



The  
**WILDER**  
Brothers

finding the  
**ROAD to US**

CARRIE ANN  
*NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**RYAN**

# Finding the Road to Us

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The Wilder Brothers

**Carrie Ann Ryan**

# Contents

FINDING THE ROAD TO US  
FINDING THE ROAD TO US

Prologue

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

A Note from Carrie Ann Ryan

Also from Carrie Ann Ryan

About the Author

# FINDING THE ROAD TO US

A WILDER BROTHERS NOVEL

By  
Carrie Ann Ryan

FINDING THE ROAD TO US  
A Wilder Brothers Novel  
By: Carrie Ann Ryan  
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## FINDING THE ROAD TO US

I was ready to say, 'I do', then my fiancé left me at the altar.

Broken and embarrassed, Trace and Elliot helped me run away—ditching my wedding dress in the process.

When I come back to the Wilder Retreat to show the world I'm no longer hurting, I know I must ignore my traitorous needs when it comes to these two men.

Because my body wants them both.

And my soul craves them just as much.

I know I can't choose, and part of me asks why I should.

Only when we decide to take that chance and share everything, the danger from our pasts refuses to let our choice stand.

With one kiss, one dance into temptation, we could lose everything.

Including our lives.



*To The Ryans.*

*I am forever blessed that you're my family. Thank you for standing by me throughout the hectic world that is my life. Here is to memories, dreams, and so many more words!*

# Prologue

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## Trace

“I ’m seriously so glad that you’re staying.” I turned to Elliot as he spoke and nodded before returning my attention to where my feet were. I had been in countless situations where I’d had to have quick footwork. But climbing up and down this hill in the Texas Hill Country meant that I was more likely to trip over a small rock and hurt my ankle. That, or fall into a grouping of cacti. Why there were so many cacti, I didn’t know. I was used to tall trees that shed their leaves in the winter and snow on the ground for months on end.

Of course, I had been living in LA and traveling with Bethany around the world for the past few years, so I couldn’t really say that anymore.

“Trace? You okay?”

I turned to Elliot Wilder, pausing to take in the view. “Yeah. Just trying to not fall and get a cactus stuck up my ass.”

Elliot burst out laughing.

“Really, cactus up your ass?”

“Shut up,” I said with a snort, shaking my head. “That does sound a little pointed though, doesn’t it?”

Elliot snorted again, grinning. “Yeah, that doesn’t sound like something I want up my ass.”

He looked damn good when he laughed, not that I let myself think that often. After all, I had better things to do than watch the way Elliot smiled. I worked with the Wilders now, and though technically Elliot wasn’t my boss, it was still too weird. I shouldn’t think about how good the other man looked in jeans, or his usual dress pants.

Plus, I was dating Alicia. We might not be serious, but me checking out

how good Elliot looked when he bent over to tie his shoe? No, shouldn't be doing that.

"Why the hell are you wearing tennis shoes? You're the one who wanted to go hiking."

We glanced at each other, and this odd, heated moment seemed to fill the air, tension riding us both. It was odd though, because I didn't know if Elliot was into guys. I wasn't even sure that the Wilders knew I was. It wasn't my place to ask, because I wasn't going to be interested in any of them—I worked with them. And I had been dating Alicia for the past two weeks, and even though we weren't exclusive, I didn't feel like making things complicated.

"Anyway," Elliot said after he cleared his throat and looked off into the distance. "My brother needed my boots for something and didn't return them. And since I've wanted to go out on this walk, I'm in tennis shoes. It's fine."

"If you say so," I said, looking at the terrain. "Just be careful."

"Whatever you say, Mom."

"Fuck you."

Elliot turned, looked over his shoulder at me, and winked. "No thanks. You're cute though."

Well, that answered that. We continued our hike, and I did my best not to watch his ass.

We went up the next hill, sweat beading on my forehead. It wasn't too hot, but the sun beat down and it was muggy. I hated muggy.

"So, when do you move in full-time?" Elliot asked.

"In a couple of weeks. Now that the wedding's over and I'm done setting up the team for the next trip, I'm ready to stay."

"It's going to be weird not being at Bethany's side all the time, isn't it?"

"Trying not to feel guilty, but yeah. Maybe I'm just too old to stand by her side every day, you know?"

"Stop it. You're more in shape than any of the younger guys there. And I say younger guys, because they're like nineteen. You are in your thirties, mister."

"Thanks. You know, I love feeling old."

"Shut up," Elliot said with a laugh. "You're not even a decade older than me."

"Nine years is still a big gap."

And that was also good to remember. I was an old man, at least that's

how I felt when standing next to Elliot. Again, not that it should matter.

“Come on, let’s get up on this ridge, take a look at the scenery, then make our way back. Kendall promised dinner tonight.”

“I’m getting spoiled with your sister-in-law and all of her cooking. I need to start hiking more if I’m going to continue to poach off her meals.”

Elliot’s gaze raked over my body, and I ignored it. But my cock hurt just thinking about it.

“Whatever you say, old man.”

“Fuck you,” I said, and Elliot laughed. He stepped to the side, and the soil shifted.

It happened so quickly, I could barely snap out my arm. I let out a sharp shout as Elliot’s eyes widened and the ground beneath him fell away.

I moved as quickly as I could, reaching for him, but I missed. Thankfully, Elliot gripped the edge of the embankment, sliding feet-first as his head slammed into the rock, bleeding almost instantly.

“I’ve got you, I got you. Just hold on, Elliot!” I shouted as I crawled towards him, looking over the edge of the cliff.

We weren’t on a mountain, but we were still high enough that if Elliot fell, there was no way he was going to make it. Broken bones would be the least of his worries.

Elliot looked up at me, eyes wide, as blood began to drip into them. He blinked it away, fingers digging into the soil, knuckles raw.

“Holy shit. Holy shit.”

“Just hold on, I’m going to pull you up.”

“The soil’s loose. You’ll fall right along with me. I’m fine, just go get help.”

“Fuck that. I’m coming for you.”

Elliot’s eyes were a bit wild but he smirked. “That’s what she said.”

“Seriously, not the time,” I said, even as hysterical laughter threatened to burble up my throat. I pushed it away and reached down.

“Just grab my hand.”

“If I let go, I’m not going to be able to hold on. I’m fine. I can figure out how to climb up.”

“Just grab my hand, Elliot. I’ve got you. I’m not going to let you fall.”

He looked up at me and moved his hand, when the ground beneath me fell away.

I gripped the rock next to me, sharp points digging into my skin, blood

making my hand slippery. I ignored the pain because that didn't matter. The man below me looked at me with determination in his gaze.

I knew that gaze.

I dreamed that gaze.

Elliot finally reached out and I slapped my hand into his, crawling my fingers up his forearm to get a firmer grip. He did the same to me and my heart raced and my pulse pounded.

His other hand fell from the side, dirt continuing to fall, and he looked up at me, his blue eyes wide.

"I've got you," I said, my voice gruff.

He swallowed, blood sliding down his face over his eyebrow. He blinked it away, but it had to burn. He dangled below me, his body weight all on my forearm, but he kept trying to reach with his other hand.

"Just find a grip, and I'll pull you up."

"You'll fall too."

"I won't." At least I sure as hell hoped I didn't. "Trust me."

In that moment of silence, with the fear of panic and loss, Elliot nodded. "I trust you."

The rocks kept falling away while I pulled, using my body as the fulcrum and all my strength to lever him up.

Finally, after what seemed like eons as blood continued to flow from both of us, Elliot scrambled up off the cliff and somehow landed in my lap.

I didn't care as I rolled to my back and sat up, holding Elliot to me.

My arms were around him, my hand running down his back as I tried to soothe the shakes out of both of us. Or maybe the shakes were just me.

"You're okay," I repeated, more of a mantra to myself than anything.

"I'm okay," Elliot whispered against my neck.

I ran my hand down his back, then up again, over his neck to run my fingers through his hair.

This was far more intimate than we had ever been, but damn it, he had scared the hell out of me.

"Let's get you checked out," I whispered, my voice gruff. I needed to pull away, needed to stop this.

But he looked at me, his blue eyes piercing.

"You saved my life."

The reality of the situation settled in.

Yeah, I had saved his life—Elliot Wilder had almost *died*.

He'd almost fucking died.

My shoulder ached, the wound that had begun to heal ripped open. I was grateful that Elliot couldn't see my back, because I could feel the warm blood dripping down my back, and if he eventually noticed, hopefully he would think it was just from him, or maybe my arm.

I hadn't even felt the pain in my shoulder at the time, but now it was raising its ugly head.

Reminding me why I was here.

When Elliot shifted on my lap, I sucked in a breath at the same time as he did.

Because he was on my *lap*, and my cock had just realized it. Elliot blushed and rolled off me. Damn it, I hadn't wanted him to know. But it was a damn biological reaction. That was it. That's all it had to be.

"Let's get you back and to the ER."

"I'm fine. Really." He held out his hand, wanting to help me up, but I couldn't touch him right then. I really couldn't. And not just because my cock wouldn't behave.

My shoulder ached, and if I used my other hand to let him help me up, he'd see that.

I shook my head, then ran my hands over my pants, dusting off the dirt.

"I've got it. But seriously, we're getting you to the ER."

"I'm fine."

"You're going to need stitches on that forehead. Let's go."

I got myself up and kept my front to him so he wouldn't see my back, or the blood beginning to pool at the waistband of my jeans.

He narrowed his gaze and reached out. I froze, not knowing what he was going to do, not knowing what I should do. He slid his finger down the line of my jaw. I had shaved that day, though I sometimes sported a beard. But Elliot just looked at me, studying my face.

"I guess I should have worn better shoes."

My lips twitched into a smile, just a bare one, before they fell again. "Just don't do that again. I think you scared ten years off my life."

"Same here. I'll be better. Promise. I guess we should go."

"You must have hit your head harder than I thought. But yeah, we're going to go."

I knew Elliot wanted to kiss me, I could always sense those things, especially because he didn't remove his hand from my face. Instead, I did the

one thing I needed to do—I took a step back.

Elliot did too, and I didn't see disappointment in his gaze, no confusion. Just determination.

So, I would do what I needed to do. What I said I would do long ago. I would move on and give in.

But not to a Wilder.

Never to a Wilder.



# Chapter One

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## Elliot

“Are you sure you’re okay to do this? You can take the day off.”

I smiled at my sister-in-law, and while I knew she was doing her best to soothe my hurts after my accident, I just wanted to get on with my life. Embarrassment crawled over me, but I didn’t think she would notice.

After all, it wasn’t every day that a Wilder fell off a cliff. At least I hoped to hell it wouldn’t be every day.

“I’m fine, really. It was only a few stitches, and thankfully I’m the Wilder with the longest hair, so it is covered.” I slid my hand through said hair and shook it out. My hair touched my shoulders now, something that it hadn’t ever done. When we were younger, all of us had short hair. My dad had liked us to look like the little soldiers and airmen that we would become, and only my sister ever had long hair.

“Are you joking right now? You scared us.”

I reached out and gripped Alexis’s hand. She smiled and squeezed back.

“I am fine, and I’ve been working with you on this wedding for months now.”

Alexis shook her head. “And I’m so grateful for that. I hadn’t realized that both members of my team would get pregnant at the same time and end up on maternity leave while this wedding happened.”

“I know the babies came early, but are they okay? For real?”

A soft expression slid over Alexis’s face, and she nodded. “The babies are just fine. I promise. It was a little scary there at first, but they barreled their way into the world with love. And now both moms are at home with their family and their new babies, and I am so grateful that you stepped up. I

know wedding planning isn't your thing."

I shrugged, sliding my hand through my hair again. The stitches itched, and I knew that meant it was healing, but it still bothered me more than I cared to admit. I had been such an idiot going on a hike like that with tennis shoes, but I hadn't been able to get my boots back in time, and I hadn't wanted to cancel my hike with Trace. Not that it mattered, because Trace and I were just friends, and I was going to get over it. And get over myself.

That the rejection was all in my head. He couldn't really reject me if he didn't know that I wanted him in the first place.

"Anyway, I'm just so grateful that you've been here for everything. I couldn't have done this without you."

"Yes, you could have. You could rule the world without any help."

"That's a lie. You know it takes a whole team and this whole family to make this work."

I shrugged, looking across the vast expanse of the Wilder Retreat and Winery.

"You're right. It does."

When my brothers and I got out of the military—through hardship, retirement, or being forced out due to injury or things that we'd rather not talk about—I had no idea what we were going to do.

I was the youngest of the family, other than our sister who lived in Colorado and had started her own family. She was the first one to move on, to create a life outside of us. I was proud of her. Because she went through darkness and came out on top, with the best possible outcome.

But when my brothers and I had gotten out within months of each other, we had nowhere to go.

But Eli, our eldest brother, figured it out for us. He not only found a road for himself, but a way to bring us all along.

We bought this piece of land outside of San Antonio using our savings, and family money that had come from losing our parents, and from selling our uncle's winery out west.

It hadn't been easy, and we had a few false starts, but now the Wilder Retreat and Winery was making a name for itself. And not only for the accidents and horrors that had happened to our family along the way. Those I'd rather not think about.

Now the retreat was used for weddings, parties, events, and a tranquil place to relax and get away. We were right outside the city, a hop, skip, and a

jump from all the major highways in and out of San Antonio. The I-35 corridor meant that San Antonio, New Braunfels, San Marcos, and Austin were practically one big city at this point. That meant traffic from all major South Texas cities were near enough to us that we were a real destination. People could come and eat at Kendall's restaurant in the inn, or at the upcoming Signature restaurant that she was building on the other side of the property. That would be a high-end five-star exclusive. And Kendall could handle it. We also built a spa that had infinity pools and its own staff. Another oasis for our guests that was also built environmentally conscious.

Of course, there was also the winery, the initial main draw of the place. Two of my brothers ran the place. We had our own vineyard that we worked our asses off to maintain. Amos, our vineyard manager, kept up with everything there for us, and worked closely with my brothers. While Naomi, our innkeeper, worked with Eli to keep the inn and the guest cabins running.

Each of us had our own job and worked hard. We added on to what was here when we bought the place and made it our own. And now most of my sisters-in-law were either working as part of the place or brought in clientele because of who they were.

"You're lost in space again, are you sure you're up for today?" Alexis put her hand on my arm, a reassuring and comforting gesture.

I shook myself out of my thoughts and focused on my sister-in-law. "I'm fine. It's one wedding. We've got this."

"Go knock on wood when you say that. It's one big wedding."

"Yes, the groom is a big business guy who happens to have a giant social media following as a model. I'm surprised there aren't screaming fangirls outside the gates."

"Don't tempt fate. Trace and his team are already making sure that we don't have things like that, since both Lark and Bethany are on property."

"With Lark and Bethany on the property, is Trace working with them?" I asked, doing my best to sound casual. Because it shouldn't matter. I should ignore the fact that Trace saved my life.

Trace was not mine and wouldn't ever be. And while I was the final single Wilder, that didn't mean I wanted to try something. I had before, and I lost it. I didn't want that pain again.

"Yes and no. His team is, but he's also working the wedding. He's been shuffling things around a lot, since he's running the security teams for Bethany and Lark from afar. I don't know how he does it."

I grunted and looked down at my paperwork. “I don’t know either.”

“Elliot.” She paused, her teeth pressing down into her lip. “I know we’re busy and we have a thousand things to do, but what’s wrong? You’re usually bouncing around and making doing a thousand things at once look easy.”

I wanted to curse at myself, but instead I put on a bright smile and did my best to make sure it looked real. “I’m doing a few more things than I used to, and I don’t think I’ve had enough caffeine. Usually, I’ve had like seven cups of coffee before now.”

Alexis winced. “Please tell me you’re being facetious when you say seven cups.”

“I don’t exaggerate. Not at all.” I said, my voice going high pitched, and Alexis just rolled her eyes and grinned. “Well then, I’m going to go check on the flowers.”

“Fantastic, because that’s something I’m not in the mood to deal with.”

“Florist issues?”

“I don’t even want to talk about it, but I think I’m done with this company. I’m just done.”

Considering I had to use the same company for my events, even though the amount of flowers for a wedding versus a corporate retreat were two completely different volumes, I nodded tightly. “Mold again?”

“Wilted roses, they smell awful, and they were late. We’re making do, the bride isn’t going to notice, but I’ll know.”

“We’ll kick their ass later.”

“Damn straight.”

Alexis’s earpiece went off, and she nodded at me before heading towards whatever fire she needed to put out.

I went back to my checklist for the wedding, which was weird.

When we first started this company, it had been somewhat established when we bought it. Events were already happening here, though not as organized as we made them now. Weddings were also done here, but the original wedding planner had been a disaster. Then the next one we hired had been a flake, and ran off. We’d ended up with Alexis, and things fell into place—she was a damn magician. The fact that she had married my oldest brother Eli, was just the actual icing on the cake.

I wasn’t a wedding planner. Hell, I had been a medic in the Air Force before all of this. My job had been to keep people safe and do my best to stabilize them so they could get to the actual base hospitals, and dealing with

shit I didn't even want to think about anymore.

But I had thrown that all away, run from all of my training, schooling, all because I lost the one person I shouldn't.

Once again I did my best not to think.

I was doing a lot of that lately, and I knew my family had started to notice, because I was the bubbly one. The happy one who could make anyone smile and tried my best to weave everyone together because when you had six testosterone-filled men in a room that were all related and all had trauma of their own, things tended to explode, even if we all loved each other and actually liked each other. I was the mediator, the happy one.

At least, that's what I tried to be.

But I had a feeling that my family was starting to see through that.

I needed to fix my facade, but it shattered a bit more when I fell off that damn cliff.

And, as if I had summoned him, I looked up at a very familiar face, the hairs on the back of my neck rising.

Trace. A friend of course, who worked with us, and was so out of my league it wasn't even funny.

Not only was he nearly a decade older than me, he was gruff, had been through hell, and could probably kill a man with his pinky.

He was also standing next to his very beautiful girlfriend, who I had only met a few times in passing. They hadn't been dating long, but had known each other for years. Since childhood, if what I remember Bethany saying was true. Trace didn't bring her around much, as Trace didn't live on the property like many of us did. He had a life outside of us and wasn't a Wilder. He was pretty good about keeping that line between us.

Alicia was gorgeous. She had long fiery-red hair. It was all natural and she looked like an Irish or Scottish princess ready to fight for her honor, like that Disney movie.

She smiled up at Trace, who looked down at her and nodded.

That's when I noticed the ring on her finger.

I staggered back, swallowing hard.

They hadn't been dating that long. I hadn't even known they were exclusive. And now, *fuck*. Shame hit me as I remembered I had touched him, had wanted to kiss him, had felt his hard cock beneath me after I fell on top of him.

He hadn't wanted me like that, couldn't want me like that. Because he

was clearly taken.

Alicia looked over at me and smiled. She waved, the sunlight glittering off that shiny rock.

“Elliot. Oh, it’s so good to see you. I hope it’s okay I’m crashing the wedding.” She winked as she said it, her voice sultry and smooth.

She sounded as if she fit in anywhere, and from the five-thousand-dollar bag on her elbow, fifteen-hundred-dollar pair of heels, and expensive dress, I figured she came from money and knew how to spend it.

Or maybe I was just judging because I was embarrassed.

“No problem. If you’re here with Trace, then we can just say you’re staff.” I winked as I said it, putting laughter in my tone.

She clapped, her ring shining again. I gestured towards it.

“I guess congratulations are in order?” I asked.

She grinned, flashing her ring again and looked up at Trace. “It only took twenty years, but here we are. Kidding! Actually, we’re more engaged to be engaged, according to the families. My grandmother asked me to wear the ring and we’re testing it out. We’ll decide our own fate later, but it’s fine to pretend. Right?” She kissed Trace’s cheek.

I didn’t know what I saw in his eyes, was it love? Or was I just blind because everyone was moving on without me, even those I hadn’t realized were ready?

“You know families. Not sure if we appreciate it, but I made a promise...” Trace’s voice was gruff, and he nodded towards me. “You doing okay? Need anything? I know you’re filling in for two people on top of your job right now.”

“I’ve got it. But thank you. Are you set?”

Trace nodded again. “I’m all set. I’m going to get Alicia here a place to stay out of the way, and then I’ll come help you.” He narrowed his gaze at my forehead. “I know your hair’s hiding them, but your stitches, are they okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said, trying not to grit my teeth.

Alicia’s hand went up to her mouth. “I’m so sorry. Trace told me all about it. That must have been so scary. I’m so glad he was there for you.”

“I’m glad he was there, too. Good thing he’s strong, right?” I asked, grinning.

“Oh, I know.” She blushed as she said it, fluttering her eyelashes up at him.

Trace wrapped his arm around her waist and nodded at me. "I'll be back."  
"Sure. Yeah."

I sighed and went back to my actual job, definitely not thinking about Trace.

He was nearly engaged. Which didn't make any goddamn sense to me, but I knew about family obligations. Just like the rest of my family. Oh, some were already married and having kids, some were on their second marriage to each other, and I was the one left behind. Of course, my cousins were also single, and they would be coming to visit soon. I was in charge of planning that, too, but I had at least a year. So at least I wouldn't be the lone single one. The fifteenth wheel or whatever.

But I needed to get my head out of my ass and focus. Trace was apparently engaged to be engaged and didn't seem to mind it.

And that meant I needed to get over myself as well.

I went through my checklist and listened to Alexis as the wedding started and music began to fill the arches. This was an old barn that had been renovated into a classy open structure. It was gorgeous, very high-end, and our celebrity clientele liked to use it.

I hadn't seen the bride yet, as she hadn't been part of my job, but I had met the groom at another business event on the property.

They didn't have any attendants, which I found weird, but the groom said he'd wanted his bride to be the spotlight. I figured he wanted the spotlight, but I was just being catty.

