and she doesn't know anyone. I'm not asking you to marry her or sleep with her, I was just hoping that you could make her feel welcome for a few hours."

Properly chastised, he instantly felt guilty, "I guess I could do that," he said. "But you have to promise me that you'll never get it in your head to set me up on a blind date again. This is a one-shot deal, Bridget, I mean it."

"Fine, fine," she said, waving her hand at him again, but not looking at him, her eyes scanning the crowd instead. "I won't plan any more blind dates for you. Look, there she is."

He wasn't sure what he expected, but the tall blonde making her way over to them wasn't it, and he could only stare at her as something strange happened deep in his gut. Unable to help himself, he let his eyes sweep over her body, taking in the sway of her hips, the swell of her full breasts, and the sweep of her long legs in one glance. But it was clear from the stormy look in her blue eyes that he'd been caught, and he found himself unconsciously taking a step back.

“There you are,” Bridget called to the woman, unaware of the silent exchange between them. “Amy, this is Grant, the guy I was telling you about.”

Amy stopped in front of him, put her hands on her hips, and let her eyes roam over him, then shrugged her shoulders, “He’ll do,” she said, then turned and started for the backyard. “Let’s get this over with.”

“Amy.....” Bridget said, running to catch up with her. “You promised to be nice.”

“I am being nice,” Amy said, glancing over her shoulder at him. “I didn’t call him on checking me out, did I?”

Bridget groaned and looked back at him, embarrassed, then back at Amy, “Fine, if you two want to be miserable, I’m just going to let you have your way,” she said, throwing her hands up in the air. “I was just trying to do something nice for the two of you, but never mind. Clearly neither of you is adult enough to handle spending a few hours with someone you don’t know.”

She stomped off, leaving the two of them staring after her, and he began to feel guilty again, “Crap,” he said. “Now I feel like a jerk.”

Amy let out a sigh, “Yeah, me too,” she said, then studied him again. “I wasn’t exactly in favor of this date, but I let Bridget talk me into it. She was just trying to help.”

“I wasn’t either, but that’s not your fault, and I’m sorry if it looked like I was checking you out,” he said. “Maybe we could call a truce just to make Bridget happy. She’s a good friend and the best babysitter I’ve ever had.”

Amy

Amy studied Grant, hating the way her heart sped up when her eyes accidentally met his and cursing the butterflies in her stomach, but she did owe Bridget a debt of gratitude. “I can make it through a couple of hours if you can,” she said. “But let’s get something clear right from the beginning: I’m not looking for romance. I have no interest in sleeping with you,

and if you even think of putting your hands on me, they'll come back bloody stubs."

"Well, I'm glad you made that clear," Grant said, a look of surprise on his face that slowly turned to amusement. "And just to reassure you, I'm not looking for any of that stuff either, so you're perfectly safe with me."

She studied him for a second, "What's wrong with you?" she asked. "Don't you like women?"

He stared at her for a second, his mouth hanging open, and she tried not to laugh, "It's okay, you don't have to answer," she said, then leaned closer and whispered. "I shouldn't have asked; that was rude, but your secret is safe with me."

"I like women okay," Grant said, finally finding his voice. "I just don't want one now."

She studied him for a second, her curiosity getting the better of her, "That was an interesting way to put that," she said. "Would you care to elaborate?"

"No, I would not," he snapped. "We'd better go find our seats. The ceremony is about to start."

Disappointed but not sure why, she followed him into the backyard and took a seat in a folding chair when he pointed to it. Only a few minutes later, the music began to play, and two by two, the attendants walked up the aisle, followed by the bride, who was beaming with happiness. Feeling a little stab of loss that she'd never have her chance to wear a white gown or walk down the aisle to join the man she loved, she watched the bride and groom join hands and face the minister.

She knew that it was only natural that she was still grieving the loss of her hopes and dreams, that with time, she would come to appreciate her single state, but she definitely wasn't there. Realizing that she'd made a mistake and never should have let Bridget talk her into coming, she looked around, desperate for a way to escape, but there was no way to leave without causing a scene.

Trapped in a crowd of people she didn't know, horrified that she was going to cause a scene, she tried to take a deep

breath but couldn't get any air into her lungs. Sure, that she was about to pass out, she let out a groan, and Grant glanced over at her, a look of annoyance on his face that quickly turned to concern.

“Are you okay?” he whispered, putting his arm around her. “You look like you're going to pass out.”

“I shouldn't have come,” she said, shaking her head trying to clear it. “I tried to tell Bridget it was a bad idea. I don't want to make a scene, but watching this is.....”

“Just close your eyes and take a few deep breaths,” he said. “Try to think about something else. Picture yourself somewhere besides here, a place you love, or a place you've always wanted to go.”

His words were soft and soothing, like being wrapped up in a soft warm blanket on a cold day, and she felt herself beginning to calm down. Eyes closed, she blocked out the wedding ceremony and pictured herself on her favorite beach, the sun warm on her skin, the water lapping at her feet. Letting out a little sigh, she let herself be swept away by the daydream, her earlier agitation slipping away as her imagination took over. Lost in the daydream, she became aware that she wasn't alone, and could feel the presence of another person on the beach with her.

The pleasant feeling dropped away instantly, and she braced herself, expecting to see Paul, but it wasn't him who strode up to her and slammed his mouth down on hers. It was the man sitting next to her, and she pulled away, only to launch herself back into his arms, desperate for more of him. She woke with a start just as he was about to kiss her again, and when Grant looked down at her, she felt her cheeks turning pink.

“I think you fell asleep,” he whispered. “You must have been having a good dream.”

Her face flaming, she pulled away from him just as the minister ended the ceremony and stood with the rest of the guests to cheer the happy couple, ignoring the way her body was throbbing. Grant kept stealing glances at her, his face full

of curiosity, but she kept her eyes trained to the front and the happy couple grinning at the crowd, hoping her body would calm down before she had to look at him again.

When the bride and groom were gone, the guests began to file back out, but Grant held her back, “If you want to go home, I’ll understand,” he said. “I won’t ask what that was all about, but I thought you were going to pass out there for a few minutes.”

“I’m okay now,” she said. “But I’ll understand if you want to go your own way. I don’t usually do things like that, but the last couple of months.....never mind, you don’t want to hear about it, and I don’t want to talk about it.”

Grant studied her for a second, “I think I’ll be okay for a few more hours,” he said. “Unless eating barbeque is going to set you off.”

She smiled up at him, “Nope, I’m completely fine with barbeque,” she said. “In fact, I don’t think I’ve ever met a rib I didn’t like.”

CHAPTER 2



GRANT

“Well then, you’ve come to the right place,” Grant said, surprised to find himself smiling at Amy, some of the earlier tension between them gone. “I’m sure we’ll be served beef from Grayson’s herds. We’re pretty spoiled around here when it comes to fresh meat.”

“That’s the first good thing I’ve heard about this dinky little town,” she said, then shook her head. “I’m sorry, that was rude. I think I’m just going through some culture shock.”

“I take it you’re not used to living in a small town,” he said. “I’ve never lived anywhere else, well, except when I went to college.”

“I’m a city girl born and bred,” Amy said with a shrug. “But I’m sure I’ll adjust; it’s just going to take some time.”

Grant looked over at the receiving line, “Come on, I’ll introduce you to Grayson and Quinn,” he said. “Quinn spent the last six years traveling all over the country. I know she lived in New York before she came home, so you two might have something in common.”

Amy let him guide her over to the crowd of people, his hand on the small of her back, only realizing as they approached his friends that it felt completely normal for him to touch her in such an intimate way. Pulling his hand away, he ignored the urge to put it back, relieved when they reached Grayson and Quinn, both with huge grins on their faces, the love they shared obvious even from a distance.

“Grant, so glad you could make it,” Grayson said, slapping him on the back. “And this must be Amy. Bridget told us all about you.”

“It’s nice to meet you both,” Amy said, shaking both their hands. “Thank you for inviting me, it was a beautiful ceremony.”

“You’re welcome, we’re glad you could come,” Quinn said, smiling warmly at her. “How are you coping with living in Prospect? It’s a bit smaller than what you’re used to. I’m from here, and it took me some time to get used to it again, especially after New York.”

Amy let out a sigh of relief, “I feel so out of place,” she confessed. “I know it will get better, but.....”

“I understand,” Quinn said. “Let’s have lunch this week. I can introduce you to some of my friends, that should help.”

“Bridget has been a big help, but she is so busy, she can’t spend all her time coddling me,” she said. “I’d love to go to lunch, just let me know when, my schedule is open.”

Amy had a little smile on her face when they walked away, “Thanks, Grant,” she said, looking up at him. “That was very nice of you.”

He shrugged, “I have my moments,” he said, then sniffed the air. “I smell barbeque. I don’t know about you, but I’m starving.”

“I could eat,” she said. “And since this isn’t a date, I can eat as much as I want.”

Grant shook his head, “See, that’s why I don’t date,” he said. “I can’t stand all the games people play.”

Amy put her hand on his arm, sending a wave of electricity up his arm. “Grant, I was just joking,” she said. “I don’t play games like that.”

It took a few seconds for the desire she’d stirred up with just a single touch to fade away, “I’m glad to hear that,” he finally managed to say. “There’s too much of it going on.”

She studied him for a second, “I think you’re as wounded as I am,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “Bridget might not have been that far off the mark getting us together.”

“We’re not together,” he said. “At least not that way.”

“Which we both agree on,” she said, with a sigh and a shake of her head. “But you have to admit, we do have something in common. Neither of us wants anything to do with romance.”

He shrugged his shoulders, “That’s true,” he said. “I guess Bridget wasn’t as wrong as I thought.”

Amy smiled at him, “Don’t you dare tell her,” she said. “I’ll never hear the end of it.”

“That’s a deal,” he said. “Come on, let’s get some food before it’s all gone.”

When they’d filled their plates, he found them a place to sit, and for a few minutes, they ate in silence, “This is the best steak I’ve ever had,” Quinn finally said, cutting off another piece. “You weren’t kidding. Fresh is so much better, it practically melts in my mouth.”

“See, there are a few benefits to living here,” he said, watching her eat. “Have you always lived in the city?”

“We moved around some when I was growing up, but we were always in a large metropolitan area,” she said. “The closest I’ve come to a place like this was on vacation. It was cute and charming when I was just visiting, but.....”

“Living here is different,” he finished for her, then couldn’t help but ask. “If you love the city so much, why are you here?”

The change in Amy was visible; her entire body tensed up, and she looked around like she expected someone to come rushing out of the bushes and attack her. “It’s a long story,” she said, shaking her head. “And I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “We’ll change the subject.”

Amy studied him for a second, “You really are a nice guy,” she finally said. “I can’t believe some woman hasn’t snapped

you up.”

“Been there and done that,” he said. “It’s a long story, and I don’t want to talk about it.”

Amy

Amy saw the flash of pain in Grant’s eyes, and although she was curious, she realized that his pain was none of her business, and this wasn’t one of those times she could indulge her inquisitive mind. A slightly uncomfortable silence fell between them and she searched her mind for a safe topic of conversation, dreading spending the next few hours with nothing to say to each other. When she’d eaten as much as she could, she pushed her plate away, and looked around the reception, hoping that would spark her imagination, but the uncomfortable silence continued.

To her relief, the perfect topic finally popped into her head, “Tell me about your ranch. I don’t know anything about raising cattle, and if I’m going to live here, I should know something,” she said, pleased with herself. “To be completely honest, I never really thought about where my food came from until tonight.”

A look of relief appeared on Grant’s face, and he began to talk about breeds of cattle, pasture lands, and an entire speech about how hard it could be to keep the animals healthy. Some of it went over her head, but she didn’t stop him with questions. Instead, she let him ramble on, amazed to see the change in him when he talked about the ranch, giving her a glimpse of the depth of his commitment to the land and animals. It also did something funny to her stomach, and when she looked into his hazel eyes, a thrill rushed through her, filling her entire body with warmth.

A bit stunned by the intensity of the feeling, she lost track of what he was saying for a second and wasn’t prepared when he flipped the conversation, “So, now that you know way more than you wanted to about ranching, since I have a tendency to get carried away,” Grant said, a sheepish smile on his face. “I was wondering what you do for a living.”

“I’m a journalist, or I was,” she said, her brain not quite working. “I mean. . . . I had to quit my job at the paper where I was working when I moved here, so I figure this is the perfect time to work on the novel I’ve always wanted to write.”

“I don’t think I’ve met a novelist before,” Grant said, clearly a little impressed. “What’s the book about?”

“Well, I haven’t exactly figured that out yet,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “But I’ve got a few ideas floating around in my head.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” Grant said. “I bet it’s not easy to write a book. I think I’ll just stick to the cattle.”

She laughed, but there wasn’t much more to say, and another uncomfortable silence fell between them. To her relief, a few minutes later the band began to set up, providing a distraction. Grant seemed just as relieved as she was, giving the band his full attention as they tuned their instruments, but began to look uncomfortable when they started to play and the tables around them emptied as the other guests filled the dance floor.

“We could dance if you want to,” he finally said. “It feels weird to be the only ones sitting here.”

Given the choice between sitting in silence and joining the other dancers, she chose the latter, “If you want to, I wouldn’t mind,” she said. “But we don’t have to. We could just sit here and watch.”

Grant surprised her by getting to his feet and holding out his hand, “I’m not sure that was an answer,” he said. “So, I’ll ask again. Do you want to dance?”

Unable to resist the invitation, she got to her feet and put her hand in his, surprised when a jolt of electricity traveled up her arm and filled her with warmth. Looking up at Grant to see if he’d felt the same thing, she sighed with relief when it appeared he hadn’t, then felt a little stab of disappointment. Inwardly cursing her strange reaction to him, she took a deep breath and followed Grant onto the dancefloor, telling herself

it was only because he was being nice to her, making her feel more pathetic.

“I’m going to have to touch you if we’re going to dance,” Grant said, a little smile on his face. “Are my hands safe if I do? I’d rather not be left with bloody stubs when the music stops.”

A blush of embarrassment warmed her cheeks, “I’m sorry about that,” she said. “I promise not to rip your hands off if you touch me. I wasn’t very happy to be here when I said that.”

“And now?” Grant said, sweeping her into his arms and out onto the dance floor. “Is it as bad as you imagined it would be?”

For a second, she couldn’t answer, the feel of his arms around her making it difficult to breathe as he guided her around the dance floor, “Actually, it’s worse than I thought,” she said, looking up at him and then wishing she hadn’t. “You weren’t supposed to be such a nice guy,” she said. “You were supposed to be a total jerk so I could get Bridget off my back.”

“Well, I’m sorry to disappoint you,” he said, spinning her around. “I could try to be a bigger jerk if that would help.”

She laughed, “I don’t think that will be necessary. I think we’re doing just fine the way we are,” she said. “We know where we stand. Neither of us wants romance, or even sex, so I’ll settle for hanging out with a nice guy for a few hours, especially if it makes Bridget happy.”

“Friends, then,” Grant said, spinning her around again. “That works for me.”

“Friends,” she repeated, even though a small part of her wanted more.

CHAPTER 3



GRANT

When the song came to an end, Grant was surprised to find himself disappointed and a bit unwilling to let Amy go, even if he knew holding her in his arms for much longer would be a mistake. He kept saying the right thing with his mouth, but his body had different plans, and for the first time in a long time, he couldn't quite control the attraction he felt for Amy. There had been other women who had sparked his interest over the years, a few lovely temptations he'd turned away from with no problem, but this time he was having a hard time putting an end to the desire stirring deep inside him.

Giving in would be so easy. There was something so natural about holding her in his arms, but he felt himself sliding down a slippery slope and forced himself to remember that he'd just agreed to be friends. But when the band launched into an upbeat country hit, he couldn't let her go and started to spin Amy around the dance floor again, but she froze, a look of confusion on her face.

"Grant, I can't dance to this kind of music," she said, looking around at the other dancers. "I'll embarrass both of us."

"You'll be fine," he said, unable to do anything but pull her more firmly back into his arms. "Just follow my lead, I know what I'm doing. In case you missed it, I'm a pretty good dancer."

"Well.....okay," Amy said. "But don't blame me if I stomp all over your feet."

“I’m tough, I think I can handle it,” he said, grinning at her. “Are you ready?”

When the music ended the next time, Amy was beaming at him and slightly out of breath, “That was so much fun,” she said. “Can we do it again?”

They danced until the band took a break for the cake cutting, then went back out on the floor for the last few songs, and he realized that he was having fun, more fun than he should be. He’d been so sure that it would be one of the longest nights of his life, but instead he was dreading it ending, and he knew that he was in trouble, that he had better find a way to shut down his feelings for Amy, and fast.

Knowing that and doing something about it seemed to be impossible, and it took every ounce of his control to let her go when the last song finally ended. “That was so much fun,” Amy said. “I’ve never really liked country music, but it sure is fun to dance to.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed yourself,” he said, following her back over to their table. “I haven’t danced like that in a long time.”

Amy studied him for a second, then opened her mouth, but before she could speak, the band announced that the newlyweds would be leaving in just a few minutes and asked everyone to go around to the front of the house. “Oh, I hope we get to throw birdseed or something at them,” Amy said, grinning at him. “That’s the best part of a wedding.”

He laughed, “I don’t know about that; there was the food and the dancing,” he said. “But let’s go see what they’ve got.”

“Fair point,” she said. “Maybe it is not the best part, but it is fun.”

When they got to the front of the house, they were both given a bag of birdseed and told to line up, men on one side and women on the other. The front door opened a few minutes later, and the happy couple stepped out onto the porch, huge smiles on their faces, and the guests cheered before settling down again.

“I guess this is the part where I throw the bouquet,” Quinn said, holding it up in the air. “Line up ladies. Let’s see who is going to be next.”

There was a rush as the single women gathered in front of Quinn, but Amy didn’t join them. Instead, she slipped over and stood next to Grant. “Not interested in catching the bouquet?” he asked, smiling at her. “Most women would beat someone up to catch it.”

“Well, I’m not most women,” she said, a scowl on her face. “I gave up on that dream.”

There was a mixture of sadness and anger in Amy’s voice, and he was tempted to press her further, but before he could, Quinn turned around and whipped the bouquet over her head, sending it flying into the crowd of women. For a few seconds the flowers bounced around from hand to hand, then suddenly came flying straight at Amy. She let out a little cry of surprise and flicked them back into the waiting crowd of women, but it didn’t work, and the bouquet came flying back at her again.

This time, she was forced to grab it and hold it to her chest to keep it from falling on the ground, and the guests began to cheer. She looked down at the flowers, her face full of panic, “I think you’d better hold onto those,” he leaned over and whispered, afraid she was going to launch them into the air again. “I think you were meant to have them.”

“I don’t want them,” she said. “Marriage isn’t in the cards for me.”

“I don’t think fate agrees with you,” he said, grinning at her. “Let’s see who catches the garter; then we’ll know who you’re going to marry.”

“It doesn’t mean anything, that’s just old superstition,” Amy said, giving him a dirty look. “I don’t think this is funny.”

He opened his mouth to tease her some more, unable to resist the sparkle in her eyes when she was mad, but something hit him in the chest, and he was forced to grab it. When he looked down, he realized that he was holding the

garter and started to throw it away, but Amy elbowed him in the ribs, her face already full of amusement.

“You’d better hold onto that,” she said. “It looks like fate has a message for you too.”

“That’s not funny,” he said, holding the garter up with two fingers. “What am I supposed to do with this thing?”

Amy

Amy burst into laughter, couldn’t help herself, and the look on Grant’s face made her laugh even harder, “Well, I guess that settles it then,” she said when she’d stopped laughing. “We’re stuck with each other now.”

After giving her a dirty look, Grant stuffed the garter into his pocket, “Let’s just forget about it,” he said. “It’s just superstition, like you said.”

“Fine with me,” she said, shifting the flowers to the other hand. “We’ll just pretend that didn’t happen, and go on with our lives.”

When the birdseed had been thrown, and the happy couple drove away with a string of cans tied behind the car, the guests began to make their way to their cars. “Well, I guess this is goodnight,” she said. “I’m supposed to meet Bridget at the car.”

“I had fun tonight,” Grant said, smiling at her. “But don’t tell Bridget.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I won’t,” she said, shaking her head. “I figure we got lucky tonight and it was a lot of fun, but the next guy she decides to set me up with might not be as nice as you are.”

Grant got a funny look on his face, “I’ll walk you to the car,” he said, his voice a little strained. “I’m going that way anyway.”

“Okay, that’s fine,” she said, shrugging her shoulders and pretending she didn’t care, but a little thrill rushed through her anyway. “I just need to go grab my purse.”

They walked to Bridget's car in silence, but it wasn't as uncomfortable as before, "Thanks for walking with me," she said when they got there. "I had a lot of fun tonight."

"Me too," Grant said, but didn't show any sign of walking away. "I'll just wait here with you until Bridget gets here."

"You don't have to do that. I'll be okay on my own," she said. "But it was sweet of you to offer."

Grant shrugged, "I can't just walk off and leave you standing here by yourself," he said. "Call me old-fashioned or whatever, but that's not right."

"Because I'm a woman," she said, wishing her heart hadn't just melted a little. "That's kind of sexist."

"No, because you're new in town," Grant said, then sighed. "And maybe a little because you're a woman."

She patted him on the chest without even thinking, and the feel of his hard muscles under her hand made a thrill rush through her, "I forgive you," she said, a little breathless, then backed away from him. "But just for the record, I'm capable of defending myself. When you live in the city, you have to know a few things about keeping yourself safe."

"I don't doubt that for a second," Grant said, smiling at her. "I wouldn't want to meet up with you in a dark alley."

She laughed, "Well, you wouldn't, because that's rule number one," she said. "No dark alley or abandoned buildings."

Before he could answer, Bridget came walking up, a pleased smile on her face, "Well, it looks like you two are getting along," she said. "I knew you would."

"We had a good time, but don't read anything into that," Amy said. "Grant and I decided that we're better as friends; sorry to disappoint you."

Bridget looked back and forth between them a couple of times, then shrugged her shoulders, "Whatever you say," she said, still looking pleased with herself. "I got you both out, didn't I?"

Grant groaned, then shook his head, “You’re a very stubborn woman, Bridget,” he said, then turned to her. “I had a good time tonight, Amy.”

“Thanks for teaching me to dance,” she said. “I had fun, too.”

“Well, I guess I’ll see you around town,” Grant said. “Be careful going home.”

“Sounds good,” she said. “You too.”

She watched him walk away, a cold feeling creeping into her, unaware that Bridget was watching her, “Just friends,” Bridget said, then started laughing. “It looked like a whole lot more than that to me, even I could feel the sparks flying between you two. I think he wanted to kiss you, and I think he would have if I hadn’t been here.”

“Now you’re imagining things,” she said, going around to the passenger side of the car and trying the door. “We’re just friends, we didn’t even exchange numbers. You’re just imagining things.”

Bridget unlocked the car, got in, waited for Amy to join her, and put on her seatbelt before turning to her, “Pretend there wasn’t something between you two all you want,” she said. “I know what I saw, and you’d better make me your maid of honor when you marry him.”

“That’s not going to happen,” she said, shaking her head. “I told you; I’m done with men. Paul completely ruined me; I don’t think I could ever trust a man again. I’m giving up on those dreams. I’ll find new ones to replace them, it’s just the way it has to be.”

Bridget turned to her, “Amy, I know how hard the last few months have been on you, I can’t imagine what it must have been like,” she said. “But not every man is like Paul. If you cut yourself off from even the possibility of love, he wins. Don’t you see that?”

She was silent for a second, letting Bridget’s words sink in, “I know that you’re right,” she finally said. “But I’m just not ready yet, and I don’t know if I ever will be.”

Bridget leaned over and gave her a hug, “I’m sorry, Amy, I guess I shouldn’t have pushed you so hard,” she said. “I’ll give you some space. I just want you to remember that men like Grant far outnumber men like Paul.”

“I’ll try,” she said. “And I don’t want to seem ungrateful, I just don’t think I can go through that again. I can’t risk having my heart broken and my entire life turned upside down. I haven’t even gotten myself straightened out from the last time.”

“You’ll get there,” Bridget said. “And you can stay with me as long as you need to, I’ve got plenty of room.”

“Thanks, Bridget,” she said. “I don’t know what I would have done if you weren’t here for me.”

“That’s what best friends are for,” Bridget said, giving her another hug. “Let’s go home. I’m ready for a hot shower and bed.”

CHAPTER 4



GRANT

“Daddy, wake up, we’re going to be late to the meeting,” Zander called, jumping into Grant’s bed and waking him from a sound sleep. “You promised we’d go today, and I’ve been up for hours waiting for you to get up.”

Groaning, he pulled the pillow over his head, wishing he could go back to sleep, “Give me five more minutes, kiddo,” he said. “I got to bed late last night.”

The truth was, he had gone to bed later than normal, but that wasn’t why he was exhausted that morning. He was suffering from lack of sleep because of a blonde-haired beauty who’d managed to get to him. She’d haunted his dreams all night, keeping him restless and filled with need, tossing and turning until the early morning hours, only easing her grip on him once the sun began to brighten the sky.

He’d never experienced anything like it, never had a woman invade his subconscious the way Amy had, and it scared the hell out of him, especially when the memory of the dreams he’d had made his body begin to tingle in a dangerous way. Throwing back the covers, he got out of bed, determined to put the woman out of his mind and enjoy his day off with Zander. His life was just fine the way it was. He didn’t need the complication of sex or romance; he’d had his chance at love and blown it, and he didn’t deserve more than the child who had been the product of that mistake.

“Why don’t you go get dressed while I take a quick shower,” he said, ruffling his son’s hair. “I’ll be ready in ten minutes.”

“I bet I can get ready faster,” Zander said, jumping down from the bed and racing out of the room.

“Don’t forget to brush your teeth,” he called, shaking his head and wishing he had as much energy as his son.

The diner was crowded when they walked in half an hour later, but he made his way through the tables to the back room where the single dad’s group always met on Saturday morning. His stomach began to growl when he smelled the food spread out on the table on one side of the room, and for the first time that morning, he was glad that Zander had woken him. Spotting his friends at their usual table, he waved at them, then guided his son over to the buffet, hoping to get some food in him before he went to play with the other children.

They carried their plates over to the table and sat down with Sawyer and Jayce, noticing the funny looks they were giving him, “What’s that look for?” he asked. “Did I miss something?”

“We were just wondering how your date for the wedding went,” Sawyer said, a grin on his face. “You were getting awfully cozy out on the dance floor.”