It was only the minister and groom standing up front, as people sat down in their white chairs, and turned towards the bride.

I did the same, standing in the shadows.

She was beautiful. Gorgeous.

Long ash-blonde hair that had been curled into waves down her back. She had a veil that went down her back. Her long voluptuous dress billowed around her like she was a fairy princess. And it was a lot of dress, but it fit her figure and worked for her. Her bouquet of white roses cascaded in front of her, with a few purple flowers mixed in for a pop of color.

She was one of the most gorgeous women I had ever seen, like an actual princess walking towards us.

Her jewelry was simple, just small studs in her ears, her diamond ring, and a green emerald surrounded by diamonds on her middle finger.

She smiled up at the groom, looking nervous. I grinned, knowing that this



was why we did it. I didn't like planning weddings, but I loved weddings. I loved people finding their match.

I watched it almost every week, and it always made me think that there were people out there for each other.

I looked towards the groom as he watched his bride, and frowned.

The groom shifted from side to side, looked around, and swallowed hard.

Was he nervous? Well, his bride was beautiful, maybe he was trying not to cry.

The groom shifted again before he turned on his heel and ran. He didn't run towards his bride, to pick her up and carry her towards the minister.

No, he ran. *Away.*

The moment he saw his bride, he ran.

Towards the trees, away from the aisle.

There was silence as the live orchestra stopped, a single violin bow making a screeching sound that echoed into the outdoors.

Then the whispers started, and they got louder and louder, wondering what the fuck had happened. Someone ran after the groom, to make sure he was okay, thinking that maybe he was sick.

But I didn't think so.

I looked at the bride as she stood at the end of the aisle, eyes wide, hand clutched around her bouquet, and my heart fell. She had just been left at the altar, in the most dramatic way possible. I had to do something. Because I might not believe in love, but I believed in heartbreak.

I prayed to hell that there was some way I could fix this. Even though I knew there was no way to mend a broken heart.

## Chapter Two

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## Sidney

“**S**idney, darling. I don’t understand why you didn’t want your hair up. It would look better with the veil. And honestly, as soon as that Texas wind hits you, you’re just going to look like a bedraggled mess. Why didn’t you listen to your sister?”

I barely resisted the urge to rub my temples, but I was used to the way my mother spoke to me. It had always been like that. A little stress, a little pain, and a whole lot of passive-aggressive attitude. But that was my mother.

“I like my hair down. And if it gets a little messy in the wind it’s fine. The wind is going to push at my dress as it is.”

My mother’s eyes narrowed as she traced her gaze over my voluminous dress, the amount of tulle and fabric overwhelming me. It hadn’t been my first choice, but it was my sister’s and my mother’s favorite. They loved that I looked like a fairy princess, and because I hadn’t cared about what dress I wore—because I was marrying the love of my life—I let them have that one. It was easier than dealing with constant fighting. Or the barbs. Or anything that came with my family.

“You’re right. The wind will mess us up. We should have done this at the club, indoors. I don’t know why Jeremy decided to do it here, but I suppose with Lark Thornbird and Bethany Cole residing on the property, it does lend it attaché.”

I knew my mother wasn’t even using that word right, but I let her be. Bethany Cole was an Academy Award-winning actress, while Lark Thornbird was a Grammy award-winning singer and songwriter. I loved both of their work, though I had never met them. They apparently either dated or married some of the owners of this property, and so in certain circles this was

*the* place to be. It wasn't Greenwich, it wasn't LA, but it was spoken of with reverence in those circles. I just wanted peace and to marry Jeremy. He made me laugh, made me smile, and made me remember to have fun. I wasn't always good at that, because I tended to stand in my own way. But none of that mattered. Today was all about Jeremy and me and our future.

"Everything's going to be starting soon. You should take your place. I'll meet you after I get down the aisle."

My mother smiled, narrowing her gaze as she studied me again. I knew she wanted me to wear the tiara that had come from her mother, filled with diamonds and other gems that weighed my head down. We were not royalty. We weren't even Texas "royalty." But we were somewhere in the Texas courts according to our family. Not as in judge and jury, though that could also be arranged, but in terms of the old family oil money that had drifted down to us over time. I wasn't in that business, and never wanted to be. My sister had taken up the cause, not in oil, but in keeping the family name and money relevant. I had decided to go small business, another mark against me. I was a florist. I loved getting my hands covered in dirt, and making arrangements where thorns would prick at my skin and I'd end up covered in Neosporin by the end of the day.

I was the family black sheep when it came to the Flowers name.

Yes, my name was Sidney Flowers, and I was a florist. But I always thought that the oil tycoon Flower family was a little ingenuous. At least I was on the nose.

"Mom, you better hurry. We're going to be late."

I turned to see my sister standing in the doorway, her long red dress gorgeous over her curves. The slit ran up her thigh, showing a generous helping of tanned leg. The dress tucked in at the waist and covered most of her shoulders. It also was fully covered in the back with no skin showing, but the front had a deep V that showed remarkable cleavage.

Her hair, the same color as mine, flowed in waves just like mine, but with a little more panache. Or maybe just with the red lips and heavy mascara, she looked more put together.

But that was Samantha "call her Sam" Flowers. My twin sister, who was kick-ass at everything she did.

"You look beautiful," she said as she stared at my mother. "Come on. You know that Jeremy and Sidney didn't want anybody standing up for them, so we need to go find our seats."

I winced at her tone, knowing she was still a little bit sore that I hadn't asked her to be my maid of honor. We hadn't wanted any attendants. Between Jeremy's job in business, and my family connections, it would've been complicated. And I wanted to stand up there with the man that I love, and have it be about the two of us. For once. Just let it be about the two of us.

"Do you have your speech ready for the wedding?" I asked, trying to bring my sister into the fold again. She had also chosen the color of dresses and other items that we were going to wear. She knew that more than I did. I just knew flowers.

"Of course," she said as she waved me off. "You look beautiful. Seriously," she repeated, then winked at me. "I'll see you on the other side, twin."

"I love you."

Sam winked again, then pulled Mom out of the room. I sighed happily, and a little nervously.

Alexis Wilder came in then and smiled at me. "Sidney, you look amazing. Stunning! Are you ready to go?"

I smiled at the other woman, immediately relaxing. Alexis had been a gem for the entire wedding. It felt as if I hadn't had to plan anything, the other woman and her team had known what they were doing.

"I am. And by the way, I hope that your team members got the care packages and flowers that I sent." Both of her assistants had gone into labor nearly at the same time, and so Alexis had finished most of the wedding prep on her own, though I thought a few of her brothers-in-law had helped, from what I had heard. I had been focused on getting my things done, and trusting Alexis. The fact that I had trusted her so completely surprised me, but we had just clicked.

Alexis beamed. "Yes. They say thank you. And I know they're going to write thank you notes."

I waved her off, as I reached down and grabbed my bouquet. "No, no, it's fine. They seriously don't need to bother with notes. I think they're a little busy with newborns."

"Tell me about it. I have a three-year-old and I have no idea how I even did that whole thing with an infant."

"Really? Three? Is that a fun age?"

"They say it's the terrible twos, but I think it's the torrential threes," Alexis said with a laugh. "Now, come on. Take a deep breath, and let's go

see the love of your life.”

I grinned, my hands shaking just a bit. When Jeremy proposed, it had been a surprise. We had been dating for over a year, and so I supposed it made sense. And we loved each other, and our worlds fit together somewhat. Jeremy’s firm was actually based in Austin, but he’d spent as much time near my small town as possible. I was moving to Austin and starting up my business anew. But it would be fine. There was plenty of room for florists. At least, that’s what I kept telling myself. I had the business plan ready to go, but I wouldn’t open up the doors for another six months, as I wanted to make sure everything was about the two of us for a while.

I shook off those nerves and told myself I would deal with the rest of the details later. First, it was about saying I do.

Alexis ran through everything again as I followed her out of the bridal suite, past some of the staff as they waved and smiled, to take my position on the other side of the door where I would walk down the aisle and meet Jeremy.

Nerves hit me again, a sense of something changing. But that’s what marriage was, wasn’t it? Change. Commitment. Compromise.

And love, I couldn’t forget love.

I looked across the sea of family and friends, Jeremy’s coworkers and superstars. When I met his eyes, I froze.

I didn’t know why my stomach lurched. I gripped the stems of my bouquet in my hand tightly and tried to breathe.

I was fine, this was going to work. There wasn’t panic in his eyes.

But he looked at me as I took my first step, ready to become his wife, and he ran.

Somebody gasped, everyone started talking at once, and I felt like I was four steps behind.

Jeremy ran?

No.

This couldn’t be happening.

The groom was not running away from the bride. That did not happen outside of the soap operas that my sister loved to watch. No, I would blink and he would be there, or this would be some kind of trick. Maybe he was going to do one of those flash mobs that had been so popular a few years ago. Yes, he would come back and there would be a band and he would make things ridiculously over the top. I would hate it, but I loved him and

everything would be fine.

Why was it hard to breathe? Why did my chest hurt? I just kept trying to breathe, tried to suck in air, but there was nothing. It felt as if the corset of my dress was tightening, squeezing my ribs and breaking them piece by piece, inch by inch.

No, this was not happening.

Jeremy wasn't coming back, and I saw red, not anger, not fury.

But the red of my sister's dress as she ran after him, heels in hand.

Why was she running after him? This didn't make any sense.

Why wasn't I saying anything, why wasn't anyone saying anything?

"Fix this," my mother spat at me. I hadn't even realized she was standing there with daggers in her gaze. "What have you done? They're going to talk about this. They are going to ruin us."

"Darling, we need to get out of here before anyone starts to question us. We'll need to fix this with the investors. Damn it, Sidney's going to ruin us, like she always does."

My parents continued to snarl at each other, yet smiled at the rest of the crowd, as if everything would be just fine, and I wasn't standing there with my chest heaving, in my wedding dress, wondering when I would wake up from this nightmare.

Jeremy left me at the altar. In such a dramatic fashion, one of my worst nightmares. No, it was beyond that, because I had never expected anything like this. How could I have even dreamed of this nightmare?

This could not be happening.

People were whispering, some had little smirks, and I knew there was nothing for me to do.

I needed to run, to get away.

I had no words. I could feel my cheeks heating, blushing hard. People were talking, and I knew they were asking each other why he would leave me. What I had done. I wasn't good enough. He hadn't loved me. He left me. Left me.

And then a hand was on my hip, pulling me to the side.

"Come with me."

I looked up into blue eyes, dark hair framing his face. "I...I can't breathe."

He nodded before taking my hand and I found myself being pulled around the side of the building—beyond the reach of the others, away from

their prying eyes.

We went down a hall, somehow inside a building—when did that happen?—when another set of footsteps came up behind us.

“You got her, Elliot?” a deep voice asked.

Elliot. The man holding my hand was named Elliot. The name started with an E, maybe he was one of the Wilders? One I hadn’t met. It felt as if my thoughts were taking their sweet time sparking in my brain.

“I’ve got her, Trace. I just don’t know where the fuck to go.”

The cursing seemed to bring me out of whatever I was going through, at least for a moment. Mostly because I wanted to curse right along with him. There was something I needed to do, though. Something that burned and broke and shattered.

“I need to get out of this dress,” I whispered.

I looked between them, stunned at the fact that these two seemed to be having a conversation without even speaking.

And then I found myself back in the bridal suite, trying to rip off my dress. “Why did I wear this stupid thing? There’s so much fabric, and I can’t even untie it myself. *He* was supposed to get me out of this fucking thing, I can’t even do it myself!”

My flowers fell to the ground and I ignored them. I never wanted to hurt the blooms, but it was fine. My mother had picked them out. Because this was the wedding that she had wanted for me, and now everything was ruined and I was ruining everything and I just needed to get out of this stupid dress.

“It’s okay, we’ve got you.” Elliot was behind me, his hands working on my dress.

Trace, the other man who I had never met, knelt in front of me, pulling at my shoes. “Come on, let’s get you out of these. They have to be uncomfortable.”

I nodded, trying to pull the pins for the veil out of my hair. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Elliot said gently from behind me.

“Never be sorry for that prick,” Trace grumbled below me. And then I was barefoot, and they were both tugging off my dress. In some ways, this was almost hysterical. Two gorgeous men with muscles and chiseled jaws tugging off my wedding dress, like they were going to ravish me. But it had nothing to do with that. I was trying to get the dress off so I could breathe. It felt as if something was clawing at my insides, trying to break free, yet I



couldn't do anything, I couldn't even fucking scream.

"Breathe now, breathe," Trace whispered as he gripped my chin.

He pinched me ever so slightly, causing a slight wince of pain, and it pulled me out of whatever the hell I was in.

"Thank you," I whispered. "Thank you."

"Don't thank us. Just breathe."

"And step out of your dress," Elliot instructed as he tugged the dress down my hips.

Somehow, I stepped out of my dress, Elliot's hand on my shoulder, Trace's on my chin.

I stood there in nothing but my panties and bra, white and silk and ready for my wedding night. I shook, wondering what the hell I was supposed to do.

"Where's your robe? Or something for you to wear? We've got you." Trace's voice was so soothing, so calm, it let me think through all the clouds and haze and hatred.

"It's on the chair," I replied robotically.

He nodded. "Good girl."

Elliot moved, then there was a rustle of fabric, and then he was wrapping my robe around me. Trace took a step back, and I tightened the belt around my waist before I slid my hands through my hair, through the curls that I loved and my mother hated.

"Thank you. Both of you." They just stared at me as if I was going to break, like I was fine china and they needed to protect me.

"I'm fine," I said again, my voice hollow.

"Sidney, you don't have to be fine," Elliot murmured.

I nodded but I didn't cry. Instead I went to my knees, hands over my face, and screamed.

I screamed in agony and pain and hatred and horror.

I screamed.

And suddenly both men were there, kneeling beside me, protecting me from the outside world, and I let them. Just this once, I let them.

Only then did I let the tears come, but I didn't stop screaming.

# Chapter Three

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## Trace

*One year later.*

I braced my palms against the shower wall, the tile cool under my touch, even with the scalding hot water sliding down my back. I stretched my shoulder, wincing at the feeling. I had been such a damn idiot. I knew I had been an idiot even taking that job, but it wasn't like I could go back and not take it. It wasn't like I wanted to.

It was one last job. One last thing for a friend.

And I had fucked it up all over again.

I was too old for this. Too old to be putting my body on the line. It wasn't like I was ancient, or even over the hill as my father used to joke, but I wasn't as quick as I used to be. All my friends and teammates would say differently, but I knew. I knew when I was done.

The puckered scar on the back of my shoulder didn't hurt anymore, but it was still sometimes tender.

Eleven months since I had been shot, eleven months since I had taken one last job for a friend and nearly lost everything.

I was a security specialist, trained to protect my charge. I was licensed to carry, open and concealed, and it had been my job to protect my friend. That had been the problem, though. Because I had become friends with Bethany—an A-list celebrity, an Oscar winner, and now a Wilder by marriage.

When she married Everett Wilder and decided to start spending half of

her time down here in Texas, I joined her. First, as someone to help keep the people who wanted to hurt her at bay, and then because I needed a home, too.

I quickly put soap in my hand and washed away the day. I wasn't done yet, still working. Just not like I used to.

Bethany understood when I told her I needed to walk away. Needed to do something different. And with her life changing, it made sense for her and Everett to work with the team I assembled, with me taking a back seat.

Everyone said they understood I wanted some time for myself, some time to figure out what I wanted. And to take that next step where I could build my own business in a different way. To be the boss. And not work for another company where I had to do what I was told all the time.

That had only been part of it.

The gunshot in my shoulder, still healing, still under wraps, at least figuratively, said something else.

The others didn't know I had been shot. They didn't need to know. I took some time off for myself for a long overdue vacation, or so they thought. Bethany assumed I took another job, needing some space, and I had let her think that. I let the thought hurt her, because I had needed to heal, in more ways than one.

And it hadn't helped that over the months I was gone, I screwed everything up.

Alicia was gone, but that was on me. And now I was here, setting up a new team with the Wilders, working not only with the winery and retreat, but ensuring every single client that came to the Wilders was safe.

The resort was spread out over multiple buildings. Acres and acres of land, and all along the hills of South Texas. They weren't the Rockies I was used to, nor the Appalachians, but it was rocky terrain filled with cacti, snakes, deer, armadillo, and even some wild boars. Or maybe they were wild pigs. I wasn't sure, but I saw signs all across the property that let me know what animals were out there.

I shook my head, once again wondering how I had ended up in South Texas, but the answer was Bethany. My friend.

She had never been anything more than that. We'd hit it off immediately. She was a decade younger than me and needed help. She'd been a star on the rise, dating an asshole at the time, and when that asshole had finally gone away, she had risen even higher. She'd had a few bumps and bruises along the way, a few stalkers, had been attacked and I had nearly been too late to

save her. I wouldn't again. The team I had trained myself had their eyes on her. They were protecting her, her husband, her family.

I needed a new start.

I had wanted something for myself and coming down here to Texas felt like the right thing.

Listening to my family and doing what they had wanted for the first time in nearly twenty years had made them so damn proud of me. At least, under their sarcasm.

The fact that I had gone back on that and wasn't marrying Alicia, the woman with the right pedigree, meant that I was once again a disappointment.

But I supposed I should be used to that by now.

I didn't want to be their perfect son—something I'd never been. I'd been a little lost with the new job, holding back from the one person I craved, so I'd tried to reach out to my parents.

And I'd fucked that up.

But now my brain couldn't get *him* out of my mind.

Or *her*.

And wasn't *that* fucked up?

I finished up in the shower and let my wool-gathering pass. I was too far into my head, and that's how I'd gotten shot in the first place.

In the past year I had changed jobs, got shot, said yes to a relationship out of loyalty, nearly gotten engaged, and broken it all off when I realized I needed to figure out my own life.

I was losing my damn mind, and I didn't have time for that. Not when the Wilder Retreat was at an all-time high with security with another celebrity wedding, a bachelorette party for an A-list star, and talks of a reality show taking place on the grounds.

I knew the latter would never happen. The Wilders wanted nothing to do with that. But if they didn't at least talk with the people, it would blow up in their faces. The Wilders seemed to know exactly what they were doing, how to play the game—even though they were military men just like I had been. I was born on the periphery, and yet I still didn't know how to navigate the waters as easily as they did. They were damn good at it, and I knew that they would protect their people. And it was my job to protect them.

I got dressed and went over my tablet to see what my plans were for the day. I had a lunch meeting with the team, but everybody was on shift where

they needed to be.

We had a couple one-on-one bodyguards that were there to protect a few A-list celebrities, and even some royalty. I snorted, wondering how the hell they had found out about the Wilders and why they wanted to stay in South Texas, but I let that pass.

We also had normal security at the winery, including around the vines. Between teenagers and entitled dumbasses, people tended to stomp through the wines and taste the grapes themselves. They were always severely disappointed, mostly because we were there to stop them. We had people on the periphery, as well, to make sure that others on hikes and other excursions on the property were safe. There were also people at the gates at the front, and patrolling the property. We were good at what we did, and I trained the team to make sure that they were even better. We had rotated out a few people over the past year, some because they wanted to get into the bodyguard business, some because they just weren't cut out for security work. Either way, it was my job to make sure that my team was ready to go.

I grabbed my things and headed towards the main building. I was on as the floater today, going around and checking on my people and making sure they were where they needed to be. Plus, if someone needed me I could be there. I had a few meetings with Eli Wilder, the CEO of the resort. His brothers called him that, because they liked that their big brother was the big boss, but I knew that it was more than just business. He was head of the family, their parents having passed long ago. He protected his family, just like he protected his interests in this company.

That reminded me I had other interests. Ones I didn't really want to think about. I hadn't woken up from a nightmare because the gunshot, hadn't woken up from the guilt about Alicia. No, it was because I'd had another damn dream about him.

The man currently walking up the path towards me.

I tried not to think about Elliot Wilder too often. He wasn't my boss, we worked on different sides of the company, but we worked together. He was a damn Wilder, so he was practically my boss. He was also way too young for me. He was an adult, in his twenties, and had seen things I hadn't when he'd been overseas. I didn't know if the others realized that, but I did, with the faraway look he got when he didn't think anyone was watching. Every single Wilder had been through their own hell, had come back scarred, broken, but were now healing, finding the love of good women, finding a way to breathe.

Elliot was the only one in his immediate family who hadn't gotten married yet. And I didn't want to think about the relief I felt at that.

The fact that Elliot was somehow the planner of the whole company never surprised me though. He was bouncy when he needed to be, enthusiastically great at customer service, and smart as a whip.

So even when he hid that sadness, I knew he was still getting the job done.

And just thinking about the fact that he had nearly died a year ago, had fallen off a damn cliff because we wanted to go on a walk together, one that had been far too much of an indulgence for me, still kept me up at night.

Then again, it wasn't that fall that had kept me up last night. No, it was *him*.

With him on my mind, and images of another, one that I didn't even know more than her name, also filled my mind.

That was just a dream, one that sometimes slid through my thoughts.

The jilted bride, the one left at the altar, the one who had broken in front of us after being so strong.

I still thought about her, and it felt like a slap in the face to the woman I had tried to be with. Alicia was gone, and her demands and hatred towards me were well over. I only put up with her because it was what my family wanted, and I hadn't minded. At least, that's what I had told myself. But there was no going back now.

Elliot reached me, tablet in hand and earpiece in his ear. He was always doing a thousand things at once, though I had the earpiece and the tablet as well, so I guess I couldn't throw any stones.

When he met my gaze there was still that zing, that chemistry that made me tense in anticipation.

I gritted my teeth as he studied my face.

"Morning," I bit out, trying not to sound like an asshole. It was just a little difficult when I was near him.

"What's wrong?" Elliot asked, frowning.

I blinked, wondering why that was the first thing he said. He never got too deep, especially in the months since I got back. Not that I had told him about why I was gone. Nobody knew. There was a reason I worked with a shirt on no matter what these days, and not just because I didn't want to see Elliot's gaze rake over my chest. But I missed that. Not that I was letting myself think about it.

I was too damn old, and I felt slower. Like I wasn't up to par. And Elliot was young and virile. Virile and fucking amazing.

I would ignore the heat I felt when near him. I was damn good at it by now.

"I'm fine," I said after a moment. I paused, studying his face. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. I'm fine."

I nearly held back a snort. Well, we were both lying. There was a moment then, a long look. I didn't know what it was about him. What I was supposed to do.

I needed to get to work, and I knew he did too. We had plans to make, meetings to go to. I needed to get on with my life, but I wasn't quite sure I could.

"Oh, hi," a soft voice said from our side, and my balls tightened, my shoulders doing the same. I ignored the twinge from the wound because I knew that voice. I had heard it in my dreams, and it haunted me.

From the look on Elliot's face, it seemed to do the same to him.

Hmm. Interesting.

We turned at the same time to see the woman with gorgeous bright eyes, her hair pulled back from her face. She had on short shorts, flip-flops, and a flowy top that cupped her breasts.

I did not let my gaze go down there though, did not look too long. At least, I hoped I didn't.

Sidney. The woman I had just been thinking about.

At the place where she had been left at the altar.

*Well, hell.*

"Hi. Well. Fancy meeting you two here." She blushed prettily, and I fisted my free hand at my side as Elliot cleared his throat. "Sidney, right?" he asked, and I knew damn well he remembered her name. He remembered everyone's names.

She smiled wide and looked between us. "I see you remember me. Probably hard to forget. But I'm glad that I saw the two of you of all people. I'm sort of embarrassed, but glad."

I nodded, thinking that today just got weirder. And a whole lot harder.



# Chapter Four

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## Sidney

**I**n the year since my life turned upside down, I thought about these two often. Probably a little too much, but I'd tried not to. Tried not to allow myself to think a little too hard. After all, this wasn't what I had expected. None of this had been what I expected.

When I decided to fly here, to get away from the disappointed looks, the pity in their eyes, the fact that I could never truly hide from the past, I hadn't expected to see the two people who had been on my mind even more than my own pain within the first ten minutes of arriving.

I had checked in at the inn, meeting the innkeeper, Naomi. She was adorable, with high cheekbones, short brown hair that flowed around her chin, and a bubbly personality that made me feel as if she was truly in her element and loved her job. Every single person around the Wilders seemed to love their job. They were nice, easygoing, and focused. If they had something to do, they would still take the time to nod at you before going on with their business. I never minded that. We all needed to work, all needed to focus, and nobody here looked at me with pity.

Of course, it could be that nobody had recognized me. After all, I had been wearing a full face of makeup, hair done in intricate waves, and wearing a dress the size of Cinderella's pumpkin carriage.

The only two people who had seen me in something other than that dress had been these two. No, they had seen me in tiny panties and a bra that had pushed my boobs up to my chin. I still couldn't quite believe I had stripped in front of them and had a breakdown.

Neither one of them looked as if they had known what to do. Did they touch me? Did they hold me? Did they run away in fear? I wouldn't have

blamed them for any of that. But they had stayed. And had helped me into my robe and helped me leave.

“Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you.” Not the best thing I had wanted to say. I wasn’t even sure what I was thanking them for. For witnessing the most embarrassing day of my life? Or for not running away screaming because I had sobbed in front of them?

The two shared a look, and once again, I was struck by how they seemed to know what the other was thinking without saying anything.

“I didn’t know you were coming.” Elliot frowned for just a second before he smiled at me, his bright eyes warm and a little too addictive.

“It was sort of last minute.” I smiled back, trying to relax. “After everything that happened last year, I tried to get my life back together. But, well, since it’s been a year, I wanted to come back to the scene of the crime.” I cringed as both men looked at each other.

There was chemistry between them for sure. A look that said something more. And the thought of them together made my pulse race. Maybe there was a little disappointment, not that I was ever going to do anything about it. No, I was done with men, done with dating, and definitely done with anything that could connect me to one of the worst days of my life. However, just the thought of them together? Seriously. Fan your face hot. Though maybe they were just good friends. Coworkers that happened to understand each other well.

Maybe I was in desperate need of some affection and the idea of love, that I was seeing things that weren’t there. After all, even before my fiancé left me, we’d stopped touching each other. He’d said it was for the wedding night. He’d wanted us to feel desperate for each other.

And since I now knew he’d been satisfying that desperation with my twin, I was the one left ice cold. Or perhaps heating from the inside out.

I’d only had my hand and other...things, since well before the wedding of my nightmares. It made sense that the objects of my fantasies would be the ones to nearly send me over the edge again, even if just in my dreams and careless thoughts.

“Scene of the crime. Well, what he did was criminal.” Trace shrugged, and I snorted.

“Pretty much. But I’m really not here about him. I promise. I’m here about me. I loved this place. This is where he had wanted us to get married. Because of the family connections.” I cringed, reminded that Elliot was the

family with those connections. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s really okay,” Elliot said, his hand raised. “I promise. That is why some people want to get married here. It’s how we stay in business.”

“True, but I shouldn’t just say it right to your face.”

“You aren’t the one who picked it.”

“True, but the foothills? I’ve always loved them. I live a couple of hours away, so it’s not like I can’t ever see them. But I drink Wilder wine,” I said with a laugh. “And ever since you opened the new spa, I’ve wanted to come visit. Though, I was never quite sure how to do so since everything happened. So now I’m here, trying to scrub the bad memories, and only end up with good.”

And try to figure out what the hell I was going to do.

Because staying at home in my small town really didn’t seem like an option anymore. I wasn’t sure it could be an option. Not when my parents were still there, still pressuring me to give in and become a team player.

It wasn’t just that my fiancé had left me at the altar. It was the fact that my sister, my twin, the gorgeous Samantha “call her Sam,” was now married to the man that was supposed to be mine.

I apparently wasn’t enough for him, so he went for the woman who looked just like me, only a little brighter, a little shinier, a little prettier—according to Sam.

I couldn’t stay in that town, knowing that the town itself knew that I had been rejected for my sister. Rejected for someone who should have loved me and been on my side.

I had been cheated on, broken, and embarrassed in one of the worst ways, and I had to live with it every day, because every single person in my town knew my name and my story. And my parents wanted me to forgive, forget, and to host the happy couple for parties and celebrations.

I was so done.

“So, what do you have planned? Or was this really last minute?” Elliot asked as he stuffed his hands in his pockets and rocked back.

I shrugged, blushing a bit in embarrassment. “It really was last minute. So I don’t have much planned. I’m staying in one of the small cabins on the north side.”

“Cabin four?” Trace asked, narrowing his eyes a bit.

I raised a brow but nodded. “Yes. Is that a problem?”

Trace shook his head. “No. It’s just off the beaten path more than the

others. You're safe though, I promise. That's my job."

I smiled. "I know I'm safe. I went through the gates here, and I read all the disclaimers about how you guys had your own security teams. I trust you."

The fact that I said that at all was odd to me, but I did trust them. I didn't even know them.

"I'm the event planner for the entire retreat, so I can tell you what activities we have coming up, and other things you can do around town. We're right outside San Antonio, and we have a service to get you out there. Either a shuttle with other people, or individual car service."

"And the car service is under my purview," Trace said with a nod. His phone beeped and he frowned down at it. "I've got to go, but, Sidney? It was good to see you again. Even under the circumstances. We'll see you around?"

I smiled then, my heart doing that little fluttering thing. I didn't know why, this was the man who was there for me on my worst day, but for some reason, it was almost as if I wanted more. But that was wrong. So wrong.

"Well, I'm glad I caught you. To say thank you."

"No thanks needed. I could have kicked his ass for you, but I figured making it more of a spectacle wouldn't have made you happy."

I snorted and shook my head. "Probably not. But it would've been fun to see."

"Well, next time I see him I'll hit him for you. Quietly."

"I appreciate that. Though I think I can do it myself."

"Damn straight." He lifted his chin, then headed down the stone path towards whoever was calling and texting.

"I don't mean to keep you. I was just taking a walk, figuring out if I was going to get breakfast or not."

"I'm glad that I saw you. Seriously though, if you need anything, let me know."

"Elliot?"

I turned to see a woman with bright eyes and an even brighter smile coming towards us.

She looked vaguely familiar.

And from the way that she smiled at me, she seemed to recognize me. A little clutch in my belly hit, worried that I was going to be embarrassed again, but the other woman just grinned.

"Hello. I'm so sorry to interrupt. I just need to steal this guy here for a

question.”

“Maddie, I’m glad you’re here. Maddie, this is Sidney. She’s staying on the property for a little bit, though I don’t know how long, and she needs some fun activities to do.”

“Oh, you don’t have to. I’m fine,” I stammered.

“Hey, that’s Elliot’s job. And mine. I am the wine tour manager, and club manager over at the winery. Why don’t I take you on a tour?”

“Oh you don’t have to. I can walk around and find things on my own.”

“I’m sure you can, but if you want the inside deets, I’ve got you. Unless you were on a tour with Elliot?” she asked, a question in her tone.

“I need to head off to a meeting, and I hated just leaving her here.” Elliot gave me a sad smile. “Sorry, I really wanted to show you around.”

“I didn’t need you to. I promise.” Shame hit me, like I was once again somewhere I shouldn’t be.

“You didn’t ask, but I wanted to. I’ll see you around. I promise.”

“It’s okay, Elliot. I just wanted to say thank you.”

“I’d say you’re welcome, but I wanted to hit the guy just like Trace did.”

“That would’ve been interesting.”

“I’ll just hold Trace’s coat when he does, how’s that?” Elliot reached out and squeezed my shoulder before heading down the path, leaving me alone with Maddie, a questioning look on her face.

She raised both brows.

“I was the jilted bride. I don’t know if that’s an actual title, but you know, the one whose groom literally ran off rather than saying I do.”

Maddie’s eyes widened before she shook her head. “Oh. Okay. That’s where I know you from. I didn’t want to say anything, because that would be awkward if I was supposed to remember your name. Well, I’m so glad that Trace and Elliot were there for you, and I’m kind of sad that they didn’t get to beat up the man. I would’ve done it too. Or, I guess I could have held your coat for you.” She winked as she said it, and I laughed, feeling a little more relaxed.

“I came here to say thank you to the men who saved my sanity, who got me out of a precarious situation. And because a fruit basket didn’t seem enough to say thank you.”

Maddie laughed, shaking her head. “I have a nice wine basket. A little gift one with some fruit and cheeses.”

“Maybe, but they live here. I’m sure they can have that anytime they

want.”

“Sadly, Trace likes beer more.” She shuddered, and I laughed.

“I like beer, too. I like wine. I also like bourbon.”

“That’s my kind of girl. I can seriously show you around though. I was just here to ask Elliot something and I didn’t get to because I completely forgot.” She shrugged and pulled out her phone, presumably texting him.

“You can go catch him. I’m sorry, I seem to be in the way.”

Maddie waved me off. “No, you’re not. I promise. I could have texted him before, I just happened to see him. Now, let me show you around.”

“It’s really okay.”

“You’re not in the way or anything. I’m really glad that you came back. Though I don’t know if any of us knew you were coming.”

I winced. “I sort of signed up under a different name. I didn’t want to be remembered.”

“I understand completely.”

I figured I might as well start off this new tour with a bang.

And try not to think of the two men that I had already seen and thanked—and dreamed about far more than I cared to admit.

“And over here is the new spa. East and his crew have been working tirelessly for over a year now, and the grand opening was a couple of months ago. With your stay, you have access to the whirlpool and sauna areas. Any treatment services you get a percentage off, and we can totally add that for you. The spa manager will hook you up.” Maddie winked at me, and I grinned. “It wasn’t completely finished last year when you were here. We were finalizing details, and making sure the infinity pools were ready to go.” She paused and looked at me. “Do you not want me to mention last year? I don’t have to. We can totally pretend that that didn’t happen, or we can talk about it. I tend to talk a lot.”

“Honestly, I’m here to face that past. Like the fact that my former fiancé is now married to my twin sister.” I said that last part pretty quickly, and Maddie blinked at me, hand over her chest.

“Okay, thankfully it’s lunchtime and we can have some wine to discuss that. If you want to. I can rage with you, or we can find a cutout of your

sister's head, print it right out, and throw darts at it. Is that what you'd like? Or maybe just your fiancé's? Former fiancé's." Maddie pinched the bridge of her nose. "You know, I'm really good with people usually. It's my job as the wine club manager and tour executive. It's what I do. But I swear all I do is keep messing up in front of you. I'm so sorry, Sidney."

I let out a breath, feeling just as awkward as she did.

I wasn't even sure why I was here. To confront my past? To be at the one place where I had been left behind? Because even that was a lie. I had been left behind numerous times before this, and I would be again. My parents loved my sister. They loved our standing in our community, and who we were. They didn't like drama or scandal.

And I was a walking reminder of their scandal.

"You know what, a little wine with lunch sounds great. I skipped breakfast on the road here, and while I was grateful for an early check-in, I am hungry."

Maddie reached out quickly and gripped my hand. "Then that sounds like we should make sure you're all taken care of. Come on, let's head to the staff area of the winery. We can take a golf cart or walk."

"There's a staff part to the winery?" I asked as we made our way towards a golf cart decked out in pink sparkles.

Maddie laughed. "Yes. It's where we Wilder women tend to drink off our bad days. Or just eat cheese and talk about our men. I figured if you wanted to talk about what happened, or pretend it didn't, it would be a better place than in the middle of the regular restaurants."

"That sounds lovely, but you don't have to go to all this trouble. You have a job to do. I can sit alone anywhere here and just enjoy myself. You have a beautiful place. You don't need to do anything special for me."

Maddie reached out and gripped my hand. "You know what? I don't have to do any of that. But I *want* to. Because the last time you were here, really shitty things happened. And I would like to make that up to you. So in order to do that, I get to pamper you a bit. And since I was already planning on heading over to the lounge to meet some of the Wilder women, I figured this would be a good chance for you to meet them too. Though I think you already met a few of them...you know. Before." She winced again. "I need to do better about not putting my foot in my mouth."

"It's kind of hard not to when I'm the awkward duck over here."

"I thought it was an awkward turtle."



“How about just an awkward animal of some sort that is flailing around and trying to figure out what she’s doing? Because that’s exactly what I’m doing. I feel like such an idiot sometimes, wondering why I’m here.” Maddie drove the golf cart expertly, making our way through the grounds, over the path, and towards the winery. The Wilders had a lot of land, more than I thought from being here previously. But it was gorgeous, and they had clearly put a lot of love into this place.

“I’m glad I’m back. I think.”

Maddie parked in front of the winery, and I took a deep breath, enjoying the scent of the outdoors and the flowers planted around the building.

When Maddie shut off the golf cart, she twisted in her seat and looked at me. “I’m glad that you’re here. I’m just sorry that we didn’t get to speak before. I was out of town on a business trip at the beginning of your planning and all of that. And then on the day of, I needed to leave for an emergency on the vines. But now I’m here, and now we get to know each other.”

“I ran with my tail between my legs last time. Scampered out before I could even say goodbye to anyone, or sign any paperwork.”

Maddie waved me off. “You didn’t need to worry about that. In fact, the man who shall not be named was the one who scheduled everything for some reason, so he’s the one who skipped out on the final papers. But don’t worry, the Wilders took care of him.”

Intrigued, I followed Maddie into the white stone building, and looked around the high arches of dark wood, and wine bottles everywhere. It was gorgeous, full of character and unique decor. A little Texas, a little Italian, and a whole lot wine enthusiast. There were people milling about, apparently starting their afternoon tour. Maddie waved at them, and talked to a man with a big beard and scowl on his face, before he twisted and left, going to talk with the innkeeper.

“Was that one of the Wilders?” I asked, intrigued at the way the two were fighting without actually fighting. Their body language spoke of tension, but they smiled at each other, though it didn’t look truly real.

Maddie looked over her shoulder and shook her head at me. “No, that’s Amos. The vineyard manager. He had a few questions for me, and now he’s doing what he does best, and growling at Naomi.” She rolled her eyes, and I lifted a brow.

“I have no idea what’s going on between the two of them, but we have bets between all of us here. You’re welcome to join in.”

“I think I’m okay. I don’t really know them. And placing bets on a relationship makes me kind of ill right now. You know.”

This time Maddie put her hand over her face and let out a deep groan. “Once again I’m an idiot. Sorry. I swear I’m better at people than this.”

“What did you do now?” a familiar voice asked as Alexis Wilder walked through an open door and smiled at me. “Sidney. Naomi told me you were here. I’m glad I got to see you.” She looked between me and Maddie and smiled. “I guess you’re here for lunch, cheese, wine, and gossip? You’re more than welcome to join us. It’s our monthly girl lunch.”

“I really don’t want to intrude,” I said, blushing. The last time I had seen Alexis, I had been wearing sweats, big sunglasses, and was piling into my car, one that my sister had been planning to drive back to my place because I was going to be taking a limo to the airport. For my honeymoon. That hadn’t happened. Instead, my sister had piled in the limo with my fiancé, leaving me behind in the dust.

“And it’s nice to see you too, Alexis,” I added, a little late.

“Seriously, join us,” Maddie said as she squeezed my hand. “I have some amazing wines for you.”

“Well, I do like wine.” I looked down at my phone, frowning at the time. “How is it already three in the afternoon?”

“We went on a long tour. Time flies when you’re having fun.”

“Food’s on the table, head on in,” a voice said from the room behind Alexis, and she moved to the side, gesturing for me to go in. “That’s Kendall, our sister-in-law. Please join us.”

I sighed and took a step forward, wondering why they were being so open to me. Maybe it was pity, but it would be nice to eat with them. To not be alone, sitting at a table wondering why I was here.

As I walked inside, I nearly tripped over my feet at the sight of Bethany Cole and Lark Thornbird.

They smiled and waved at me, as if I was welcome there.

I was losing my damn mind, that had to be it.

A woman with dark hair and gray eyes came forward and held out her hand. “Hello, I’m Kendall Wilder. You must be Sidney.”

I looked around at everyone, wondering if I had a name tag on me somewhere, letting everyone know that I was Sidney Flowers, the jilted bride and florist.

“Hello, I am. And I have no idea what I’m doing here.”

Maddie let out a laugh. “I might have sent out the bat signal to let everyone know you were coming. Even though you didn’t say you were coming, I was going to kidnap you anyway.”

I looked at them, wondering why I was being invited into what clearly was a family lunch.

Lark Thornbird came forward, her eyes soft as she held out her hand and gripped mine. “It’s so nice to meet you.”

“Yes, I’m Bethany,” the other woman said, and I just shook my head, my eyes wide.

“I know who both of you are. And I feel like I’m in this weird dream. A better dream than the last time I was here, but seriously.”

Alexis beamed. “I know, I still can’t believe that these two are with my brothers-in-law. I don’t really know how that happened.”

“It’s the Wilders, they just take you in and you don’t know how to get out,” Bethany said with a laugh. “Seriously though. We have wine, cheese, and lunch. Let’s have some fun.”

Maddie held out a glass to me, and I took it without thinking, still wondering if I was asleep. “We wanted you to have a memory at the Wilder Retreat and Winery that was fun, and just about us. Just about you. So, let’s have fun.”

I swallowed some wine and finally understood. They didn’t want me to be alone. Living in my own thoughts, being afraid. Because I was here to face my fear.

Somehow, this was going to work.

So I held up my glass and grinned. “To getting over being left at the altar,” I said point blank, and Lark beamed at me.

“Oh, I’m totally going to write you into a song. If that’s okay.”

My heart fluttered. “I would be honored. But make sure you mention his very small penis when you do.”

Everyone burst out laughing and clinked glasses.

“We have her going on just the first sip. I think this is going to be the start of a beautiful friendship,” Kendall said as she wrapped her arm around my shoulder and turned me towards the food.

By the time evening settled in, I was a little drunk, okay, maybe slightly more than a little, but I was happy, full, and laughing so hard I nearly peed myself twice.

Alexis and Kendall had left earlier to be with their children, and I loved

that this family was so close, and growing by leaps and bounds.

“And then, I look out, and all of them are standing stark naked in the moonlight, drunk off their asses, and dancing in the mist that came from the clouds off in the distance. I still don’t understand why they were naked though.” Bethany shook her head, and I tried to hold back my laughter, failing miserably along with Maddie.

“Elijah said it was a dare, one that all of them took because they were drunk, so they were dancing naked in the moonlight, with mist making their bodies glisten, and it was like this weird ritual, one that I hope is a tradition,” she said into her wine, and I hiccupped before taking another big gulp.

“You know, I think I need some water. I need to sober up if I’m going to be thinking about all six Wilders naked and wet.”

Lark laughed and handed over a glass of water. “Drink deep. But never forget those Wilder men, naked and hot as hell. Though East is mine.”

“And Elijah is mine,” Maddie added.

“And of course Everett is mine. And Kendall and Alexis have claimed Evan and Eli.” Bethany paused. “I guess Elliot’s left. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. And he’s cute, and now that I’ve seen him naked, well...” She trailed off and I just shook my head, ignoring the way that I had to press my thighs together. No. I was not going to think about Elliot Wilder naked. Or the fact that I was also thinking about the man that he kept giving smoldering looks to. No, I would not be giving Trace any naked thoughts either.

“Well then. Seems like we’re getting here a little bit late if they’re discussing us naked,” a man in a suit said from the doorway, and I turned to see seven Wilders, or maybe there were only two. I was a little cross-eyed, so I wasn’t sure.