He looked over at Zander, who was shoveling food into his mouth as fast as he could, “Hey, slow down, you’re going to make yourself sick,” he said, then looked back at his friends. “Very funny, we were just dancing. It didn’t mean anything, so don’t start in on me.”

“That’s not what it looked like to us,” Sawyer said, glancing over at Jayce, who was grinning. “From where we were sitting, it looked like you were having a lot of fun, and who could blame you? Bridget’s friend is hot, all that blonde hair, and those legs.....”

“Yeah, she’s a real looker,” Jayce said. “I’m actually a bit jealous.”

“That’s no way to talk about a woman,” he said, looking down at Zander again. “You two need to grow up.”

“Okay, okay, we get it,” Sawyer said, shaking his head. “You’re made of ice, no woman will ever melt that cold

interior of yours, not even one as pretty as Bridget's friend."

"Her name is Amy," he said, giving them both a dirty look. "And we're just friends, nothing more, so how about we change the subject."

After leaving the diner, he took Zander to the park to let him burn off a little more energy, then headed back to the ranch for a late lunch, hoping he could steal a little time for a nap that afternoon. Throwing his keys in the basket by the kitchen door, he emptied his pockets, looking longingly at the couch in front of the big stone fireplace and wondering if it would be bad to let Zander play video games while he slept. When he set his cell phone down, he noticed he had a few missed calls and realized that he'd forgotten to take it off silent the night before.

When he saw that he had ten missed calls from his mom, he instantly began to worry and punched in her number, "It's about time you called me back," his mother said. "Do you have any idea what this morning has been like?"

"I'm sorry, I had the ringer turned off on my phone and forgot to turn it back on," he said. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"What's wrong?" his mom repeated. "I can't believe you're asking me that. You should know exactly what's wrong."

"Well, I can't read your mind, so you're going to have to help me out here," he said, taking a deep breath. "Zander and I just got home and I'm a little tired, so maybe we could hurry this along."

"Don't talk to your mother like that," she said. "I just wish I didn't have to find out from other people that you've started dating again. I thought that might have been something you told me first, but I can see that I was wrong."

"Mom, I have not started dating again," he said with a sigh. "I don't know who told you that, but they're wrong."

"So, my friends lied about you having a date to the wedding last night?" his mom asked. "I suppose they also lied

about you staying out on the dance floor with her all night, and getting really cozy.”

“We did not get cozy, and I’m tired of people saying that,” he said. “Amy and I are just friends; I’m not dating her. I’m not dating anyone, nothing has changed.”

There was a long silence on the other end, “Well, I just worry about you is all. It’s hard to be this far from home,” his mom said, her voice softer. “It’s not good for you to be alone all the time, that’s no way to live. I was hoping that you’d finally found someone to make you happy, you deserve that.”

“I appreciate you worrying about me,” he said, his annoyance melting away. “But I promise I’m fine, Zander is all I need.”

Amy

Amy sighed with frustration as she read the words on the screen again, then deleted everything she’d written with a disgusted grunt. “Garbage, it’s all garbage,” she said, getting to her feet. “It’s completely hopeless, I give up.”

Grabbing her coffee cup, feeling like a complete failure, she headed downstairs to the kitchen, wondering if she should go back to bed and hide under the covers. “Well, don’t you just look like a ray of sunshine this morning,” Bridget said when she came through the door. “I take it the writing isn’t going well.”

“It isn’t going at all,” she said, collapsing into a chair at the table and putting her head down. “Writing a novel isn’t as easy as I thought. I might have bitten off more than I can chew.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out; maybe you’re just trying too hard,” Bridget said, setting a full cup of coffee in front of her. “Have you had breakfast yet?”

She looked up at her friend, “No, I couldn’t eat anyway, I’m too depressed. I want my old life back,” she said, then sighed. “What are you doing home, anyway? Don’t you have school today?”

“A pipe broke in the girl’s bathroom, and the principal decided just to give us the day off instead of trying to get the boys and girls to share,” Bridget said, shrugging her shoulders. “I don’t mind. An extra day off is always nice. Let me make you some breakfast; you’ll feel better if you eat something.”

“The only thing that’s going to make me feel better is if I figure out how I’m going to support myself. I can’t keep living off you, Bridget,” she said. “I’ve been here almost a week, and I have nothing to show for it. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

Bridget went over to the refrigerator and got out bacon and some eggs, “First, I’m going to make us some breakfast,” she said, putting a pan on the stove. “Then we’re going to figure this out, just because you’re not ready to write that novel yet doesn’t mean that you should give up.”

“But I have to pay my bills,” she said. “I can’t just hang around the house waiting for inspiration to hit me.”

“So, you do something else for a while,” Bridget said, bringing their plates over to the table and setting them down. “I’m sure you can find a job to hold you over until you’re ready.”

“Maybe I should have just put up with Paul,” she said, looking at the food on her plate, not sure she could eat it. “I mean, it wasn’t that bad.”

Bridget looked at her in shock for a second, “Now I know you’ve lost it,” she said, walking over and picking up the newspaper. “We’re going to find you a job, and you’re going to stop talking like that.”

When Bridget dropped the newspaper on the table next to her, she sighed, “That used to be me,” she said, pointing to the front page. “I can’t believe I had to give it all up because of that jerk.”

“Wait, who says you have to give it all up?” Bridget asked. “Why not apply for a job at the paper here in town?”

* * *

Amy paused in front of the doors to the newspaper office, her stomach full of butterflies, her palms sweating, then took a deep breath and went inside. “Good morning,” the woman behind the desk said. “How can I help you?”

“Hi, my name is Amy Erickson, and I was hoping to talk to someone about a job,” she said. “I’ve been a journalist for four years, and I just moved here. I don’t know if you have any openings, but I figure it couldn’t hurt to come in and ask.”

The woman looked her up and down, “Do you have a resume and samples of your work with you?” she asked. “You couldn’t even be considered for a job without them.”

“Right here,” she said, sliding the manila folder out of her bag. “I appreciate the opportunity to talk to someone.”

“Yes, well, we’ll see,” the woman said, taking the envelope. “Have a seat. It might be a while before someone is free to talk to you.”

Making herself comfortable as best she could in one of the hard plastic chairs, she picked up a copy of the paper and began to read it, glancing up occasionally to see if the woman had come back. She’d just about given up hope when the woman appeared in front of her, a big smile on her face, clearly pleased when she saw the open newspaper.

“What do you think of our little publication?” the woman asked. “It’s nothing like the big town paper you were working for, but we’re proud of what we create.”

“It’s a wonderful paper,” she said, setting the newspaper aside and getting up. “You should be proud.”

“Well, it still has its weak spots,” the woman said. “But I think you might be able to help with that. Let’s go back and talk about it. I’m Elsie Bonner, by the way, I own the paper.”

“Oh, it’s nice to meet you,” she said, a little surprised. “Thank you for taking the time to talk to me.”

Elsie laughed, “Don’t look so surprised, women can own newspapers too,” she said. “My family has owned this paper since it was started. When it was time for my father to retire,

he put me in charge since my brother can barely spell his name.”

“It’s not that,” she said. “You were sitting at the front desk, I just assumed.”

“Betty usually handles the front desk, but she’s out sick today, so we’ve all been taking turns,” Elsie said. “Come on, let’s go back to my office and talk. I’ve got something special in mind for you if you think you’re up to the job.”

At the mention of a job, she perked up, “I’m very versatile, I’m sure I can handle anything you throw my way,” she said. “Honestly, I’ll just be happy to get back to work, I’ve recently discovered that novel writing may not be my thing.”

“You’re young, give yourself some time,” Elsie said, leading her through an open space full of desks and pointing out the other employees as they passed. “You’ll have to excuse my office. We’re having some work done on the attic, so right now, it’s part storage space.”

Elsie had to move several stacks of old newspapers before she could sit down, and she realized that she already felt at home looking around the cluttered office. “Can I get you some terrible coffee or a soda?” Elsie asked, then sat down when she shook her head. “Okay then, let’s get right to it. I would be a fool to let someone with your talents walk out the door without hiring you. The problem is, we have a tight budget, so I’d like to propose hiring you as a freelancer instead of a full-time reporter.”

She was a little disappointed but tried to hide it, “I’m sure that’s not what you were hoping for, but let me assure you I think in the long run, you’ll come out of this deal just fine,” Elsie continued. “To start with, I’d like to hire you to do a series of twelve articles about the difference between living in a small cattle town and living in a big city. I want something light and airy, something that will make people smile and maybe even laugh at themselves a little. Besides that, I’ll have some smaller pieces I’d like you to do on things happening around town. We’re coming up a bit short on local news, and the readers have been complaining.”

The disappointment slowly began to fade, replaced by a spark of excitement, “That’s an interesting offer. I think I’d like to take you up on it,” she said. “But first, maybe we should discuss the details.”

Elsie laughed, “You mean how much am I going to pay you?” she asked. “Don’t worry, I plan to be generous. I know talent when I see it, and I have a feeling we’re going to sell a lot of papers, thanks to you.”

CHAPTER 5



GRANT

Grant watched his men unload the last bull, then signaled to the driver, “That’s got it, Jimmy,” he said. “Just let me close the gate, and you can head back out for the next load.”

“You got it, boss,” Jimmy called with a wave of his hand. “Last load, and then we can call it a day.”

After closing the gate on the trailer, he waved, and Jimmy pulled away from the loading chute, leaving a trail of dust behind him. Walking over to the fence, he leaned up against it and watched as his hands herded the animals that they’d just unloaded into the pens assigned to them. The auction the next day would bring a much-needed boost to his bank account and hopefully get his name out into the breeding circles for the first time, something he’d been working toward for years.

Once he was satisfied the animals were secured, he started for the big barn, thinking that he’d get a look at the competition, but a woman standing at the entrance to the building caught his attention. She was looking around, a slightly confused look on her face, her nose wrinkled up at the smell around her, and he let out a long sigh, wondering if he could make himself walk away. But even as the thought went through his head, his feet were already moving toward her, something deep inside him stirring to life.

“This is the last place I thought I’d find you,” he said, making Amy jump. “You get used to the smell after a while.”

She looked over at him and a blush spread across her cheeks, making her eyes look even bluer, “It is a bit fragrant,” she said, waving her hand in front of her face. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ve got animals in the auction tomorrow,” he said. “A couple of breeding bulls and a couple dozen of my best heifers. I’m trying to break into the breeding market; that’s where the real money is.”

“I think you lost me for a second there,” Amy said, her forehead wrinkled in confusion. “You breed special cows so they can breed more special cows.”

He laughed, “Well, that is one way to look at it,” he said. “It’s really no different than people breeding dogs; we just do it for different reasons.”

“And we don’t eat dogs,” Amy said with a shiver. “I hope this experience doesn’t turn me into a vegetarian.”

“I was wondering what you were doing here,” he said. “The fair doesn’t open until tomorrow.”

“I’m here on assignment for the newspaper, I started freelancing for Elsie this week,” she said. “She’s got this crazy idea for a series about living in a small town, but she wants it written from a city girl’s perspective. So far, the only thing I can say for certain is that it’s kind of stinky around here.”

He laughed again, then shook his head, “I don’t think you should print that,” he said, then looked over at her. “What happened to the novel you were going to write?”

Amy looked a little embarrassed, “Well, as it turns out, it’s hard to write a book when you don’t have any idea what to write about,” she said, then shrugged her shoulders. “Besides, I’m more of the journalist type than a novelist.”

“Well, Ms. Journalist, how about I show you around?” he asked, surprising them both. “It will be another hour or so before Jimmy is back with the last load of cows. That should give us plenty of time to poke around.”

When they stepped into the big show building, Amy paused and looked around, her eyes wide at the sight of all the

pens and crates of animals. “The bigger animals are kept outside,” he explained. “But if you’re interested in chickens, geese, ducks, pigs, or sheep, this is the place to be.”

“There are so many of them,” she said, taking a few steps forward. “I don’t know where to start or what I’m supposed to be looking for. They all look the same to me.”

Just then, a 4H group came through the door, the kids chattering excitedly about the entries and debating who would win blue ribbons. “I have an idea,” he said, dragging her over to them. “Hey, you all, this is Amy. She’s from the newspaper in town, and she’s doing an article on the fair. I was hoping you might tell her a little about the animals you’ve been raising and what makes them special.”

“The newspaper, that’s cool,” one of the boys said. “I’ll show you my pig. He’s right over there, and he’s going to beat everyone else.”

Giving Amy an encouraging grin, he shoved her forward, and she was quickly surrounded by the pack of teenagers, “I’ll be right here waiting when you’re done,” he said. “You’re in good hands, I promise.”

Amy smiled back at him, “Thanks, Grant,” she said, then whipped out a mini-tape recorder. “Does anyone mind if I record this?”

He spent the next hour watching them tromp all over the building, then had to interrupt, “Jimmy is back with the next load of cattle,” he said. “If you want to watch us unload, we should go now.”

“Thanks so much, you all, this was great,” Amy said. “And don’t worry, I’ll try to mention you all in my story.”

“Well, that must have gone well,” he said. “Are you still thinking you’re going to become a vegetarian?”

“No, I don’t think so,” she said, then a look of surprise appeared on her face. “And I must have gotten used to the smell; it doesn’t seem so bad anymore.”

Amy

Amy watched the bawling, stomping, and kicking animals as they came out of the trailer from a safe distance, realizing that it was the first time she'd been that close to anything so large. As she watched Grant's men expertly maneuvering the big animals out of the trailer and into the waiting pen, she couldn't help but admire their skill on horseback. When the trailer pulled away and the dust had settled, she joined Grant at the fence, watched them guide the cows across the show ring and into the pens on the other side, then turned and looked up at him.

"I had no idea so much work went into putting food in the grocery store," she said. "I have new respect for what you and your men do every day."

"It's a lot of hard work, but most of us do it because we love it," he said. "I can't imagine doing anything else with my life."

"You're lucky," she said. "Not very many people can say that they truly love their job."

"I guess," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "But there are times I wonder if it's worth it. Winters are tough here. You're about to find that out soon enough. We get lots of snow and the temperature rarely gets above freezing. Those months can be the longest of the year."

"But you're still here, still trying to expand the ranch," she said. "It must be worth it, or you wouldn't do it."

"It's in my blood, I guess. My family has been ranching in this valley since it was settled back in the late eighteen hundreds," he said. "I never really thought about doing anything else. I'm happiest when I'm in the saddle herding or just riding, and I get plenty of time to do both."

She looked over where the men were dismounting and tying their horses up to unsaddle them, "I've never ridden a horse," she said. "They're so big, I think I'd be scared to death."

He looked over at her, studied her for a second, then shook his head, "I don't believe that for a second," he said. "If you

can handle living in the city, you can handle a thousand pounds of horse.”

“A thousand pounds?” she asked, her eyes getting big, then shook her head. “No way I’m getting on one of those things.”

“Maybe I was wrong about you. How disappointing, but suit yourself,” he said, shrugging his shoulders and starting to walk away. “I was going to point out it would be a great addition to your story, but I’m not a journalist, so I might be off base.”

She knew what he was doing, and told herself that it wouldn’t work; she could walk away from the challenge but found her feet following him. “Wait, I didn’t think about that,” she said. “Maybe I could manage to get on one of the small ones, just for the article. I mean, it would add to my story.”

“Well, then, let’s get on with it,” he said, heading for the horses.

“Wait, I didn’t mean right now,” she said, watching him walk away. “I meant sometime in the future, maybe when there aren’t all these people around to watch me make a fool of myself.”

Grant stopped and turned around, “See, I knew it,” he said. “You’re chicken.”

“I am not,” she said. “I’m just cautious, and.....okay, maybe a little chicken.”

“It takes a brave person to admit that,” he said, walking over to her. “I won’t let you get hurt, Amy, I promise.”

She looked up into his eyes, and something began to stir deep inside her. Suddenly, she knew with complete certainty that Grant wouldn’t let anything happen to her, that he would protect her, and not just from falling off the horse. Stunned by the depth of the knowledge, sensing there was a deeper meaning to what she was feeling, she could only stare at him for a second, trying find some equilibrium again.

“You can trust me,” Grant said. “I’ll be right there with you the whole time.”

She let out a long sigh, “Now I can’t say no because you really mean that,” she said. “Okay, I’ll get on a horse, but that’s it.”

“Well, that’s a start,” he said, holding his hand out to her. “Come on, I know which one will be perfect for you.”

“I just hope it’s a little one,” she said, following him over to the hitching rail.

“Don’t worry, I’ll give you a boost,” he said, grinning at her, making her entire body tingle. “But there’s one hard and fast rule when it comes to horses: never approach them from behind; that’s a perfect way to get kicked.”

“Got it,” she said, hesitating when he stepped up to a big black horse. “What’s rule number two?”

“Always introduce yourself to the horse before you get on,” he said, stroking the animal’s face. “Come on, don’t be shy, Lightning is a sweetheart. He’s a favorite on the ranch because of his calm temperament.”

Her hand shaking a little, she reached out and touched the horse’s neck, then feeling a little braver, began to stroke him like Grant was. The horse snorted and turned his head to sniff her, and she froze, frightened by the sudden movement, then felt the velvety softness of his nose and sighed.

“Oh, it’s so soft,” she said, then looked up at Grant. “He’s not as scary as I thought he was.”

“Told you,” he said, grinning at her. “Horses can be amazing companions when they’re treated with the respect they deserve.”

“Is that rule number three?” she asked, an idea for her story beginning to germinate in her mind. “I’m keeping track, you know.”

“It should be,” he said, laughing. “Are you ready to get up there?”

She took a deep breath, then leaned over closer to Lightning, “Okay, here’s the deal: I have mad respect for you, boy,” she said. “So, I’d appreciate it if you went easy on me.”

I'd rather not get dumped into the dust on my butt today, if that's okay with you."

Lightening snorted again, shook his head up and down, and she jumped back a step, "He didn't.....I mean, it looked like....." she stammered. "I would swear he understood what I just said, but that's not possible, is it?"

Grant laughed, "It sure looked like it to me," he said. "Who knows, maybe he did understand you."

She gave him a dirty look, "Let's just do this before I lose my nerve," she said. "How do I get up there?"

"That's easy," Grant said, grabbing her by the hips and lifting her into the saddle. "See, that wasn't so hard."

Between the waves of desire rushing through her and the feeling of the huge animal underneath her, she couldn't breathe for a second. "Warn me the next time you do something like that," she finally managed to say, then took a deep breath, willing herself to calm down. "I wasn't expecting you to do that."

"Sorry, I guess I should have warned you," he said, grinning up at her. "But you're up there, aren't you?"

Now that she was getting her equilibrium back, she realized that it didn't feel as scary as she thought and forced herself to relax. "Okay, maybe it's not so bad," she said, then grabbed the saddle when Grant untied the horse and began to walk. "Grant, this wasn't part of the deal, let me off right now."

CHAPTER 6



GRANT

Grant ignored Amy and kept walking, counting down the seconds in his head, surprised when it took much less time than he'd thought for her to stop panicking. By the time he finally turned around and looked at her over his shoulder, her body had relaxed again, and there was a smile of amazement on her face. Picking up his pace just a little, he kept walking then made a wide sweeping turn before bringing Lightening to a stop and walking over to Amy.

"I know you're going to yell at me, so get it over with," he said. "Then you can tell me how fun that was."

Amy let out a little huff, "You could have warned me," she said, then sighed. "Never mind, clearly you didn't get the message last time."

"You would have just said no," he answered, grinning up at her. "Now tell me the rest."

She glared at him, "It is kind of fun," she said. "But I feel kind of silly being led around like a little kid."

He shook his head, trying to hide a smile, "Well, there's only one way to fix that," he said, throwing her the reins. "Off you go."

When he clicked his tongue, Lightening started walking toward the trailer. Amy let out a little scream, then pulled back on the reins, bringing the horse to a stop. She glanced over at him and opened her mouth, but he held up his hand and shook his head.

“Don’t say it,” he said. “I didn’t warn you, and I’m not going to the next time either.”

Amy let out a little yelp but grabbed the reins, “Grant, I don’t know what I’m doing,” she said. “What if he starts running or something?”

“He’s not going to, just relax,” he said. “If you want him to go left, pull the reins that way, if you want to go right, pull them the other way. Back to stop, and a nudge with your heels will get him going again. Give it a try, I don’t think Lightening will mind.”

She looked at him, her face full of uncertainty, “You can do this, Amy,” he said, walking over and adjusting the stirrups. “People have been riding horses for centuries.”

“Okay, tell me what to do again,” she said. “How do I get him going?”

“Give him a soft nudge with your heels,” he instructed. “Then pull the reins to one side or the other to get him to change direction.”

Her face filled with concentration; Amy nudged Lightening with her foot. She almost lost her balance when he started to walk but recovered quickly and led him around the parking lot, a smile slowly spreading across her face. When she made it back to him, her eyes were dancing with excitement, and she grinned down at him, not bothering to hide her enthusiasm this time.

“That was awesome, I can’t even describe how cool it was, I had no idea. No wonder you love this; I can’t wait to do it again,” she said, then looked down. “But I don’t know how to get down.”

He laughed, “See, I told you, and you’re a natural,” he said, walking up next to her. “How about this time I help you down? Next time we’ll work on mounting and dismounting.”

He reached up but paused for just a second, “Are you ready?” he asked, grinning at her. “I wouldn’t want to surprise you.”

She looked down at him and their eyes met, sending waves of desire shooting through him, “I didn’t think I was, but I might have been wrong,” she said, then shook her head. “I mean, whenever you are.”

Warmth spread through him, intensifying the desire and awakening his magic, but he reached for her anyway, unable to stop himself, ignoring the little voice that told him to stop. When his hands closed around her hips, the voice in his head was silenced, and he lifted her easily from the saddle, but didn’t let go of her right away. Instead, he gave himself a few seconds to enjoy the feel of her body pressed up against his. Amy let out a little gasp but didn’t move when he finally set her on her feet, and before he could stop himself, he lowered his head and kissed her.

Passion burst to life between them when his lips touched hers, and Amy’s arms snaked up around his neck, pressing her breasts up against his chest and igniting a need deep inside him. She felt so perfect in his arms, warm and soft in all the right places, and for a moment he lost himself in the pleasure coursing through him, forgetting his promise as his magic came to life, surging through him with the pleasure. He felt the moment that Amy surrendered, and for a second, the animal in him rejoiced, but the man in him suddenly realized what he was doing and pulled away from her.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done that,” he said, steadying her when she wobbled a little. “I.....well.....I don’t have a good excuse. It was a mistake, and it will never happen again.”

It took a second for Amy’s eyes to focus on him again, and he braced himself for her reaction, “That’s a lie, and we both know it,” she finally said, shaking her head. “But you can tell yourself that if it makes you feel better. I think I should go now. I had a great time with you today. Thanks for all your help with the article.”

He started to let her walk away, knew that was the best thing for them both, but something wouldn’t let him, and he found himself catching up to her. “There’s a carnival tomorrow night,” he said. “I thought maybe you’d like to go, that is, if you’re interested in that kind of thing.”

Amy stopped and turned back to him, “Are you asking me out on a date?”

He froze, not expecting the question, not sure of the answer, “I.....guess I am,” he answered, going with his gut. “I shouldn’t be, but I am. So, what do you say?”

“I’m a fool who is never going to learn her lesson,” Amy said, shaking her head. “Are you going to pick me up or should I meet you there?”

Amy

Amy parked her car in front of the house just as Bridget came walking up with the children in her afterschool program, got out, and ran over to them. “I’m sorry that I’m late,” she said. “I got held up at the fairgrounds.”

“You smell like horses,” Bridget said, wrinkling her nose.

“That’s because I’ve been riding one,” she said, a big grin on her face. “And I’m going to do it again the next chance I get.”

“Well look at you, already turning into a small-town girl,” she said. “What’s next, branding cattle or maybe rounding up the herd?”

“Very funny,” she said. “Grant tricked me into it, all I did was walk around. I’m not exactly an expert yet, but it was awesome.”

Bridget’s face lit up, “Grant was there?” she asked. “Isn’t that interesting, and he tricked you into getting onto a horse, even more interesting.”

“Will you stop that,” she said, feeling a blush rising on her cheeks. “He was there dropping off cattle for the auction. He helped me with the article for the paper, and let me ride one of his horses, and that was it.”

“You’re lying,” Bridget said, crossing her arms over her chest. “I can tell.”

She felt guilty for lying, “I didn’t want to tell you because I know that you’ll make a big deal about it,” she said, then

sighed. “It might have been a little more than that, though. We’re going to the carnival together tomorrow night.”

Bridget dropped her arms to her sides and her mouth popped open, “Seriously, that’s great,” she said. “I knew you were perfect for each other, but I didn’t think Grant would..... well after what happened to his wife.....he always said he wouldn’t ever.....”

“Ms. Learner, can we go inside now?” Zander, an adorable five-year-old, asked. “We’re ready for our snack.”

Bridget looked horrified, “Oh, Zander, I’m so sorry, Ms. Erickson and I got distracted,” she said. “Why don’t you kids go on inside and get washed up? We’ll be right behind you.”

She waited until the little boy was far enough away that he couldn’t hear her, “We’ll have to talk about this later,” she said. “This isn’t a discussion for little ears.”

They followed the kids into the kitchen, saw that they all got their hands washed, but when they were all sitting at the big wooden table, she realized that there was an extra kid. “Bridget,” she whispered. “Did you know that there were seven of them today?”

“Oh, I completely forgot, you got me distracted,” she said. “The extra one is yours; his name is Seth Turner. He’s in third grade, and you’ll be making twenty-five dollars an hour to watch him after school.”

“Bridget, what are you talking about?” she asked. “I’m not a babysitter.”

“But you could be,” she said. “I’ve got a waiting list a mile long. If you take a few classes, you could get licensed, and we could take on more kids. The extra money would be all yours. You said you wanted to start paying rent and your half of everything else, and this would give you enough money to do that.”

“What about my job at the paper?” she asked. “I can’t give that up.”

“You won’t have to; you’d only be working a few hours in the afternoon, and once the kids are done with their snack and

homework, you could even work on your articles,” Bridget said. “I gave this a lot of thought, and this would help us both out. Say you’ll do it, Amy.”

“Well, how about that,” she said, giving her friend a hug. “Now I’ve got two jobs.”

“And a date tomorrow night,” Bridget said, grinning at her. “Things are definitely looking up.”