“Elijah,” Maddie said with her hands up. “We may have had too much to drink. But we were welcoming Sidney here to the retreat, and trying to get her dumbass former fiancé out of her mind. Did it work?” She paused, her mouth pouting. “Of course, I just mentioned him so I guess it didn’t work.”

I waved her off and took a big gulp of water. “No, no. Jeremy and his micro penis are just fine wherever the fuck he is with my twin sister. He never even got me off. I had to do it myself. He’s not on my mind. Of course, now I have naked Wilders on my mind and I completely blame the girls,” I said apologetically to the Wilder men in the room.

However many of them there were.

I probably should have been embarrassed, but I'd always been a bit open in my thoughts...just not so drunkenly.

"And that's enough of that. Let's go get these women tucked in," the man who must be Elijah said as he picked up Maddie with one quick movement, carrying her like a bride over the threshold. They were so damn pretty, so damn happy. And I couldn't help but be a little envious.

East picked up Lark, while Everett threw Bethany over his shoulder, making both of them laugh.

"We'll see you tomorrow, Sidney. Make sure you take some aspirin," Bethany called out, and I tried to stand up, a little wobbly. One hand took my hip, another my hand, and I realized that they hadn't actually left me alone. I stood between the two men of my dreams, the two men that now seemed to be four if I didn't squint hard enough.

"Well hell," Trace mumbled, and Elliot held back a snort. "We leave you alone for a few hours, and Maddie gets you completely wasted. Good job."

"It's okay. It's been nice. I don't really have girlfriends at home. They've been really nice to me. And I don't even know why they were. I just came here because I wanted to have good memories of the place of my demise, and figure out what the hell I'm going to do with my flower shop at home. But here I am, thinking naked thoughts about you and Trace." I paused, let out a giggle. "I probably shouldn't have mentioned that. But the ladies did say very complimentary things about you naked, Elliot. Just so you know."

Elliot ran his hands over his mouth, his smile wide.

"My God. How much wine did they have?" Trace asked, as they moved me from the couch.

"Just enough I think." I stopped them both, trying to sober up as much as possible. When I gripped each of their hands, they looked down at me, then up at my eyes.

"Thank you. For a year ago, and for today. Just, thank you."

"You don't have anything to thank us for," Elliot said.

"But I do. Even if I don't know exactly what right now."

They were just so...amazing. Together. Apart. There was something in me that was drawn to them, even if I knew I shouldn't be. The fact that part of me wanted them both told me I was beyond redemption, but I didn't care. Not in this moment. Maybe not ever.

And then drunken me, happy me in that moment, went to my tiptoes, and pressed my lips to Elliot's, a soft kiss, one that I wanted to be more in my

drunken state, or maybe just in my dream state. But Elliot didn't move, instead he froze. I knew it was because he wouldn't take advantage of me. And I was drunk enough to know that this had to be a dream. And then I twisted and did the same to Trace. He let out a grunt but didn't pull away. Instead, I leaned against him, letting him catch me as my knees gave out, and I gladly fell back asleep, knowing that this dream felt a little too real. Because I could still taste them on my lips.

But it couldn't be real.

At least I really hoped this wasn't.

# Chapter Five

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## Trace

I slid my hands through my hair as I tried to get the memory of the night before out of my head. It wasn't as easy as it should have been, considering Sidney had been drunk. She'd kissed me and Elliot. It was only in thanks for helping her out of her wedding dress and into something more comfortable a year ago. And I guess for just being nice to her when she first showed up. But hell, I still felt like a lech for liking that kiss as much as I had. But she hadn't been thinking clearly. I wasn't going to think about it anymore. Just like I wasn't going to think about Elliot.

My phone buzzed and I looked down at it, seeing my father's name on the screen. I let it go to voicemail. I wasn't in the mood to deal with them.

I always had expectations set on me. From the time I was born, a path was laid out for me. One that all members of my family were held to. I wasn't like the Wilders, wasn't comforted by the fact that I had family now, or was working towards a common goal. No, I was the rich boy who wasn't rich, the one who went into the military as enlisted, then gotten out to start his own business. And the one time I had tried to be the good son, to listen to my mother, I ended up with a person I shouldn't have.

And when I called it off—and supposedly broken Alicia's heart though I knew she hadn't loved me any more than I had loved her—I broke another family rule. And I was apparently damn good at it, so I was going to ignore my parents. At least for a little while.

I had work to do, and not a lot of time to do it in. We had three events happening at the same time today, not including the normal wine tours. Maddie had her work cut out for her today, along with Elijah, and my team was handling that. I was overseeing the events going on at the main event



hall, the restaurant, and the inn's business center. I had no idea how the Wilders could organize it all and keep it going and running as if we weren't all running ourselves ragged, but they were doing a damn good job.

I knew a lot of it had to do with Elliot. He could multitask like nobody's business, even when it looked like he was lost in his head.

I wasn't sure the other Wilders even realized he did so much behind the scenes. But I wasn't going to get in the middle of that. I turned the corner on the way to my office and saw a familiar face. Albeit, slightly greener than the day before.

My cock pressed against the zipper of my jeans and I willed that sensation away. No, that was not for now, or ever. I needed to get my head out of my ass.

"Afternoon," I said as I tilted my head towards Sidney.

She looked up at me, a little pale, a slight tinge of green telling me she wasn't fully recovered from the night before.

"Afternoon. Though I did just wake up."

I winced. "Did the girls not feed you at all?"

"Oh, they did, I'm just not the best drinker. And, well, I didn't even realize that my wine glass was never empty."

I held back a laugh at that. "It's good wine. The Wilders know what they're doing."

"I drink it at home, albeit not in the quantities I did last night." She pressed her lips together and rocked on her heels. Although as soon as she did that, she seemed to think better of it, and let out a shudder. As she put her hand on her stomach, I barely resisted the urge to reach out and steady her. She needed to sit down and drink some water, or to find some greasy food.

"I wanted to say I was sorry."

It felt like a kick in the gut, though I knew it shouldn't. She had been drunk.

"Seriously, I mean, I'm sorry for doing that without asking or whatever. And, well, I remember it all. And just, I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. You were having fun."

"Maybe a little too much fun," she said a little wryly.

I chuckled softly. "Yeah. Maybe. But I didn't mind." I had no idea why I said that last part, and when her eyes widened, I nearly kicked myself.

"I didn't mind either. And, on that note, I'm going off to the new infinity pool to have a swim. I could use some gentle movement."

She turned and practically ran towards the spa.

Had she really said that? No, I was just hearing things. She hadn't wanted to kiss me. Right?

And now I had to do my best not to think about her in a bathing suit.

Damn it.

I headed to my office, grateful when I didn't run into Elliot. I tended to run into him often these days. It was as if this retreat kept forcing us in each other's path. Ever since I saved his life on that cliff, I couldn't get away from him fast enough every time we ran into each other.

Then again, he did the same. So I needed to ignore that chemistry.

"Get over yourself, Trace. Neither one of them is for you."

"Talking to yourself, big man?"

I turned to Mark and snorted. "Yes. Always. It's a sign I'm spending too much time working on my own. You doing okay?"

Mark was one of the older members of our team, had been here since the beginning. He was good at his job and felt responsible, just like I did, whenever something slid through the cracks. But that was in the past. Now we were a stronger unit with the heightened security.

"You on Bethany's detail today?" I asked, even though I knew the answer. I was the one who made the schedule, after all.

"You know it. Although I'll never do as good a job as you."

I snorted. "Not so much. But it's good that her traveling team can take a break. See their families and all that."

"You used to do both. I like that you've split up Bethany's team like that."

I nodded. "Yes, this way we can see things that we might've missed otherwise, we get more time focused where we need to, and we have people who are familiar with this area, and others that are trained better at traveling with Bethany. Same with Lark's team. But how are you doing with the event that she has coming up?" I asked.

"Doing good. It's a charity gala, even though nobody's dressing up in formal attire."

"You can't even say that with a straight face," I said with a laugh.

"The only reason I even own a suit is because of this job. I'd be in jeans every day of the week if I could."

"You are in jeans most days, it's how you fit in here in Texas."

"Damn straight. You want to go over a few more things?"

I nodded as the rest of our currently off-duty team walked in. I liked the new team and the way that we worked together. Not all places needed security like this, but we did. We had some problems in the past, back before I joined them, but now we were like a well-oiled machine. We still had a couple of positions open, ones I needed to work on filling. And I would. I wanted the Wilders and their families safe. Especially since some of the Wilders lived on property with their kids. Some had homes off property, but we all had places to stay here, too. I didn't live on the property, even though sometimes I slept over in the security bunks. But I tried not to do that too often. Because, apparently, I needed a life, according to Bethany.

As I headed out, I looked over my list for the rest of the day. There was a Wilder dinner later that evening, and I wasn't sure I was going to go. I was always invited, but it was a family thing. Bethany was like a sister to me, and she called me family, but it always felt weird to intrude on their time. No, that wasn't quite it. It was more the fact that I felt like I was intruding on Elliot.

I went through my list, and realized we needed another change with the outside security. Bethany and Lark were both getting more famous, and their fandoms growing. Lark's new song had gone viral at the exact same time as Bethany's recent movie released, breaking records. People wanted photos of them, even more so than when they were in LA. They wanted them in their "down-home element" as the others called it. I shook my head as I made notes, going over what I needed to do with my electronics guy.

I had an unsettled feeling, and I hated that. What I also needed was my right-hand man. When Justin left to start his own business in New York, as that's where his wife was originally from, it left me shorthanded. Not with the number of people I had, but with experience. I needed somebody who the Wilders trusted, and somebody who could live on-site.

That was harder than it sounded, because there were so many clashing personalities.

I leaned back in my chair, trying to figure out what I needed to do next.

When I finally was about to give up and go walk the perimeter, someone knocked on my door.

I looked up and blinked. This man looked so fucking familiar, but I knew I had never seen him in person in my life.

Dark hair, light eyes, a strong jaw. He had a few days of stubble on his face, a nose ring that seemed almost out of place until you noticed the ink down his arms visible with his Henley sleeves rolled up. He had on worn

jeans, work boots, and a scowl.

It was the scowl that I recognized.

Because I had seen it on Elliot's face before, and East's.

I would eat my hat if this wasn't a Wilder, even though he wasn't one I knew.

"Can I help you?" I asked, standing up. I didn't know who this was, and I didn't like the fact that I didn't. I thought I knew everyone related to the Wilders, but then it clicked. Oh, I knew exactly who this was. They were in my dossier. Because of course I had a dossier when it came to the Wilders.

"Actually, I was hoping I could help you," the man said, his voice cool but not rude.

"Let me see, you must be Ridge."

The man's eyes widened before a bright smile slid over his face. But that smile didn't reach his eyes, which made me worry. What was this man hiding, and why was he here without any notice?

A Wilder cousin coming to visit the family? Somebody would know. And that somebody would tell me so it was on my security logs.

"Well, Trace Pritchett. Your reputation precedes you. Yes, I'm Ridge Wilder. One of the cousins."

"I remember you from the file."

"I think it should worry me that there is a file, but considering who my cousins married, I'm glad that you're taking care of them. And that's why I'm here."

"You're here because your cousins married an actress and a Grammy Award-winning artist?" I asked, curious.

"No, because my job is security, and while I couldn't come and work until now, I figured you could use some help. And I could use a change." He held out the folder he had been holding.

"Is that your resume?"

"Yes, but the electronic version is better. I just wasn't sure how you felt about paper."

"How old do you think I am? I swear, all of you Wilders are like that," I grumbled as Ridge smiled again, this time reaching his eyes.

I took his resume while shaking my head. "Does the family know you're here?"

"No, I wanted to apply for the job without having to rely on family."

"You don't think it's tricky since all seven of them, including Eliza, are

owners?”

“I want a job—I need a job. And I need a change. And I didn’t want the Wilder name to be the reason you hired me.”

I gave his resume a cursory glance, and raised a brow at what I saw.

Damn. This man looked like he’d be perfect for what I needed. Then again, should I hire a family member without letting the Wilders know? Fuck no. But this guy looked like he needed a job, and maybe the Wilders needed him here.

This wasn’t a decision I was going to make on the spot. But, as a familiar voice echoed down the hall and my shoulders tightened, I realized that everything would be out of my hands soon. He would be hired or not, but it wouldn’t be up to me.

Elliot walked into the office, stopping short in surprise.

“Ridge? Hell, what are you doing here?” Elliot’s grin widened and he wrapped his arms around Ridge’s shoulders.

Ridge tightened for just an instant, met my gaze and shook his head. He didn’t want me to mention that slight mistake in front of Elliot. But I wasn’t sure I wanted to keep secrets from Elliot. I was doing that enough as it was.

Ridge wrapped his arms around his cousin and hugged him back. “Hey, good to see you, Elliot. Place looks great.”

“You’ve seen it before, you and your brothers. I’m glad that you’re here. Are you staying on property? Why didn’t Eli tell me?”

“Not staying on property but I wanted to walk around, and, well, I’m here for a job.” He shrugged.

“Oh. Wow. Wait. You’re in security, that’s actually pretty great. We wanted to hire you back before we hired Trace.” Elliot gave me an apologetic look. “Sorry.”

“No need. You’re a family-run establishment.”

“Well, sorry I couldn’t take the offer then. But Trace seems to know what he’s doing here. That’s the scuttlebutt in our circles.”

Elliot beamed. “You have circles? Why don’t I know these things? I need to know everything. But wait, you want a job here? You want to work with us?”

Ridge shrugged, and I stood back, leaning against the desk as I let Elliot handle this for me. I liked watching him figure out his family. The guy always wanted to take care of everybody and ensure the others were safe and happy and taken care of. But he rarely did the same for himself. Somebody

needed to take care of him, but it wasn't going to be me. Elliot would never allow that.

"I need a change, and it would be working *for* you guys. Not with you. I'd be fine with that."

"Sounds like a complicated answer," I muttered, and Ridge shook his head. Elliot gave me a look.

"I think that's up to Trace." He held up his hand before I could say it was the exact opposite.

"We don't tell Trace who to hire. But damn it, Ridge. We love you. If you need us for anything, you know we're here."

Ridge was quiet for so long, I was afraid we were going to end things right here, awkward as hell. But he eventually huffed out a breath. "I just need a job. Change of scenery. And I wanted to get the lay of the land before the reunion anyway."

Elliot looked nervous. "Oh, yeah. The reunion."

"I'd say ask me for anything when it comes to helping with that, but I'm not good at that. But I am good at my job." He turned to me. "Take a look at the resume, see if you want to interview me. I know I could have emailed, but I was driving around and figured I'd come see the family and shoot my shot. My number's on the paper. Just let me know."

As he turned to walk out, Elliot reached out and gripped his arm. "Come to dinner? We're doing a Wilder dinner tonight."

"A Wilder dinner?" he asked, eyes bright.

"Yes. And you're a fucking Wilder. So you're going to be there. Got me? Also, you're not staying anywhere else. Family stays here."

Something washed over Ridge's face and he nodded. "Yeah. That sounds good. I'll let you two do what you need to, and I'll see you soon. Hope to hear from you soon, Trace." Ridge walked out, leaving me standing there and feeling a little lost, wondering what the fuck had just happened.

"Do you know what's going on with your cousin?" I asked. Elliot sighed and shook his head.

"Not even a little bit. Do you actually need somebody? I was sort of fucking around when I said that."

I held back a laugh as I stepped forward, needing to be near him. It was a mistake, but I liked the heat of him.

"Yeah. I was looking for someone to replace Justin."

"From what I know of Ridge, he'd be a good fit."

“It won’t be a problem with family working here?”

Elliot looked at me and laughed, a full belly laugh that lit up his whole face. I reached out without meaning to and brushed his hair off his face. It was getting so long that he could pull it back in a ponytail. Elliot didn’t freeze this time though, instead he looked at me and leaned into the touch as he stopped laughing.

“What’s wrong?” I asked softly, taking a step forward.

I reached around him and closed the door, leaving the two of us alone. If Elliot needed privacy that was fine, but I needed it too.

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m just stressed because I’m planning the reunion and I feel like I’m going to fuck everything up. Things just feel weird right now.” He stepped away and I let him, allowing him space to open up. “The rest of the family’s moving on and I feel left behind. And I have no idea how that happened. I’m mostly fine with that. I’m planning a fucking family reunion, and I’m the single guy, so it makes sense. Everybody’s so worried about their jobs and family and kids, plus I’m the planner. And now Ridge is here and something’s wrong with him and I don’t know how to fix that. I just feel like I’m losing my mind.”

“Okay.”

Elliot glared at me. “Okay? I’m over here rambling about random shit that doesn’t really mean anything to you, and you say okay?”

“Okay. You feel left behind?”

“Everybody has a relationship, they have someone. And there’s going to be this huge family reunion where I’m supposed to just stand there and be the odd man out. But I don’t even know what I want.”

He met my gaze and I did the one thing I shouldn’t do, the one thing I needed more than I needed my next breath. I slid my hand around the back of his neck and crushed my mouth to his.

He tasted of coffee and mint. He growled into me as I deepened the kiss. His hand slid around my hip, squeezing, and I explored his mouth roughly with my tongue. I pulled away, just enough to see that he stared at me wide eyed.

“What about that? Did that help?”

Elliot burst out laughing. “Not even a little bit. What the fuck, Trace?”

I shrugged, wondering what the hell I had just done. This was the one thing I told myself I wouldn’t do. “I don’t know. It felt like the right thing to do.”

“You just got out of a relationship.”

“No, it wasn’t even a real relationship.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“It doesn’t matter. But I’ve wanted to kiss you for a long time, and I got you to shut up and think. So there you go.”

“You kissed me to shut me up?” he asked, anger evident in his tone.

“Maybe. Or maybe I just wanted to kiss you.” I shrugged and stuffed my hands in my pockets. “I don’t know what the hell I’m doing, Elliot. You can walk away and pretend you don’t want this. But I know you do. I can see the outline of your dick through your jeans.”

Elliot glared down at his pants, and then at mine. “Fuck you.”

“We can do that, but I thought I’d be the one fucking you.”

Where the hell was this coming from? It was like someone had taken over my body. But I’d been thinking about doing it for long enough, I might as well blow everything up in the process.

“What does this mean?”

“It means I wanted to kiss you.”

“And what about Sidney?”

I nearly staggered. “There is something there. I felt it the day of her wedding, and doesn’t that sound like a dumbass thing to say?” I said with a laugh. “I was with someone and she was getting married, and there was still a connection.”

“And once again I am the odd man left out,” Elliot said, and then rubbed his temples. “I’m going to stop whining. But seriously, you kissed me, and Sidney kissed me last night and apologized for it this morning.”

“She did the same to me. But I didn’t like her apologizing.”

Elliot narrowed his gaze. “Same. What are we going to do?”

I shrugged, wondering if for once I should just do something for myself. “Maybe we just see? Sidney’s not here for long. Maybe see what she wants. Something temporary. I’m good at temporary.”

I looked at Elliot as his face clouded over, and I wondered what that was about before he nodded. “Temporary works.” He sighed. “So, I guess we go get the girl? And hope to hell we don’t scare the fuck out of her by asking her what we’re going to ask?”

“Yeah, let’s go get the girl. And hope we don’t fuck everything up.”

Although I had a feeling we were about to do just that.



# Chapter Six

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## Elliot

The dream came on as it usually did. Fire searing my skin, smoke blocking my airways. It didn't matter that I knew it was a dream. I still had to live through it, just like I lived through it in real life. Miles turned to me, grin slick, eyes bright. "You ready for this?"

That didn't make any sense though. Because once the fire started, Miles wasn't there. I wanted to lean forward, to tell him it would be okay. That we would make it. But I had never lied to Miles. Even when I had to lie to everyone else about who he was, I never lied to him.

"Let's go back. Let's just go back."

"You know I can't do that, Elliot. No phoning home." He winked at his reference about a movie I had never even seen before heading out, leaving me behind. They always did that, they left me behind. Each of my siblings, my parents, and every single person in my life. They left me behind, and then I would follow, doing my best not to lose it all as I went.

I wasn't the lucky one, despite what they said.

When the screaming started I shot up from bed, running my hands over my chest and through my hair. I needed a haircut. Miles would've hated the long hair, but Miles wasn't here anymore. Nobody was. I could keep the long hair, and maybe let it get even longer so I could braid it back. I didn't care anymore. I needed to. My family needed me to care.

But I didn't think it was going to happen.

I hated that my subconscious was such a bitch. Because I knew why I'd had the dream, why that particular dream was haunting me. It wasn't the fact that I missed Miles, because of course I did, though it wasn't that aching and gnawing feeling it had once been. It was about everything else.

When my brother got out of the military, and the rest of us followed suit, Eli had asked us each point blank what we would do if we all worked together. And if it would be helpful to do that at all. He had asked those questions, some of us lied, some of us told the brutal truth. You couldn't hide evidence from everyone. Especially when some of us had scars on our body. But I hadn't said a damn thing. Just that I hadn't wanted to be left behind if my brothers joined in on something. And while that was the truth, they didn't need to know about Miles. Only one person knew, and that person was still in, still overseas.

So I knew the dream wasn't merely about that. No, it was about her, and him.

I was allowed to fall again, right? Allowed to be? That's what I wanted. I had just fucking complained that everyone was moving on and leaving me behind. And yet my damn subconscious wanted to bring up my dead boyfriend, the one I'd held as he'd lain dying. I had pressed my hand to his stomach, trying to put everything back inside when it wouldn't go. It was my damn job to do that, to try to put him back together, but there was no saving him.

I thought I'd gotten over it, but apparently just wanting to try to start something new with Trace and Sidney was a little too much for my brain. I would figure it out. Or I would lie here in my own sweat and subconscious hatred.

I sighed and rolled out of bed, stripping the sheets from the bed since I had sweated through them again. I had the day off, which was nice. Which meant Trace and I had a plan.

Not a good plan, but at least something.

I had no idea what the hell I was doing. Unlike some of my friends, I had never been in a poly relationship, never been around that type of thing. But I knew they worked. It just took communication—something I wasn't always good at. Even though I spoke quickly and was a little too bubbly for some people, I wasn't the best at communicating. Imagine that.

Sidney had been on a day trip the day before, so she wasn't around when Trace and I went to find her.

I could still taste Trace on my lips, could still feel him against me, and the part of me that wanted him hadn't gone away. The fact that we both wanted Sidney, had felt something for her in the brief moments we were together, told me that this could be something. At least, until she went back to her town

and moved on.

Or maybe I was losing my damn mind and was seeing things that weren't there. Which was fine. It didn't have to be real. It could be a weird dream that meant nothing. But, for now, we would see where this went.

Her not being around at first when Trace and I went to ask her if she wanted to go on a date with both of us, like we were fucking insane, gave me a little bit more time to think. Not that it was good for me, but I tried. It was always good to just sit back and try to figure out exactly what the hell was going on.

Did I really want this? I didn't know but I wanted to try. I *needed* to try. Because if I didn't get off my ass and actually do something, I was going to lose my mind. Or lose out on something that could be amazing.

The fact that my dreams of late hadn't just been about Miles but had been filled with Trace, and even a woman in a wedding dress running away, told me that I needed to think a little harder about what I wanted.

I showered and got ready, answered a few texts and emails for work. It didn't matter that I had the day off, a Wilder never really had a day off. That made me smile, thinking of something our father used to say. Because we were all workaholics, even if we didn't want to be. Sometimes we'd grumble about it, but most of the time we loved what we did.

And I did love what I did. This hadn't been on my radar of things to do when I was a kid—the fact that I had gone from being a medic in the military to now planning events for a large company resort and winery meant I was leaning into something fun for the first time in my life.

As I got my coffee and got ready to take a morning walk, giving myself time to figure out what to say or how the hell to start this day, someone knocked at the door. My chest tightened, and part of me wanted it to be one of my brothers saying they needed help with work today. The problem was, I knew it wasn't. I knew that knock. And it annoyed me that I knew that knock.

The man had been in a relationship not that long ago, so had Sidney, and here I was lusting after both of them like an idiot.

I pushed those thoughts from my mind and opened the door to see Trace standing there. He wore an oat-colored Henley rolled up to the elbows so I could see his forearms. I loved men's forearms. It was well-known that most people who liked men also liked their forearms, even if they didn't admit it.

He also had on worn Wranglers and hiking boots, which made me smile because I knew those boots. They were the same boots he'd worn when I'd

nearly fallen off the cliff. I looked down at my own boot-covered feet, and noticed Trace's gaze doing the same.

"Glad to see you wearing boots, because I figured we could take Sidney on a hike."

I raised a brow and sipped my coffee. "Really? You trust me to hike with you again?"

"Well, you're wearing boots this time, so I guess it's okay. Though I don't know if Sidney even likes hiking. But I figured we could discuss what the hell we're doing in a private setting."

"What are we doing?" I asked, needing the answer.

Trace leaned forward and brushed his knuckle against my bearded jaw.

"I'm not sure. But there's something there. Even in those small moments we've had. There's something there. And I'm tired of not thinking about it."

"Does that mean you've been thinking about it often?" I swallowed hard, resisting the urge to lean into his touch. I wasn't going to do that. I was going to be smart about all of this. Only I didn't feel smart at all.

When Trace leaned forward and brushed his lips against mine, it felt like this was what I had been waiting for. Even before he dated Alicia, I had wanted this. He had been Bethany's bodyguard, all strong and protective and exactly what I wanted. But it hadn't been smart then, and I wasn't sure it was smart now. He worked with us, and he needed this place just like I did. And I didn't know him as well as I wanted to.

"Let's go see what she says."

"Really? Just like that?" I shook my head as I closed the door behind me and noticed Trace's coffee cup resting on the porch rail.

"I'm glad I didn't offer you coffee. Seems you already have some."

"The amount of caffeine I intake every day should be a little worrying."

"Same here. And people think I'm hyper without it."

"You're not hyper, you're just always putting duty first. Makes sense. Your mind runs a mile a minute, so of course you're going to do things at the same speed."

I nearly tripped over my feet in front of him, as if he had noticed me and understood.

"So, this connection with Sidney, are we just asking her to hang out with us? Or...what?"

Trace shrugged as we headed down the path. I paused and looked at him. "What do you want?"

Trace looked at me for a long moment then sipped his coffee. “I don’t know. And I’m kind of tired of not knowing. But I want you, Elliot. And that might make me an idiot if things get fucked up, but I do.”

Something inside me twisted, and I didn’t know if it was good or bad, but I nodded. “You want me? That’s good.”

“And you?”

I raised a brow. “What are you trying to get at?”

“You want me.” It wasn’t a question, the cocky attitude giving me a hard-on. Damn the man. “Yeah, I do. But you knew that, it’s why we’re out here. That’s why I let you kiss me.”

“You kissed me too.”

“And Sidney? What happens with her?”

“I don’t know. But ever since that day, I can’t stop thinking about her.”

“And you were with someone at the time,” I said, wanting to know more about Trace. I didn’t want forever, but I wanted to find out more. There was a road to travel here, one we had to figure out.

“It wasn’t what you thought. What anyone thought.”

“Then what was it?”

“Hey, you two,” a familiar voice said as we turned to see Sidney, the object of our desires, of everything that seemed to be wrong and right, coming towards us. She had her hair piled up on her head, sunglasses covering those pretty eyes, and an earbud in one ear.

“Hey, you,” I said, a smile on my face. I didn’t even know her, and just being near her made me smile.

It wasn’t insta-love, I didn’t love her, I didn’t know her. But I wanted to know her. And after years of hiding myself, it was kind of nice to want to know more about someone.

“Good morning,” Trace said, a small smile on his face. That nearly knocked me back, because Trace didn’t smile often, and when he did, it stunned me every time.

“I figured I might go on a hike. But I have no idea what I’m doing there. I am wearing the right shoes though.” She gestured down to her well-worn hiking boots, and I barely resisted the urge to smile over at Trace.

“Well, we thought we should ask you out for a hike anyway.”

She smiled wide and looked between us, confusion etched on her face. What exactly was Trace orchestrating here? And why did I want to know more?

“That sounds fun. I didn’t know you guys were off today. Don’t you have better things to do than hiking on your property?”

“Maybe, but hiking’s fun.” Trace snorted a laugh, and Sidney looked at us quizzically. “And I guess we can tell you about the last time Trace and I hiked.”

“Oh, I’d love to know.”

“It all started because he wasn’t wearing the right shoes,” Trace began, as he gestured for us to follow him. The fact that I wanted to follow him so easily worried me, but I knew that this was just a hike. Nothing more. We might have joked that we were going to go get the girl, that everything was temporary, but we didn’t know each other. Not enough.

“And you’re okay? That must have been so scary,” Sidney said, her eyes wide as she looked at us. “I’m glad you two were there for each other.” She paused. “So, how long have you two been together?”

I nearly tripped over my feet as Trace gave that deep laugh that went right to my gut.

“We aren’t together.” Trace looked at me. “Yet.”

My toes curled in my hiking boots, and I shook my head. “We’re just friends. Ish.”

Trace raised a brow as Sidney blinked at us. “I feel like there’s a lot of history in that one ish, and I want to know more but I’m a little afraid to ask.”

“It’s okay. We’re sort of taking this day by day, and decided to go on a hike today.”

“A hike you wanted me to be on,” she said slowly. “That’s not interesting at all.”

“So, what is it that you do, Sidney?” I asked, changing the subject because I wasn’t ready for where that conversation was going to go.

“I’m a florist.”

“Isn’t your last name Flowers?” Trace asked, as if he didn’t remember.

Sidney rolled her eyes. “Yep. The Flowers family doesn’t usually go into the floral arrangement business, but that’s what I did. I love growing flowers, and I love arranging them. And, well, the name sort of lent itself to my own business.”

“And your family doesn’t approve?” I asked, a little confused.

“My family is a little more interested in preserving the family name and dynasty.” She rolled her eyes. “We’re also Flowers Oil.” She dropped that bomb and my eyes widened, Trace nodded as if he had already known. The

man had probably already done a background check on her.

“Hence the wedding here a year ago,” Trace added.

Sidney sighed, and I wanted to kick him for bringing that up, but that was where we’d all met.

“Pretty much. Only the best for the Flowers family. They don’t really understand me wanting to own my own shop and not go into the family business of making more money. My sister did though.” She cringed. “And of course, now that Jeremy is moving from his family business and going to help mine, they’re making things work for them in that small town.”

“Leaving you out,” I said without thinking, and Sidney nodded.

“Leaving me out. Which is fine, because I don’t want to be part of that, but it’s a whole thing. That’s why I’m here actually.” She sighed and looked around the countryside. “I started that shop because I wanted something of my own, but it’s getting harder and harder to ignore the responsibilities that come with family being near. I know it’s not far from here, but it feels like such a different world. This place even feels like a different world than New Braunfels or San Antonio or Austin. And you’re not far from any of them.”

“The I-35 corridor is just one big city these days.” I said the familiar refrain.

“Pretty much. And, I don’t know, I’m trying to figure things out. And I thought why not do it at the place where you guys helped me finally stand up for myself.”

“You did that on your own by facing the others and telling them that the wedding was off.”

She rolled her eyes. “And then I ran out the back before I had to deal with anything. My parents will never forgive me for making them handle everything else.”

“You told the guests to leave,” I said. “You said that the wedding was off, and they had clearly already realized that because of what that bastard did. That’s on them. Not you.”

“Maybe. That’s not how my parents see it. Hence again why I’m trying to enjoy the time away from them.”

“Meaning we shouldn’t bring it up,” I said with a laugh. “I get it about families. Although mine all work on the same compound.”

“I like the fact that you all work together. You didn’t always?”

I shook my head and held out my hand, helping Sidney over a small boulder. She slid her hand into mine, the warm contact sending a shiver down



my spine. Our gazes met, and she smiled before nodding her head in thanks.

“No, we were stationed all over the world before we got out, then decided to move down here.”

“Really? So you guys aren’t even from here?”

“Nope. We’re all Air Force. But San Antonio’s a big area for the military to retire, and when the opportunity to buy and operate this place came up, we figured out how to make it work.”

“That’s crazy. In a good way. You guys have made a name for yourselves.”

“We try. It helps that the women my brothers have all married each have their own talents that make the place shine. I know for a fact we couldn’t have done it without them.”

“And you guys are all close. Do you all live on property?”

I shook my head. “We started out that way. But as families grew and the kids were born, some of them moved off property. Plus, Bethany is on location a lot, and they have a place out in LA. Same with Lark.”

“That’s really cool. It was amazing hanging out with them my first night here. Though I wasn’t expecting to drink so much.” She blushed as she said it, and while that was a good segue into asking about a little more, Trace cleared his throat and shook his head. I nodded and let the conversation go on.

“So, you are in charge of security?” Sidney asked, and Trace nodded.

“Yes. I used to work for Bethany, but now I work for the whole team. I like it.”

“And you’re not from here either?” Trace shook his head and I leaned forward, eager to learn more. I knew a little about Trace but not enough. Like why he and Alicia had been together at all.

“No, we’re from the East Coast. I know of the Flowers family, and I bet you know of Pritchett Developments?”

Sidney let out a small gasp as my eyes widened. Even I had heard of Pritchett Developments. I just hadn’t realized that was Trace Pritchett’s family.

“My parents have worked with yours,” Sidney said with a shake of her head. “Small world. Especially down in South Texas.”

“Tell me about it,” Trace grumbled. “Anyway, like you, I didn’t want to work for the family business, so I joined the military when I was eighteen, much to my parents’ disappointment.” Trace shrugged, and I knew there was

more to that. I was still floored that Trace came from that family. The Pritchett family was old money, not oil money like Sidney's, but *old* money.

And what the hell were these two doing standing by me? The Wilders were not money. Oh, we were making it now, but nothing like they were.

"I wasn't in for long, because I liked the private sector more. I wasn't into mercenary work like some books and TV shows would have you think, so I started off working for a friend, then ended up making my own company, going to college at night to get my business degree. But yeah, I get wanting to make things on your own. You both are doing it."

We continued to talk about family, places we wanted to visit, places we had been. We didn't talk about where we had been deployed. No one needed to know that, and I didn't want to talk about it, but it was nice to talk.

Nice to know who Trace was.

"I still don't know how you met Jeremy," I said after a minute, wanting to know more about the man she'd nearly tied herself to.

Sidney sighed and looked off into the distance. "It was at a charity event. I don't know, I guess he swept me off my feet and I ignored all the red flags. It's fine though, he's happy with my sister, and I can pretend it didn't happen."

Trace raised a brow. "Really?"

"Not in the slightest," she said with a hollow laugh, and I reached out and squeezed her hand. She looked down at my touch and smiled. "Not going to happen. But I can try. Weren't you with a woman when I saw you there?" she asked, turning to Trace. I really wanted to know more about that too.

"Alicia's family is friends with my family. I said yes to the family connection because I thought I needed to. Things didn't work out."

"Well, that was as vague as ever, but at least it gives me a little more insight. Not much though. And now the two of you..." She trailed off, and I looked at Trace, knowing that this was the best opening we were going to get.

"And now the two of us aren't connected. She's still friends with my family, however."

"That's good." She swallowed. "I guess. I mean...no hard feelings?"

Maybe. "So, about that kiss..." Trace said softly. I grinned as Sidney's gaze shot between us.

"I'm sorry. That was so stupid."

"Don't be sorry." I smiled. "We liked it. Maybe we should do that again."

"What?" she asked.

“We’re just saying, we didn’t mind it. And if you didn’t mind it, let’s talk about that some more.”

It was the most awkward way I could have put that, and while Trace groaned beside me, Sidney blinked in front of me. I figured I had just fucked that up.

But at least I was trying. And she hadn’t run off.

Yet.

# Chapter Seven

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## Sidney

**H**onestly, I must have fallen off a cliff like Elliot had and hit my head because there was no way one of my lustful dreams was being discussed. No actual way.

But I could feel the sun on my face, the heat as I warmed from the inside out in embarrassment—or something more. I could sense the wind on my skin, the way it riffled the strands that had come loose from the messy bun on top of my head. I could feel the small drip of sweat down my spine that had nothing to do with the muggy South Texas air, and everything to do with the nerves currently doing a tap dance.

All of this told me their questions were real, that this odd feeling of *something* between us wasn't in my dreams or out of context. That I wasn't making it all up because I needed something to cling to after being left at the altar and all the crap that came after.

I'd been left by one man.

Why not have daydreams and more when it came to not one, but *two* men? Two men who were clearly on a collision course with each other. I wasn't sure what I needed to say, or if they wanted me to say anything at all.

“Is this something you two do often?” I asked, not even realizing I was going to ask that until the words were out. But now they were out there, and I wasn't angry about it.

I didn't have the information. The details.

And I needed the details if they were asking me what I thought they were asking me.

Because if I was one of many, a night just to have fun, was that such a bad thing? It would be one night of pleasure—and it damn well would be

pleasure with these two—and then I'd go on with the rest of my life with this memory for me and me alone.

But if I wasn't one of many, and I was just one, what the hell did that mean?

And why was I so unsure of what I wanted the answer to be?

The guys looked at each other. "No, we've never asked anyone this," Elliot said after a moment that felt like a year. A little blush stained his cheeks, making him look even hotter. That long hair, bright eyes, and the way his beard was just a little rough so it would probably leave a beard burn. Not that I was thinking about that at all.

"I really need you to explain exactly what the hell you're asking about, because I feel like I'm losing my mind."

Trace ran his hand over his face, the muscles in his forearm bunching. I wasn't looking too hard. Or at least was trying not to.

"Hell, I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm sorry. What we wanted to say is we would like to take you out on a date."

Elliot blinked. "Yes. That's exactly what we wanted to say."

"Did you guys not talk about this beforehand?" I huffed out a laugh, holding up my hand before they could say anything. "So, it's clear that you don't do this often. You take me out into the middle of the woods and somehow I thought that this was a good idea, and now you're asking me for what, a threesome?" My voice went a little high pitched at the end.

Elliot winced while Trace just smiled.

That damn smile.

"No, I wasn't thinking that."

"I'm not quite sure I believe you," I said to the man with all those muscles. "So, what, are you feeling pity for me that I was left at the altar? You think I should face my demons with a bang?" The blood drained from my face as my words settled in, and Elliot and Trace both burst out laughing. Thankfully I joined them.

"That's not what I meant. Seriously. Did not mean banging."

Elliot wiped tears from his eyes as Trace shook his head. "We thought that you're here to enjoy yourself, and, I don't know, there's a connection. You felt it." He moved forward, his eyes hooded. "You felt it that day, even when you were engulfed in everything else."

He was right. "I stood in front of you two in my bra and panties, tossing off my dress and shoes, and I had never felt so bare before. And I thought

you two were hot, but it wasn't like that. I was ready to say I do. I loved him."

"We know you did. Or do." Elliot frowned. "Actually, I don't know which of those is right."

"I don't love him. Not anymore. I think I only really loved the idea of him. But he left me for my twin sister, so they are living their own soap-opera dream, and I'm figuring it out on my own. I'm here to, I don't know, find myself? No, that sounds ridiculous."

"It doesn't," Elliot corrected, and I shook my head.

"It feels like it to me. I feel like I'm losing my damn mind, and I wanted to come here to the scene of the crime so I could be okay. To be able to go back to my small town and tell the world that I came back here and I didn't feel a damn thing. That I'm over him and he can have whoever he wants because it's never going to be me."

"Good. Is it helping?" Trace asked.

"I have no idea. The problem is I don't feel *anything* for him. Walking through the place where there will be an actual wedding going on this afternoon? All I felt was awkwardness because I kept thinking of the two of you the whole time." I slammed my hand over my mouth. I couldn't believe I just said that out loud. Nobody was supposed to know that.

Elliot took a step forward. I immediately took a step back, needing the distance. Thankfully he didn't follow me, but he did stay close, as did Trace.

"You thought about us?"

"You guys are hot and saw me in my underwear. Of course, I thought of you." I tried to sound blasé, but it wasn't working.

"Well, that's interesting."

"Is it? Or is this just all overwhelming? I kissed you two because I thought I was dreaming. I've kissed you guys countless times in my dreams. And I realize that I'm blurting all of these things out, and I'm not even drunk, but I might as well be because I might just jump right off this cliff. Maybe it's the same cliff you fell off."

"That was on the other side of the property," Elliot answered deadpan. "But please don't jump. You've thought about us?"

"Of course I have. You guys are hot. I guess I'm just going to keep saying that over and over again until I die of mortification."

"No need, because I thought about both of you too, except in my case, you were both taken."

My gaze shot over to Trace, who shrugged. “I was with someone then, but I’m not now. I don’t know what I want. I don’t know what the future holds, and this isn’t forever. Why don’t we just enjoy ourselves while you’re here?”

“A hookup. You want a hookup?”

Trace shook his head. “Just a date. Just to see. You know, before I inevitably fuck it all up and then we all have to walk away awkwardly. But at least you don’t live here. So it won’t be as awkward for you.”

“There’s a lot to unpack in that statement.” I turned away to look over the rolling hills, the winery in the distance, and sighed. This area wasn’t like the rest of Texas. It was a whole different temperate zone. It felt like I was on the other side of the world, the other side of my life. “I have always tried to do everything right. To allow my family to dictate my actions, because it was easier.”

“And now?” Trace asked, his voice low.

“And now, I keep thinking about that kiss. The fact that it was just a thank you, and yet it felt so right.” I spoke faster before they could interrupt. “But it’s clear that the two of you are going through something together. And I worry I might stand in the way of that. Or am I just the precipice that you need to fall off so you can fall into each other?”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. But maybe it would be enough. The jumping off point for the rest of my life.

“All I want is a date,” Elliot said. “Just to take you both out. Though technically this hike could be considered a date.”

I snorted. “I’ve never been on a date with two men before. Hiking or no.”

“I’ve never been on a date with two people either,” Trace said.

“I have been on a date with two people,” Elliot replied. “And it was nice. Until we were all shipped off to different locations, so it didn’t stick. I know that even a fun relationship, even if you don’t want to use the word relationship, can work.”

I looked between them.

“So just this? A kiss, you helping me get over my breakup. And us doing the same for you?” I asked Trace, who shrugged.

“I don’t know. Call it a midlife crisis,” he said with a laugh, but I knew he was lying.

“How old are you anyway?” I asked, only slightly teasing.

“Old enough.” He paused. “Thirty-five. I’m the old man of the group.”



“Oh.” I swallowed. “I thought you were younger. You look younger.”

“Is that going to be a problem?” Elliot asked.

“I’m twenty-four.” I smiled as Trace leaned down and kissed my brow.

“Well, that’s not too bad of an age-gap. Not when there’s three of us to make up the difference.”

“Is this really happening? Or am I losing my mind?”

“It can be both,” Elliot answered with a laugh, and I rolled my eyes.

“So, what do you guys get out of this? A date, wine and cheese, and conversation with two people?”

“That could be it. I don’t know, it just feels right. Even if it’s insane.”

Trace stepped closer and I swallowed as he ran his finger along my jawline.

“You don’t have to say yes. You can walk away. But, if you want to, why not try it out with us?”

“That’s a good line,” I breathed, as Elliot chuckled roughly from behind me. I hadn’t even realized that I had been surrounded, standing on a trail between two men, all alone.