* * *

Amy waited at the entrance to the carnival as anxious as any kid to get inside, the bright lights and music an invitation she was finding difficult to resist, and she wondered where Grant was. She’d spent the entire day wandering around the fair, absorbing the atmosphere as well as a lot of knowledge, but tonight was just for fun. She was turning off her reporter’s brain and letting go for a few hours. Spotting Grant coming through the crowd, she resisted the urge to primp a little before he saw her but stopped herself. Despite the kiss, she still wasn’t sure she was ready for anything more than friendship.

Part of the problem was that nothing she’d tried so far in a relationship had worked. She’d tried taking her time, tried not worrying about what tomorrow would bring, and something in between more times than she could count. But Grant was different. There was something about the man that made her feel protected and cherished, and that confused her even more. Leaping into another relationship after what Paul had put her through made her quake with fear, but then she saw the smile that spread across Grant’s face when he saw her, and all fear melted away.

“You’re an idiot,” she told herself, then looked around to see if anyone had noticed she was talking to herself.

“I’m sorry that I’m late,” Grant said as soon as he walked up. “There were some transportation problems with one of the bulls, and I had to fix it myself. I hope you haven’t been waiting too long.”

“No, not really,” she said. “I can’t wait to get in there though. I thought these things were only in movies and

television.”

“You’ve never been to a carnival?” Grant asked. “It’s just like an amusement park, I’m sure you’ve been to one of those.”

“No, it’s not,” she said, linking her arm in his. “This is so much better. Come on, I want to ride that thing that goes up in the air and then drops you first.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Grant asked, looking at the ride. “I think I’m too old for this.”

“Oh, no, it sounds like someone is chicken,” she said. “But don’t worry, I won’t let anything happen to you, I promise.”

CHAPTER 7



GRANT

Grant stumbled off the last ride, trying to put on a happy face but feeling like he was going to throw up, “You look a little pale,” Amy said, looping her arm through his. “Maybe we should sit down and rest for a few minutes.”

“I hate to admit it, but that might be a good idea,” he said. “I used to go on these rides for hours when I was a kid, but now.....”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have made you go on that last one,” she said, pushing him down onto a bench. “Sit here, I’ll be right back.”

Amy was back only a few minutes later with an ice-cold bottle of water, and he downed half of it before putting the cap back on. “Better?” she asked, sitting down next to him. “No more rides, I promise. You should have told me they were making you sick.”

“I was doing okay until that last one,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Besides, it’s a little embarrassing to admit I can’t handle a silly carnival ride.”

“It was probably the round and round that got to you,” she said, making herself comfortable next to him. “We’ll just sit here and people watch for a while. You’ll feel better soon.”

He put his arm around her without even thinking, thought about pulling it away for a second, but Amy snuggled into him, a feeling of comfort washed over him, and he changed his mind. Choosing not think about what that meant, to just enjoy the moment, he didn’t move, and instead sat inhaling the scent

of Amy's hair, the warmth of her body where it rested against his making his body tingle.

A few minutes later, she looked up at him and smiled, "Are you feeling better?" she asked. "Some of the color is coming back to your cheeks."

"I think I'll live," he said. "Sorry about that. I hope I didn't ruin your night. We can move on if you want to."

"I'm not in any hurry, this is kind of nice," she said. "And it's fun to people watch. I like to make up stories about their lives, the more ridiculous the better. See that guy over there waiting in line at that food stand? He's really a spy wearing a fat suit, and he's here to bust the leader of a counterfeit operation running out of the carnival."

He laughed, "You have quite an imagination," he said, then looked around. "Okay, what about that woman over there?"

Half an hour later, he'd laughed so much his abdomen hurt, and he was out of breath, "You're terrible," he finally said. "If any of those people knew what you were saying about them, they would have been horrified."

"Well, none of it was true," she said, grinning at him. "You're the first person I've ever done that with."

"Your secret is safe with me," he said, grinning at her. "Are you ready to move on?"

"Sure, let's go play some games," she said, jumping to her feet. "I know that it's a waste of money, but it will be fun."

"Lead the way," he said, getting to his feet. "You can pick the first game."

Amy walked down the center of the fairway, looking at the games on both sides, then pulled him over to a shooting gallery, "This is the one you want to play?" he asked, surprised. "Do you know anything about shooting a gun?"

"Now, there's something a small town and the city have in common," she said, striding over to the game and slapping down five dollars. "Guns are common in both places. Don't

get me started on the statistics, I did a feature article on gun control.”

“That didn’t answer my question,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s not as easy as it looks. Do you want me to give you some pointers?”

“No, thank you, this one I can handle on my own,” she said, grinning at him, then picked up the air rifle and looked down the site. “Stand back and watch the magic.”

Shaking his head, he stepped back and gave her some space, “Have at it, little lady,” he said. “I’ll be back here hoping that you don’t embarrass yourself.”

“I think you’re the one who is going to be embarrassed,” she said, then snorted. “Little lady.....you are an old man.”

“That’s enough out of you, smarty pants,” he said, grinning at her. “Come on, stop stalling and take your shots.”

Amy stuck her tongue out at him, but when she turned back to the shooting gallery, she became serious. After studying the moving targets for a few seconds, she lined up her shot and took it. There was a little ping when the stream of air hit one of the ducks as it went by, but it stayed up right, and Amy let out a little huff but raised the gun again and took a second shot. The second target didn’t go down either, and he wondered how she was going to handle missing eight more times, but to his surprise, she turned around and smiled at him.

“Now I’ve got it,” she said. “Are you ready?”

Before he could answer, Amy turned around, aimed the air rifle and fired off eight shots in quick succession, knocking down eight ducks, the ping as each one went down echoing out of the game into the fairway. Amy let out a grunt of satisfaction, set down the gun, turned around and grinned at him before taking a bow, and he couldn’t help but laugh.

“That was some mighty fine shooting,” he drawled, imitating an old cowboy. “You sure did show me. Why, in all my years, I’ve never seen such a thing!”

Amy laughed, “Your turn,” she said, grabbing a rifle and holding it out to him.

Stepping up to the game, he put down his money and picked up the rifle, looked down the sight, and took his first shot. Groaning when it went wide, he lined up the next shot, adjusting his aim, but missed the second time, then a third, before he got it right and took out the next seven targets.

“Not bad,” Amy said. “Want to go again?”

“You’re on. I think that was just beginner’s luck,” he said, slapping down a ten-dollar bill. “The winner gets a kiss.”

Amy

Amy studied Grant for a second, smiling, “Now that doesn’t seem quite fair,” she said. “So, how about this instead? If you win, you can have that kiss, but if I win, you have to teach me to ride.”

Grant pretended to consider her counter offer, but she could see the sparkle of amusement in his eyes and knew that he was going to accept. “Well, after careful consideration, you’ve got a bet,” he finally said. “I still win either way, so why not.”

“You can go first,” she said. “I wouldn’t want you to get flustered when I hit all ten targets.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t get flustered,” he said, stepping closer to her. “But I can think of a few ways to throw you off balance.”

The look in his eyes made her heart pound and her palms sweat as a thrill rushed through her, “Hey, that’s cheating,” she said, stepping away from him. “Stay back, mister.”

“Well, then you’d better get up there and shoot,” he said. “I can only control myself for so long.”

She gave him a dirty look, even though what she wanted to do was take him up on the offer. “Fine, I’ll go first,” she said instead, then stepped up to the game and picked up the rifle, taking deep breaths to steady herself.

As soon as the compressed air hit the gun, she took her first shot, then four more, knocking down a target with each

one, then turned and grinned at Grant. “That’s half,” she said. “Do you want to give up now and save your pride?”

“Well, aren’t you just full of yourself,” Grant said, then nodded at the game. “Finish it up, sweetheart. You’re going to miss; I can just feel it.”

Refusing to let him get her off balance, she turned back and fired the last five shots, but there were only four pings as the targets fell this time, and she set the gun down with a huff. “Okay, cowboy, I gave you an opening,” she said, turning and walking over to him. “Let’s see what you do with it.”

Grant studied her for a second, “I’ll be back for that kiss in just a second,” he said, then grinned at her. “And I’ll still teach you to ride, even though you’re going to lose.”

Thrills rushing through her, she watched him walk over to the game, pick up the rifle and fire off his first five shots, each ping as the targets fell making her heart pound a little faster. When he made the next four shots with no problem, a feeling of anticipation began to grow inside her, the thought of his lips on hers again only fueling it, and she shivered when he aimed his last shot. Grant pulled the trigger, but the ducks just kept swimming by, and it took her a second to realize that he’d missed.

She didn’t feel the rush of winning like she expected. Instead, a feeling of disappointment washed over her, “Looks like I won,” she said, walking over to him. “When do we start the lessons?”

“How about right now,” he said, pulling her into his arms. “Lesson number one is how to properly kiss your riding instructor.”

A thrill rushed through her, but she wasn’t about to give in right away, “I’ve never heard of such a thing,” she said. “I think you’re just making up a reason to kiss me.”

He didn’t answer, instead, he threaded his fingers through her hair, tipped her head back, and covered her mouth with his. The instant his lips touched hers, her body came to life, throbbing and tingling in all the right places, her nipples

hardened against his chest, and a low moan escaped from deep in her chest. Grant pulled her closer and deepened the kiss, the world around them dissolving as the passion between them slowly came to life.

“Well, will you look at that, Beckett’s got him another victim,” a slurred voice drawled penetrating through the haze of passion. “How long do you think it will take him to kill this one?”

“Looks like he’s already working on it,” another man said, then laughed drunkenly. “I don’t think we should let him get away with it this time, boys. I think it’s time we taught him to keep his hands off of poor, defenseless women.”

Grant froze, then slowly pulled away from her, then shoved her behind him, “I don’t want any trouble, you two,” he said. “Move along before you do something you’ll be sorry for in the morning.”

The taller of the two men stepped forward, “I should have beat your ass when you started messing with Lyndsay, but she wouldn’t let me, and look what happened to her,” he said. “If you think I’m going to stand back and watch you do it again, you’re crazy. I didn’t protect my sister, but I’m going to protect this one.”

“I don’t need you to protect me,” she said, stepping out from behind Grant. “Just go away and leave us alone.”

“Sorry, ma’am, we can’t do that,” the other man said. “It’s for your own good. You don’t know what you’re messing with here, but you need to walk away right now.”

Just then, a police officer came walking up, “Is there a problem here?” he asked. “You boys look like you’re bothering these people. I thought I told you to get on home.”

The two men looked over at Grant and then back at the police officer, “We were just going to teach him a lesson,” the taller one said. “But I guess that can wait, but you listen to us, missy, this guy is no good, he’s.....well, he’s not normal. Take our advice and stay away from him, or you’ll end up dead like our sister.”

She looked over at Grant, whose face had turned to stone, “That’s enough, Stewart, go on home,” he said through clenched teeth. “This doesn’t help anyone. Lyndsay is gone, and nothing is going to bring her back.”

“I think I’d better help you boys find a ride,” the officer said. “Come on, let’s go before I have to take you away in a squad car.”

As soon as the three disappeared into the crowd, she looked over at Grant, “What did they mean?” she asked, shivering. “Who was Lyndsay?”

“My wife,” Grant said and started walking away. “It’s time to go home.”

She had to run to catch up to him, “Wait,” she said, grabbing him by the arm. “That’s it, that’s all you are going to say?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he said, looking anywhere but at her. “It doesn’t matter, it happened a long time ago.”

“Clearly it does,” she said, then let him go. “But if you don’t want to talk about it, that’s fine. This was clearly a mistake, it’s obvious that whatever happened, you’re still not over it. Go on home, I’ll see you around town.”

CHAPTER 8



GRANT

Grant watched Amy walk away, a sense of loss settling over him, a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach, wondering how their perfect night had suddenly gotten so complicated. Aware that he only had two choices, and he'd have to make up his mind quickly, he let her get a few more steps away from him before something deep inside him propelled him toward her, making the choice for him. He had no idea what he was going to say, how to explain without telling her everything, just that he couldn't let her walk away.

"Amy, wait," he called catching up to her. "Can we go somewhere private so we can talk?"

She studied him for a second, then sighed, "Grant, you don't have to talk about it," she said. "I understand. We've only known each other for a little while. I shouldn't have gotten so upset. Let's not let it ruin the night."

He shook his head, knowing this was something he had to do, but at the same time understood that it was going to come between them, and wondered how he'd managed to forget his promise to himself. Taking her hand, he led her out of the carnival to his truck, unlocked it, and helped her in, then got in on the other side and closed the door.

"I met Lyndsay the summer after I graduated from college. I came home to run the ranch so my parents could have some freedom," he said, realizing he'd never told anyone the story from start to finish. "I'd only been home a few days when we ran into each other in the diner. I was head over heels for her from that moment on, and knew that she was the woman I was

going to marry. She'd just turned eighteen that summer and her family thought I was too old for her, but she didn't care, and we were married before the summer was over."

He paused, needing a second to gather his thoughts, to push away the memory of the fresh-faced girl he'd fallen in love with. "Grant, it's okay," Amy said. "You don't have to talk about her if you're not ready. I understand now, I really do."

"It's okay, I need to do this, I think it will help," he said, then let out a long sigh. "At first, things were great between us, and I thought we'd really found that happily ever after everyone is looking for, but it didn't last. Once we started to get to know one another, it all kind of fell apart, and then Lyndsay got pregnant, and it all unraveled completely after that."

"Oh, Grant, I'm sorry," Amy said. "That must have been so hard."

"I wish that was it, I wish I was just talking about a failed marriage," he said, then had to take a deep breath to chase away the guilt and pain he'd unleashed talking about it. "On the day she came home from the doctor, she told me that she never wanted kids, that she wanted her freedom. We fought about the baby, and I guilted her into keeping it. She was miserable the entire time she was pregnant. I think by the time she went into labor; she hated me and the baby. I'm sure she would have been gone the second the baby was born if it had been possible."

That night came back to him like it had just been yesterday, and he took a ragged breath, not sure he could go on. "What happened, Grant?" Amy asked, putting her hand on his arm sending a wave of comfort rushing through him. "Something went wrong with the baby, didn't it?"

He nodded, staring straight ahead out the window, "They made me choose," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "They could save the baby or try to save them both and risk them both dying. I chose the baby. I killed Lyndsay so he

could live, ended her life so he could begin his, and I'll live with that guilt for the rest of my life.”

Amy was silent for a long time, “Oh, Grant, no one should have to make that choice,” she said, looking over at him, tears streaming down her face. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that. There was no right answer, you have to see that.”

“I know it was an impossible situation, I’ve heard that a million times, to be honest, I’ve heard it all,” he said. “I wasn’t to blame, it wasn’t my fault, I couldn’t control how things went, but that’s not true. I could have stopped what happened. I never should have gotten her pregnant in the first place, it was a stupid accident. I should have let her get rid of the baby, I should have done so many things differently.”

“You can’t blame yourself, Grant, you didn’t know what was going to happen,” Amy said, reaching over to take his hand. “You did the best that you could.”

“But it wasn’t good enough, and I swore to myself that I would never let it happen again,” he said, finally looking over at her. “I’m sorry, Amy, for a while I lost sight of that, but tonight reminded me of my promise: I shouldn’t have asked you out, I shouldn’t have kissed you. I didn’t mean to mislead you, I just.....well, you make me feel things I haven’t felt in a long time, but I can’t risk taking this any further.”

Amy pulled her hand out of his, “I see, I guess that explains it then, and you did warn me, so I only have myself to blame,” she said, then took a deep breath. “It’s getting late, and I have a busy day tomorrow. Thank you for taking me to the carnival, it was fun.”

She opened her door and started to slide out, “Amy, wait,” he said, then paused, fighting an internal struggle between what the man and the animal inside him wanted. “Let me give you a ride to your car.”

Her shoulders slumped, “That’s okay, you can see it from here. I’ll be fine,” she said, then slid out of the truck and carefully shut the door.

He watched her walking across the parking lot, a feeling of loss descending over him, his fingers gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles turned white, and didn't relax until her taillights disappeared into the darkness. It was a long time before he finally started up his truck and headed back to the ranch, feeling as hollowed out as he'd ever felt, the animal inside him howling with mourning at the loss.

Amy

Amy had been staring at the computer screen for ten minutes, trying to talk herself into hitting the send button, when she heard the front door open and the sound of children's voices began to echo through the house. When they came bursting into the dining room where she was working, she took a deep breath and sent the article off to Elsie, telling herself it was as good as it would get. Writing the first article for the series had been much harder than she'd expected. There was so much riding on this one piece, and it hadn't helped that she'd been nursing a bit of a broken heart.

It had been almost a week since she'd walked away from Grant at the fairgrounds, and she was still angry at herself for starting to fall for him, wondering if she'd ever learn her lesson. But she was also angry at him for stringing her along when he had no intention of following through and disappointed that he could so easily turn his back on something that seemed so right. Shaking her head, she pushed Grant from her mind, determined to forget about him and move on with her new life. She didn't need a man, and certainly not one with as many issues as Grant.

Zander was the first one to get to her, "Amy, guess what?" he asked, practically vibrating with excitement. "We're writing a school newspaper, and I get to write an article, just like you."

"Wow, that is exciting," she said, closing her computer. "What are you going to write about?"

"I don't know," he said. "I'm supposed to figure it out for my homework. Will you help me?"

"I'd love to," she said, ruffling his hair. "But first, I think it's snack time."

“We get fruit snacks today,” he said, already heading for the kitchen. “I love Fridays.”

Laughing, she quickly put her computer out of reach and followed him to the kitchen, “I hear the kids are putting together a newspaper,” she said, jumping in to help Bridget get everyone washed up. “What brought this on?”

“Oh, we do it every year, but they’re all a bit more excited because of you,” her friend said, smiling at her. “You’re a bit of a celebrity, you actually work for a newspaper.”

She laughed, “Well, how about that,” she said, shaking her head. “I already promised Zander that I’d help him pick a topic for his article. I’d be happy to help the other kids, too.”

“We might just take you up on that offer,” she said. “I’m sure the kids would love having you involved. Maybe you could come into the school one day next week and give them some pointers.”

“I’d love to,” she said, wondering if she had the beginnings of another story on her hands. “Just tell me when, and I’ll be there.”

It was almost six o’clock, and the six kids she’d been helping with their articles had all chosen a topic and were busy planning what they were going to write, except Zander, who couldn’t make up his mind. Sitting down next to him, she looked at the list he’d made then over at the little boy who was staring intently at the list.

Zander looked up at her, “I can’t decide what to write about,” he said. “I want to choose all three.”

“Do you want some advice?” she asked, ruffling his hair. “Choose the one you know the most about.”

Zander looked down at the list, then back up at her, “Fishing,” he said. “My dad and I go fishing all the time.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard,” she said, smiling at him. “Now, what are you going to write about fishing? It should be something informative, something your readers don’t know.”

Zander didn't say anything for a few minutes, but she could see that he was thinking hard by the look on his face, "I know," he said, suddenly excited. "I could tell them the best places to go fishing."

"There you go," she said. "And what else?"

"Hmmm.....the best bait to use," he said, bouncing up and down in his seat. "And the best time of day to catch fish."

"I think you've got it," she said, beaming at him. "I'm going to give you one more piece of advice though: pick the top three places and focus on those, then you might have space to add pictures."

"Oh, that would be so cool," Zander said, grabbing his pencil. "I already know which three I'm going to pick."

She sat watching Zander for a few minutes, then looked around the table, a smile on her face, understanding for the first time why Bridget enjoyed her job so much, and looking forward to helping out at the school. When the front door opened, and she heard voices, she glanced up at the clock and realized that it was already time for the kids to go home and felt a little stab of disappointment.

"All right you all, it's time to clean up," she said. "It's time for you all to go home."

She started to get up, but Zander pulled her back down, "Will you look at this?" he asked. "Did I do it right?"

Taking the worksheet from him, she looked it over, "This looks great," she said. "I'm sure your teacher is going to love the idea."

Zander grinned at her, then threw himself into her arms, "Thank you, Amy," he said. "I'm glad you're here, you're so nice, and you're pretty, too."

She laughed, "Well, thank you for the compliment," she said, hugging him back. "I'm glad I'm here too. Today was fun."

CHAPTER 9



GRANT

It had been a long week and all Grant wanted to do was go home, put a pizza in the oven for dinner, and watch a movie with Zander. He didn't want to think about Amy, he didn't want to feel the cold stab of loss every time he thought about that night at the carnival. He'd made the right decision, and second-guessing himself wasn't going to change that. Letting himself into the front door, he made his way to the kitchen, where Zander was usually waiting for him, but Bridget was the only one in the room.

"Hey, Grant, Zander is in the dining room working on his article for the newspaper," she said. "The kids have been working on it since they got home. They're really excited."

"Oh, wow, I completely forgot about the school paper," he said, shaking his head. "That was a long time ago."

"Don't remind me," Bridget said. "I'll go get him for you."

"That's okay, I'll go," he said. "You look tired."

"I'm ready for the weekend," she said. "I'm going to sleep until noon tomorrow."

He laughed, "Lucky you," he said, heading for the dining room. "I'll be right back."

When he stepped through the door, his mouth was already open to greet his son, but the sight that greeted him froze him in mid-step, and all the air went whooshing out of his lungs. His son was hugging Amy and looking up at her with adoration in his eyes, making his body do all kinds of strange things. Backing up a step, he fought to control the wave of

desire that followed and the burst of magic that swept through him.

When he was finally able to take a deep breath, he stepped forward, a wave of anger surging through him, “What are you doing with my son?” he asked. “Let him go right this instant.”

Amy jumped back from Zander, a look of shock on her face, “Zander is your son?” she asked, stumbling up out of her chair. “I didn’t know, Bridget didn’t tell me. I was just helping him with his homework.”

“Or using him to get to me,” he said, not sure where the words were coming from, desperate to feel anything but the attraction that was flooding his system. “It won’t work, Amy, I won’t change my mind, there can’t be anything between us, and using my son to get to me is a dirty trick. You’re acting like.....a stalker.....I won’t.....”

Amy’s eyes filled with tears. She looked around at the kids, then back at him, “Maybe we’d better take this outside,” she said, her voice full of anger. “I don’t want them to hear what I’m about to say to you.”

“Maybe that would be a good idea,” he said through clenched teeth. “At least that will get you away from Zander.”

She didn’t say anything, but her face turned red, then she let out a little growl and stomped past him. He followed her, letting his anger flow, afraid if he didn’t, he would grab her and kiss her. Bridget looked surprised when they stomped by and got up to follow, but he held up his hand to stop her, not wanting an audience.

When they stepped out onto the porch, Amy twirled around and gave him a look that made him miss a step, the anger in her eyes making them sparkle and stirring up the desire he’d been burying deep inside him. She put her hands on her hips, took several deep breaths, making her chest rise and fall, and he found his eyes drawn to her plump breasts, and he knew he was dangerously close to losing control.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Amy said, crossing her arms over her chest. “Are you seriously going to stand there

staring at my breasts after what you just accused me of? I can't believe I was ever attracted to you. You've got to be the most egotistical jerk I've ever met, and I've met a few of them. How dare you accuse me of stalking you and using Zander to get to you? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. You're not that great of a catch, or do women always do this kind of thing to you? Let me tell you something else, you have no idea what it's really like to be stalked by someone, to have them show up where you work, or follow you home after a long day. You have no idea what it's like to wake up in the middle of the night and see someone watching you through your bedroom window.....”

Amy's words died away, her face took on a haunted look, then she turned, ran back into the house, slamming the door behind her, making it impossible for him to catch up. When he walked in, Bridget was standing in the middle of the kitchen looking in the direction of the stairs, but turned to him, a look of confusion on her face that quickly turned to anger.

“What did you say to her?” Bridget asked. “She hasn't had that look on her face since she got here.”

“I have to talk to her,” he said, ignoring the question and trying to walk past her. “I said some things I shouldn't have.”

Bridget stopped him, “That was obvious,” she said. “Maybe you should leave her alone. I think you've done enough damage.”

He looked up the stairs and then sighed, “I didn't know she was living here,” he said. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“I thought I did,” she said. “Amy's been helping me out after school to help pay her rent until her job at the paper takes off.”

“I thought.....oh, God, I'm so stupid,” he said, sinking down into a chair. “I accused her of stalking me and using Zander to get to me.”

Bridget stared at him, her mouth hanging open, then shook her head, “You're a bigger idiot than I thought,” she said, looking toward the stairs. “I can't think of anything worse you

could have said to her. She doesn't like to talk about it, but the whole reason she moved here is because her ex-fiancé has been stalking her. She got a restraining order against him, but it didn't help. He followed her everywhere, then a few weeks ago, she woke up in the middle of the night and he was right outside her bedroom window. The next day, she packed as much as she could in her car and came here. The man ruined her life, Grant, and no one did anything about it. She didn't deserve that, and you should be ashamed of yourself. I thought you two liked each other, I thought you were getting along."

"We were until it all blew up," he said. "I freaked out and told her we couldn't be together. I can't go through that again, Bridget. I can't be responsible for another woman dying because I can't control myself. You know what happened with Lyndsay, I can't go through that again."

"You're a fool, Grant Beckett," Bridget said. "Amy is not Lyndsay, I'm sorry you had to go through that, but millions of women give birth every day, and they're just fine. I understand why you're scared; you have every right to be, but what happened to Lyndsay wasn't your fault. It's time you forgave yourself and moved on. It's time to stop punishing yourself, it won't bring her back, and you're just making yourself miserable. Don't let Amy walk away, you'll be sorry someday, I promise you."

He sighed, "Thanks for the advice, Bridget," he said, getting to his feet. "But I think it's too late. She'll never speak to me again, not after what I said."

"You'll never know unless you try," Bridget said, shrugging her shoulders. "And there's no time like the present. I'll keep an eye on Zander if you want."

Amy

Amy wasn't surprised when there was a knock on the door, "I'm okay, Bridget," she called. "But I'm not coming out unless Grant is gone. I don't ever want to talk to him again."

There was silence on the other side of the door, then the knocking started up again. With a huff, she got out of bed, wiping the tears off her face with the back of her hands, then

threw open the door. "I said that I'm fine....." but her words died away when she saw Grant standing in the hallway.

She started to slam the door in his face, but he stuck his foot out, "I'm sorry, Amy," he said. "I shouldn't have said that. I didn't even really believe it; it was just seeing you with Zander.....I don't know it felt.....good."

"That doesn't even make sense," she said, shaking her head. "I can't do this with you, Grant, I can't take the ups and downs. I'll stay away from Zander if that's what you want. We were having a lot of fun working on the newspaper, but I don't want any trouble, I've had enough of that to last a life time."

He studied her for a second, "I really am sorry, Amy," he finally said. "I was a jerk, I don't know what I'm doing half the time, and the other half, I'm scared to death about the way I feel about you. I shouldn't have said what I did. I hope you can forgive me, I never meant to hurt you. Maybe we can start over."

"I don't think so," she said. "I made a promise to myself, too, Grant, and I'm going to stick to that promise. I'm done letting men mess with my head, I'm done letting myself care only to have it thrown back in my face. I'm sure that you're a nice guy, I just don't think you're the guy for me. Someday, when you're over what happened to Lyndsay, you'll find someone."

"I guess I understand, and I don't blame you," Grant said, his face full of sadness. "I guess the timing isn't right, but I want you to know that I never meant to hurt you, I wasn't playing with your feelings, I really do care about you, Amy."

"Just not enough," she said. "Goodbye, Grant. I'll try to stay out of your way when you come to pick Zander up."

She stepped back and slowly closed the door, trying to ignore the stricken look on Grant's face, then collapsed onto the floor, wrapped her arms around her knees, fighting the tears that stung her eyes. It's better this way, she reminded herself. She couldn't fix Grant, she couldn't heal the wounds he'd sustained when Lyndsay died, only he could do that, and she sensed that he wasn't ready, that he might never be ready.

The next time there was a knock on the door, it was followed by Bridget's voice, "The kids are all gone, Amy," she said. "Can I come in?"

She got to her feet and opened the door, saw her friend, and the tears started up again, "God, I'm such a mess," she said when she'd gotten control of herself again. "I never should have gone on that date."

"I'm sorry, Amy, I never meant for this to happen," Bridget said. "I swear I'll never set anyone up on a blind date again. Can you ever forgive me?"

She pulled back and looked at her friend, "You meant well, and you are my best friend," she said. "But no more blind dates, okay?"

Sunday morning, Amy was rudely awakened by the curtains in her room being ripped open to let in the early morning sunshine, "Rise and shine, we're going out to breakfast, and we've got to get moving if we're going to get a table," Bridget said, walking over to the bed and pulling off the covers. "I let you wallow yesterday, but today you're getting out of bed and facing the day."

"I wasn't wallowing, I was resting," she said, pulling the pillow over her head. "Today I was going wallow."

"Come on, Amy, get out of bed," Bridget prodded. "Let's go have some fun, it's going to be winter before long. Let's take advantage of the nice weather, some sunshine would do you good."

"Fine," she said, throwing off the pillow and sitting up. "What do you want to do?"

"Let's take a hike, the fall colors are perfect right now," Bridget said. "You haven't been out of town since you got here. We'll pack a lunch and have a picnic. I know this beautiful little lake that would be perfect."

"Okay, you've talked me into it," she said, getting out of bed. "Just let me jump in the shower and get dressed."

When they walked into the diner later that morning, everyone in the building stopped talking and looked over at

them. “Did I forget to put clothes on or something?” she leaned over and asked Bridget. “Why are they all staring at us?”

Just then Ruth, one of the owners, came rushing up, “Well, look at this, we’ve got a real celebrity here this morning,” she said. “Come on ladies, I’ve got the perfect table for you.”

She looked over at Bridget, who shrugged her shoulders, “Ruth, did we miss something?” Bridget asked. “What are you talking about? We’re not celebrities.”

Ruth stopped walking and turned around, “Well, for today, Amy is. Everyone is talking about the article you wrote for the paper,” she said. “It’s been the main topic of conversation around here. The machine out front sold out in an hour, Elsie is going to be thrilled.”

Stunned, she followed Ruth to a table right in the center of the room, surprised by how many people greeted her by name, and a bit overwhelmed by all the attention. “Well, how about that,” Bridget said, grinning at her. “I’m friends with a celebrity.”

CHAPTER 10



GRANT

Grant leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, enjoying the autumn sunshine, thinking there wouldn't be many more days like this one before winter brought the cold and snow. Zander was standing by the shore of the lake, his entire focus on the fishing poles, hoping for one more bite before they pulled the lines in to have lunch. Knowing it would probably be their last fishing trip, he'd kept the lines in the water much longer than normal. With the sun climbing in the sky, it was unlikely the fish would still be biting, but Zander was happy, and that's all that mattered.

Deciding to give Zander ten more minutes, he stretched out and crossed his ankles, thinking he might grab a quick nap, but the sound of footsteps and female voices caught his attention. Sitting up, he turned to look over at the trail, groaning when he saw Bridget and Amy come up over the final rise and pause at the top to look at the lake. Reminding himself that he'd done all he could to smooth things over with Amy and she'd made it very clear where they stood, he turned back around, ignoring the way his heart was pounding or the cold spot deep inside him when he thought about what could have been.

"Dad, look, Bridget and Amy are here," Zander called, running over to him. "Can I go talk to them?"

Knowing there was no avoiding them, he reluctantly got to his feet and turned around, hoping he didn't do anything to make things worse since he seemed so good at it. "Go ahead," he told Zander, then watched as his son took off at full speed

toward the women. “But slow down, you’re going to trip and fall.”

Bridget looked surprised when she saw Zander, then looked up and waved at him. He waved back, but was more focused on Amy’s reaction. The smile on her face was genuine when she saw his son, and a wave of warmth spread through him, quickly followed by a burst of desire more powerful than any he’d felt before. When she finally looked up at him, their eyes met, sending waves of something much more powerful than desire rushing through him. His magic slowly began to come to life, making his body tingle, bringing with it the animal inside him, and a deeper need than he’d ever felt before.

He had the insane impulse to close the distance between them, pull Amy into his arms, and kiss her. He even took a few steps forward before he stopped himself, then managed to get control of both his magic and the wolf inside him. It occurred to him as he watched them walk toward him, Zander looking up at Amy with a huge smile on his face, that he was fighting a losing battle. Even his son had figured out how special she was.

Wondering what it would feel like to give up, to stop fighting his desire for Amy and give in to the instinct he’d been fighting since the first time he saw her, he waited until they reached him, a sense of anticipation suddenly rushing through him. It would be so easy to break his promise to himself, so natural to pull her into his arms and lower his mouth to hers. He’d done it before and remembered all too well how wonderful it had felt.

“Grant, what a surprise,” Bridget said, looking a bit nervous. “I just want to say that I didn’t plan this. I didn’t know you two would be up here, I promise. I just wanted to enjoy the nice weather, and I’ve always loved this lake.”

“I believe her,” Amy said, shrugging her shoulders. “She promised she was done matchmaking.”

“We’ll walk around the lake and find another place to have our picnic,” Bridget said. “We’ll give you plenty of space, you

won't even know we're here."

Zander ran over to him and started pulling on his arm, "Don't make them go," he begged. "I want to show Amy our fish."

"I wouldn't dream of it," he said, looking over at Amy. "There's plenty of room here for all of us. We were just about to have lunch; you should join us. I bet you're hungry after that hike."

Amy hesitated for a second, her eyes searching his face, and to his relief he felt the warmth of the connection between them come to life. "Well, since Bridget didn't plan this, and Zander wants to show me his fish, I guess that would be okay," she finally said, smiling when his son began to jump up and down with excitement. "Just let me put my backpack down, and I'll be ready."

Needing a few more minutes to work through what he was feeling, he let Zander lead Amy down to the water, but stood watching them as his son began to explain the fine art of fishing to her. A little smile on his face, the warmth he'd felt earlier spreading through him again, the promise he'd made to himself began to fade from his mind, replaced with a feeling of hope, something he hadn't felt for a long time.

Stunned by the emotion washing over him, he didn't hear Bridget come up next to him, "I didn't plan this, but I almost wish I had," she said, looking over at Amy. "Fate sure is being patient with you. Don't blow this chance like you did all the others, it might be the last one you get."

Before he could answer, she walked away, and his attention was drawn down to the shore where Zander was lifting the stringer full of fat fish out of the water, Amy looking on, her face full of fascination. When the fish began to thrash, sending a spray of ice-cold water cascading over them both, Amy let out a little scream, and stepped back from Zander, nearly falling into the water. A panicked look appeared on Zander's face, and he knew that he was about to drop the stinger, soaking them both in the process.

“Hang on, I’m coming,” he called, closing the distance between them in only a few steps and grabbing the stringer. “How about we get these fish back into the water.”

Amy nodded her head, a wary look on her face, “I didn’t know they were still alive,” she said. “I thought.....well, I don’t know.....”

He laughed, couldn’t help himself, “We don’t kill them until we’re ready to clean them,” he said. “That way they stay fresh.”

“Clean them?” she asked, wrinkling her nose, then shook her head. “Never mind, I don’t want to think about it before lunch.”

“I’m going to teach Amy how to fish after lunch,” Zander said proudly. “But I might need some help with the hooks.”

“Let’s talk about it after we’ve had some lunch,” he said, ushering Zander away from the fish. “Go check your pole before we eat.”

Amy

“Okay, Dad,” Zander said, skipping away from them. “I hope you packed me peanut butter and jelly.”

Suddenly alone with Grant, Amy instantly became aware of how good he smelled, which reminded her of how good he tasted, and she felt herself blushing. Turning away so he wouldn’t see, she started to walk away, not trusting herself or him, not when she could feel the tension in the air between them. She’d never been drawn to a man like she was drawn to Grant, but it was like sticking your finger into a flame, attractive at first, but painful later.

The problem was that she couldn’t seem to get away from him, he kept popping up in her life like he belonged there, and it drove her crazy. Looking at him now, she wondered which side of him she’d see that day, the flirty, sexy man she’d started falling for, or the haunted shadow of the man he used to be, then reminded herself that it didn’t matter. Neither of those men belonged to her.

“If you don’t want to learn to fish, I can let Zander down easy,” he said, breaking the silence between them. “I’m sure you weren’t planning on getting a fishing lesson from a five-year-old this afternoon.”

She looked up the bank at the little boy, happily helping Bridget unload food from their backpacks, “Honestly, I didn’t even have this hike planned, so I don’t mind,” she said. “He’s so excited, I don’t want to let him down. Just promise me that you’ll handle the hooks.”

Grant grinned at her, making his eyes sparkle and her heart skip a beat, “That’s a deal,” he said. “Are you ready for some lunch?”

When they’d all eaten their fill, they put the trash and leftovers back into the backpacks, then Zander grabbed her hand and pulled her back down to the water. She listened carefully as he explained how the fishing pole worked, then watched as he reeled his line in, a bare hook finally emerging from the water. She tried not to laugh as he growled and grumbled about the fish stealing his bait, then stomped back up the bank to Grant and shoved the pole at him.

Grant ruffled his son’s hair, an understanding smile on his face, and her heart fluttered in her chest again when she realized there was a third side to him. She must have groaned loud enough for them to hear, because both their heads turned at the same time, identical looks of concern spread across their faces.

“Are you okay down there?” Grant called. “We’ll be there in just a second. Don’t fall in or something, that water is ice-cold.”

“I’m fine, and I’m not going to fall in,” she shot back, giving him a dirty look. “Those fish just scared me before.”

Grant just shook his head, but there was a smile playing at the corners of his mouth, “Zander, why don’t you give Amy a casting lesson while I check my pole,” he said. “Just let me slip a casting plug on here so you don’t skewer one of us.”

When he handed the pole back to her, there was a harmless-looking piece of plastic on the end of the line instead of a hook, “Okay, Zander,” she said, stepping over to the water. “Show me how it’s done one more time, and then I’ll give it a try.”

After several attempts, she’d managed to slam the casting plug into the water so hard the line broke, gotten itself tangled in the trees twice, and almost poked herself in the eye. “I don’t think this sport is for me,” she finally said, handing the pole back to Zander. “I think I’ll just settle for sitting on the bank and watching.”

“Don’t give up yet, I think you’ve almost got it,” Grant said, walking over to them. “The secret to casting is all in the wrist. I can help if you want.”

“I don’t know, I just don’t think I’m going to get it,” she said, shaking her head. “Maybe my wrist is defective.”

“You don’t strike me as a quitter,” Grant said, a challenge in his eyes. “But if you’re ready to give up, that’s fine with me. It’s just not a very good lesson to teach Zander.”

“That was a low blow,” she said, taking the pole back from Zander. “But it worked, so show me what I’m doing wrong.”

Grant walked over to her and studied her for a second, “I’m going to have to touch you,” he said. “I don’t want to end up with bloody stubs.”

She laughed, then shook her head, “I promise you won’t,” she said. “But do you really have to keep reminding me I said that?”

“Every chance I get,” he said. “It was cute.”

“Cute?” she asked, a bit insulted. “It was meant as a warning.”

He shrugged, “It was cute,” he repeated. “Now, hold the pole in your right hand with your feet shoulder-width apart, then when you pull it back over your head, snap your wrist.”

She tried, but the line smacked the water right in front of her, “That didn’t help,” she said, then let out a little gasp when

he wrapped his arms around her and aligned her body right with his. “Grant.....I don’t think.....”

“Just relax,” he whispered into her ear. “Let me guide you through it.”

It was impossible to relax with his body pressed up against hers, and she had to take deep breaths to keep the surges of desire that threatened to drag her under from taking over. Afraid that she’d do something stupid if she didn’t get away from him, she concentrated on what he was doing, her breath coming in little gasps as one thrill after another shot through her. When the line finally went zinging out into the water and the casting plug landed with a plop, she was both relieved and disappointed.

Grant didn’t let her go right away, and she finally turned to look up at him, “I think I get it now,” she said, her eyes darting to his lips, a part of her hoping he would kiss her. “Maybe you should let me go now.”

CHAPTER 11



GRANT

“*I* should, but I don’t want to, this feels too nice,” Grant said, tempted to nuzzle Amy’s neck, but sure that would be going too far. “Just let me have one more minute.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’m not going to let you do this to me again,” she said, slipping out of his arms. “I understand that you still haven’t healed from what happened, and it’s possible you never will, so I forgive you for pulling away from me, but I’m not going to let it happen again. We’re all wounded in some way, Grant, even me. I can’t be with you if you’re going to hide those wounds from me, it just won’t work. I’m an all or nothing kind of girl.”

He studied her for a second, realizing that’s exactly what he wanted, a woman who would give herself completely to him, a woman who demanded he do the same. “I’m not sure I’m there yet, Amy, but I’m working on it,” he said, trying to be as honest as he could. “But I’ll make you a deal: the next time I get scared, I’ll talk to you about it instead of pushing you away. I wish I could promise you more; I wish we could have met before.....”

“But then you wouldn’t have Zander,” she said, looking over at his son. “We’ll just have to work with what we’ve been given, Grant. Just don’t push me away, that’s all I’m asking.”

“Does this mean that I get to kiss you now?” he asked, grinning at her. “I mean, it is the opposite of pushing you away, right?”

“Nice try, Mr. Beckett, but in case you’ve forgotten, we have an audience,” Amy said, looking over at Zander. “Instead, I think you’d better give me another casting lesson, and then you can show me how to bait a hook.”

“That doesn’t sound like nearly as much fun,” he said, then sighed. “But if that’s my only choice, I guess I’ll just have to make the most of it.”

Hours later, Grant looked up at the sun, surprised to see how low it was in the sky, “Okay, Zander, we’ve got to wrap things up,” he called. “We need to start heading home soon. Tomorrow is a school day.”

Zander and Amy both groaned, and he couldn’t help but smile as a wave of warmth spread through him. “Five more minutes,” Amy called over her shoulder. “I just know there’s a fish out there with my name on it.”

“I think you’ve created a monster,” Bridget said from behind him, where she was stretched out reading a book. “You’d better hope that fish finds her soon, or we’ll be here all night.”

He laughed, “We’re going to make a small-town girl out of her yet,” he said. “She’ll never want to go back to the city.”

Bridget studied him for a second, “And is that what you want?” she finally asked.

“I think so,” he said, looking over at Amy and Zander. “I wasn’t ready for this, Bridget, but now that it’s happening, I’m going to do my best not to screw it up.”

Bridget nodded her head, “Now, that sounds more like the man I used to know,” she said, getting to her feet, a smile on her face. “Now, let’s see if we can wrangle these two away from the water.”

“You’re on. I’ll take the big one, you take the little one,” he said. “Zander will listen to you better.”

It took some coaxing, but they finally managed to get Zander and Amy to give up the fishing poles, and a few more minutes to get the fish cleaned and packed away for the trip home. Then they all loaded the rest of the gear back into their

packs and with Bridget in the lead, started down the trail. Amy was already planning her next fishing trip as they made their way home, asking him a million questions, and telling them all about the next article she was going to write.

They'd been on the trail for about fifteen minutes when he looked to the west and saw a bank of dark clouds headed their way. "We'd better pick up the pace a bit, you all," he called. "It looks like we might get wet if we don't."

Amy looked up at the clouds, taking her eyes off the trail just as she stepped on a loose rock, dislodging it and twisting her ankle before he could get to her. She went down with a surprised cry, then sucked in a deep breath and closed her eyes, rocking back and forth but not moving that leg. He rushed over to her, knelt down next to her, put his arm around her, and supported her until the worst of the pain passed, his protective instincts suddenly awakened.

When Amy finally opened her eyes and looked up at him, tears running down her face, he gathered her into his arms and held her for a second. "I'm sorry I didn't get to you in time," he said, pulling back and looking down at her. "Do you think it's broken?"

Amy gritted her teeth and wiggled her toes in the heavy boots, then let out a hiss of pain, "No, it's not broken, I can wiggle my toes," she said, a grimace of pain on her face. "But I don't know if I can walk on it."

Shrugging off his pack, he started digging through it, "Okay, let's just take this one step at a time," he said, handing her a water bottle. "Drink some of this while I find the first-aid kit. We'll start with a painkiller and see how it feels then. I don't think we should take your boot off. It provides some support and will stop the swelling until we can get you back."

Amy nodded, tears in her eyes, "I'm sorry, Grant," she said. "I should have been watching where I was going."

"It could have happened to any of us," he said, smiling at her. "I'm going to send Bridget and Zander down to the parking lot. You and I may need to find some shelter until after the storm passes. Even if you can walk on that ankle, we're

not going to be able to move very fast. Better to hunker down and stay dry.”

Amy

Amy was angry at herself. She should have been paying better attention to where she was going; now everyone was waiting for her, and she still wasn't sure that she could walk. The pain medication had turned the shooting pain into a dull ache, but when she wiggled her toes, pain shot all the way up her leg, forcing her to take deep breaths until it passed. Grant hadn't left her side since she'd fallen. His quiet strength was helping as much as the pills, but what it couldn't fix was the dark grey clouds slowly creeping over the horizon.

“I should try to walk, it looks like it's going to rain soon,” she said. “We don't want to get caught out here in a storm.”

“No, that wouldn't be a good idea,” he said, getting to his feet. “Why don't you just let me carry you?”

“You can't carry me a half a mile,” she said, shaking her head. “It would break your back.”

“I'm a lot stronger than I look,” he said, easily lifting her to her feet. “And you don't weigh that much.”

“You can't carry me and both our packs, Grant,” she said, shaking her head again. “We'd both end up hurt. If I don't put too much pressure on my ankle, I think I should be able to manage.”

“Okay, fine, have it your way,” Grant said, but didn't let go of her. “Go ahead, give it a try.”

Taking a deep breath, she put her weight on the ankle and took a step, sending waves of pain shooting up her leg, and her knee buckled. Grant grabbed her before she hit the ground, lifted her into his arms, and stood holding her until she got her breath back, and the pain was just a dull throb again. Without a word, he set her down on a rock, grabbed his pack, slung it over his shoulders, grabbed hers, handed it to her, and swept her up again.

“We tried it your way,” he finally said. “Now we'll do it my way.”

“I had to try,” she said, letting out a sigh of frustration. “I’m sorry I ruined your day with Zander. I hope they make it back okay.”

“They’ll be fine. Bridget grew up in these mountains, and you didn’t ruin our day, you just made it better,” he said, smiling down at her. “It’s been a long time since I’ve had to hide out in a cave from the weather. This should be an adventure, and I can’t think of anyone I would want to share it with more than you.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better,” she said, then looked up at him and saw the look in his eyes. “You really mean that, don’t you?”

Grant nodded, his eyes locked on hers, “I meant every word of it,” he said. “Fate seems to think we belong together, and I’m tired of fighting something that powerful. If the universe thinks we’re right for each other, I’m willing to listen.”

“It’s nearly impossible to resist you when you say things like that,” she said, her entire body filling with the now familiar warmth. “It does things to me that I’ve never felt before. It scares me, Grant, I don’t want to get hurt again.”

“I’m scared too. I never thought I would find someone like you, someone who would force me to face the demons that have been haunting me for all these years,” Grant said, shaking his head. “We’ll take it slow if that’s what you want, give ourselves time to get used to the idea of what’s happened between us. The last thing I want to do is hurt you. I can be patient. I’m not the only one who has scars, maybe I’m not the only one who still needs to heal.”

She looked up at him, then let out a long sigh, “Bridget told you, didn’t she?” she asked. “I didn’t want everyone to know about Paul, I didn’t want the looks or the pity. I would have told you that night you told me about Lyndsay, but you.....”

“Pushed you away, and then I accused you of stalking me. That was a first-class jerk move,” he said. “I still feel bad about it.”

“You didn’t know, it’s not completely your fault,” she said, surprised when he set her down on a rock. “Do you need to rest?”

“No, we’re here; I just want to go inside and make sure everything is okay,” he said, grinning at her. “Sit here for a second, I’ll be right back.”

“I’m sorry I doubted you,” she said, looking around. “You aren’t even out of breath.”

“I told you I’m stronger than I look,” he said. “Don’t move, I’ll be right back.”

When Grant disappeared into the cave, she let out a long sigh, trying to get control of the desire racing through her veins. She was teetering on the edge, ready to give in to all the feelings racing through her. The only thing holding her back was the memory of Paul peering into her window and the memory of the way it felt when Grant pushed her away that night in the truck.

Spending the night with him without giving in to the need coursing through her was going to be one of the hardest things she’d ever done. Her only hope was that he’d meant what he’d said and wanted to take things slowly. She was already half in love with him. Sleeping with him would only deepen those feelings, and she was desperately trying to protect her heart.

CHAPTER 12



GRANT

Grant pulled the boiling pot of water off the fire and set it on a rock, then grabbed a couple of big logs from the pile in the corner and threw them into the fire. After watching to make sure they were going to catch, he turned to Amy, noticing how pale her face had become, and realized she probably needed some more pain medication before he removed her boot, but knew he had to get some food into her first.

Crossing to the other side of the cave, he dug around in the emergency supplies stashed in a big wooden box, “I think we need something hot to eat,” he said, coming up with several dehydrated meals. “I’ve got spaghetti and meatballs or chicken and noodles.”

“I’m not very hungry,” Amy said, shivering. “I just want to go to sleep.”

He brought the pouches over to the fire and set them next to the hot water, “I’m sure you’re exhausted, but we can’t leave that boot on all night,” he said. “You need to eat something and take a couple more pain pills before we take it off. I’m sure it’s going to hurt.”

Amy looked down at her ankle, “I’ll take the chicken and noodles then,” she said. “Thank you for taking care of me. I know I’m not being a very good patient.”

“Other than that stubborn moment when you decided to try and walk, you’ve been the perfect patient,” he said, unable to stop himself from thinking about how Lyndsay would have

behaved if she'd been in Amy's place. "Besides, I like taking care of you."

Slipping off his jacket, he draped it around her shoulders, "Thank you," she said, looking up at him. "It's going to get cold tonight. I hope we don't freeze."

"We'll cuddle up and keep each other warm," he said, grinning at her. "You know, share our body heat and all that."

"Grant....." she said, a little catch in her voice.

He leaned down and kissed her, "I was only talking about body heat," he said. "But if you have something else in mind, I'm open to suggestions."

"As tempting as that offer is, and believe me, it's tempting," she said, her voice husky. "I think you'll just have to settle for body heat."

"You can't blame a guy for trying," he said, grinning at her. "And just so you're prepared, I'm not going to stop trying, so you'd better get used to it."

"You'd better go make our dinner before this gets out of control," she said, shivering, but this time he knew it wasn't because she was cold. "A woman can only take so much."

He laughed, "I'll remember that," he said. "And use it to my advantage."

When he'd added the boiling water to the silver packets, he carried them back over to the fire and settled down next to Amy. "The package says that they have to cook for five minutes," he said, handing her a spoon. "It won't be a gourmet meal, but it will fill you up, and we even have dessert."

"I am starting to get hungry," Amy said, then sniffed the air. "Do I smell chocolate?"

"Chocolate cake," he said, pointing to one of the silver bags. "I doubt it will be much like cake, but it's chocolate, so I won't complain."

When the time was up, he handed Amy her dinner, then carefully opened his, wrinkling his nose at the way it looked, "Maybe I'll eat with my eyes closed," he said, stirring the

noodles around with his spoon, then looked over at Amy.
“How’s yours?”

“It looks like baby food,” she said, scooping some up and letting it plop off her spoon. “But I’ll eat it if you will.”

“On the count of three,” he said, scooping up noodles.
“One, two, three.”

He shoved the bite in his mouth, then began to slowly chew it, “Okay, that wasn’t so bad,” he said after he’d swallowed. “I just can’t look at it.”

Amy’s nose was wrinkled up, “It’s edible,” she said. “But that’s about all I can say.”

They ate in silence more for the nutrition than enjoyment, then he picked up the cake packet and popped it open, taking a deep breath of the fragrant steam. “You go first,” he said, holding it out to her. “This can’t be that bad.”

Amy dipped her spoon in the brown mess, pulled it out, and slipped it into her mouth, then moaned, making his body do crazy things, but he took a deep breath and fought for control. “Now, that’s good,” she said, grinning at him. “More like warm chocolate pudding, but I’m not complaining.”

“Keep moaning like that and I won’t be held responsible for what happens,” he said, then dipped his spoon in and took a bite. “That is good. Maybe we’ll just eat dessert from now on.”

Amy took another bite, then studied him for a second, “Grant, you didn’t really think I was stalking you or using Zander to get to you?” she asked. “I know you said you were sorry about saying it, but I just wanted to make sure that you didn’t really think I would do something like that.”

He set the cake down and pulled her into his arms, “When I saw you hugging Zander, I freaked out just a little bit,” he said, then sighed. “Seeing you with him felt so right, Amy. I don’t know if that makes sense, but you two look like you belong together, and that scared me even more than the way I feel about you.”