In a horror movie this was where the murderer would get us all, or maybe they were the killers. But this wasn’t that, this was real.

And I might as well fling myself into the future. Because I knew all too well that there was no looking back.

“I won’t be standing in the way of the two of you?” I asked, needing an answer.

“Never,” they said at the same time. I saw the way they looked at each other over my head, and I wondered if that was a lie.

I didn’t want to be the third wheel, standing between them so they could be with each other, but if it was just for a weekend, perhaps even a week if I let myself stay longer, what could it hurt? It wasn’t like I would ever see them again.

“Just a date?”

“Just a date.” Trace lowered his head and kissed me, and this time there was no alcohol, no inhibitions blocked. It was just his lips on mine, and Elliot’s hands sliding over my hips, keeping me steady. A moan slid from between my lips, and I would have felt embarrassed, but then Trace groaned and let me go. I would have felt bereft at the lack of touch, but then Elliot turned my head toward him.

“Ready?” he asked, and I nodded. He lowered his mouth to mine. It was

different from before, not a quick peck, not a drunken mistake. Instead, it felt like something more. Something amazing. I just had to remind myself it was just for a date. Just for this weekend.

He leaned back and I licked my swollen lips.

“Whoa.”

Elliot grinned, and then let out a shocked breath as Trace leaned over me in order to crush his mouth to Elliot’s.

The sight of Trace taking control and Elliot giving in nearly made me come. It was the single hottest thing I’d ever seen in my life.

And as I stood between them, both of them breaking apart to catch their breath, I didn’t want to feel like I was in the way. I wanted to feel like I was part of this. After all, they were both touching me separately, bringing me in.

“So what happens next?” I asked as I looked between them. “Because as fantastic as that was, I can hear someone coming up the path, and I really don’t want to be caught having sex on a trail. That’s just me though.”

Elliot grinned. “I think that’s Maddie and the tour group. Let’s get out of here.”

“Oh yes. Let’s,” I said as I scrambled away from them.

Trace took my hand and slowed me down. Elliot stood on the other side of me.

“What’s next is we go out to dinner tonight. We can go off property or stay on property, it’s all up to you. I don’t know, it just seems fun, don’t you think?”

It honestly seemed like I was still dreaming, but I wasn’t going to stop. At least for now.

Trace squeezed my hand before he let go, all three of us needing a little more space so we could make it down the rocky path.

“Did that really just happen?” I asked, and Elliot huffed.

“Apparently. I feel like I’m still dreaming, while also losing my mind.”

“That’s exactly what I thought.”

“At least we’re on the same page there.”

“Good, we can all three be there as we try to have a little fun. I think we could use it.”

There was something in his voice, Elliot’s too. I didn’t know them well enough to know what it was, but I wanted to learn. That was part of the problem though. They knew each other so much better than I did either of them. But that would be fine. Because this was just for fun. A bucket-list

item.

I'd lost everything that I had before. The romance, the heat—I had lost it all. I would never be the jilted bride again. I would never allow myself to feel that way. I wouldn't be left behind. But if I went into this, just a single date, full faced and ready to go, I wouldn't be hurt.

Because I would guard my heart. It was the only way. I would have fun and then walk away, and maybe these two would end up together, or maybe they would just have fun too.

But either way, it was just a date. Just a weekend.

I was allowed to have fun.

“What's going on in that head of yours?” Elliot asked as he moved down the path and nodded at a few people, including one of his brothers.

“Just thinking about what's going to happen when I leave here.”

“Don't think that far ahead. Live in the now. As someone who's a planner for a living, that feels a little hypocritical for me to say.”

My lips twitched. “Possibly. So yes, I should just live in the moment.”

“In the moment's kind of nice though. It's a good day, we're going to have good food tonight, and then we'll see about later.”

I had a feeling Trace was used to being in charge, the leader, and I would let him for now. Elliot seemed to relax when Trace took charge, and frankly, as a business owner who was always on her own with certain things, it was nice to let someone else take the lead and make decisions.

I just didn't know where this led at all.

This felt like a beginning. But it didn't mean there would be a middle and an end. At least not in a traditional way.

It was just a date. As I stood between the two tall men, and we talked about our weeks, and what our plans were beyond tonight, I figured that would be okay.

I was still finding me, let alone a future. I didn't need promises of forever. I just needed a promise of right now. And it seemed I might finally have that.

# Chapter Eight

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## Trace

I rubbed my hand on the back of my neck, staring at Eli. “Are you sure about that?”

Eli Wilder nodded and looked down at his tablet. “Pretty much. An event with four hundred people. It’s going to max out our inn, all the cabins, and the local hotels.”

“And max out every part of the venue itself.” I pinched the bridge of my nose and went through some security options. “They taking over the winery too?”

“Yes.” Eli frowned down at his watch. “Elijah was supposed to be out here to help. Everett too, but they had an emergency.”

My head shot up. “No one told me about that. What’s the situation?”

“With wine. Not security. Just a wine emergency. And it has nothing to do with drinking wine.” Eli rolled his eyes. “I made that joke, and Elijah said a few choice words to me.”

“What type of wine emergency doesn’t involve security or drinking wine?” I asked as I ran my hand over my beard.

“Something about a faulty wire. No fire,” he said quickly. “Just life. No wine was ruined, because thankfully Amos caught it in time.”

“That’s good. I like Amos.”

“So do I. I don’t know what the winery would do without him.”

“Any idea what’s going on between him and Naomi?” I asked, noticing the two had been smiling at each other earlier, but yelling at each other in the parking lot the day before.

“I tend not to ask. I don’t really want to know. Then I might actually have to do something about the fact that the two of them don’t really get along

even though I'm pretty sure they've been together off and on for years."

I whistled between my teeth. "Damn. I didn't know that."

"I don't think most people do. Again, it's their business and it doesn't mess with work. And they're both so goddamn private, it's not like they need us to do anything about it."

"And what happens if they eventually need us to do something about it?" I asked.

"Then we will. Though I'll probably stick Alexis on that."

I held back a laugh, thinking of Eli's wife. "Alexis can get anything out of anyone."

"So," he began, and then frowned. I couldn't figure out why until I looked out the window. Sidney paced in the courtyard, stepping over the white stone pavers as she seemed to argue with someone on her phone. There were others milling about, and since nobody else seemed to notice, she must have been whispering. I wanted to go out there, take that phone from her, and handle it myself, but based on our previous encounters I knew that that would get me nowhere. In fact, she'd probably throw the damn phone at me.

"Look at that. Another segue in less than a minute."

I turned to look at Eli, a question in my expression.

"So, are you going to talk about her and my brother?" he asked, and I cursed under my breath.

It wasn't that we were hiding what was happening. It was that we didn't know what *was* happening. I was going in this blind. I didn't normally pursue relationships. The one time I did, I fucked it up so royally when I realized we shouldn't have been together in the first place. And I was still dealing with the ramifications of it. I didn't know why I seemed to be the steady one for the three of us, which meant I would probably fuck it up.

"Don't play coy. Alexis saw you." He shrugged. "She didn't mean to. And she didn't tell anyone else but me because we don't keep secrets. But she saw the three of you kiss."

"Which time?" I blurted, and could have kicked myself. I was good with secrets. I was good at keeping quiet and doing what I needed to for my job. I was observant. But when it came to Elliot and Sidney apparently, I was far from observant.

"Well." Eli blinked, a smile spreading over his face. "Should I ask about your intentions?"

I barely held back a laugh, while Eli grinned at me. "Are you asking as

the boss, or the big brother?”

“Yes, no, either. But no matter what, I guess it’s none of my business.”

I shook my head, confused as hell once again when it came to the goddamn Wilder family. “Then why did you ask?” My voice was raised slightly, and Eli sighed.

“Because I love my brother. And if you can get him to smile for real these days? And if you want to keep hiding from what’s scaring you? Then do what you need to.”

I shook my head at the man, annoyed and confused all at once. “Shit, Eli.”

“I know, I know. I don’t even know how I got to be so wise. It’s a gift. But if you make my brother smile, then I’ll love you forever. You’re already one of us, it was about time you get with one of us.”

“And what about Sidney?” I asked, wondering why I was opening up. I didn’t do that.

“That’s on you. And Elliot. I know you both would never intentionally hurt her, but when I look at her? I see a woman who desperately wants a connection. And if that’s the both of you? Good. If not? Make sure she’s happy for as long as she has each of you. Just don’t hurt her.”

I stared at the man who growled more often than not, and had been an officer in the Air Force, but I never would have pegged for the big boss man that he was now. “Seriously, I guess you are the wise one.”

Eli smiled. “I’ve watched all of my brothers fall in love, and now I’m about to welcome cousins here for the weekend and I want to get to know them. Someone has to be the old wise man on the hill.”

“You’re just as old as me, maybe-wise man.”

“Maybe. Now, go have fun. Make good choices.”

Eli grinned and I laughed. “Fuck you.”

“No thanks. But wear a condom.”

I flipped him off, grabbed my things, and headed out of the office. I had a date tonight—with two people. And I was going to try not to fuck it up.

That was easier said than done.

# Chapter Nine

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## Sidney

I leaned back against the booth, hand over my stomach as I tried not to laugh too loudly in the restaurant. Tears threatened to stream down my face.

“And then, as Mom slid peanut butter through his hair, she gestured towards me with the spoon, and said I was next if I wasn’t careful.” Elliot laughed, telling about the time he put gum in Everett’s hair on purpose because the two were fighting over something ridiculous.

“Is peanut butter how you get gum out of hair?” Trace asked.

“That doesn’t seem right.”

“I guess it’s an old wives’ tale that is actually true. You sort of work it through the hair, and it makes it greasy, but the gum becomes stiffer and makes it easily removable.”

Both guys looked at me and I shrugged. “I had a twin sister who liked to chew gum and was a brat even when she was a little kid.”

I pushed those memories away, because they weren’t as filled with happiness as Elliot’s were.

“See, this is why I’m glad I was an only kid. Yes, my parents were overbearing and I could never live up to their potential—but who can? At least I didn’t get gum in my hair.”

“I feel like there’s a lot to unpack in that statement,” I said with a laugh. “If you want.”

“No, no. We already know that both of us come from family expectations and that both of us like to go the opposite ways.”

“My family expectations weren’t really voiced, and were mostly on me.” I turned to Elliot who sighed into his drink.

“I joined the Air Force because that’s what I thought I should do. After all, every single one of my brothers had, so why not me?”

“You didn’t want to go to college right away?” I asked. “I went for business because I didn’t know what I was supposed to do. It was that or communications or fine arts. I don’t even know what you do with those degrees. Hell, I don’t know what you do with any degree these days.”

“I did my first two years of college in active duty, grateful that online college progressed as much as it has.” Elliot sighed, though his eyes were still full of that laughter from earlier.

“And then you got out and finished college and did this whole lovely Wilder thing?”

“I finished college while opening up the Wilder Retreat. The rest of my brothers already had their degrees, but I was a couple years behind.”

“You’re also the youngest.”

“Just a wee baby,” I teased, and Elliot leaned forward and nipped at my jaw.

“Really?”

“I’m just saying,” I said, blushing hard.

We were all very good at not having too much PDA. This was the first real date after all, and we were three people out in public in South Texas. While in some places it would almost be the norm to see a polyamorous throuple out on a date, not so much here. Frankly, I was nervous. This was my first date since Jeremy. My first date since being left at the altar.

A night out with two very attractive men, with no promises. Everything felt good and strange and just...happy? Was that really what I felt? Perhaps it was the idea of no promises. No worries. Just three people laughing over dinner and having fun.

Elliot went back to his story to explain how Everett had to shave his head because of the gum issue. I just laughed along, and then enjoyed hearing about the day-by-day antics of what it was like to run a resort and winery. I knew so much work went into what they did—after all, I owned my own business and I worked long hours in order to make it work. Right now my team was running the shop, but only for a couple more days. Then I would have to go back to the real world, back to my small town where people saw me as the little rich-girl cast-off.

No, I wasn’t sure how I was going to deal with that, but that was not right now.

“Elliot?”

I looked up to see a man with a strong jaw, kind eyes, and a sturdy frame at the table. The woman on his arm was gorgeous, classy, sophisticated, and wore a sheath dress that fit her like a glove. She smiled at us as well, and Elliot perked up.

“Hey, LJ. How are you?”

“I’m good. Just taking Tessa out for our date night.”

Tessa patted the man’s chest. “He says that like it’s a chore. Six months of being married, and suddenly date night is an issue.”

“Well, we’re not going to be able to have so many nights out at a nice restaurant like this unless we schedule it ahead of time.” He looked at her again and she blushed. I perked up.

“Congratulations,” I said, hoping that it was meant for the wedding, and anything else that they were keeping between them.

Elliot winced. “I’m sorry. This is Sidney. And you already know Trace,” Elliot said. He gestured towards the couple. “This is LJ, our lawyer and family friend, and his new wife, Tessa.”

“So nice to meet you,” I said.

Trace lifted his chin. “And I guess more congratulations are in order from that not-so-subtle clue?” Trace asked.

LJ just beamed. “We told her family yesterday, so now we get to tell the rest of the world.”

“I’m pretty sure he’s going to tattoo it on my forehead at some point,” Tessa said with a laugh, and Elliot scooted out of the booth to hug them both. Trace followed suit. When LJ somehow pulled me out of the booth as well to hug them, with all of us laughing at the edge of the table, it all felt right. Nobody wondered why three of us were out, maybe it was just friends hanging out, and I was fine with that. And LJ and Tessa looked so happy, starting the rest of their lives and futures like they had no cares in the world, or perhaps they had all the care in the world, but were ready to face it together. And that was the difference. They seemed like a unit, and had family to love and care for, and were making a family of their own.

“I’ll let you guys get back to eating, but we just wanted to say hi. And, Elliot, we’ll be on property Wednesday to go over a few things. Will you be around?”

“We’ll all be there.”

“As will I, since I had a few things for you to go over with the new hire,”

Trace added, and LJ nodded.

“No problem. I’m excited for the Wilder Family Dinner.” They said their goodbyes before heading out.

“It’s good to see him smiling again.” Trace took a sip of his beer.

I looked over at him. “What do you mean? Or is it none of my business?”

“LJ’s family used to run a so-called rival resort. It’s in the past. His brother and father weren’t great people, and are behind bars for good reasons.”

My eyes widened as I leaned forward. “Poor LJ. And from the way that you guys are looking at each other, I guess other things happened.”

Trace cleared his throat. “They’re part of the reason that I helped set up security here.”

They went into detail about the events with LJ’s family, and I sat there stunned, not quite believing that his family could do that.

“That’s terrible.

“It was, but LJ’s one of us now. Sans the name.”

“Well, I’m glad that he has you. And that he’s working with you. And that it’s not awkward.”

“Yeah, we’ve all worked it out. You know, LJ went on a few dates with my sister-in-law.”

My eyes widened again as he told me the story and we finished our desserts.

Everything felt warm and happy and just good. I was going back home soon, and this burst of a memory would soon go away. But in the end it didn’t matter. I wanted this. I wanted this memory before I went back home and had to deal with real life and the ramifications of it.

I got into the passenger seat of Trace’s SUV as Elliot slid into the back.

“I do like the fact that we sort of carpooled here, even though you don’t live on property, do you?” I asked.

Trace shook his head. “No, I live off property. Though, I do live close. But since I work there, it just made sense that I’d drive us here and then take you back.”

“Did you add the back deck that you wanted?” Elliot asked, and I watched as Trace met the other man’s gaze in the rearview mirror.

“I did. Is that some smooth way of saying you want to come to my house and see?”

I laughed as I turned to see Elliot blushing.

“I’m not good at this. Whatever this is.”

I tapped my fingers against my knee and made a decision. Of course, I’d made the decision before I’d even come on the date. After all, I had come here to find myself. I might as well figure out exactly what I wanted.

“I guess it would be fun to get a look at your deck.” I paused awkwardly, but as provocatively as possible. Trace gave me a look and Elliot burst out laughing.

“I’m not laughing at you, I’m really just laughing at myself because I was about to make a big deck joke.”

“Oh, I’ll show you my deck,” Trace said without a hint of humor, and I burst out laughing. I could not help it with this man.

“Really? Big deck energy?”

“You’ve got it,” Trace said with a wink. “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. Let’s have you see my big deck,” he teased. I smiled in response, wondering if I was losing my mind, and then realizing I didn’t care at all.

“You’re both ridiculous, and I like it,” Elliot said from the backseat, laughing once again. I wasn’t even a little bit buzzed this time so, why not? Why not get them out of my system? Yes, that was a good way to think about it, getting them out of my system.

When we pulled into a ranch style house in a small suburb close to the Wilder Retreat, I smiled at the whiskey barrel planted with flowers and holly bushes in the front.

“It’s adorable.”

Trace growled at me. “It’s very manly. I don’t know why you think I live somewhere adorable.”

I snorted as I got out of the car and looked around the neighborhood. “Is this a newer development?”

“Yes, so it doesn’t have the trees that I want. I love live oaks and cedar, even though I’m allergic as hell to them.”

“Honestly, same.”

Elliot snorted. “I think we all have cedar fever during some parts of the year. But the trees you have planted look healthy.”

Trace smiled at both of us as he let us in. “I try to keep up with the house. Though I’m on your property more often than not.”

“So you bought a house when you moved out here?” I asked, taking in as much of the space as I could. The place was decorated in soft browns and

tans. Very masculine, and yet welcoming and warm at the same time. It had an open concept, with a large kitchen, and a huge sectional in the living room.

“A lot of this stuff is from storage, since I was on the road mostly with Bethany, and the price per square foot in LA is a little different than South Texas.”

“Oh, and yet the pricing keeps going up every minute here,” I said, shaking my head. “I own the building my shop is in, same with my house, and yet developers are constantly asking to buy both places so they can build on it. It’s amazing how much it’s grown here.”

“As I’m a transplant Texan, I can’t really complain,” Elliot said. “But I still live on the property that has always been part of the inn. So I can’t say much.”

“Come on, let’s go check out that deck,” Trace said with a wink. I followed, holding back laughter as Elliot’s shoulders shook.

Trace’s house was on an easement, so the high fence and brick wall shielded him from the neighbors. It was a warm night, a little muggy, but Texas always seemed to be muggy. I was used to it, and I still felt like mosquitoes seemed to seek me out.

“I love your house.”

Trace cleared his throat. “Yeah. I’m still working on it.”

“But you work more hours than I do. So, when do you have time?” Elliot asked.

“I’m trying to do better about that. Trying to remember what’s important.” He looked at both of us.

“I’m going back in two days. My time is almost up.”

I needed to say that, though I didn’t know why that was so important right now. But they needed to remember I was leaving, and I needed to remind myself.

“I know. It seems like you just got here,” Elliot said.

“As much as I’d love to be able to take weeks off at a time, I still own my own business. And while I trust my team, I do need to go back. To my business. To my life. Honestly, I just need to face everything I left behind there. Same reason I came here, to face the place that everything changed.”

And to get these two out of my mind. Though I didn’t say that out loud.

“You’re not too far away you know,” Elliot replied. “If you ever want to come back to visit. For the weekend or something.”

“Maybe,” I said right back, my heart racing, my mouth dry.

“And what about tonight?” Trace asked.

“Tonight?” I sighed. I knew this was probably insane. Probably too much. But it didn’t matter. I wanted this. And I might get my heart broken along the way, but at least it would be on my terms.

“Now I’d really like to see what happens. Even if I only have a few more days.”

Elliot moved forward and brushed my hair from my face. “I think we can make that happen. You just tell us what you want, and we won’t go any further than that.”

“And you two? Would you be together as well?”

The two of them met gazes, and I could feel the heat radiating off them in waves. “Maybe tonight. Maybe another night.”

I swallow. “And when I leave? Will you two continue this?” I hoped they would. Because even if I couldn’t be part of this forever, I knew these two needed to be together. Even if they couldn’t see it yet.

Elliot smiled and blushed again. “Maybe. You wouldn’t mind that? If we were together when you weren’t with us?”

“Um, it would just be the hottest thing I’d ever think about. So, if you guys could give me details afterwards, even by text, that would be great,” I said quickly, holding back laughter.

Trace moved forward, his fingers dancing along my shoulder as Elliot stroked my jaw.

“As much as that fence gives us privacy, we should probably take this inside,” Trace said softly.

I blushed.

Yes. We should.

They each took a hand, guiding me inside, and my pulse raced.

This had never been on my bucket list, never been something I fantasized about before meeting them, but in this situation, with these two men? It was everything that I needed.

We stood in front of the sectional, Elliot’s hands sliding down my shoulders. Trace lowered his lips to mine and I leaned into him, my hands on his chest as he deepened the kiss with each passing breath. I sank into him as Elliot’s hands slid up and down my sides, and then to the back of my neck to tilt my head towards him. It was a little rougher, a little headier. And everything I craved. Elliot’s lips slid against mine, both of us groaning into

one another, until he pulled away and took Trace's lips. I was pinned between them, the exact place I wanted to be. I could feel the outline of Elliot's cock against my ass, and Trace's against my stomach. Pinned in every way. And I would be pinned more soon. I shivered, and Trace looked down at me, chuckling roughly.

"Good?"

"Very good."

"We're only beginning."

Elliot pulled us onto the couch, and I found myself on his lap, his hands sliding up my shirt. I groaned as his fingers danced along the cup of my bra, over my nipples. They pebbled for him instantly, my body on alert. When Elliot spread his legs, it caused mine to spread and my skirt to ride up. Trace knelt behind us and grinned.

"Look at that, putting her on display for me. Such a good boy."

"Why don't you see exactly what I'm displaying for you," Elliot said softly, before he pinned my arms behind me. It thrust my breasts up, and he played with my nipples lazily, pulling the cups of my bra down to slowly rub my nipples in between his fingers. I groaned, rocking over his cock as my legs spread infinitesimally more.