“He’s a sweet little boy and I’m already very fond of him, Grant, and that scares me a little bit, too,” she said, then shook her head. “A year ago, if someone had told me that I’d be here, I would have laughed at them. Life can be so confusing, and I’m having a hard time keeping up.”

“We’re in no hurry,” he said, pulling her closer, then looked down at her. “Will you tell me about Paul?”

Amy

Amy looked up at Grant, her heart suddenly pounding, the thought of talking about Paul making it hard to breathe, “Talking about him won’t bring him here,” Grant said. “But if you’re not ready, I’ll understand. The man traumatized you, drove you from your home, and that’s going to take some time to get over. Talking about it might help, Amy, and I’m happy to be the shoulder that you cry on.”

“I won’t ever cry about him again, he doesn’t deserve my tears,” she said, anger welling up inside her. “I promised myself that a long time ago. Any love I had for him was extinguished the first time he followed me home from work, yelling taunts at me.”

“How did you meet him?” Grant asked. “Maybe if you start at the beginning, it will be easier.”

“It was a blind date, a friend set us up,” she said, then took a deep breath. “It wasn’t love at first sight or anything like that. Paul seemed like a nice guy, and that’s what I was looking for. I was tired of dating, tired of falling too hard and getting dumped, tired of playing all the games. I took my time with him, didn’t let myself get too involved, but he never gave up. I finally agreed to marry him after we’d been dating for two years, and that’s when everything went sideways.”

Grant gave her the space to collect her thoughts, “I moved into Paul’s apartment as soon as the ring was on my finger, and it seemed like he changed overnight. Suddenly nothing I did was good enough. He wanted me to wait on him and treated me like a servant,” she said. “For a few weeks, I was too shocked to fight back, but when it began to wear off, I stopped taking it. Then one night he hit me in the middle of an

argument. I packed up and moved out right then, I didn't call the police or report the assault, I just wanted get away from him."

"It didn't end there, did it?" Grant prompted when she'd been silent for too long. "You're almost there now, don't stop."

She shook her head, "He started following me everywhere, calling me at work, waiting for me outside the grocery store, he'd yell threats at me, say terrible things. I was so frightened," she said. "I was able to get a restraining order eventually, but it didn't help. He started breaking into my apartment and leaving things for me. The cops couldn't catch him, so I started carrying a gun. I woke up one night and he was standing outside my bedroom window. I pointed the gun at him, but he just laughed, and that's when I realized that I'd never be able to kill him. I called Bridget that night and left the next day, because he was never going to leave me alone. He thought he owned me. I really believe he would have hurt me eventually."

Grant was silent for so long, she turned to look up at him, surprised to see his face rigid with anger, "He would have; men like that never quit," he finally said. "I want you to promise me that if he shows up here, you'll tell me right away. The cops might not have been able to handle him, but I can and I will."

There was a hard edge to his voice that made her tremble just a little bit, but along with it came a burst of warmth that surprised her. "He won't follow me, at least I don't think he will, and he'd have to find me first. He'll never think to look for me here," she said. "But I like knowing that you'll be there to protect me, and you were right, I do feel better now that I've talked about it."

He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead, "I'm glad you told me, Amy," he said. "I want to kill the guy, but I'm glad you told me."

"Murder might be taking it too far," she said, giving him a kiss. "But I wouldn't mind seeing him bleed a little."

“Speaking of bleeding, I think we’d better take a look at that ankle,” he said. “The pain pills should be working now, so we shouldn’t wait much longer.”

“I’m as ready as I’ll ever be,” she said, scooting away from him. “It doesn’t hurt as long as I don’t move it.”

“I’ll try to be gentle,” he said, kneeling next to her foot. “I’m going to loosen the laces first, then I’ll try to ease the boot off. Let me know if it hurts too much, and I’ll give you a break.”

She braced herself, waiting for the pain as he unlaced her boots, talking calmly to her the entire time, slowly slipping her boot off. Letting out the breath she’d been holding when her foot was free, she wiggled her toes, wincing when the pain was suddenly back and radiating up her leg. Closing her eyes, she took deep breaths until it subsided, then opened them to find Grant watching her, his face full of concern.

“I’m okay,” she said, managing a weak smile. “I shouldn’t have wiggled my toes.”

“Let’s get your sock off and see what it looks like,” he said, slowly peeling her sock away to reveal a big bruise circling her entire ankle. “Okay, well, that doesn’t look so bad.”

“Are you kidding? It looks awful,” she said. “No wonder it hurts so much.”

“There’s not that much swelling, that’s a good sign,” he said. “I’m going to wrap it for tonight. Hopefully, this storm will break by morning, and we’ll be able to get out of here so you can get some real medical attention.”

“You’re doing a great job,” she said. “I couldn’t be in better hands.”

CHAPTER 13



GRANT

Grant tucked the sleeping bag up around Amy's shoulders, "Get some sleep. You'll feel better in the morning," he said, smoothing her hair back from her face, then giving her a kiss on the forehead. "I'm just going to step outside and call home to check in."

Amy looked up at him, half asleep, "Okay, I'll be right here when you come back," she said, then gave him a little smile. "Thank you for taking care of me. No one has done that for a long time."

"Well, you'd better get used to it," he said, kissing her once more. "I plan to be doing a lot more of it."

"Mmmm..... that feels nice," Amy murmured. "Do it again."

He leaned down and kissed her again, his body reacting when she sighed into his mouth, but forced himself to pull away. "Go to sleep, sweetheart, before we start something we can't finish," he said. "I'll try not to wake you when I come back."

Amy scowled but didn't say anything, and a second later, she was asleep, her face relaxed, her breathing even, and he quietly crept away from her. Throwing on his jacket, he slipped out of the cave and ran across the open space toward a big tree, hoping it would give him enough cover from the rain to make his phone calls. Bridget was first on his list, and he started worry when the phone just rang and rang, but she finally picked up just as he was about to hang up.

“Sorry, I was just putting Zander to bed,” she said. “He’s all tucked in up in Amy’s room, his idea, not mine, and before you ask, he’s just fine. We had a big dinner, read a few books, he took a bath, and if I don’t miss my guess, he’ll be asleep in five minutes.”

“I never doubted you for a second,” he said. “I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

“How is Amy’s ankle?” Bridget asked. “It looked pretty bad.”

“She’s got an ugly bruise and some swelling. I don’t know when she’ll be able to walk on it, but she’s tough; she’ll be fine,” he said, pride in his voice. “What’s the weather look like?”

“Not great. It’s supposed to rain all night and into tomorrow morning,” Bridget said. “I called the ranch to let them know what happened, and the boys have everything under control, but I don’t know if anyone will be able to get to you tomorrow.”

“I was afraid of that,” he said, looking up at the rain. “We’ll be fine for another night. I just hope Zander won’t be too much for you.”

“Are you kidding? He and I are having a blast. You just keep Amy safe,” Bridget said. “Call me in the morning. Maybe it will stop raining sooner than they think.”

After a quick call to the ranch just to reassure himself, he crawled into the sleeping bag with Amy, wrapped his arms around her, and fell asleep almost instantly. The warmth of their connection wrapped itself around them, keeping them snug through the long, chilly night, and he woke feeling more refreshed than he had in a long time.

Slipping out of the sleeping bag, he stirred up the coals in the fire pit, added some wood, then, when he was satisfied it was burning again, grabbed his fishing pole, and as the first rays of sunshine peeked over the mountain, headed for the stream and breakfast. The rain had swollen the gently flowing creek into a swollen torrent, but he worked his favorite pools

and still managed to come up with two fat silver fish, then headed back to the cave with a small detour on the way.

When he came back in, the fish in one hand, a surprise for Amy in the other, she was sitting up staring at the fire, but a smile spread across her face when she saw him. “Is that sunshine I see out there?” she asked. “I already feel like I’ve been cooped up in here for days.”

“It’s only been one night, but I brought something that might help,” he said, holding it out to her. “And some breakfast.”

“You brought me a stick?” she asked. “What am I supposed to do with that?”

“Use it as a crutch,” he said. “Look, it’s the perfect shape up here at the top, but we might need to make it shorter. Do you want to give it a try?”

“Will you help me up?” Amy asked. “I can wiggle my toes a little bit today, but.....”

“Just let me do something with these,” he said, holding up the fish. “I thought we could have them for breakfast. I don’t know about you, but I’m not ready for another one of those emergency meals yet.”

Amy made a face, “Anything would be better than that,” she said. “I’ve never had fresh trout before.”

“Well then, you’re in for a treat,” he said, setting the fish in a skillet he dug out of the supply box. “All we’re missing is a couple of eggs, but this will have to do.”

After he helped Amy to her feet, he measured the crutch, cut off a big chunk, then wrapped one of his tee shirts around the top, “Okay, let’s give it another try,” he said, handing it over to her. “We can cut a little more off, but I don’t want to get it too short. The bottom is going to wear away as you use it.”

Amy took a couple of tentative steps, putting just a little weight on her bad ankle, then looked up at him and smiled, “Grant, this is going to work great,” she said, hobbling over to him. “You’re a genius.”

“Well, I don’t know about a genius,” he said. “But I do think I deserve a kiss.”

She laughed, “I think I can manage that,” she said, stretching up and planting a big kiss on his lips. “Maybe even a second one.”

This time when she stretched up to kiss him, he grabbed her and pulled her into his arms and kissed her until she was limp. “That’s more like what I had in mind,” he said. “Do I still get a second one?”

Amy looked up at him, her eyes filled with desire, “That might be dangerous,” she said. “But what the heck, life is no fun if you don’t take a few risks.”

Amy

Amy watched from the bank as Grant trailed the bait through the deep pool in the stream, “Don’t you think you’ve caught enough,” she said, laughing when he jerked on the line and nothing came up. “Maybe there aren’t any left in there. You might have caught them all.”

“I threw them all back, too,” he said, grinning at her. “So, they have to be in there.”

“Well, they’re clearly smarter than you are now,” she said, looking around at the sundrenched woods around them. “You know, being stranded up here isn’t such a bad thing. It’s really beautiful, especially after all that rain.”

“You should see it in the spring or the summer when the flowers are blooming,” he said. “I think that’s the best time of the year.”

“But the fall colors are just like flower blossoms,” she argued, gesturing around her. “All the reds, yellows, and oranges, it’s like a big bouquet everywhere you look.”

“When you put it that way, it’s hard to argue,” he said, shaking his head. “But there is one thing about fall that I like best of all. I’ll show you if you’re up for a little adventure.”

“Where are we going?” she asked. “I’m not moving very fast these days.”

“Oh, it’s not far,” Grant said, putting away the fishing line. “I’ll carry you.”

She didn’t bother to fight, didn’t really want to if she was honest, and when she was settled in his arms, she let out a long sigh of contentment before snuggling a little deeper. Grant held her a little tighter as he took off through the woods, a little smile on his face, and she realized she’d never felt as sheltered or protected as she did when she was with him. Thinking back over the years and all the relationships she’d had, it occurred to her that she’d never trusted anyone the way she trusted Grant, had never been able to be herself with any of them as she could with him.

When she looked up at him, their eyes met, and a wave of desire washed over her, but for the first time it didn’t make her feel panicky. Instead, a burst of anticipation made her entire body begin to tingle. Wondering if she was ready to take the leap that fate was asking her to make, she laid her head on Grant’s chest and listened to his heart beating, breathing in his unique scent until the answer came to her, as clear as a bell. For the first time in her life, she’d found a man worth risking her heart for, a man capable of making her happy for the rest of her life.

She wasn’t going to throw away the gift fate had given her, she would fight for what she wanted, even if it meant defeating a ghost. All the doubts and fears melted away, leaving only a quiet determination to stop letting the scars of the past stand in the way of the future. Holding onto them had done nothing but cripple her, and given Paul even more power over her life than he’d already had. It was time to let him go, to move on with a man who would always protect her.

“Okay, close your eyes; we’re almost there,” Grant said, grinning down at her. “I want it to be a surprise.”

She did as he’d asked and kept her eyes closed, even though she was tempted to peek, “Okay, you can open them,” he said a few minutes later. “A little treat to go with our fish tonight.”

At first, she wasn't sure what she was looking at, but then it hit her: the bright red spots on the bushes were raspberries. "Oh, Grant, they're berries," she said, smiling up at him. "I thought they were flowers at first. Are they good?"

"The best thing you've ever eaten," he said, setting her carefully down on her feet. "The last of the season are always the sweetest. I used to help my mom pick them every year to make jam, sometimes we'd be up here, and it would be snowing."

She hobbled over to a bush and plucked one off, popped it in her mouth, groaning when the sweet juice exploded in her mouth, "Oh, my God, that's incredible," she said, then looked around. "And there are so many of them."

"That's what the bears will be thinking, too," he said. "We'd better pick some and get out of here as fast as we can. I'm not in the mood to have a fight with a bear today."

"A bear?" she asked, looking around, then back at him. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Well, you have to be careful up here," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "And there's no reason to tempt fate, so let's get picking."

When they got back to the cave a few hours later, Grant set her down then started unloading their haul from his backpack, "I didn't know there were so many things you could eat in the woods," she said, watching him unload the berries, a bunch of greens from the edge of the stream, and what looked like potatoes to her. "How do you know about all this?"

"Years of experience and some really good teachers," Grant said, standing up and looking at the food he'd laid out. "We're going to do something different with the fish tonight."

"Is there something I can do to help?" she asked. "I feel terrible just sitting here and watching you work."

"You can owe me a dinner," Grant said, smiling at her. "And just for the record, I like fried chicken."

"Noted," she said, easing back onto the sleeping bag, the excitement of the day making her sleepy. "I might just close

my eyes for a second or two, suddenly I'm exhausted."

"You're healing, it takes extra energy," Grant said, walking over and helping her get into the sleeping bag. "Take a nap. I'm going to go out and get some more firewood before I start on dinner."

"Maybe just a short nap," she said, closing her eyes. "Don't let me sleep too long."

CHAPTER 14



GRANT

Grant dropped the load of firewood on the pile outside the cave, then turned and started to go back for another load, but only made it a few steps before something told him he shouldn't leave again. He stood, letting the feeling wash over him for a few seconds, before turning and heading back to the cave, his instincts telling him that Amy needed him. As he got closer, he could hear her crying and whimpering and quickened his pace, thinking that she'd gotten up and hurt herself, but when he stepped inside the cave, she was still asleep.

It only took him a second to realize that she was having a bad dream, and he rushed over to her, knelt down next to her, and tried to decide how to wake her up gently. Before he could, she began to thrash around in her sleep, "No, no, leave me alone," she cried out. "Please don't hurt me."

He reached out and touched her shoulder, "Amy, it's just a dream," he said, but she didn't respond instead, she began to scream as if she was being attacked and pushed his hand away.

Shocked for a second, he just stared down at her, then afraid that she was going to hurt her ankle more, pulled her into his arms and held her tightly. "Amy, wake up, you're having a bad dream," he said. "Come back to me. There's nothing here that's going to hurt you."

She fought him for a second, then relaxed in his arms before her eyes slowly came open, and she looked up at him. Anger surged through him when he saw the fear and panic on her face, awakening his magic and an urge to punish the man

who had traumatized her so badly. Taking a deep breath, he pushed it away, knowing that wasn't what Amy needed right then, and held her a little tighter, reminding himself that she was safe.

"You're okay," he said, rocking her back and forth. "No one is going to hurt you with me around."

Amy took a big shuddering breath, wrapped her arms around him, and held on tightly, "I was dreaming about Paul," she managed to say, her voice shaking. "He was here in the cave, and he was threatening to kill me. He kept saying I was his and no one else could have me. He told me you were dead, that he'd killed you....."

Her words trailed off in a sob, and she buried her face in his chest, "I'm fine, Amy, Paul isn't here, it was just a dream," he said. "And if he does come after either of us, he'll be sorry. He has no idea who he's messing with."

That seemed to calm her down, and she took a deep breath, then looked up at him, "I'm sorry, Grant, I didn't mean to drag you into this. You shouldn't have to deal with my problems, you have enough of your own," she said, then let out a long sigh. "I told myself earlier today that I was going to stop letting Paul ruin my life. He drove me from my home and a job I loved, I don't want to let him come between us, too. I thought I was over love and would be happy spending my life alone if it meant I never got hurt again, but then I met you, and here I am, wanting more again."

The look in her eyes stirred his magic in a way he'd never felt before. The little spark of hope deep inside him grew as the connection between them came to life, and for the first time in years, he felt the guilt and pain slipping away. As his magic pulsed through him, awakening his animal instincts, he understood that Lyndsay had never been the woman he was destined to spend his life with.

He and Lyndsay had been wrong for each other from the very beginning, a youthful mistake that led to her tragic death, but he was no more to blame than Lyndsay was. Fate could be as cruel as it could be generous, and he'd be a fool to turn his

back on the love the woman in his arms was offering him. He'd punished himself long enough. If he'd made mistakes, it was only out of love for his unborn child; he'd made the only choice that he could have, and it was time to forgive himself for choosing life over death.

The weight of the past slowly slipping off his shoulders, he gently shifted them into a more comfortable position, but kept Amy wrapped firmly in his arms. "You and I are more alike than you realize. I've spent the last five years punishing myself because of what happened to Lyndsay," he said. "Every morning, I'd look at myself in the mirror and tell myself that I didn't deserve love, that I'd had my chance and blown it, but I realize now what Lyndsay and I shared wasn't love, it wasn't anything like what I already feel for you. I don't want to let the past come between us either. I care about you, Amy. I care about you a lot, and I'm not going to walk away from what we share ever again."

When she looked over at him, tears were running down her cheeks. "We're just a big mess, aren't we?" she asked. "Both of us afraid of falling in love, even when it's clear that there's something special between us."

"Well, at least we're in it together," he said, grinning at her. "It's much better being a little messed up with someone who's just as messed up."

Amy

Amy laughed, "I think I should be insulted by that, but you're right," she said, snuggling into Grant's arms. "The funny thing is, when I'm with you, the past doesn't matter as much. Maybe we've been thrown together to help us both heal. Maybe we can do together what we couldn't do alone."

"That's a very interesting theory," he said, then paused, a little smile on his face. "What did you have in mind?"

"Oh, I don't know....." she trailed off surprised by the question, the look in his eyes making her heart begin to pound. "I didn't think.....I mean....."

Her words trailed off in a gasp when Grant's eyes filled with desire and her body came to life. She let out a little sigh as the connection between them flared. "I don't want to wait anymore," she said. "It's been long enough. I don't think I could trust you more than I already do, and I want to take the next step."

Grant studied her for a second, the playfulness gone from his face, "Amy, are you saying what I think you are?" he asked, his voice husky, his eyes searching her face. "That's a big step, one we can't come back from."

She reached up and stroked his cheek, "I'm ready, Grant," she said. "I want to feel your hands on me, I want you to kiss me until that's all that matters, I want you to make love to me."

He groaned, untangled himself from her, then gently laid her on her back, "I can't say no to you. That's one thing I'm beginning to figure out," he said, lowering his mouth until it was just inches from hers. "I hope you won't ever use that against me."

"Never," she whispered. "I know how lucky I am. I won't ever take that for granted."

When his mouth came down on hers, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down on top of her, opened her mouth to him, and lost herself in his kiss. Growling deep in his chest as he kissed her, Grant's hands began to explore her body, sending waves of pleasure rushing through her, but it wasn't enough for either of them. Breaking the kiss, he reached for the bottom of her shirt, pulled it over her head, then slipped the clasp on her bra free and slid it off her shoulders.

His eyes drank her in, and then he reached out and traced a path between her breasts down to the button on her jeans, making her gasp with anticipation. After slipping the button free, he unzipped them and gently tugged them off her hips, a little groan escaping from his chest when he saw the lace panties she was wearing. When the jeans joined the rest of her clothes in the pile, Grant stripped of his clothes, and she

couldn't help but reach out to stroke the hard muscles of his chest.

He gasped at her touch, his eyes locked on hers for a second, filled with something more than just desire, and she was stunned. "I need you now, Grant," she whispered. "I want to be yours; I want you more than I've ever wanted anything."

"You will be mine," he said, awakening his magic with his words and sending power surging through him and strengthening the bond between them. "After tonight, you'll be mine, Amy."

She felt his words deep inside her in a place she didn't know existed. She was a little dizzy for a second, then warmth washed over her, and she gave herself up to the power of the passion between them. "Take me then," she said. "I'm yours."

Grant growled deep in his throat, reached down and stripped off her panties, threw them onto the pile of clothes, then let his eyes roam over her naked body. She opened her arms to him in a silent invitation, and he stretched out next to her, his hand already stroking over her body. He captured her mouth in a searing kiss that didn't last long enough, but when he began to kiss her neck then moved lower to her breasts, her disappointment vanished in a wave of pleasure.

He teased her hard nipples with his teeth while his hand explored, slipping lower and lower, making her writhe beneath him with anticipation. She was about to beg for his touch when he slipped one finger between her folds and began to stroke her, sending fresh waves of pleasure rippling through her and stealing her breath. Gasping as he took her higher and higher, she lifted her hips to him, then went tumbling over the edge, her nails digging into his shoulder, her whimpers of pleasure echoing off the cave walls.

As the sensations began to fade, she became aware of a throbbing need deep inside her, and she began to feel desperate to have him between her legs. "Please, Grant," she panted, opening her legs wider for him. "I need you inside me now, I can't wait any longer."

“And I can’t tell you no,” he said, slipping between her legs, his eyes locked on hers. “I need you as much as you need me.”

When she felt his swollen manhood slip between her folds, she gasped and lifted her hips to him, then cried out when he plunged himself deep inside her, stretching her slick passageway and sending waves of pleasure rushing through her. Instead of fulfilling the need pulsing deep inside her, she found she only wanted more, and lifted her hips to him again, making him growl deep in his chest. Grant buried himself deeply inside her again and again, his growls of pleasure only making the sensations more intense, and she was suddenly filled with more than just physical pleasure.

Dizzy again with the feeling, she could only hang on he took them both higher and higher, then with one last powerful thrust of his hips propelled them over the edge. He emptied himself inside her, and her body responded, gripping him tightly and making him growl and grind his hips into hers. It was several long seconds before either of them could take a breath and several minutes before Grant finally collapsed on top of her, still buried deeply inside her.

With a sigh born of true pleasure, she wrapped her arms around him and held on tightly until he finally lifted his head and looked down at her. “I’m probably squishing you,” he said. “But I don’t want to move, I don’t want to break the connection.”

She reached up and stroked his cheek, “I’m not going anywhere,” she said, smiling up at him. “I’m pretty sure we’ll get to do this again.”

“Is that a promise?” he asked, then slid off her when she nodded her head. “I’m going to hold you to that in about ten minutes.”

“Grant.....” but her words died away when he pulled her into his arms and began to nuzzle her neck, one hand already beginning to explore her body.

CHAPTER 15



GRANT

Grant woke with the sun but didn't get up; instead, he lay watching Amy sleep, wishing they could stay secluded in the cave for the rest of their lives, but he knew that the real world was just a step away. They only had a few hours left before the rescue party would get to them, and he didn't want to waste a second of the time they had left together. It would never be as simple as it was right now. Back home there would be outside pressures and Zander to think about. He'd never dated before, as much as his son clearly loved Amy, it might be different when he had to share his father with her.

Pulling Amy into his arms, he forced himself to stop worrying. They'd take this one step at a time; there was no rush to tell Zander. Instead, he focused on the woman in his arms and the warmth that spread through him when she was near him, and let out a long sigh as the tension disappeared. Nuzzling Amy's neck to gently wake her, he let his hands slide up to cup her breasts, marveling at not only how perfectly they fit in his hands, but at how quickly her nipples hardened at his touch.

"Good morning," he whispered into her ear when she stirred with a gasp. "We don't have very long before the boys will be here to get us. I just thought we could make the most of the time we have left."

She looked over her shoulder at him, a seductive smile on her face, her eyes already filled with desire. "Mmmm.....I can't think of a better way to wake up," she said, wiggling her hips against him. "What did you have in mind?"

When he grabbed her hips and slipped inside her moist heat, she let out a long sigh, “Oh, I should have known,” she said, already breathless. “I’m glad we think alike.”

When the riders finally approached the cave, they were waiting outside for them, soaking up the early morning sunshine, content to sit in silence. As soon as his ranch manager, Tony, took one look at them, he let out a long whistle, then shook his head, a smile slowly spreading across his face. His first instinct was to let go of Amy’s hand, but he held on, reminding himself that he was entitled to be happy just as much as anyone else, and it was time to move on.

Tony signaled to the other riders, then slipped off his horse and walked toward them, “Well, it sure is good to see you two,” he said. “It looks like you made it through okay. How’s that ankle, little lady?”

“Tony, this is Amy,” he said, helping her to her feet and handing her the crutch he’d made, then put his arm around her. “She’s tougher than she looks.”

Tony laughed, and she elbowed him in the ribs, “It’s nice to meet you, Tony,” she said after giving him a dirty look. “Thank you for coming all this way for us. I feel like such a fool for causing all this trouble.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble,” Tony said. “It’s a beautiful day. We don’t mind playing hooky from work for a few hours. We brought a couple of extra mounts. I didn’t know if Amy could ride or not, so I brought the big roan and a little mare.”

“We’ll have to double up on the big roan,” he said. “She’s ridden once, but she’s hurt and I don’t want to risk her falling off.”

“You got it boss,” Tom said. “I’ll let the boys know.”

After everyone had a short rest, he helped Amy into the saddle, then jumped in behind her, gave the horse a gentle nudge with the heel of his boot, and they were headed home. Amy was silent as they rode and he wondered if she’d fallen asleep, but then she turned in the saddle and looked back at him, a worried look on her face.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Does your ankle hurt?”

She shook her head, “I was just wondering.....well, I don’t know what we are to each other or where we’re going from here,” she said. “I know maybe I shouldn’t ask, and I’m not trying to be pushy or anything, but I guess I just want to know what you’re thinking.”

He pretended to consider what she’d asked, “I think I’d like you to be my girlfriend, if that’s okay with you,” he finally said, then grinned at her. “Does that help?”

“I think so,” she said, grinning back at him. “Are you going to tell Zander? I hope he won’t be upset?”

“He really likes you, so I don’t think that will be a problem,” he said, then hesitated. “But I’ve never dated before, Amy, it might take him some time to get used to the idea. Maybe we should take it a little slow with him.”

“I understand, I don’t want to upset him,” Amy said. “I care about him, Grant. He’s an amazing little boy, I’ll let you take the lead on this one.”

He looked down at her, then gave her a kiss on the forehead, “You’re an amazing woman, Amy,” he said. “How about this: I’m going to take you out on a date, I’ll tell Zander about it and see how he takes it.”

“You want to take me on a date?” she asked, a little smile on her face. “That’s so sweet.”

“Dinner and dancing,” he said, then shook his head. “Well, maybe we’ll skip the dancing part.”

Amy laughed, “I’ll go anywhere with you,” she said. “Just name the place and time, I’ll be there.”

“There’s a fundraiser next Saturday for the 4H. I was thinking maybe we could go,” he said. “It’s a formal dinner, so if that doesn’t sound good to you, we could do something else.”

“That sounds like fun,” Amy said. “You’ve got yourself a date.”

Amy

Amy took one more look into the mirror, then turned in a circle, thrilled with the dress that Bridget had loaned her, but still nervous about her date with Grant. It was a little silly considering the fact that they'd already slept with each other, and it wasn't like a real first date, but the only problem was no one had told the butterflies in her stomach that. Taking a deep breath, she turned away from the mirror, grabbed the little clutch that matched the dress, and left her room before she chickened out.

Grant was waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs, Bridget behind him, a sappy smile on her face, and his eyes lit up when he saw her banishing the butterflies. "You look incredible," he said, stepping up to take her hand when she got to the bottom of the stairs. "All the other men are going to be jealous that you're with me."

She didn't resist when he pulled her into his arms and kissed her, ignoring the sigh from her friend over in the corner. "You two are so perfect together," Bridget said when they parted. "Don't screw it up this time, Grant."

"Thanks for the advice," he said, giving Bridget a dirty look, then looked back over at her. "Are you ready for this?"

"If you are," she said. "I'm a bit nervous. I don't really know that many people in town, and I'm sure everyone will be talking about us before the night is over."

"One of the drawbacks of living in a small town," Grant said with a shrug of his shoulders. "If you don't want to go, we could just go back to the ranch and put something together for dinner."

"I'll be fine, but you're sweet for asking," she said. "Shall we go?"

When they walked into the country club at the golf course outside of town, she was aware of the eyes following them across the room to their table, and the butterflies were back. Grant squeezed her hand, and smiled at her, then helped her into her chair before sitting down next to her.

“We’ll just sit here for a second, give them all a few minutes to discuss us, then we’ll face them head-on,” he leaned over and whispered. “Once they meet you, it will be fine, I promise, just be yourself, and they can’t help but love you.”

She took a deep breath to calm herself down, “I know you’re right,” she said, leaning back in the chair. “I’ve just never been such an outsider, it’s a bit overwhelming.”

“Look over there,” he said. “Isn’t that Elsie over by the bar? Let’s go say hello.”

Relieved to see a face she recognized, she got to her feet, “That’s a great idea,” she said, taking his hand when he held it out. “She loved my last article and my idea for next week.”

“She’s a smart lady,” Grant said. “People love those pieces you’ve been doing. As soon as they find out who you are, I bet everything will be fine.”

When Elsie saw Amy, she latched onto her and started leading her around the room, introducing her to everyone. Grant followed along behind them, an amused look on his face. She received nothing but warm greetings and praise for the first two articles she’d written, and by the time Grant finally pried her away from Elsie, she was feeling much more confident.

“Everyone was so nice,” she said as he helped her back into her chair. “I don’t know what I was worrying about.”

“None of them are perfect, and most of them will talk behind your back, but deep down, they’re good people,” he said. “Sometimes it feels like we’re one big family around here. We fight and squabble, we drive each other crazy, but we’re there for one another.”

“Thanks for bringing me, Grant,” she said, leaning over and giving him a kiss. “I’m having a good time, and I’ve met a lot of people tonight. I think it will be good for my articles.”

“I’m glad. I’m having a good time too,” he said. “It’s been too long since I got out.”

The food was excellent, but she pushed her plate away before she was stuffed, “I can’t eat another bite, or I won’t be able to walk,” she said. “That was delicious, as good as any restaurant in the city.”

“We know a thing or two about food around here,” he said, smiling at her. “Did you leave room for dessert?”

“Only if you carry me out of here,” she said. “I couldn’t eat another bite.”

“That could be arranged,” he said, grinning at her. “But how about I get it to go and we can go back to the ranch? I haven’t been alone with you for a week. I don’t mind sharing you for a while, but a man has needs.”

She laughed, “And what needs would we be talking about?” she asked, a blush rising on her cheeks, then shook her head. “On second thought, maybe you shouldn’t tell me.”

“If you won’t let me tell you, then I’ll just have to show you,” he leaned over and whispered. “But I will tell you this much, it involves you naked in the new bed I bought this week.”

“You bought a new bed?” she asked, a bit surprised.

Grant shrugged, “I bought us a new bed,” he said, grinning at her. “It was time to get rid of the old one, time to let go of the past and move on.”

She leaned over and gave him a kiss, “That’s so sweet,” she said. “Let’s go home and try it out.”

“I like the sound of that,” he said, getting to his feet. “I’ll just go beg for dessert to go. Just remember to limp a lot when you get up.”

When she finally got to her feet, she didn’t have to fake her ankle hurting and barely made it to the doors before she had to sit down. Grant swept her up in his arms instead and carried her to his truck, tucked her inside, buckled her seat belt, and then gave her a kiss that made it very clear what his plans for the rest of the night were.

CHAPTER 16



GRANT

Grant took a sip of his coffee and then set the cup back on the table, enjoying the sight of Amy, dressed only in one of his tee shirts, bustling around the kitchen making breakfast. It wasn't just that she stirred him in ways no other woman had, she was amazing in so many other ways, and watching as she moved around his kitchen like she belonged there, he had to remind himself to slow down. He'd made the mistake of moving too fast once before and wouldn't make it again, even though deep down he was sure that it wouldn't matter how much time he took. Amy was meant for him.

Unable to resist the urge to touch her, he got to his feet and walked over to the stove where she was frying up crisp pieces of bacon. "That smells good," he said, putting his arms around her and nuzzling her neck. "But not as good as you smell."

Amy gasped, then shivered, "Grant, you'll make me burn the bacon," she said, her voice already husky with desire. "Go sit back down and behave yourself."

"If you knew what was going through my mind right now, you'd know that I am behaving myself," he whispered in her ear, smiling when he got the response he was looking for. "We still have a couple of hours before Zander gets home, plenty of time for what I have in mind and breakfast."

Amy peeked at him over her shoulder, then turned back to the bacon, "That's a very tempting offer, but I'm starving, and so are you," she said. "Breakfast first, and then we'll see how much time we have left."

“Fine,” he said, pretending to pout. “What can I do to help?”

“Go sit back down and stop distracting me,” she said, turning and giving him a big kiss. “It’s my turn to cook; you can do the dishes.”

When their plates were empty, he sat back in his chair with a contented sigh, realizing that he’d been hungrier than he realized, thanks to the desire that seemed to be his constant companion when Amy was around. Looking up at the clock, he figured they had plenty of time to go back up the bedroom and started to get up to clear the table, but Amy pushed him back down in his chair.

“I’ll get this,” she said. “Finish your coffee.”

When she came back from the sink, he pulled her onto his lap, “Now that we’ve had breakfast, I believe there was something else we were going to do,” he said, sliding his hand up her shirt to cup her breast making her gasp and the nipple harden against his palm. “And I think this is an excellent place to start.”

He captured Amy’s mouth in a kiss that left them both breathless, then got to his feet to carry her to the bedroom, but there was a knock on the kitchen door, and a second later, it burst open. Lyndsay’s mother was standing on the porch, her face a mask of anger and when she saw them, she let out a huff of displeasure, then stomped inside, slamming the door behind her.

“So, the rumors are true, you’ve got a whore in my daughter’s house,” Trudy said. “How dare you do this; how dare you desecrate Lyndsay’s memory with this woman? I told you that I’d personally see to it that you were miserable for the rest of your life. You’d better get her out of here right now, or you’ll be sorry.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” he said, gently setting Amy on her feet, then turning to Trudy, “You can’t just come into my home like you belong here,” he said, taking a step toward her. “And this isn’t Lyndsay’s house, it’s mine. I’ll do what I want with who I want. It’s none of your business. I’m going to ask you

nicely to leave now, and I hope that you'll cooperate so this doesn't have to get ugly."

"None of my business," Trudy shrieked at him. "If it hadn't been for you, I'd still have my daughter. You're nothing but a monster, you killed her, and you'll probably kill this one too. Does she know what you are, what you're capable of? I bet not, I bet she thinks that you're a nice guy. She doesn't know what is lurking deep inside you, but I do. Lyndsay told me all about it. She was afraid of you; did you know that? She was frightened of you, and she had good reason to be. You're nothing but a murderer, Grant Beckett, and you don't deserve to be happy."

"That's enough," he finally shouted, interrupting Trudy's tirade. "I want you to leave right now, I've heard enough of your accusations to last me a lifetime, and I won't listen to it anymore."

Trudy narrowed her eyes at him, "I'm going to take Zander away from you and make sure that you never see him again," she spat at him. "He shouldn't be raised by someone like you, he deserves to be brought up in a normal home with normal people, not by a bunch of animals."

"You need to leave now," he said, taking a couple of steps toward her. "Or I'm going to have to call the police and have you removed. It's your choice."

"This isn't over, I'm going to avenge my daughter's death," Trudy shouted at him. "I'm going to ruin your life, and enjoy doing it."

When the door finally slammed closed behind Trudy, he let out a long sigh, and turned to Amy, who was staring at him with wide eyes. "I'm sorry about that," he said, his stomach sinking when he realized Amy didn't know he was a shifter. "As you heard, Trudy blames me for Lyndsay's death like the rest of the family. Don't pay any attention to what she said; she's still grieving."

Amy shook her head, "Grant, you shouldn't have to put up with that," she said, slipping into his arms. "No wonder you've had some much trouble getting over what happened."

He sighed, “For a long time I thought she was right, and that made it easy to take,” he said. “Now that I’ve begun to forgive myself, I can see how toxic she is, and I’m going to have to give some thought to whether she’s going to be able to see Zander anymore.”

“I’m sorry, Grant,” she said. “I never meant to cause all this trouble.”

He shook his head, “It’s not your fault,” he said. “You had nothing to do with this. Trudy feels guilty because she and Lyndsay fought over the baby too. She didn’t want Lyndsay to get rid of it any more than I did.”

“And she’s taking it out on you,” Amy said, nodding her head. “I guess I can understand that, but that doesn’t mean you have to put up with all that ugliness. She called you a monster and an animal, and so did Lyndsay’s brothers that night at the carnival, she said Lyndsay told her all about you.....”

“I don’t think now is the time to discuss this,” he said, gently pushing her away, a feeling of panic welling up inside him. “We need to talk, but Zander is going to be home soon, and I don’t want him to find you here. I should take you home now.”

Amy

Stunned by Grant’s rejection, Amy stepped away from him, “Oh, okay,” she said, feeling tears stinging her eyes. “I’ll just go get dressed.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” he said, turning away from her. “I’ll start cleaning up.”

It took all her strength to climb the stairs and put on the change of clothes she’d brought with her without giving in to the tears that threatened every time she thought about how close they’d come. Keeping her eyes averted from the bed she’d come to think of as theirs, she hung Bridget’s dress up, gathered her things, being careful not to forget anything, then went back downstairs.

Grant was staring out the window when she got back to the kitchen, so deep in thought that he didn’t notice her, and she

took a second to study him, hoping that when he turned around, she'd see the man she was falling in love with. She finally had to clear her throat several times before he turned around, the haunted look back in his eyes, and instead of feeling warmth when their eyes met, she shivered as her entire body became cold.

"I'm ready," she said, doing everything she could not to cry. "I'm sorry if I took too long."

"No problem, they're bringing Zander home a little late," he said. "I still have plenty of time to get you home and get back before they get here."

Disappointment thundering through her, she followed him out of the house, her body aching with the need to touch him, but he made it more than clear he didn't want that, so she climbed into the truck and buckled her seat belt. They drove back to town in silence, her heart feeling like it was going to break and knowing that she only had herself to blame.

When Grant pulled up in front of Bridget's house, he turned to face her, "I'm sorry this ended so badly," he said. "I just want you to know that I'm not pulling away from you. I just have a few things to sort out before this goes any further. Trudy reminded me that things aren't as simple as I wanted to believe. I still want to be with you, Amy, but right now, I need a little space."

It took everything in her not to freak out; he hadn't run away from her this time, but she had a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach that something was wrong, that she'd missed some important fact. She wanted to push him right then, wanted to ask all the questions racing through her brain, but instead, she took a deep breath and steadied herself.

"I don't really have much choice, do I?" she finally asked. "But I just want you to know that whatever it is you have to tell me, it won't change the way I feel about you. Don't make me wait too long, Grant."

She got out of the truck before she started crying, feeling a wall go up between them, ran up the front walk, and let herself in without looking back. If he wanted space she'd give it to

him, but she wasn't going to let him see how much it hurt. He already had too much power over her. Leaning up against the front door, she finally let the tears come, her sobs echoing through the house and bringing Bridget running down the stairs.

“Oh, no, Grant screwed up again, didn't he?” she asked, wrapping her up in a hug. “What did he do this time?”

At first, she couldn't speak, all her pent-up tears in a rush to get out now that she could let them go, but she finally managed to tell Bridget what happened. “He said he needs some space to figure some things out,” she finished. “I told him not to wait too long; I didn't know what else to say. I'm so pathetic, I should have stood up for myself, I should have made him tell me right then. Now I'm going to be miserable waiting for him to call me.”

Bridget guided her into the kitchen and pushed her down into a chair at the table tucked into the corner of the room, “First of all, you're not pathetic, you're in love,” she said, then sighed. “Amy, you did the right thing. Grant has a lot to work through, and seeing Trudy like that must not have been easy. That woman has been making his life hell since Lyndsay died.”

“She called him a monster and an animal, it was awful,” she said, remembering the look in the woman's eyes. “I think she really hates him, Bridget. She warned me that he'd kill me too, and asked me if I knew what he really was. You've known him his entire life, do you know what she was talking about?”

Bridget studied her for a second, then got to her feet, “I'm going to make us some tea,” she said. “I think you need it.”

“You didn't answer my question,” she said, her stomach doing flip-flops. “What is he hiding, Bridget? I'm your best friend, you have to tell me.”

Her friend sat down next to her again, “I wish I could, Amy, I really do, but it's not my story to tell,” she said, shaking her head. “But I promise you it's not something terrible. Grant isn't a monster or an animal. He won't kill you; he'll protect you for the rest of your life. The truth is, you're

lucky Amy, Grant is the kind of man all women want to fall in love with. It may not feel like it right now, but someday this will all make sense.”

It was her turn to sigh, “I wish I could say that makes me feel better, but it doesn’t,” she said. “I thought you would be on my side, but I can see that I was wrong. I think I’ll skip the tea and go up to my room. I’m kind of tired, it’s already been a long day.”

Bridget didn’t stop her, but just as she was about to walk out of the room, she called, “I wouldn’t have set you up with him if I thought he wasn’t a great guy,” she said. “You’re my best friend, I just want you to be happy, I really would tell you if I could. Please don’t be mad at me.”

She stopped and turned around, “I’m not mad at you,” she said. “I’m just disappointed.”

CHAPTER 17



GRANT

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Grant said, nearly coming up out of his chair. “That’s ridiculous, Mel, I’m not going to let that woman push me around.”

“Calm down Grant, it’s just for a couple of weeks,” his uncle said. “I know it seems ridiculous, but these are some serious accusations Trudy is making against you. We don’t really have much choice but to let the system work this out.”

“Mel, Zander wasn’t even there,” he said, shaking his head. “And we weren’t having sex in the middle of the kitchen, and even if we were, it’s my home, I should be able to do as I please. She barged in. Did you tell the judge that?”

Mel shook his head, “Grant, I told you, Judge Franklin isn’t listening to either side until the hearing,” he said. “If I keep pestering him, he’s just going to get mad, and right now, he’s on our side.”

He let out a frustrated sigh, “How many times is that woman going to be allowed to do this to me?” he asked. “Isn’t there a way we can stop her from filing these suits? If you weren’t family, I’d be broke by now. This can’t continue, and it’s not good for Zander. Every time we have to do this, it disrupts his life. That woman has got to be stopped.”

“I’m working on that too,” Mel soothed. “I know how frustrated you are, but I think this time Trudy has gone too far. The courts never want to ignore these cases when they involve children, but there is a breaking point.”

“I hope that you’re right,” he said. “I’m trying my best to move on with my life, to give Zander a more normal childhood, but Trudy has been blocking me at every opportunity. I used to think that Zander needed all of his family, but I’m beginning to think it might be better if he didn’t see them anymore.”

“Let’s talk about that some more when it gets closer to the hearing,” Mel said. “You’re angry now, but you might change your mind.”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen,” he said. “But you’ve never given me bad advice, so we’ll hold off on that for now.”

Mel closed the file that had been opened on his desk and put it to the side, “Now that we’ve handled business, I want to hear all about Amy,” he said, a smile on his face. “She must be quite a woman if she’s managed to pull you out of your funk.”

He couldn’t help the smile that spread across his face, “She’s amazing, and I’m not sure I deserve her,” he said. “I just hope she’s still mine when this is all over.”

“Love is never easy, but if it’s meant to be, it will all work out,” his uncle said. “You’d better go break the bad news to her. I wish I could do something sooner about this, but sometimes the wheels of justice move slowly.”

Grant left Mel’s office, dreading telling Amy that he couldn’t see her until the ridiculous custody hearing was over, but a tiny part of him was relieved that he had more time before he had to tell her the truth about what he was. It made him feel like a coward, but he remembered all too well Lyndsay’s reaction when he’d told her after they’d gotten married. He couldn’t let things between them go any farther until he told her, and knew deep down that he should have told her before they slept together, but he’d been a coward then, just as he was now.

After getting into his truck, he sat there for a few minutes debating how to handle the situation, then pulled his cell phone out and called Amy. She picked up on the third ring, and his heart did a flip-flop when he heard her voice, and an intense feeling of longing swept through him. Pushing it away,

trying to ignore the hope in Amy's voice, he asked her to meet him at the diner for lunch, then forced himself to hang up the call, feeling like he was about to cut off a part of himself.

Amy was waiting for him in a booth in the back, and he knew the moment that he saw her face that he wouldn't be able to wait until after they'd eaten to talk to her. It wasn't fair to either of them. The smile that appeared on her face when she saw him coming toward her disappeared when he didn't return it, and it was all he could do not to pull her into his arms and tell her that everything was going to be okay.

"Trudy followed through on her threat to try and take Zander away from me," he said, as soon as he sat down. "We have a hearing in three weeks. I'm sure nothing will come of it, but my lawyer says that I need to lay low until then."

Amy studied him for a second, "What are you trying to tell me, Grant?" she finally asked. "Are you saying we can't see each other?"

"I'm sorry, Amy, this is the last thing I wanted," he said. "Trudy made up a bunch of crazy stories, and right now the judge isn't listening to anything I have to say. I don't have any choice but to wait it out."

Amy didn't say anything for a long time, then let out a long sigh, "I know Zander has to come first, but it isn't fair," she said. "We weren't doing anything wrong, we're adults, and what we do behind closed doors shouldn't be anyone's business."

"I know, I'm sorry, Amy, I'm just as frustrated as you are about this," he said. "But I don't know what else to do, I can't lose Zander."

She looked down at the table, then back up at him, "We were supposed to talk," she said, a tear sliding down her cheek. "I know that's selfish, but I feel like you're pulling away from me, using the hearing as an excuse to avoid it. Whatever it is, Grant, it's not going to matter."

He reached across the table, "I promise we'll have that talk," he said. "I'm not giving up on us, and I hope you won't

either. What we have is special, Amy, something that could last a lifetime. The three of us would make the perfect little family; I just need a little more time. Three weeks won't seem like that long, and we'll get to see each other when I pick Zander up after work."

Amy

Amy looked up at the clock, then jumped to her feet, but had to hold onto the table as a wave of dizziness swept over her. "Oops, looks like it's time for me to go," she told the kids when the room stopped spinning. "I'll see you guys tomorrow, have a good night."

Heading for the kitchen, she found Bridget starting dinner, "I'm going to head up to my room for a little while," she said. "Everything is under control in the dining room."

Bridget looked over at her, "Are you feeling okay?" she asked, a look of concern on her face. "You look a little pale. Maybe you should lie down for a few minutes."

"I'm just a little tired, I haven't been sleeping well lately," she said. "Maybe I will lie down for a while, if you don't mind."

"I think you should," Bridget said, then hesitated. "Maybe you should just see him, Amy. I know it's hard, but ever since you started avoiding Grant, you've been..... well, not yourself."

"I know, but I don't know what else to do," she said, letting out a long sigh. "It hurts too much to see him and know I can't even touch him. At least this way it's just a dull ache all the time instead of the stabbing pain I feel watching him walk away."

"That woman should be shot," Bridget said, stomping her foot. "This has gone on long enough. How many times is the judge going to give her more time? It isn't going to change the truth."

"I'm beginning to think that it doesn't matter," she said, a stab of loss stealing her breath for a second. "If Grant really wanted to be with me, he'd fight; instead, he's just letting her

drag this on and on. I'm about to give up. At least then I could start healing."

"Oh, Amy, don't do that, you'd just be letting that woman win," Bridget said, rushing over to her and putting her arms around her. "Grant loves you. I can see it in his eyes when he looks at you. Please don't give up."

"I wish I believed that, but it's been six weeks, and we still have another three to go before the hearing," she said, shaking her head. "I can't fight this battle on my own, Bridget. Grant has to want it too, and I'm beginning to think that he doesn't."

* * *

Amy shifted in the uncomfortable plastic chair, wondering why they put them in places where there were sick people. Then, she realized she might be one of those people. The doctor's call had surprised her; she'd always been in perfect health, but she had been feeling rundown lately. She'd assumed it was the lack of sleep and stress of missing Grant; now she just hoped that was all that was wrong with her.

When the door to the back of the office opened and a nurse stepped out, her heart began to hammer in her chest, "Ms. Erickson, the doctor can see you now," the woman said, smiling at her. "Sorry we had to keep you waiting."

She got unsteadily to her feet, wishing that Grant was there with her, then pushed the thought from her mind, reminding herself that he'd made his choice to let Trudy win. "I haven't been waiting that long," she said, smiling back even though she felt like she was going to throw up. "Thank you for making time to see me this afternoon."

The nurse led her past the exam rooms to the doctor's office, which did nothing to elevate the fear that coursed through her. "Have a seat, Dr. Meyers will be right here," the nurse said. "Can I get you anything?"

She shook her head, too nervous to speak, and the nurse slipped out without another word. Only a second later the door opened again, and Dr. Meyers came in. "Good to see you again, Amy, don't look so frightened," she said. "I didn't mean

to scare you by having you come back in this afternoon. You're not dying."

"But I'm sick," she said. "I haven't been feeling very good lately, I've been tired all the time, and well..... I didn't tell you before, but I've had a couple of dizzy spells."

Dr. Meyers smiled at her, "Those symptoms sound like what I would expect," she said. "You're not sick Amy, you're pregnant, about six weeks if my calculations are correct."

She was too stunned to speak at first, "Pregnant, you mean like with a baby?" she finally asked. "That can't be right, I'm on birth control. It's not possible."

"We ran the test three times just to be sure," Dr. Meyers said, getting up from behind her desk and sitting down next to her. "Amy, no form of birth control is completely effective. A small percentage of the time they fail. It sounds to me like you have some decisions to make."

It took a second to understand what the doctor was suggesting, "I'm having this baby," she said, her voice more forceful than she'd intended. "I mean it's not bad news, just surprising news. I've always wanted to be a mother. As soon as I get over the shock, I'm going to be thrilled."

The doctor laughed, "Well, then, as soon as you've recovered, let's get you an appointment to come back and see me," she said. "You and that baby need a more complete physical than what the state requires for you to get a child care license. I'd like to see you tomorrow if you can make the time."

CHAPTER 18



GRANT

Grant paused outside the back room of the diner, not in the mood to socialize, but Zander was pulling him by the hand, a look of anticipation on his face. “Come on Dad, we’re already late,” his son said. “All the good games are already going to be gone.”

“I can only move so fast,” he said, feeling the exhaustion that had become his constant companion lately. “Slow down, I’m tired today. I didn’t sleep very well last night.”

Zander stopped and looked up at him, “Dad, are you sick?” he asked. “You’re tired all the time, and you never want to do anything anymore.”

Wishing he hadn’t said anything, he shook his head, “No, I’m not sick,” he said. “I just have a lot on my mind these days. It’s nothing you should be worried about.”

His son studied him for a few seconds, “You should tell Grandma to leave us alone,” he finally said. “I don’t like her very much, and she’s keeping you and Amy apart. I liked it better when you were together. I thought she was going to be my mom.”

He could only stare at Zander, wondering how a five-year-old could know so much, “Son, you shouldn’t be worrying about grown-up problems,” he said. “Besides, you’re only five. How did you know what was going on?”

“I’m not a baby, Dad. I saw how happy you were around Amy,” Zander said. “I still think girls are gross, but she’s not so bad, and she smells really good.”

“She does, doesn’t she?” he said, ruffling Zander’s hair. “Why don’t you go play with your friends? I’ll come get you when it’s time to eat.”

Zander ran off and he stood watching him for a few minutes, then got himself a cup of coffee, his son’s words echoing through his head. He was surprised to find his usual table filled with his friends, including the men who had left the group when they got married. But it was Sawyer and Jayce who got to their feet, “Hey, Grant, just wanted to let you know before you sit down that we called everyone here to have an intervention,” Jayce said. “We’re your friends, and we’re all worried about you.”

“Sit down. We need to talk,” Sawyer said. “We can’t watch you do this to yourself any longer. It’s time someone beat some sense into you.”

Stunned, he collapsed into a chair, sloshing his coffee over the side of his mug, “Did I miss something?” he asked, looking around the table at the familiar faces. “What is this all about?”

“You throwing away the best thing that ever happened to you,” Mitchell said. “Clearly someone needs to give you a kick in the butt, and I guess that’s us.”

“I’m not throwing Amy away,” he said. “I’m trying to protect Zander.”

“I don’t think you believe that any more than we do,” Noah said. “Falling in love can be a scary experience. Believe me, I remember.”

There were nods around the table, he opened his mouth to argue, but Jessie held up his hand, “Don’t try to blame Trudy, you could have put a stop to that ridiculous mess a long time ago,” he said. “I think you’re scared, and I think I know why. You haven’t told her yet, have you?”