"That's a good girl," he whispered as Trace slid his hands up my legs.

"I'm so glad you wore a skirt. It's like you knew I'd want you as a present I could unwrap." He pushed my skirt up over my hips so it bunched around my waist, leaving me feeling bare, vulnerable, but safe. Far safer than I had ever been with anyone else.

"Look at your panties, they're already wet for us. Do you think if I press my hand against your pussy, you'd wet my palm?"

"Why don't you check and see?" I said, my voice rough.

"I want to see too. So tell me what you're doing," Elliot growled against my neck, biting down gently. I groaned, needing more, wanting more. And then Trace's fingers were over my panties, sliding his knuckle along my clit, and I bucked over Elliot's lap.

"So sensitive. So wet."

"I'm not going to last very long if you two keep doing this while we're all still fully clothed."

"I guess I better get you naked."

I sputtered, and as quickly as I could catch my breath, they had my panties and skirt off, and Elliot was pulling my shirt over my head. He undid



the clasp of my bra, my breasts falling into his palms.

“Dear God, you’re magnificent,” Elliot whispered as he cupped my breasts, playing with me. His fingers slid down between my folds and I gasped as he rubbed his finger over my clit.

And then Trace was there, licking over Elliot’s fingers. Somehow the combination of them was too much, just a single lick, a single touch, and I was shaking, coming over his tongue, over his fingers. I was orgasming seemingly instantly, with Trace’s beard sliding against the inner silk of my thighs, and I knew it would leave the most perfect abrasion. I finally came back to myself, and just the sight of Trace’s head between my legs, continuing to lap at my pussy, nearly sent me over the edge again. When Elliot spread me for Trace, I squirmed.

“Too much?” Elliot asked, biting down on my earlobe.

“I want to touch both of you. And you’re still fully clothed.”

“I think we can fix that.”

Trace gave me one final lick before he patted my pussy with his palm. Suddenly I was on my back, and both of them were stripping in front of me, alternating between staring at each other, then down at me.

I slid my hand over one breast, my other hand between my legs, needing to touch myself from the sight of them.

“Look at that, can’t even stop. So damn pretty.”

“I want to taste her,” Elliot said, so he leaned forward and took Trace’s mouth with his.

I groaned, not feeling left out in the slightest. Not when I knew my juices were on Trace’s tongue, and now Elliot’s.

They each pulled off their pants, and then they were standing there, naked gods looking gorgeous as all hell. They both had tattoos, some on their arms and backs. Trace had a few more scars, a huge puckered one on his shoulder that I wanted to ask about. Elliot had a few as well, his a little older.

I sat up, watching the two of them, as they learned each other’s bodies, sliding their hands over each other’s dicks. When they turned to me, I groaned.

“You like what you see?” Trace asked, and I raised a brow.

“Considering it looks as if that dick of yours is about to burst with one touch, I’m pretty sure you like what you see, too.”

“I can taste you on my tongue, and I have Elliot’s dick touching mine. Pretty sure I’ve reached nirvana.”

“And I’m here all alone, not touching anyone but myself. Whatever shall I do?” I said with a laugh, and then Elliot moved forward. But before he could kiss me, I reached out and cupped his balls. He groaned. I scooted to the edge of the couch and took his dick in my hand.

“Well, what shall I do with this?”

“Anything you want. Seriously, I will do anything for you.”

“How about you just let me do this for you?” I swallowed the tip of his cock into my mouth. The salty taste slithered over my tongue and I groaned, hollowing my cheeks as I slid down his length. I reached out with my free hand and gripped Trace’s cock, pumping him at the same pace that I bobbed my head over Elliot’s.

I knew they were touching each other as I continued to play with them, and I could barely breathe, I could barely think. And then Trace moved, but not out of my grip. They positioned me so I could touch both of them, easily able to move between them. He knelt beside me so he could slide his fingers over my pussy. Somehow Trace was fingering me, Elliot’s hands were on my breasts. I traded, sucking down Trace and using my hands on Elliot.

They were both shaking, and I could barely keep up, hands and mouths and touches all blending into one.

I nearly came again, and I knew they were close, but they pulled away at the same time.

“I need to be inside you. Let me be inside you.” Trace uttered the words next to my ear, sending shivers over my body.

I nodded, dazed, and then there was the sound of a condom wrapper being opened, followed by another. I found myself on my knees on the couch, with Trace behind me and Elliot in front of me. I let myself go back to Elliot, swallowing him whole as Trace slid deep inside me. He stretched me in one motion, and I let out a groan, pressing my ass to him.

“So fucking hot.”

And then Trace was moving, while I sucked down Elliot. Elliot twisted my hair into his fist and kept my head steady as he began to fuck my mouth. It was hard and fast, and I gagged, but it was exactly what I wanted. Trace pounded into me from behind, and it felt like I was moving in all directions, barely able to hold back. I came again, clamping around Trace’s cock. He leaned over me, kissing the back of my neck, and then crushed his mouth to Elliot’s. I could feel when Trace came. When he pulled out of me, I found myself on my back with Elliot’s condom-clad cock deep inside me. They

pushed my knees up to my shoulders as I licked at Trace's cum-covered cock. I licked him clean, loving the way they continued to explore my body. And when Elliot came, I did too, but I couldn't keep up. I found myself crying, holding onto them, needing to breathe.

That had been the most erotic moment of my life, the most touching, and as they held me, bringing me back to reality, I knew I never wanted to let go. Because reality would be here any moment. Reality meant my ending.

But that was just fine with me. I would have this memory until the end of my days.

Because I didn't get love. But I could have this.

And no one could take it away from me. Not even myself.

# Chapter Ten

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## Elliot

I woke up with the hard-on of all hard-ons and groaned, squeezing the base of my dick. I had yet another dream of the weekend prior, of Sidney sliding between Trace and me, sweat slick, glistening, and so damn sexy. It was hard to believe that she had been ours for the evening.

I knew, going into that encounter, that it wouldn't last for long because we all had different lives, but part of me couldn't wait for her to come back.

I sat up, ignored my raging erection, and rubbed my hands over my face.

"Snap out of it, Wilder," I screamed quietly into my palms. I needed to shower and get on with the day. There were things to do, family to prep, things to organize. I didn't understand why it felt like I was wading through mud to do what I was made to do. Sidney would be coming back. She was only two hours away. And until then, I had to focus on my job and everything else in between.

And Trace was still here, still confusing me as ever.

I slid out of bed, thankful my erection was finally dying down, and went to get ready for the day. I pulled my hair back from my face, the little bun in the back making my lips twitch. Oh, my dad would be rolling his eyes so hard right now if he ever saw that.

I ran my hand over my chest as I made my way outside, coffee in hand.

It made me sad, just a little, that I was about to be organizing a family reunion and my entire family wouldn't be there. Eliza and her husband and kids would be flying in from Colorado, but our parents were gone. They had been gone long enough that it didn't shock me anymore when I thought about it. They would never know we were working together like we were. But it still made me sad to think that as we organized this huge family reunion, with

two sets of cousins, that only one set of parents would be there.

And it really made me think for once about my uncle, who no longer had his brother. Soon my cousins and their parents would be on the Wilder grounds, and we would have a meal, and go hiking, and do all the other things that I was currently planning. There would always be a sense of loss. It didn't matter that our families were growing, that there would be grandkids at this event where there hadn't been the last time we had done this over a decade ago. My parents still wouldn't be there.

In my head, I could hear Miles rolling his eyes so hard and laughing. He would tell me once again that I needed to look at the good things. But that was odd coming from a ghost. Miles was gone too. Just like my parents. And yet here I was, planning an event without my parents, after having a weekend where I'd been with two different people, and still wanting them. Thinking about them more than I should. Miles would tell me to move on, but move on to what? I didn't know what Trace wanted. Or how long he would stay. We were such different people, it didn't make sense to me. Sidney didn't even live here. She was on her own road of discovery. We were stops on the way, and I needed to remember that.

"There you are." I turned to see Everett jogging down the path.

I shook my head at him. "Why are you exercising so early? And did you need me for something?" I asked, his words catching up through my bound brain.

"Bethany is out on location, and I needed to stay here for a few things with the family, so I didn't sleep well last night and have way too much energy, if you know what I mean." He winked as he said it.

"I really don't need to hear about your lack of sex life."

"Well, I figured I would talk to the one person in our family right now who understands the lack of sex life."

I flipped him off before I took a big gulp of my coffee, ignoring the burn down my throat.

"Anyway, I wanted to know what time you wanted to meet to go over the Henderson and Franklin projects."

I frowned, looking through my calendar on my phone.

"Maybe four o'clock? Not sure. I have a few other things to do."

"No problem." Everett was the CFO of the company, and we all worked together like a unit, even if we butted heads sometimes.

"I'm headed out to go bury myself in my inbox. Let me know if you need

anything.”

“No problem.” Everett paused, before he began to jog in place. “By the way, say hi to Trace for me later. And Sidney when you see her.” He winked, before continuing down the path.

I shook my head. Our family was a little too close for comfort. Why did we always have to know exactly what the others were doing, and why were we constantly in each other’s pockets?

And how the hell did they know that I had been with Trace and Sidney?

I sighed, and headed into work, knowing that I needed to get over it. The faster I did that, the easier it would be for me. I headed to my office, nodding at a few guests, and Amos, as I passed them. The other man glared at me before he shook his head and came over.

“What is it?”

“Have you seen Naomi?”

I raised a brow. While I had just thought it was annoying that people were all up in my business, I really wanted to know what the hell was going on between the two of them. “Not this morning. Do you want me to text her?”

“No. I’ll find her. Damn woman.” He stomped off. I just shook my head. It seemed I wasn’t the only one who was going through issues that neither one of us wanted to deal with.

I headed into my office, as my phone started to buzz, text after text.

It was vendors, valet services, and travel agents. I somehow did a thousand things at once, and I enjoyed it. I used to have a little more energy, but these days I tried not to wear myself out trying to please everyone. I snorted. Okay, so I still did that, but at least I was trying not to.

Another text came up and it got my pulse racing. It was a group text, but this one had nothing to do with family.

SIDNEY:

I can make it up by five on Friday. I have a wedding on the other side of town that I’m having to add into my schedule for Friday morning. So I won’t be able to make it up until then. And because of traffic it might be even later.

TRACE:

Do you need us to come pick you up? Send a car?

That was Trace, while I was the planner, he was the protector. The one who just wanted to get her here for us.

SIDNEY:

No, it's okay. I'd rather have my car. But I'll be later than I thought. I'm sorry.

ME:

I'm just glad that you're coming.

SIDNEY:

That's what she said. Or maybe, that's what I want to say. :wink emoji:

I laughed and shook my head.

ME:

We can make that happen. Be safe, drive safe. And we'll see you in a couple of days.

SIDNEY:

Sounds fun. Now you two have fun on your own as well. Though I know we all have ridiculously busy schedules.

TRACE:

Speaking of, I need to head to a meeting. Talk to you all soon.

I tried not to think about the anticipation crawling over me.

ME:

I'll see you both soon. And I guess I should get to work.

SIDNEY:

Go make people's days.

ME:

Yes. We'll try.

I paused, remembering something.

ME:

Also, I may actually call you for a work thing soon. We had a vendor issue.

SIDNEY:

I'm not that far away for emergencies. Maybe not this week with my schedule, but we can make it work. Just let me know.

I smiled, not able to help myself. I needed to not get too close, too attached, but I wasn't good at that.



ME:

Will do. Have fun.

SIDNEY:

Always. Well at least I try.

TRACE:

See you soon.

I set my phone down, a smile playing on my lips. We did need a new florist. At least an additional option with our schedule. And with the size of Texas, Sidney was technically only on the opposite side of San Antonio. Two hours away wasn't that much in the grand scheme of things. We needed a new vendor. Why couldn't it be someone I trusted?

Even if she was in the process of thinking of what she was going to do with her shop since her family was making her life miserable.

"You went from smiling to scowling in like two seconds. What's going on?"

I nearly fell out of my chair as I looked up to see East there, his hands in his pockets and brow raised. He wore a flannel shirt, jeans with a hole in the knee, and his tool belt around his waist. Next to him, Elijah looked the complete opposite in his three-piece suit, expensive shoes, and slicked-back hair.

How all of us were brothers and yet so different, I would never understand. Except we all growled. That was the Wilder way.

"How long have you two been standing there?" I asked, my voice going only slightly high pitched.

"Long enough to wonder who the hell you're texting," Elijah said as he came in the office, a little too curious.

I snatched my phone off my desk and shook my head. "Stop it."

"What did I walk in on?" Ridge asked, and Elijah's face brightened, as did mine.

East scowled as usual, but that was his normal face.

"Hey, you. Lazing about all day?"

"Not so much. I'm house hunting." He rolled his eyes.

"So you're making it official?"

"The paperwork's in. The Wilders and Trace have hired me. Now I get to watch your asses for a living. Should be fun."

"When do you start?"

“I have a job to finish at the old place, and then there’s selling the house and buying a new one, so not for a couple of months. But that’s fine. At least according to Trace.”

Ridge gave me a look as he said Trace’s name, and I held back a scowl. I didn’t need yet another family member up in my business.

“Well, if you don’t want to have to find a place right away, there are the extra cabins,” East put in, and I grinned, because that’s what I had been about to say. And from the look on Elijah’s face, he had been thinking the same thing, too.

Ridge shook his head. “I’m not going to take advantage. It’s okay, I’ll find a place. Maybe I’ll just rent. The housing market’s weird right now. I don’t even want to discuss interest rates.”

Elijah fixed his tie and shrugged. “First of all, you should be talking to Everett when it comes to interest rates. He knows what the fuck he’s doing there. Same with our lawyer, LJ. But seriously, all of us in this room, and the rest of our siblings other than Eliza, have lived on property. We have those spaces for a reason when family comes to visit. We have several right now because a few of us have moved off property and East hasn’t renovated them yet to become cabins for guests.”

“At some point you’ll have to remember I’m a handyman, and not a contractor.”

“You’re certified as a contractor,” Ridge said. “At least, that’s what Brooks said.”

“Your brother’s a contractor? Wait, I knew that,” I said, rubbing my temple. “Sorry, it escaped my mind.”

“Brooks is good at many things, just like East. But seriously, I don’t want to take up space.”

“Well fuck that, you’re going to stay here. At least until we figure things out for you.”

I looked at Elijah. “I’m sure you meant with you, not for you.”

“You clearly don’t understand my power. Or the women’s power. Because they will orchestrate everything.”

I laughed. “You know, he’s right. The women will plan everything for you. And Eliza will lead the charge, even from Colorado.”

“You guys are insane.” Ridge sighed. “But maybe it’s a good thing. Maybe it’ll be good to stay a little closer, keep an eye on you guys. Especially because I hear you’re planning the reunion?”

I sighed and pointed at the paperwork on my desk. “Yes, let’s get to that, and then I have a thousand and fourteen things to do.”

“Only a thousand and fourteen? You’re slacking,” East put in. “I do have one more thing for the agenda, and then we can move on.”

I narrowed my gaze. “What?”

“So, how was the date?”

I flipped him off. Ridge beamed. “Oh? There’s dirt? Tell me all the dirt.”

“Oh, just Elliot out there with the very handsome Trace, and a very beautiful jilted bride, Sidney.”

I scowled at East. “Sidney doesn’t need to have that title. Let’s get that asshole away from anything having to do with her.”

East nodded. “You know, you’re right. How about a florist? The beautiful florist, Sidney.”

“See? This is why I’m glad I’m here. Tell me more.”

I shook my head. “No, we’re going to work. And then I’m going to ignore all of you. I have things to do.”

At that moment, my cell buzzed.

“Seriously. So much work.”

“Then let’s get to it,” Elijah said, but from the look in his eyes, he was only giving me a temporary reprieve.

By the time I was finished with work, I had salad dressing on my shirt, some form of coffee stain on my lap, and had put out enough fires to know that this week was going to be a hard week. It didn’t matter that I knew what I was doing, or that my team was great at what they did. It also didn’t matter that Alexis was the queen of wedding planning, and we worked together as a unit and got shit done.

No, none of that mattered when I had to work with new vendors, price increases, and people backing out of their commitments.

It had taken all day for me to realize that I was exhausted, and there was no returning from that.

I just wanted to go home, heat myself up some leftovers, and fall into bed.

What I really wanted to do was text Sidney back and see how her day was. I talked to her a few more times during the day, but only about flower

things, because we did need a new vendor.

I didn't know if that would be awkward, once whatever our relationship was fizzled out, but it was nice to talk to her.

I opened my front door, then paused when I realized the damn thing had been unlocked.

I frowned, looking around, my heart beginning to race. We had a few security issues in the past, and I had locked it that morning. Hadn't I?

The scent of steak cooking, though, made me pause, and I truly for a moment thought I had walked into the wrong house.

But no, I hadn't. There Trace was, standing in jeans and a black T-shirt, a cast iron skillet in his hand.

"I saw you coming, so I unlocked the door. Figured you were tired enough that unlocking the damn thing would probably break you."

I looked up at him and blinked. "How did you get inside? And where the hell did that cast iron skillet come from?"

He looked over his shoulder and smiled. And just like that, I could breathe again.

It was so weird, but it made me happy all the same.

"It's from my place. I wanted a steak, and was going to ask you if you wanted to come over, but that seemed like a lot of excess driving. And then I thought maybe we could go out, but we both had a long day. So, I'm cooking for you. And you gave me keys to your house over a year ago. Remember?"

I cringed. "After the whole cliff incident."

"Yes, the *incident*. You like your steak medium rare, right?"

"Yes. Wow. I wasn't expecting this." I set my things down on the counter then moved forward and slid my hand over the back of his neck. He turned and kissed me.

I sank into him, all of the worries and fears over the past twelve hours gone. It was like I could breathe again.

I didn't know how, but he did that to me.

That should worry me, but I wasn't going to let it. At least not for now.

"There you are."

"Here I am. Wow. That smells delicious."

"I sure hope so. The baked potatoes are in the microwave, should be done. I made mushrooms, and some spinach salad."

My stomach rumbled and I licked my lips. "This is all amazing. I was planning to reheat leftovers."

“The leftovers you had had mold on them, so I threw them away. You really do need to take better care of yourself.” He frowned at me, looking me up and down in a way that sent shivers through me, and I didn’t know if that was good or not. “You used to be better at taking care of yourself. You would always cook for yourself. What’s wrong?”

I shook my head. “I’ve just been tired. Busy.”

“You need to hire an assistant.”

I nearly tripped over myself as I pulled a beer from the fridge, then pulled out another for Trace. He gave me a quick nod in thanks.

“Says you, the man who doesn’t have an assistant of his own.”

“I hired Ridge, didn’t I?”

“Ridge is going to be your assistant?” I asked, as I clinked my bottle to his and sucked down a long pull.

“Not exactly, but he’s just as experienced as I am, so he’s going to take some of the load. You need help, too. You don’t need to do everything on your own.”

I leaned against the counter. “So says the man who just broke into my house and is making me a full dinner without any help from me.”

“Go set the table, and I didn’t break in, I had a key.”

I smiled, wondering why this felt right. We hadn’t even talked about it, we were just here, doing this like it was normal.

I didn’t have normal. Miles and I hid our relationship, and I hadn’t had one since. That made me pause in the act of setting the table, and Trace came up to me, setting the salad bowl on the table before wrapping his arms around my waist. He pulled my back to his front and rested his chin on my shoulder.

“If this is too much, tell me. I just figured I should feed you since you’re not doing it yourself.”

I sighed. “It’s not too much. I’m just not good at allowing it.” I swallowed hard. “I’ve only had one serious relationship, and, thanks to the times, we’d had to hide it.”

“The guy you lost?” he asked, his voice soft with understanding.

“Yeah. His name was Miles. And he was great. But we were as serious as you could be when you were hiding it from your crew. In the end, I don’t know if it was as serious as it would have been back home. And I’m not saying that you and I are serious,” I blurted as I realized what I was saying. “It’s more that I’m trying to figure out how to be in a relationship at all that isn’t just a one-night stand, or a couple of blowjobs.”

“Well, I’m not good at it either. Though a couple of blowjobs does sound nice.” He laughed as he turned me in his arms and pressed his lips to mine.

“The steak’s done, just resting. Let’s get some food. Tell me what you want on your potato.”

“I am a glutton when it comes to baked potatoes. I want everything.”

“Then we can make that happen.” He kissed me again and somehow I found myself sitting at my own table, eating food I hadn’t prepared, and laughing as we talked about our days.

We cleaned up together, hip to hip in my kitchen. And it just felt right.

When Sidney texted just as we finished, we called her on speakerphone. I needed to hear her voice, just like I needed to be near Trace.

It didn’t feel weird that she was away, that it was just Trace and me here together. Because when you were three, you weren’t just three all at once. You were three relationships within a larger relationship. It didn’t matter that we weren’t putting labels on it, that we all knew this could fade at any moment.

“Your dinner sounds amazing. I ordered in soup and a sandwich.”

“At least there were vegetables on your sandwich,” Trace teased, and Sidney laughed over the line.

“I also ordered groceries, so I’ll be able to cook for myself the rest of the week. It sounds like we all had a tough few hours.”

“Yes, but it’s what we love to do.”

“True, but I would like sleep more.” We heard her yawn over the phone, and I looked at Trace.

“Get some sleep. We’ll talk to you soon?”

“You know it. Have fun tonight, boys. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” She paused. “Or do everything that I wouldn’t or would do, and give me details later.”

My lips twitched. She hung up and I looked over at Trace.

“This doesn’t feel real.”

“It is. But now that everything is cleaned up, I think we need to do that one thing that you mentioned earlier.”