He shook his head, “No, I was going to then Trudy filed that complaint against me and Mel said I should stop seeing her,” he said. “I’m not scared, I’m just being cautious, there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“How long have you been telling yourself that?” Derek asked, then shook his head. “It doesn’t matter, what matters is what you’re going to do about it now. Are you really going to let Amy slip right through your fingers?”

“You may not get a chance like this again,” Grayson said. “If she really loves you, she’ll understand, if she really loves you, it won’t matter, and if it does, then she wasn’t the one for you, but you’ll never know until you take that leap of faith.”

He sat back and looked around the table, a weight lifting from his shoulders, “I’ve been miserable without her, but I’m so afraid that I’m going to lose her, I can’t face telling her,” he said. “I have no idea what I’m going to say. She might reject me, Lyndsay did. She was afraid of me after I told her, she cringed when I touched her. The only reason she got pregnant was because she got drunk one night and forgot what I was.”

“Amy isn’t Lyndsay, and the sooner you stop thinking that she is, the easier this is going to be,” Noah said. “You wouldn’t have fallen in love with her if she was the kind of person who would reject you because you’re different, and I think you’re not being fair to her by assuming that she won’t understand the gift you’ve been given.”

“It’s time for you to take control of your life back from Lyndsay’s mother,” Mitchell said. “What happened to Lyndsay was a terrible tragedy, but no one is to blame. You didn’t kill her, and it’s time to stop letting Trudy hold that over your head. You are one of the best fathers that I know, and the judge knows that too. Your personal life is just that, personal. You wouldn’t be doing anything wrong if you’re with Amy.”

“Maybe I should just marry her; that would take care of the problem,” he said, trying to lighten the mood. “I don’t know why I didn’t think about it before.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Jayce said. “If you were married, the judge would have no choice but to dismiss the complaints.”

“I was kidding,” he said, looking around the table. “At least I think I was kidding.”

“Funny how that was the first thing you thought of,” Derek said, grinning at him. “Do you want me to help you pick out the ring?”

“Hold on, I really was just kidding,” he said, looking around at his friends again. “Wasn’t I?”

Amy

Amy parked in front of the newspaper office, then sat in her car for a few minutes, hoping her stomach wasn’t going to start doing flip-flops again and reject the breakfast Bridget had made her eat. Wondering if she should have scheduled the meeting with Elsie for later in the day when she wasn’t as nauseous, she took a few deep breaths, then slowly got out of the car. When the world didn’t tip sideways and her stomach didn’t rumble dangerously, she let out a relieved sigh and headed for the building, hoping it would last.

Elsie was sitting behind the reception desk when she walked in, and a huge smile spread across the woman’s face when she saw her, “Right on time, just another thing I like about you,” she said, then studied Amy for a second. “You look a little pale. Are you feeling all right?”

“I’m fine, just a little tired,” she said, smiling at her boss, not ready to reveal that she was pregnant to anyone yet. “I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“Well, I would suggest that you take a few days off, but I have something different planned for you,” Elsie said. “Let’s go back to my office and talk.”

When she was seated across from the older woman in the crowded office, Elsie grinned at her again, “I was right about you,” she said, sliding an envelope across the desk to her. “You’ve sold more papers in the last six weeks than any of my other journalists have in the five years since I took over the paper. I’ve adjusted your paycheck to reflect that. Go ahead and open it.”

After ripping the envelope open, she slid the check out, then sat staring at it for a few seconds, “Elsie, this is three

times as much as we talked about,” she finally said, shaking her head. “That’s a big adjustment.”

“And you deserve every penny of it,” Elsie said, smiling at her. “But I do have to warn you, it comes with a few strings attached.”

“Strings?” she asked. “What kind of strings?”

“Well, just one,” Elsie said. “I want you to work for the paper full time. That check would be your weekly salary, and we have a generous benefits package. This paper needs you, Amy, you’ve breathed new life into this place, and I don’t want to let you go.”

She looked down at the check, then back up at Elsie, a slow smile spreading across her face, “I’d love to,” she said, then the excitement faded. “But before I take the job, there’s something you should know. It might make you change your mind.”

“Nothing you could say would make me change my mind,” Elise said, shaking her head. “But give it a shot.”

“The thing is.....I didn’t really plan it..... but I’m pregnant,” she said, saying it out loud to someone beside Bridget making her heart pound. “It’s still kind of a secret, so I’d appreciate it if you kept this between us, at least for now. I still have some details to work out, and well.....”

“You haven’t told Grant yet,” Elsie said, her face full of compassion. “I understand.”

“How did you know?” she asked, then sighed. “Things are a little tricky between us right now, and I don’t know how he’s going to react.”

“It’s a small town, people talk,” Elise said, shrugging her shoulders. “Grant was messed up pretty bad after Lyndsay died, but we all noticed how much he changed after he met you, and for the better, I might add. He seemed happy again, and we were all glad to see it. Now this thing with Trudy..... well, we all just wish she’d mind her own business.”

Touched by the kindness of strangers, she felt tears stinging her eyes, “Thank you, it’s nice to know that people

care,” she said. “I think I’m beginning to understand what Grant meant when he said you all take care of each other.”

“Sounds like an article in the making,” Elise said, getting to her feet. “Your secret is safe with me. Let’s go find your desk and get you settled in.”

She followed Elise out of her office, a bit stunned by the turn of events but feeling like her life was finally going in the right direction. She had a job that would support her and the baby, and it was a job she was going to love. Since she’d found out that she was pregnant, she hadn’t been sure what path she was going to take, whether she would stay in Prospect, but now things seemed a bit clearer.

For now, at least, she’d stay, live with the ache of missing Grant until he came to his senses and realized what they had was worth fighting for. Until then, she’d live her life without him, protect and nurture the life inside her, and hope that someday Grant would hold their child in his arms with as much love and joy as she had already felt for the new life they’d created.

“Well, here we are,” Elise said, gesturing to an empty desk tucked into the corner of the room. “Raid the supply closet for anything you need, then take the rest of the day off and get some sleep. I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow morning.”

She was in the kitchen later that afternoon when Bridget came in with the kids and a huge bouquet of flowers, “Well, look at those,” she said, grinning at her friend. “It looks like you have an admirer.”

“I don’t think they’re for me,” Bridget said, holding them out to her. “I found them on the front porch, and the card has your name on it.”

Her heart pounding, she took the flowers from Bridget and set them on the counter, then plucked the card from between the blooms and opened it. “Oh, they must be from Grant,” she said, tears stinging her eyes. “It says, I miss you.”

Bridget gave her a big hug, “See, I told you everything would work out,” she said. “Maybe we should celebrate.”

“I don’t know about that,” she said, rubbing her stomach.
“We’re not exactly back together, but I do have some more
good news: Elise offered me a full-time job today.”

CHAPTER 19



GRANT

Grant watched Zander getting on the bus from the kitchen window, hating Mondays more than he usually did, and wondering how much longer the mess with Trudy was going to go on. All the time he'd spent away from Amy had only made it that much clearer to him that she belonged in his life, and every day he told himself it would be the last they spent apart, but Mel wouldn't budge on letting him see her.

He knew now without a doubt that he wanted to marry her, but he wanted to do it the right way this time. He wanted the long engagement and a big fancy wedding. He already had the ring, had rehearsed what he would say so many times, it was emblazoned on his brain, and had even talked to Zander about how he felt. All that was standing in his way was Trudy and a judge who seemed to be on her side, which drove him just as crazy as not seeing Amy.

So lost in his thoughts, he jumped when someone knocked on the door. He turned from the window and started across the room, but before he could get there, it flew open. For a second, he thought Trudy was invading his home again, and anger surged through him, but it was his mom who walked in, her arms loaded down with luggage.

"Well, aren't you going to help me with these?" she demanded. "I've been traveling all night, and I'm exhausted."

"Mom, what are you doing here?" he asked, rushing over to take her bags.

“You didn’t really think I was going to stay away when I heard what a fool you’re being,” she said, giving him a dirty look. “Your friends called me, Grant. I can’t believe you’ve been hiding all this from me. I’m hurt and angry, but we’ll talk about that later. Right now, I’m going to help you get this all straightened out.”

“Mom, you can’t just come charging in here and make this all better,” he said, shaking his head. “Where’s Dad? Does he know you’re here?”

“You just watch me,” she said, a stubborn look on her face. “Your uncle Mel is being an idiot, he’s not the only one who went to law school, in case you’ve forgotten. Now, take my bags up to my room, I’m going to make some coffee, and we’re going to have a long talk.”

“Mom, I have work to do,” he said. “I can’t just take the day off.”

She froze him with a look, “Do you love this woman?” she asked, a challenge in her eyes. “Because if you do, missing out on a day of work is a small price to pay for getting what you want.”

He didn’t answer right away; instead, he let the question bounce around in his mind. “I love her more than I thought possible,” he finally said. “Is there really something we can do? Mel seems to think we don’t have any choice but to wait until Judge Franklin decides to hear the case.”

His mother snorted, “Go put my bags away. I’m going to make some coffee,” she said. “We have a lot to talk about, and I haven’t had much sleep.”

When he came back downstairs, he found his mother tapping away at her computer, her reading glasses perched on her nose, a full pot of coffee in the middle of the table. “Okay, let’s get to it,” she said, looking over at him. “We have work to do. Your uncle has been taking the easy way out, but it’s time to stir things up if you’re willing to fight for what you want.”

He knew the look in his mother’s eyes, had seen it many times growing up, and for the first time in weeks felt a

glimmer of hope. “I’ve been ready to fight for weeks,” he said. “I want Amy in my life, and I want Trudy and the rest of Lyndsay’s family out of it forever.”

“That’s my boy,” his mother said. “Now, here’s what I want you to do.....”

When he walked into his uncle’s office later that afternoon, he was ready for a fight, but Mel only sighed when he saw him walk in the door, a stack of papers in his hand. “I wondered how long it would take your mother to get here,” he said with a sigh. “She gave me an earful the other night. Let’s see what she came up with.”

Mel skimmed the pages, then set them down on his desk, “Can you prove any of this?” he asked. “I can’t go forward on this if it’s all based on just rumors.”

“It’s not just rumors,” he said, sitting down across from his uncle. “Judge Franklin has been out hunting on Trudy’s ranch every weekend since she filed the case. He’s been giving her extensions in exchange for using the land, and I have witnesses lined up who will be happy to testify if it comes to that. It’s no wonder he changed his mind about supporting my case.”

“Well, I’ll be, we finally got that old bastard,” his uncle said, a smile spreading across his face. “We’ve been looking for a way to get him off the bench for years, but it looks like your mom finally did it. I’ll file this as soon as I look it over a little closer. In a few days the you know what is going to hit the fan around here.”

“It’s about time,” he said with a sigh of relief. “I just want this to be over so I can move on with my life. Amy and I have waited long enough to be together. I’m going to ask her to marry me as soon as all of this is settled.”

“Congratulations,” his uncle Mel said, clearly happy for him. “After everything you’ve been through, you deserve a little happiness.”

Amy

Amy's arms were full as she made her way up the sidewalk to the front door. Knowing she'd never get it open without dropping everything, she used her elbow to ring the doorbell. Bridget opened the door only a few minutes later, burst into laughter, then took the vase from her hand and stepped out of the way.

"Grant must be spending a fortune on flowers," she said, sniffing the latest bouquet he'd sent her. "He's sent you two a day all week. I have to admit I'm a little jealous."

"Well, I'm happy to share. My desk at work is covered, there's no more space in the living room, and my bedroom smells like a hot house," she said, not hiding how pleased she was. "I'll admit it's a little over the top, but I'm not going to complain."

Bridget plucked the card from the center of the flowers and waved it in the air, "What does this one say?" she asked. "I bet it's something romantic."

She frowned for a second, something about the message from this morning bothering her, "I've changed," she said, grabbing it out of Bridget's hands. "I'm going to put it with the rest."

Bridget followed her into the kitchen and watched as she put the card on the refrigerator with the rest, "That one doesn't fit," she said, a frown on her face. "The rest are.....I don't know, different."

She looked over at her friend, "Do you think so?" she asked. "I was feeling the same thing, but maybe he just ran out of things to say."

"Maybe," Bridget said, but didn't look convinced. "I'm probably reading more into it than I should."

Amy pushed away the uneasy feeling in her stomach and focused on the other cards, her heart soaring when she saw the messages. "I wonder how much longer he's going to do this," she said, reaching out to touch one of the cards, then put her hand over her stomach. "I still have to tell him about the baby,

and it's not going to be long before it's going to be impossible to hide it."

Before Bridget could answer, the doorbell rang, "I wonder who that could be?" she asked, rolling her eyes. "I'm on a first name basis with the kid who delivers flowers now, thanks to you."

When she opened the door, she was greeted by the biggest arrangement yet, "Hey, Ms. Erickson, this is for you," Zac said, peering around the flowers. "It's pretty heavy, do you want me to take it inside for you?"

"That would be great," she said, swinging the door open wider. "You can put it on the table in the kitchen."

After slipping a bigger-than-normal tip to Zac, she walked him out, then went back to the kitchen and pulled the card out of the flowers. She read it once a second time, before looking up at Bridget with a huge smile, feeling giddy enough to do a little dance right there in the kitchen.

"What does it say?" Bridget asked. "From the look on your face it must be good."

"He wants to meet me for dinner tomorrow night," she said, her heart singing with joy. "I bet we're finally going to have that talk. Something must have happened with the custody case, and the waiting paid off. Now I can tell him about the baby. I hope he isn't upset; he might be, you know. Oh, what am I going to wear? Most of my clothes don't fit anymore."

"Hey, slow down," Bridget said, laughing. "We still have time to go shopping, and I told you so."

She laughed, "You only get to say that once," she said, hugging her friend. "Tomorrow night seems like a lifetime away. I wish I could see him right now."

* * *

Amy walked up to the restaurant so nervous her palms were sweaty and her hand shook when she reached for the door, but she took a deep breath and opened it with determination. After

waiting for so long, she was ready to move forward one way or another, and knew that her life would never be the same after her dinner with Grant. Her confidence wavering as she stepped inside, the thought of losing him making her heart ache, she hesitated just inside the door, but the man behind the podium had already spotted her.

“Good evening,” he said. “How can I help you?”

“I’m meeting someone here,” she said, her voice shaking. “I’m a little late, he’s probably already here.”

The man’s face lit up, “Oh, you must Ms. Erickson,” he said. “Your dinner companion is waiting at the table for you. Right this way.”

Telling herself that everything was going to be fine, she followed the man through the restaurant to a table in the middle of the room, glad that Grant had chosen a restaurant a few towns over. No matter the outcome of their dinner, the last thing she wanted was the prying eyes of her friends and neighbors watching their every move.

When the man stepped out of the way with a quick, “Enjoy your dinner,” she already had a smile on her face, but it faded away when she saw who was sitting at the table.

She started to back away, but Paul jumped to his feet and stepped over to her, “Amy, how wonderful to see you, it’s been too long,” he said, smiling warmly at her, but his eyes were hard and cold. “Come sit down, let’s get caught up.”

“I don’t think so,” she said, trying to step away from him. “Leave me alone, Paul.”

He grabbed her arm and squeezed until she sucked in a breath, then leaned over and whispered, “Don’t make a scene, Amy, I just want to have dinner with you, and then you’ll be free to go, I promise.”

She didn’t trust him, but looking around the room, she realized that there was no one to help her. She was surrounded by strangers. “I’m only staying for a few minutes,” she said, sliding into a chair. “There’s nothing you can say to me that

will change anything. You're an abusive bully and I don't love you anymore. Actually, that's wrong, I never loved you."

Paul studied her for a second, then shook his head, "Women never know what they want," he said. "But I'm willing to forgive you this time, although I have to tell you how disappointed I was to wake up and discover you were gone. Do you have any idea how long it has taken me to find you? It wasn't easy, that's for sure, but what's important is that we're here together again."

She shook her head, suddenly dizzy, unable to believe that the nightmare had started all over again, "We're not together again," she said. "I don't want anything to do with you."

"Didn't you get my flowers?" Paul asked. "I've changed, Amy, I'll be the man you want, you'll see."

Feeling like she was going to pass out, she reached out and grabbed the glass of tea in front of her and took a long drink, making a face at the acidic taste it left on her tongue. "Not sweet enough?" Paul asked, pouring more sugar into the glass and then stirring it. "Try that now."

Not sure why, except that her head was swimming, she picked up the glass and took another drink, then set it down with a thud, sloshing some over the side. "Whoops," she said, her voice sounding far away. "I spilled some."

"That's okay," Paul said, wiping up the spill with his napkin. "Have some more."

She shook her head, "No, thank you," she said, shaking her head and making herself even more dizzy. "I've had enough."

Paul smiled at her, "Yes, you probably have," he said, sitting back in his chair. "Now we'll just sit her until it works, you really shouldn't have had so much to drink. It's going to be embarrassing when I have to carry you out of here."

CHAPTER 20



GRANT

Grant walked up the steps onto the porch, reached out and rang the doorbell, anticipation thundering through him, so anxious to see Amy that he groaned in disappointment when Bridget opened the door. “Well, it’s nice to see you too,” she said, before a look of surprise appeared on her face. “Wait, I thought you were with Amy.”

“She’s not here?” he asked, disappointment blocking out what Bridget had said. “I really need to talk to her.”

Bridget pulled him into the house, a look of worry on her face, “Grant, Amy was supposed to meet you for dinner tonight,” she said, giving him a shake. “Why aren’t you with her, and what are those?”

He looked down at the flowers in his hand, “I brought her flowers, I thought she’d like them,” he said, looking around the house for the first time. “What’s all this? Do you have an admirer?”

Bridget stared at him for a second, clearly confused, “Grant, didn’t you send all these to Amy?” she finally asked, gesturing around the room. “These are hers, not mine.”

“What?” he asked, his brain finally engaging. “Who sent them to her?”

“We thought it was you,” Bridget said, dragging him into the kitchen and pointing to the refrigerator. “She’s been getting them all week, twice a day like clockwork.”

“It wasn’t me,” he said, suddenly feeling a bit panicked. “Where is she, Bridget?”

“She went to meet you. . . . I mean, whoever sent these flowers,” she said, her eyes getting big. “Oh, no, these must be from Paul. Something about it bothered me; it didn’t seem like something you would do, but I thought you were just in love.”

“Please tell me you know where they are,” he said, taking a deep breath to keep the fear and panic at bay. “Did Amy tell you where they were going?”

“There,” Bridget said, pointing to the last card. “She was supposed to meet him at eight.”

He grabbed the card and headed for the door, “I’m going after her,” he said. “Call the sheriff and tell him. . . . I don’t know. . . . just get him there.”

“I’m going with you,” Bridget said. “I’ll make the call in the truck.”

They were silent as they sped down the highway, his knuckles white on the steering wheel, the gas pedal pushed to the floor. “Do you think we’ll make it in time?” Bridget asked. “I can’t believe I just let her go, I’m so naive. I’ll never forgive myself if she gets hurt. Can’t you drive any faster?”

“I’m going as fast as I can,” he said. “We’ll get there in time. Fate wouldn’t let me get this close and then take her away from me.”

He felt Bridget’s eyes on him, but didn’t dare look away from the road, “You really love her, don’t you?” she asked. “She’s a lucky woman, Grant.”

“I’m the one who’s lucky,” he said, shaking his head. “Amy saved me, Bridget. She brought the sunshine back into my life, and I can’t believe I wasted all this time.”

He pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant, “Tell her, not me,” Bridget said. “She needs to hear it. You just about broke her heart, you big jerk.”

“I know, I was an idiot,” he said, jumping out of the truck. “But I’m here now, and I’m going to teach that guy a lesson he will never forget: no one messes with my woman and walks away.”

Amy

Amy tried to get to her feet, her brain screaming at her to get away from Paul, but she couldn't make her legs work, "What did you give me?" she mumbled, starting to tip sideways in her chair. "You drugged me, didn't you?"

Paul jumped to his feet and helped her out of her chair, "Oh, darling, it looks like you've had too much to drink," he said loudly. "I think we'd better get you out to the car."

She tried to fight him, but the drug was taking her deeper under, "Don't want to go," she managed to say. "Please, I don't want to....."

"It's okay, sweetheart, I'm going to take good care of you," Paul said, sweeping her up into his arms. "Sorry about the interruption folks, my wife had a little too much to drink. I'm just going to take her out to the car."

Trying to kick her legs, hoping that she'd knock something over or make Paul drop her, she threw her head back and forth, but people just looked away. "Stop it right now," Paul hissed at her. "I only have so much patience. Don't make your punishment worse than it's already going to be."

They were almost to the front doors of the restaurant and tears streaming down her cheeks. She tried once more, but Paul gave her a hard shake, and she remembered the baby. Sucking back a sob, she went still, biding her time, hoping to find a way to get him to let her go before they got outside and it was too late. A big gust of cold wind hit them when they walked into the entryway, and she looked over, relief flooding her when she saw Grant and Bridget blocking the exit.

"Get out of my way," Paul barked. "Can't you see that my wife is sick?"

A growl came from deep in Grant's throat, "That's not your wife. Put her down now," he said through clenched teeth. "The sheriff is already on his way."

"I don't know who the hell you are, but I'm taking my wife out of here right now," Paul bluffed. "Get out of my way before I have you arrested."

“Leave her alone, Paul,” Bridget said from behind Grant. “She’s not your wife, you’re lying. What did you do to her?”

Just then the wail of sirens filled the night, and she felt Paul beginning to waver. He turned around and started to go back through the restaurant, but several men had gotten to their feet, blocking his escape. Turning back to Grant and Bridget, he took a deep breath and tried to run past them, but Grant caught him with a solid punch in the face. Paul lost his grip on her, blood spurted out of his nose, and she went tumbling to the floor, landing in a heap at Grant’s feet.

Grant

Grant’s vision was filled with red, a killing rage rushing through him, but Amy was crumpled at his feet and his concern for her almost blocked it out. Torn between killing the man who had hurt his mate and making sure that Amy was okay, he hesitated just long enough for Paul to turn and run back across the dining room. He disappeared through the swinging doors into the kitchen. There was the sound of plates breaking and people cussing, then silence.

A second later, the sheriff came rushing through the door, two deputies behind him, “He went out through the kitchen,” he said, then sank down next to Amy. “Sweetheart, are you okay?”

There was a muffled moan, and he gently turned her over, then pulled her onto his lap, “It’s going to be okay,” he said. “Bridget already called an ambulance. Don’t worry, help is on the way.”

Amy’s eyelids fluttered, but she didn’t open them, and he had to force himself to stay calm, “It’s going to be fine, you’re tough, remember,” he soothed for himself as much as Amy. “We’re going to get through this, and then we’re going to live happily ever after, I promise, I took care of everything, Trudy won’t ever bother us again, you just have to make it through this.”

He was so focused on Amy, he didn’t see the paramedics arrive, “Grant, you’re going to have to let her go,” Bridget said, stepping up and putting her hand on his arm. “They can’t

work on her if you're in the way. Come on, let them do their jobs.”

Kissing her on the forehead, he gently laid Amy down on the floor, “I’ll be right here, sweetheart,” he said, then got to his feet and stepped out of the way. “I’m not going anywhere; I’m going to be right here with you the entire time.”

“It’s going to be okay,” Bridget said. “I don’t think he was trying to kill her, just knock her out.”

“That bastard was trying to kidnap her,” he said, watching the paramedics work. “I’m going to find him and kill him.”

“Grant, that’s.....” Bridget trailed off when she saw the look on his face. “You’d better get the council’s permission first.”

“They’ll grant it,” he said, watching as an oxygen mask was placed over Amy’s face and she was hooked up to fluids. “They couldn’t deny me after this.”

When Amy was finally on a stretcher, one of the paramedics came over to them, “She’s stable, but there’s no way to know what he gave her without blood tests, and we can’t do those until we get to the hospital,” the woman said. “Are there any major health concerns we should be worried about?”

“I don’t know,” Grant said. “I don’t think so.”

“Ummm..... there might be something,” Bridget said, then looked over at him. “I’m sorry, Grant, this isn’t the way she wanted you to find out, but she’s pregnant, about eight weeks now.”

Amy

Amy came awake slowly, her head throbbing, not sure where she was. She opened her eyes, then closed them again when the pain became more intense. Trying to remember what happened to her, she lay perfectly still, the effort of thinking making her head hurt even, and finally gave up, letting the darkness envelop her once again. The next time she woke, the headache was just a dull pain and she managed to open her eyes, confused for a second when she saw the white walls.

Looking around, she let out a sigh of relief when she saw Grant slouched in a chair by the bed sound asleep, then it all came rushing back to her. Letting out a little gasp, she closed her eyes again, but heard Grant stirring in the chair and opened them to find him staring down at her, his face full of concern.

“You’ve been out for a long time,” he said, reaching out to take her hand. “I was beginning to think you weren’t coming back to me.”

“How long have I been asleep?” she croaked; her throat so dry she could barely swallow. “I need some water.”

“About eighteen hours,” he said, helping her sit up and drink from a straw. “The doctor decided you needed the rest, so we didn’t wake you. How are you feeling?”

“I have a little headache, but that’s all,” she said, then remembered the baby. “Grant.....”

“The baby is fine,” he said, sitting down next to her on the bed. “The drugs Paul gave you didn’t hurt the little one, and she says you should make a full recovery.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and before she could stop herself, she began to cry, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” she sobbed. “I don’t know how it happened. I’m so sorry, but you don’t have to have anything to do with it if you don’t want it, I’ll understand, after what happened.....”

Grant gathered her into his arms and began to rock her, “Sweetheart, I couldn’t be happier,” he said, stroking her hair. “I can’t think of anything I want more than a baby that’s a little of both of us, well, except maybe you and Zander, but I think I have enough love to go around.”

She looked up at him relief pouring through her, “You’re not mad?” she asked. “You’re not scared?”

Grant kissed her on the forehead, “I’m scared to death,” he said. “But I’ve decided that after tonight, fate is done messing with us. I should have fought harder for you. I shouldn’t have let Trudy come between us. I promise you that will never happen again. You’re going to be stuck with me for a long time, Amy Erickson, so you’d better get used to the idea.”

Her tears this time were tears of joy, and when Grant kissed them off her face, she started laughing, “I’ve waited so long to hear that,” she said. “But I knew that you’d eventually come to your senses.”

He laughed, “I can only screw up so many times,” he said, pulling her closer. “I promise that was the last one.”

CHAPTER 21



GRANT

Grant leaned back in his chair, his stomach pleasantly full, and watched his mom and Amy at the other end of the table, thinking that his father was all that was missing. The two women had hit it off immediately, not that he was the least bit surprised. They were more alike than he'd realized. He looked over at Zander, who was watching the two women as well, with a puzzled look on his face, and he put his arm around him, hoping that all the changes wouldn't be too difficult for him.

"Are you sure that you're okay with all this?" he leaned over and asked. "A lot of things are going to be changing. If you're unhappy I want you to tell me, and I'll do my best to fix it."

Zander looked up at him, a smile on his face, "I'm okay, Dad. Really, you need to stop worrying," he said, and then his face turned serious. "How much longer are they going to talk about babies? There can't be that much to say."

"Is that what's bothering you?" he asked. "Son, I'm sorry to tell you this, but you're going to hear a lot more baby talk around here, but I promise we won't forget about you. You and I will still have our special time, and Amy wants to find something fun to do with you, too. I think that would be nice. Don't you?"

"I was thinking about starting a newspaper with some of the kids at school," Zander said. "Do you think she would help?"

“I’m sure she would love that,” he said. “Why don’t you ask her.”

Before Zander could get up, his mom got to her feet, “Well, let’s get this mess cleaned up,” she said. “Then Zander and I will get out of your hair.”

He got up to help, “Where are you going?” he asked. “I don’t think we talked about this.”

“I just thought you two might want some time alone,” his mom said, patting him on the arm as she went by. “Bridget invited us over to her house. We’re going to have a movie night.”

“Grandma said I could eat as much popcorn as I want,” Zander said. “And Bridget made cookies.”

“Well, I don’t see how I can say no to that,” he said, shaking his head. “Maybe you could ask me first next time.”

His mom turned around, “Would you have said no?” she asked, then turned back to the sink when he didn’t answer. “That’s what I thought.”

Amy laughed, “She’s got you there,” she said. “And just so you know, I’m taking notes.”

He groaned, “Just what I need, two of you,” he said, giving Amy a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks Mom, that was nice of you, but I hate to make you leave, you just got here.”

“It’s just for one night,” his mom said. “After that, you’ll be stuck with me for a while. Your father wants to meet Amy, he’ll be here the day after tomorrow, so you’d better enjoy tonight.”

When the dishes were done, his mother pulled him into the formal dining room at the back of the house, “I have something for you,” she said, digging in the pocket of her sweater and pulling out a velvet box. “I want you to give this to Amy.”

“Mom.....” he started but she shook her head, a stubborn look on her face and he opened the box. “It’s Grandma’s ring,

you've been wearing this ring since you and Dad got engaged."

His mom lifted her hand and showed him her ring finger, "I made your dad buy me a new one before I left. He grumbled and growled about it, but he always gives in in the end," she said, wiggling her finger and making the diamond sparkle. "It's time for the ring to move on. Amy should be wearing it, Grant, that's what your grandmother would have wanted."

He gave his mom a big hug, "It's going to mean so much to her," he said. "Have I told you lately that you're the best mom in the whole world?"

"Maybe once or twice, but you're welcome to say it again," she said, then stretched up and kissed him. "I'm glad you finally found someone to make you happy, son. Amy is a wonderful woman, and she's perfect for you. I expect to see that ring on Amy's finger when we get back in the morning."

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "I'll do my best."

There was still one more hurdle to go, one more truth that needed to see the light of day, and it made his stomach fill with butterflies when he thought about telling Amy. He was still scared that something would go wrong with the baby, still heard the voice in his head telling him he was a monster, but he wasn't about to run away this time. His mom had given him the time and space he needed to break the truth to Amy. He just hoped that she believed him, that he wasn't forced to show her the other side of him.

Taking a deep breath, he stuffed the ring into his pocket, "It's going to work out," his mom said. "She loves you and that's all that matters."

"I hope that you're right," he said. "It would kill me to lose her now."

Amy

Amy gave Debra a big hug, then smiled at the older woman when she pulled back and studied her for a second, "Welcome to the family, Amy," she said. "I can't wait for you to meet Carter; he's going to love you as much as I do."

A bit overwhelmed, Amy couldn't speak for a second, "Thank you, that means a lot," she said, tears pricking her eyes. "I'm looking forward to spending more time with you and meeting Carter."

"Tomorrow is soon enough," Debra said. "Zander and I should get going, Bridget will be waiting for us. I know my son will take good care of you, but if you need anything, I'm only a phone call away."

"Thank you again," she said. "For everything you've done and for raising the man you did. He's pretty special, and I'm lucky to have him."

"He's lucky to have you," Debra said, giving her one more hug. "We'll see you tomorrow, but don't worry, it won't be too early."

When the door closed behind her, she turned back to Grant, who was smiling at her, his eyes filled with love, taking her breath away for a second. Walking over to him, she wrapped her arms around him and laid her head on his chest, listening to the steady pound of his heartbeat.

Warmth washed over her, and she looked up at him, "I always feel better when I'm with you, like I'm being wrapped up in a soft, warm blanket," she said. "That probably sounds silly to you, but that's what it feels like."

His eyes met hers, "I know exactly what you mean," he said. "Amy, we need to talk, we should have had this discussion a long time ago, but it's not going to be easy for either of us, so I put it off, and now....."

"Grant, whatever it is, it doesn't matter. I told you that before and I'm telling you again," she said. "It's not going to change the way I feel about you. It's been weeks since we've been alone, I don't want to talk, I want to climb into bed with you. I want you to put your hands all over me, I want to put my hands all over you, I want you to make love to me, and then you can tell me what you have to."

"But, Amy, you don't understand," he said, shaking his head. "You might....."

“I won’t,” she said, then slid her arms up around his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. “Enough talking, Grant, take me upstairs.”

He let out a long sigh, “No one has ever had as much faith in me as you do,” he said, swinging her up into his arms. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you, but I’m going to be grateful for the rest of my life that I’ve got you.”

“I love you, Grant,” she said, knowing the words couldn’t wait another second. “I love you so much it makes me feel dizzy sometimes.”

“I love you too, Amy,” he said. “More than I ever thought possible, you’re a part of me, Amy. We’re linked in a way I didn’t think was possible, and I want you with me for the rest of my life.”

She shook her head, smiling at him, “I don’t think that’s going to be long enough,” she said. “But it’s a good place to start.”

He carried her into the bedroom, laid her gently down on the bed, and stretched out next to her, then his mouth found hers in a kiss so tender and full of promise that she was lost in only a heartbeat. The passion between them slowly came to life as Grant kissed her lazily but thoroughly, awakening her body and her senses until she was desperate for more. He undressed her one article of clothing at a time, placing kisses on her exposed skin and sending ripples of pleasure through her body until she lay naked before him.

Getting to his feet, he let his eyes sweep over her as he removed his clothes, then stood looking down at her, his eyes almost glowing in the bedroom’s darkness with an intensity that should have scared her. Instead, she felt what she could only describe as power flowing through her, filling her with not just the familiar warmth of their love, but something else, something far more elemental.

Her body throbbing with anticipation, need stealing her breath as she let her eyes roam over his body. She swung her legs over the side of the bed, then reached out and wrapped her hands around him. Grant gasped, then groaned with pleasure

as she stroked him, but she wanted more and leaned forward, taking him into her mouth. His groans turned to growls that came from deep in his chest.

His fingers slid into her hair as she lavished him with attention, his hips moving in time to her ministrations until, with a strangled cry, he pushed her back onto the bed. “God, you’re incredible,” he said, shoving her legs apart and crawling between them. “You make me feel things I’ve never felt before, and now it’s my turn.”

She wasn’t expecting his head to dip down between her legs, wasn’t prepared for the onslaught of sensations that flowed through her when his tongue found her swollen nub. Her breath caught in her throat, strangling the cry of pleasure that tried to escape from her chest as her body responded to Grant’s tongue, beginning to tremble and shake as he drove her closer to the edge. When the climax finally came, she cried out his name, overwhelmed by the intensity, and for a few long seconds thought that she was going to splinter into a million pieces.

It took several seconds for her for the sensations to fade enough that she could open her eyes and suck in a deep breath, but Grant wasn’t finished. “I need to be inside you,” he growled, grabbing her by the hips and flipping her onto her stomach. “You’re mine, Amy, mine until the end of time.”

After pulling her up onto her hands and knees, he got behind her, used his knees to spread her legs, then grabbed her by the hips and with one powerful thrust, drove himself deep inside her. Her body was instantly filled with warmth, pleasure, and another surge of power that took her breath away and only intensified the powerful waves of sensation rushing through her.

With each thrust of his powerful hips, he took them both soaring, building the tension until with a growl that rattled the windows, Grant emptied himself inside her. Her body responded, clenching and tightening around him as she dissolved once again in the power of the connection between them, not only spiritual but physical. When he finally collapsed onto his side, pulling her with him and wrapping his

arms around her, she let out a contented sigh and closed her eyes, sure more than ever that she was right where she belonged.

CHAPTER 22



GRANT

When Amy's skin began to cool and goosebumps covered her arms, Grant roused himself from his stupor, pulled the blankets over them, then rolled up on his side and looked down at her. Wishing he could find the words to tell her just how precious she was to him, he reached up and stroked her cheek with his thumb, and she smiled up at him, making his heart sing with joy. He let the feeling wash over him, enjoying it twice as much because he no longer had to fight what he felt for her. Leaning down he kissed her, then slid his hand down to her stomach.

The baby was no more than a slight bulge in her middle, but when he rested his hand there, he could have sworn he felt a fluttering heartbeat under his palm. Love, the kind of love only a parent can have for a child, flowed through him, and he smiled down at Amy, gratitude joining all the other emotions crowding him right then.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" she asked, doubt clouding her eyes for a second. "I know that you're probably scared, but I promise that I'm healthy, and I want this baby, Grant. I want it so much. I'll do everything I can to make sure we're both fine, I promise. I'll take really good care of myself; you don't have to worry."

"Sweetheart, I want this baby as much as you do," he said, leaning down and kissing her. "What happened to Lyndsay was a terrible tragedy, but it wasn't my fault, I see that now. I'm scared, but only as much as any man would be if the woman that he loved was going to give birth to their child. I'm

going to hold you to that promise to take care of yourself, but I'm going to take care of you too, both of you."

"That's a deal," she said, smiling up at him. "I love you, Grant."

"I love you too, Amy," he said, giving her another kiss, then sliding down in the bed and gathering in his arms. "Now, I think it's time we had that talk, and don't try to stop me this time. You need to know the truth about me. I just want you to promise me that you'll keep an open mind, there are things in this world that defy explanation, sometimes we just have to rely on faith. We just have to believe."

Amy looked up at him, a bit of confusion on her face, "I'm not sure what you mean," she said. "It sounds like you're talking about....."

"Magic," he finished for her when her words trailed away. "I'm talking about magic, Amy, a gift I carry that most people don't, something that makes me different than other people."

She pulled out of his arms, "This isn't the way I thought this was going to go," she said, then looked over her shoulder at him. "What exactly are you trying to tell me?"

"I know this is going to sound crazy, and I'll understand if it takes you some time to get used to the idea," he said, then took a deep breath, but before he could tell her the truth, someone started pounding on the back door. "What the hell? Who would be pounding on the door this time of night?"

"You'd better go check," Amy said, her voice barely above a whisper. "It might be an emergency."

"Don't go anywhere," he said, "I'll be right back."

One of the hands was standing at the backdoor when he opened it, "I'm sorry to wake you up, Mr. Beckett, but one of the horses is colicky. We need your help out in the barn."

He raced back upstairs, "I'm sorry, Amy, one of the horses is sick, I have to go out to the barn," he said, kneeling on the bed next to her. "I'll be back as soon as I can. Promise me that you'll stay here. I know you must be a little freaked out right

now, but try not to be. It will all make sense when we finish our talk.”

Amy studied him for a second, her eyes searching his, then he saw love blossom in them, “I’ll be right here waiting for you,” she said, reaching out to stroke his face. “Now and forever.”

He ran back down the stairs, flooded with relief, sure that everything was going to work out, and followed the young man out to the barn, “Which one of the horses is it?” he asked. “Have we called the vet?”

“I don’t know,” the hand said, a scowl on his face. “I was sent to get you. No one gave me any details; all I know is that they wanted you in the barn right away.”

He was a bit surprised by his anger, but followed him through the night, but when they stepped into the barn, it was empty. “What’s going on?” he asked, looking around. “Why did you bring me down here?”

“Sorry, Mr. Beckett,” the young man sneered. “But I need some money to get out of town and I’m sure not going to earn it working for you.”

He heard the sound of footsteps coming up behind him, but before he could turn, a sharp blow to the back of his head knocked him to the ground, and the world began to spin. Pain radiated from his skull through his entire body, his vision began to dim, and the last thing he heard was a man shouting at the hand to get the woman from the house.

Amy

Amy had been lying in bed staring up at the ceiling for ten minutes, racking her brain and trying to figure out Grant was going to tell her. His mention of magic had thrown her off balance, had been the last thing she’d expected, and the rational part of her brain rejected even the possibility that it was real. She wished now more than ever that she’d forced Bridget to tell her, then realized that if her best friend knew Grant’s secret, it must be true.

Knowing she had no choice but to wait for Grant to come back and that she'd never sleep with so many questions running through her head, she got up and slipped into a pair of sweats and a tee shirt. Downstairs in the kitchen, she paced around the room a couple of times, resisting the urge to call Bridget and make her tell her. She finally went to the refrigerator to look for a snack, hoping that would distract her.

She was still hunting through the shelves when there was a knock at the door, "I'll be right there," she said, closing the refrigerator door, wondering who it could be.

Aware that Paul was still lurking around somewhere, she peered through the glass at the man on the other side, "I'm sorry to bother you, Ms. Erickson, but Mr. Beckett sent me to get you," the young man said. "He needs your help in the barn. I need you to come with me."

Slipping on the shoes she'd left at the back door, she peered out at the man again, "I don't know anything about horses," she said. "I don't know why he'd want me."

"I don't know, ma'am," the hand said, beginning to look worried. "They sent me because he can't get away. He was awfully upset when I left. I think he really needs you."

Ignoring the little feeling that something was wrong, she was unable to stop herself from going to Grant, so she unlocked the door and stepped out onto the porch. "You'll have to show me the way," she said. "I've never been out to the barn."

"That's okay, it's not far," the young man said, taking her elbow. "I'll just hold onto you so you don't trip."

That was her first sign that something was wrong, and she tried to pull away, but the man grabbed her and picked her up off her feet. "It would be much easier if you cooperated, I don't want to hurt you," he said, giving her a hard shake. "Paul said I could knock you around if you don't play nice, and I'm not afraid to hit a woman."

She went limp in his arms, afraid that he would hurt the baby, cursing herself for being so stupid, hoping that wherever

Grant was, he'd figure out she was missing soon and come after her. The man set her on her feet, gave her a push toward the woods, making her stumble, but she caught herself just before she fell to her knees and turned to give him a dirty look.

"Don't push me," he growled. "I just want to get this done and get my money. It doesn't matter to me what condition you're in when you get there."

The man led her through the woods to a dilapidated old building almost completely hidden by the trees around it, and her heart sank when she realized that no one had been there in years. The man called out a quiet greeting, then shoved her up onto the porch and opened the door, letting a weak light spill out from inside.

"In you go, we've done well so far," the man said. "Don't make this ugly now. Besides, there's someone in there who's very anxious to see you."

Forcing herself to take a deep breath, pushing away the panic and fear that threatened to overwhelm her, she stepped inside, not surprised to see Paul waiting for her. He was leaning up against the fireplace, a pleased look on his face, and he nodded to the man who shoved her into a chair and tied her up.

"Is that bastard dead?" Paul asked. "I don't want any more surprises."

She tried not to react, but inside, she was screaming, "I hit him on the head so hard that he's never going to wake up," the young man said. "Now give me my money. I'm getting out of here for good."

"There's one thing I forgot to tell you about our little arrangement," Paul said, pushing himself away from the fireplace. "I never leave loose ends; they have a way of finding their way back to you."

Before she could even blink, Paul pulled a gun from his pocket and fired it and the young man crumpled to the floor, then lay still, a pool of blood forming under his body. She stifled the scream threatening to burst from her chest, and

forced herself to take deep breaths, not recognizing the man she once thought that she loved.

“Well, here we are again,” Paul said, waving the gun around, a crazy look in his eyes. “I’m really disappointed in you, Amy. I thought I made myself clear the other night. You belong to me, and nothing is going to stand in the way of us being together. I’m afraid that you’ve given me no choice but to teach you a lesson.”

“Leave me alone,” she screamed, wiggling in the chair and trying to get free. “I’ll never be yours, Paul, I belong to someone else. Grant is going to come after me, and when he does, he’s going to kill you.”

The slap across the face knocked her sideways, and the chair went crashing to the floor. One of the legs broke off, loosening the ropes that bound her. She lay still, not wanting to give her freedom away yet, then looked up at Paul, who was looming over her, ignoring the pain radiating from her cheek. He grabbed her and jerked her up off the floor, the broken chair clattering back to the ground when the ropes slipped free.

“Don’t talk about that bastard, he’s dead. Do you hear me?” Paul screamed in her face. “He’s dead, he’s not coming after you. You’re never going to see him again.”

He dropped her onto the floor in the middle of the broken chair, her hand closed over a piece of wood, and when he bent over her again, she swung it at him. The chair leg connected to Paul’s head with a dull thump. His eyes opened wide, then rolled up into his head, and he crashed to the ground next to her. Crawling away from him, she tried to catch her breath, afraid that she was going to pass out. Then she tried to get to her feet, but her legs wouldn’t hold her.

The smell of blood began to make her feel nauseous, and she started crawling toward the door, but before she could get there, Paul staggered to his feet. He crossed the room and grabbed her by the hair, forced her to her feet, then leaned over, got right in her face, his eyes blazing with madness, and she braced herself. Before Paul could strike her, a wolf howled

right outside the cabin, a sound that made the hairs on her arms stand on end, and he hesitated with his fist in the air.

Spinning out of his grasp, she started for the door just as another howl split the air, and a huge grey wolf came crashing through the window. It landed in front of Paul, teeth bared, saliva dripping from its huge jaws, a growl coming from its huge chest, then began to advance on him. Paul backed away, crying like a baby, and cowered in a corner, his eyes frozen on the wolf.

The animal glanced over its shoulder just long enough for her to see Grant's eyes looking at her, and all the air came whooshing out of her lungs as understanding settled over her. When he turned away, she looked over at Paul, who had the gun out of his pocket and was pointing at her, his entire body trembling, his eyes glazed over with insanity.

"If I can't have you," he screamed, his finger squeezing the trigger. "No one can."

CHAPTER 23



GRANT

Grant was only vaguely aware of the sting of the bullet as it buried itself into his leg when he lunged at Paul, the rage of predator he'd become and the instinct to protect his mate blocking out the pain. Paul screamed and tried to fire again, but he was already on him, knocking him to the ground. The gun went flying out of his hands, then landed with a thud across the room. He saw Amy dive for it out of the corner of his eye, but he was focused on the man he'd pinned to the ground, and the need to spill his blood.

Already anticipating the rush when his teeth punctured the fragile skin of Paul's neck, he tried to rein in the wolf and bring the man back into control, but the rage inside him wouldn't be silenced. He finally became aware of Amy calling his name, her voice was distant at first, barely a whisper, but it grew stronger, penetrating the fury and the need to kill.

"Grant, he's not worth it," she said. "Come back to me, I know this isn't who you are. Let the law deal with him. He's sick, you don't want to have his death on your conscience."

He shook his head, needing the kill, "I have the gun, Grant, he can't hurt me again," she said. "I'm not hurt, and the baby is fine. I love you, sweetheart, all of you, but this isn't what you want, I know it. Let it go, for me, for us, for the baby."

The rage slowly began to fade, and he backed away from the pathetic blubbering man, then with a colossal effort he shifted again, sending the wolf back into hiding. A second later, his crew came bursting through the door, and he collapsed onto the floor, the wound in his leg suddenly

burning like it was on fire. Amy threw the gun down on the floor and rushed over to him, sinking to the floor next to him, and pulling his head onto her lap.

“Grant, you’re hurt, you’re bleeding,” she cried. “Don’t move, we’re going to get you some help.”

He looked up at Amy, the pain suddenly fading away, “You’re still here, you didn’t run away,” he said, astonished to have her holding him, not cowering in fear. “You didn’t leave me.”

“I love you, Grant, I’m never going to leave you,” she said. “But we’re going to have to have a long talk about this wolf thing.”

He started laughing, couldn’t help himself, “I love you, Amy,” he said. “And I want you to marry me, the sooner the better. I want my ring on your finger so the world knows how much I love you.”

“That’s a deal, Mr. Beckett,” she said, leaning down and giving him a kiss. “But first we have to get you to the hospital.”

“Just get me up to our room,” he said, trying to sit up. “I’ll be fine in a couple of hours.”

“Grant, you have a bullet wound,” she said, starting to look desperate. “It won’t heal on its own.”

One of the wranglers knelt down next to her, “He’ll be okay,” he said. “We just need to give him a little time to heal, and the sheriff is on his way. It might be better if he wasn’t here when he shows up.”

Amy looked down at him, a question in her eyes, “We have amazing healing powers. My leg is already healing,” he said, wincing at the pain. “But it hurts like hell, and this floor is really hard.”

“We have a lot more than I thought to talk about,” she said, moving out of the way. “We’ll do this your way, but you’d better not die on me, Grant Beckett.”

“Not going to happen, sweetheart,” he said, then had to hold his breath for a second when he was lifted off the floor. “I’ve too much to look forward to die. You’re stuck with me for a long time.”

“You’d better be right, because this baby needs a father,” she said, stomping away from him. “And you just asked me to marry you. You’re not getting out of it.”

He was laughing when they lifted him off the floor and the pain took over, dragging him into darkness, and he didn’t wake until hours later. Amy was curled up next to him, her even breathing telling him that she was asleep, and he lay there with his eyes closed, just enjoying the scent of her. There was only a dull aching throb in his leg, and he knew from experience that it would be completely healed by morning.

Amy rolled over in her sleep, and then her eyes flew open, “Oh, no, did I hurt you?” she asked, sitting up. “I didn’t want to leave you, but I got so tired, I couldn’t keep my eyes open.”

“It barely hurts anymore,” he said, pulling her into his arms. “I told you, we’re fast healers.”

Amy

Amy turned in Grant’s arms so she could look down at him, “You’d better not be lying to me,” she said, pleased to see that his color had gotten better and the dark circles under his eyes had gone away. “Let me see for myself.”

She jumped out of bed and went over to his side, grabbed the covers and yanked them off, gasping when she saw the puckered scar on his leg. “I told you,” he said. “Wolf shifters don’t stay hurt for long. Come back to bed.”

Giving him a dirty look, she walked back around the bed and climbed in next to him again, settling back into his arms, her head resting on his chest. “I thought I was going to lose you,” she finally said with a long sigh. “I don’t think I’ve ever been that scared in my entire life.”

Grant snorted, “You were scared? When I heard that gunshot, I thought I’d lost you,” he said. “I guess I went a little crazy, I hope I didn’t scare you.”

She looked up at him, remembering the moment he'd burst into the cabin, "I don't remember being scared until you got shot," she said. "I knew that you'd never hurt me, I felt it deep down inside. You were only trying to protect me."

They fell silent for a second, "Thank you for stopping me," Grant finally said. "A part of me would still like to kill that son of a bitch, but you were right, he's broken, and seeing me only made it worse."

"He won't be bothering us again," Amy said. "Now I have about a million questions, and the first one is about the baby. Will it be a shifter like you are?"

"Maybe, but not necessarily," he said, pulling her closer, then slid his hand down to her rounded belly. "If it's a boy, the chances are better, but there's no guarantee. Would it bother you?"

She shook her head, "I was just curious," she said. "And what about this warm feeling I have when I'm with you? I thought it was just love, but it's more, isn't it?"

"It is love, but it's more than that," he said. "We have a connection, Amy. It's been there from the very beginning. We have a bond created by my magic, one that can't be broken by anything on this Earth. So, I really meant it when I said you were stuck with me."

She looked up at him again, her heart swelling with love, "That's okay," she said, smiling at him. "There's no place else that I want to be."

He untangled himself from her and reached into the drawer next to the bed, "I have something for you," he said. "I didn't have it with me when I asked you earlier, but I think it's time to put it on your finger."

He opened a velvet covered box and held it out to her, "Marry me, Amy," he said. "Make me the happiest man on Earth."

"Oh, it's beautiful, and it looks old," she said, reaching out and touching the ring, then quickly pulled her hand back. "I felt something when I touched it."

“It was my grandmother’s,” he said, slipping it on her finger. “She was an amazing woman, smart and feisty just like you. She would have loved you as much as I do. My mom offered it to me for you. I feel this has so much more meaning than any ring I picked in a jewelry store.”

“It’s perfect, and I would be honored to wear it,” she said, tears running down her cheeks. “I love you, Grant.”

“I love you too, Amy,” he said. “Now come over here, and let me show you how much.”

EPILOGUE



Sawyer watched Grant and Amy gliding around the dance floor, the little baby bump under Amy's dress only making her that much more beautiful, and he felt a stab of loneliness. It was clear to anyone who looked at them how deeply in love they were, and as happy as he was for them, he wondered why he could not find that kind of love. Unlike the rest of his friends in the single dad's club, he wanted to get married again and find a woman to spend the rest of his life with, but he was starting to think it wasn't in the cards for him.

He was just about to turn away from the dance floor, tired of punishing himself, when he saw Piper across the yard. He paused, surprised when a wave of attraction washed over him. When their eyes met and she smiled at him, he staggered back a step, the attraction suddenly full-fledged desire, and he had the strangest urge to turn and run away.

Piper had worked for him from the very beginning, had signed on the day he bought the ranch, and he'd never experienced even the slightest twinge of attraction to her. He had no idea how to deal with what was happening to him. As she made her way across the yard to him, a smile on her face, he took a second to study her, noticing the way her breasts pushed against the fabric of her dress and the way her long legs looked peeking out from under the skirt.

Shocked when his body began to tingle and tighten, he did the only thing he could think of, and fled like a teenager facing his first crush, leaving Piper stunned and staring after him.

When he made it to his truck, he jumped in and started the engine, then sat staring at the wedding reception for a long time, willing his strange reaction to his best employee to go away. Piper wasn't the woman for him; she was stubborn, opinionated, and the last thing he wanted to do was lose her. The ranch wouldn't survive.