I frowned. “Go grocery shopping?”

Trace grinned, then slid his hands between us. I groaned as he cupped me through my jeans, rocking into his hold. “Oh, we’ll be doing that too. But first, there’s something I need to check.”

Trace went to his knees, pulling me out of my pants. I groaned, sliding

my hands through his hair.

“Okay. This is a good dessert.”

“Hands on the counter,” he ordered, and I did so immediately. I swallowed, trusting him in this moment more than anything else.

When he swallowed me whole, I groaned again, rocking my hips. He pushed my hips back into the counter, taking control, and I didn’t mind one bit. He tongued at the slit of my cock, before going back down on me, using one hand to keep me steady, gripping hard enough to bruise my hips, but that was exactly what I wanted. The other hand went to my balls, cupping them, rolling them in his hand. I was already so close, just from being near him, that when he flicked his tongue again, then used his hands to squeeze the base of my cock, I didn’t hold back.

“I’m going to...”

But he didn’t pull back. He didn’t care about my warning. Instead, he swallowed every drop of me. I shuddered in his hold, the orgasm tearing through me.

When he finally pulled away to catch his breath, my knees went weak.

“Oh my God.”

“Damn straight.”

I pulled at him, needing him, and forced him to his feet. I crushed my mouth to his. He let me take control for just a bit, and I tugged on his shirt.

“Shirt off. I need to touch you.”

“I can make that happen.”

And then his shirt was over his head before he pulled at mine. At least two buttons flew off, and I laughed into his mouth as he kissed me. I was already hard again, pulling at his jeans.

“What you do to me,” I whispered.

Then my hands went to his shoulders, and I paused, frowning.

“What is it?” he asked, his breath coming in pants.

“What the hell is that? I know that feeling. I was a fucking medic.”

I turned him around, and I had a feeling it was only because I surprised him that he even let me do it.

“You were shot? And recently, too. What the fuck?”

Trace blushed and turned around. “I’m fine.”

“Now you are, but you were *shot*. And this wasn’t a few years ago. This was within the year. What the hell, Trace?”

“I did one last job with my old security team. It didn’t go well.

Everything's fine. I promise. I'm here now."

"When you were gone for those couple of months—you were recovering from a gunshot wound?" I asked.

Trace winced, but nodded. "My life is different now. It's okay."

"You still carry."

"Yes, to protect you guys. It's my job. It was my job before, and I would have taken a bullet to protect Bethany, too. Anyone on her team would. It comes with the job. You know that."

My heart was in my throat but I nodded, before I slid my hand over the scar again.

"Does it hurt? Are you doing physical therapy?"

"It only hurts sometimes, when I move wrong. And yes, I'm doing my physical therapy."

I studied his face to see if he was telling the truth, and he was, at least as far as I could tell.

"Well, I'll be double checking. Because I don't like to see you hurt."

"Says the man who fell off a cliff."

"That was once, and I didn't hide it from you."

"There are a lot of things you don't know about me, Elliot. A lot of things you don't need to."

I ignored the hurt. "I think you getting shot should probably be one of the things I need to know. And you should tell Sidney too. If it's the three of us in this, she should know."

Trace sighed and slid his hand around my neck.

"Yeah. I will."

"Okay." I swallowed hard, then kissed him softly. "But first, there's something I need to do."

I went to my knees and pulled him out of his jeans. Trace laughed roughly before he took control, tugging at my hair, sliding his cock down my throat, and fucking my mouth as if he had been craving this for days. Years.

And I took him, gagging, needing, and wanting.

When he came, we both fell to the floor, still touching, sticky, laughing, and it was only our beginning.

For whatever a beginning could be.



# Chapter Eleven

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## Sidney

TRACE:

Drive safe and text when you get here. We'll meet you out by the cabin.

ELLIOT:

No need to check-in this time, we've got you.

**M**y pulse raced at that, and I knew it was silly to feel that way. He only meant that they had handled the paperwork for me, not anything more. This weekend was just for fun, just a moment where I could forget about the stress of being home and dealing with my small town and family.

ME:

I'm leaving in an hour and will text you when I get there. See you soon!

My heart fluttered as I put my phone away. I didn't know why I was so nervous. This weekend would just be a weekend of fun and heat and something for me.

Then I'd have to make the big choices when it came to the rest of my life. "Sidney? Are you ignoring me? I told you that I needed to talk to you."

I held back a sigh at the sound of my mother's voice and pasted a smile on my face. I turned from my front counter and wiped my hands on my apron. I'd been working all morning on a small wedding that had been through issue after issue. I still needed to finish getting ready and set up the shop for my team over the weekend. I'd told Trace and Elliot I would be

leaving in an hour, but I would be cutting it close, even without the new interruption of my mother.

“Hello, Mom. I didn’t know you would be coming in today. I thought you were out of town this weekend.” And leaving me alone for the first time in a year.

“Your father and I are leaving later this evening. We have drinks with the Dolans at seven. Before we go, I wanted to come here and ask you once again to rethink your plans for next month.”

I knew the word rethink wasn’t what she meant. She wanted me to do things her way. It didn’t matter that I wasn’t a child and was a businesswoman with my own thoughts and needs. It didn’t matter that I was the wronged one and that my own twin sister was the one who held the knife. No, my mother wanted us to be the perfect family.

Our small town might not be a metropolitan city, but our family were the ones people looked to. At least, according to my mother. I never saw it that way. No, we were just lucky that my great grandparents and grandparents had money and we had trusts because of it. My grandparents and parents lorded it over the rest of the town.

I was the rich girl who wanted her own name and life. Her own business.

I didn’t know why I’d let my life come to this—and I was done.

There were reasons I was tempted to leave this town and its judgment... and it wasn’t only the woman in front of me.

And it sure wasn’t the men I would be seeing in a few hours.

Oh, just the idea of my family knowing what I would be doing this weekend nearly put a smile on my face. No, I’d never let her know. I wasn’t ashamed, but I didn’t want to have my family anywhere near Trace and Elliot. The guys didn’t deserve that.

Embarrassment threatened to crawl up my spine but I pushed it away. Because the quicker I got through this conversation with my mother, the faster I could get everything ready for the weekend and head back to the Wilders.

And then I’d be able to breathe.

And perhaps figure out what I would do next. Because I couldn’t live this way anymore. Not when I knew that I’d gone to the Wilders to say goodbye to the old, by going to the scene of the crime—the place where my life had changed forever.

I hadn’t meant to find Elliot and Trace. And I knew what we had was

only for a moment—but that was all that mattered. It was for *me*. Not what was best for others.

“I hope you have a wonderful time with the Dolans.” I smiled wide, though I was beyond done with this conversation already. “I’m heading out of town myself and have a list of things to do before I go. Is there something you need right now, Mom? Or are you here to once again ask me to publicly forgive my ex and my sister when I honestly don’t care anymore? Or are you here to ask me to say yes to Mike Dolan’s proposal even though I’ve never been on a date with him, but it will help you save face?”

My mother’s gaze narrowed, her cheeks pinking. “There is no need for that tone. You have no idea what you’ve done to this family’s reputation.”

I sighed, rubbing my temples. “What reputation? That we’re stuck-up with money?”

“Sidney!”

“Sorry, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t lash out like that. But, Mom? He left me for my sister and honestly, I don’t care anymore. We were never meant to be together if that was his goal. As for Sam? She’s never spoken to me about it. She hasn’t apologized to me or told me what was going on in her head when she decided to run after my fiancé on my wedding day. But I don’t have to accept whatever excuses they make or whatever excuses you want me to make for them. My life doesn’t revolve around that. My life is my work and what choices I need to make.”

“And you leaving town and selling the shop is the perfect plan? I won’t even comment on what you said about your sister. I can’t get into that right now with your father waiting.”

Of course, she didn’t want to talk about it. She wanted it all swept under the rug and for the world to know we were the perfect family. Because we were known in the state of Texas. Not just in this small town. And that was their problem. My family were the kings and queens of this small town, and had some authority in some circles around the state. At least, that’s what my family thought. I never did. Hence why I owned my own business.

“Mom, if I want to move my business and expand, I will. You’ve never liked me running a florist shop as it was. I’m not sure why you care now.”

“You’re shaming the family, Sidney.”

I rolled my eyes, exhausted once again. This was one reason I needed to leave. I’d left for college, but then I’d come back to town. I needed to just start over in more ways than one.

“Stop acting like this is a soap opera or that we’re part of the ton in a regency romance.”

My mom opened her mouth to say something, but the door opened behind her and one of my mother’s brunch friends walked inside. This woman had never come into my shop before, so she must have seen my mother’s car outside and wanted a scene.

Reason forty why I needed to move.

“Oh, Nancy! I didn’t know you’d be in here,” Mrs. Shannon said. She barely held back the sneer as she looked around the place, but I caught it. I always did with my mom’s society friends.

“Oh, Barb,” my mom said, leaning forward to kiss the other woman’s cheek. “I was just checking in on my daughter. A mother’s work is never done.”

“I’m so glad you are! Such a terrible time last year. The gossips are at least slowing down. It breaks my heart to think about everything that happened.” Mrs. Barbara Shannon placed her hand over her heart and sighed dramatically.

This time I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. The Southern Texan Women’s (TM to come) drama was too much for me most days, but when I was in a hurry to head to Elliot and Trace it nearly sent me over the edge.

“Time has moved and healed,” my mother said solemnly before she glared at me over her shoulder, and somehow led the other woman out of the shop as they spoke of daily things, but the undercurrents were all about the gossip of the town and those they deemed important enough to be friends with.

I needed to get out of this town and put space between my family and my future.

I just wasn’t sure how to do that.

Or if going on this trip this weekend would be a way to help...or make the choice harder. But I needed time to make my own decisions.

And if Elliot and Trace were part of that?

Then I’d let myself believe.

If only for the weekend.

“You’re here!” Elliot wrapped his arms around my waist and picked me up, swinging me around him.

My heart raced and I laughed, holding him tight. “Don’t drop me!”

“I promise. You’re safe with me.” He set me down and looked into my eyes before pushing my hair back from my face. “Welcome back, Sidney.”

I took a deep breath and did what I told myself I’d do the moment I set foot on Wilder land—I pushed the worries of my town and my life away to live right here in the moment.

Decisions and drama would be there when I got back. My team had the shop in hand and if there was an emergency, they’d call me. I trusted them and knew they could handle this. They were the big reason I was thinking of opening a new shop in a new place.

I had plans tentatively in place for a shop in Austin thanks to a college friend and, when the time came, I’d take that step—despite my parents’ negative attitude. Because a Flowers woman shouldn’t work like I did.

I sighed and pushed those thoughts away—especially at the curious look on Elliot’s face.

This weekend wasn’t about hard choices. Not with Elliot’s arms around me and knowing I would be seeing Trace soon.

“Thank you.” I smiled up at him. “This is a nice welcome. Do you do this for everyone as part of your job as the Wilder Event Planner?” I winked.

“You know it. I actually need to head back to the front office to go make out with a whole bridal party that just showed up.”

I elbowed him in the gut and he staggered back dramatically, his eyes filled with laughter. The fact that he looked so much lighter than he had the first time I saw him made me want to smile. I wanted him to be happy, and to see him smiling was perfection.

“Would you like me to hold your coat while you do?”

“Well...” He leaned down and kissed me, hard and quick, and I pressed my thighs together, need coursing through my veins.

“Seriously. The best welcome.”

“I try. So...I have to actually go help Alexis with a few things that popped up unexpectedly. It should only take an hour, but I’ll be back as soon as I can. I’m so sorry.”

“Go, help. In fact, I’ll come with you if you want. I’m energized from the drive since I was sitting for so long. Let me use some of my energy.”

Elliot leaned forward. “I have other plans for your energy,” he practically

purred.

I smiled, blushing. “Well...I suppose we can find time for that, too. But first, let me help.”

He studied my face. “It’s at the same part of the property as your wedding. Are you going to be okay with that?”

The fact that he said it point blank made it easier for me to answer honestly. “It will be perfectly fine. The place has new memories for me...and that’s thanks to you and Trace.”

He grinned. “Well...we try.”

He took my hand and I took another step into my future, knowing it was only temporary, but exactly what I needed.

The next morning, I slid out of bed from between Trace and Elliot and headed to the shower. I was sore in the best way possible and filled with so much joy and happiness, I felt like I could burst.

I wanted to get a quick walk in, since both Trace and Elliot had to work for a bit this morning. While I was here for the weekend to be with them, I also knew that weekends were big work times for both of them. It usually was for me as well, but I was allowing my team to work unaccompanied, as a kind of test run for opening a new location.

Hands slid around my waist in the shower and I leaned back into Elliot’s hold.

“I didn’t want to wake you, but don’t you have to head to your meeting?”

I turned in his hold as he kissed me softly, hands lazily sliding over my body.

“I have fifteen minutes.”

“You should get showered, because I am all nice and clean.” I patted his ass and pulled away from him.

“Temptress,” he groaned, and I grinned before heading to the closet to pull my clothes out from my suitcase.

Trace wasn’t in bed when I walked back out to the bedroom, and I frowned before heading to the kitchen for coffee.

Elliot passed me as I made my way to the coffeemaker and poured two cups, one in a to-go mug, and one in a big mug for me.

“I have to go. But I’ll see you soon.”

“Your hair is wet, and you still have water running down your back,” I said with a laugh.

“My family will just have to deal with it. I put my hair up, that counts for something. It’s okay, it’s so humid, they’ll just think it’s sweat.”

“That’s a lovely image,” I said as I laughed. He leaned down and pressed a hard kiss to my lips before heading out.

This felt so normal, the good kind of normal.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” I warned myself, before I saw movement out of the corner of my eye.

I went out to the back porch and saw Trace stretching in just a pair of sweats.

He was all muscle, all strength, and a hell of a lot of experience.

I swallowed hard, watching him move slowly through the motions, and licked my lips. Trace turned and winked.

“Perv,” he muttered.

“You’re the one stretching shirtless in front of me with sweat glistening down your back, what else am I supposed to do? I mean, look at those V-lines. They’re practically begging me to lick them.” I paused. “Again.”

He looked down at his stomach, then up at me. “I guess we can make that happen.”

“So, you’re just stretching out here in the sun to taunt me?”

“I was staying away because I knew if I interrupted you and Elliot, we’d probably end up breaking something in the shower, and Elliot would be really late for work. The sooner he gets to this meeting, the sooner he can come back.”

“So, you knew that if you were there, we would be unable to control ourselves.”

“Pretty much.” He smirked.

I just shook my head, my gaze going to his scars. He had told me about some of them, though he didn’t remember all of them. It scared me that the life he led had allowed him to forget where some scars had come from. Then again, I always had bruises on my legs and arms from walking into walls and pieces of furniture, and I would never remember exactly what happened. It was just par for the course. But that was different.

“Did you want some coffee?” I asked, lifting my cup.

“I’ll come in and get it. But as soon as I’m in there, I want you naked.”



I blushed and shook my head. “So bossy.”

“Once you get on your knees, I’ll show you how bossy I am.”

I laughed, then my eyes widened as he stalked towards me, gaze intense. I let out a strained gasp and ran into the kitchen, trying not to slosh coffee over my hands.

“You’re a menace,” I said as I went to make him a cup.

“You don’t need to serve me, Sidney. I may order you around in bed, but even then, you order me right back.”

“Maybe, but I needed something to do with my hands.”

“I have a better idea,” he rumbled, before tugging my hair back from my face, the pain just on the edge of pleasure. And then he crushed his lips to mine. I groaned, keeping the coffee mug between us steady so I didn’t drop it.

“Take a sip,” he whispered, and I did before he took the mug back and put it on the counter.

“So, let’s see, what is it that you want for breakfast today?”

I rolled my eyes before I tugged on his sweatpants, freeing his cock.

“I knew you weren’t wearing underwear.”

“I like you watching my VPL.”

“Visible penis line for the win,” I teased, before going to my knees. I looked up at him and winked. “Think you can make a cup of coffee without burning yourself while I have your cock in my mouth?”

“That’s nearly playing with fire,” he teased, but then he slid his hand through my hair and pushed my face towards his dick.

I opened my mouth and let him slide his cock between my lips.

I groaned around him, relaxing my jaw so he could go deeper, pressing against the back of my throat. He was in control. I didn’t mind it, loving the way that he gently brushed his hand along my cheek and slid his hands through my hair, but continued to fuck my mouth. My hands went to his ass, fingernails digging into his flesh. He groaned, increasing the speed. I gagged a bit, but it was exactly what I wanted. If I needed to push away, I could, but he was still gentle with me, and knew what I could handle. When he came, I pulled him even closer, not letting him pull away. I swallowed each and every drop, the salty taste sliding down my tongue.

He tasted amazing, or maybe I was just losing my damn mind. I didn’t care though, because his cock was still hard in my mouth, and he slowly pulled away, helping me to my feet.

“Such a fucking menace,” he whispered, before crushing his mouth to mine. I knew he could taste himself on my tongue, and it made me even wetter. So when he spun me around so my hands were on the counter and pulled my yoga pants down, I groaned.

“No underwear. I’m sensing a theme.” And then he slid his hands between my legs and speared me with two fingers. I was so wet that he slid in easily. With his hand on my ass, he fucked me with his fingers, the sounds of my wetness filling the kitchen. He tugged at my shirt, his hand on my breasts as he made me come with just a few more strokes.

I rocked back, my hips against his, his fingers rough and yet so fucking hot on my nipples. He pulled my pants all the way off, my shirt quickly followed, then I heard the sound of foil crackling behind me. I knew he was taking care of us both, so I gripped the edge of the counter, and went to my tiptoes. He spread me and slid deep inside.

One thrust, and I was full, stretching. His cock was so big it was hard for me to breathe, but it didn’t matter. I pushed back into him, wanting more. He had one hand on my hip, keeping me steady, as he moved. He thrust in and out, slowly at first, teasing, and then harder and faster. I met him thrust for thrust, aching for him. When he slid his hands between us, over my ass and gently breaching my backside, I groaned.

“I want to fuck you here. When Elliot’s in your pussy, I want your ass. And I’m going to take it.”

“Yes. Take it.”

He smiled against my neck as he fucked my ass with his finger and my pussy with his cock. Finally, *finally*, I came, clamping around him. I had no idea how he could be so hard after coming once, but that was Trace. He followed me soon after, both of us shaking and shouting with our orgasms.

This weekend was going to end far too quickly, but for now, I knew exactly what we were going to do.

And who I was going to be with.

There were no decisions to be made. No choices. I would have them both, and they would have me.

I didn’t need anything else.

# Chapter Twelve

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## Trace

“S eriously, there is a lot of lifting when it comes to your job,” Sidney said with a laugh, and I shook my head, moving around hay bales like I was a farmer or something.

The only reason I was doing this was that Elliot needed my help, and I liked when he and Sidney watched my muscles work. I didn’t particularly like tossing hay around, but as I wasn’t allergic to this stuff, I didn’t mind. But I was a sweaty mess, and Sidney didn’t fare much better since she offered to help, despite Elliot and me saying that she should relax on her weekend off.

“I’m not just going to sit by the pool while you guys are doing manual labor. Plus, we can clean up and go get dinner like we planned that much earlier. This is my weekend to do anything that I want, and this is what I want to do.”

I raised a brow before I shook my head and went back to setting up for the “Hoe-down Wedding,” as the couple had called it. I wondered why they wanted it to look like they were sitting inside of a barn, complete with baby goats in pajamas, but the baby goats were happy because it kept them warm, and they were well cared for.

That had been the major thing when allowing animals onto the property, so the goats came with their owner, a family friend, someone who actually took care of the animals.

“Did you see the baby goats? Adorable.”

“Please don’t tell me you want a baby goat.”

“Well, no, it would be so adorable that I wouldn’t get any work done.”

“I doubt that’s the real reason.”

I leaned down and stole a quick kiss. She blushed and went back to get another chair.

That morning I had taken her in the kitchen, then again in the shower, and when Elliot came back from his meeting, we had taken each other.

I was already tired, as we hadn't had much sleep the night before, and yet exhilarated at the same time. It was nice. All of this was nice.

I hadn't expected to have all of these feelings when it came to the two of them either. I liked the way that we worked, the way all of us seemed to gel with one another. And while I knew that Elliot's family had an inkling of what was going on between us, nobody judged. If anything, they seemed to want to push us together.

I knew Sidney thought that this was only a onetime thing this weekend. But I wanted to ask her back. And maybe even visit her. I didn't want this to end.

I had no idea who the hell I was for even thinking that. Considering I had run from the only relationship that I had ever tried to be serious about, and I hadn't even loved her.

That was on me for saying yes in the first place. To listening to my parents' wishes. But they had wanted me to step up. I had failed them in their eyes, but I wasn't going to fail Sidney. I just had to think about exactly where this was going. Because this was real life, not a fairytale. Poly relationships worked, but we had to communicate to make it work. And that meant I had to be completely open, and they had to be as well.

We finished setting up and Elliot came forward, clipboard in hand.

"Alexis has it all, and that means we are off to actually enjoy the evening. I got us reservations at my sister-in-law's new restaurant. Don't ask how hard that was to get," he grumbled and I snorted.

"Let me guess, you had to flip a coin or arm wrestle with East because I think this was his weekend to have the family table."

At Sidney's curious glance, Elliot cleared his throat.

"We have two main restaurants on the property: the one in the inn, which my sister-in-law runs, and then the five-star place on the other side of the property. It's newer, and high-end. Kendall runs that as well, and is the head chef. Though she and her assistant are sharing duties more often than not these days.

"It's good, because of the twins and everything, and Kendall's able to take more time off, but with the restaurant getting more starred reviews from

critics, it means it's harder than ever to get a seat."

"Oh, I've heard of Signature, and I'm excited to try it. But what does it mean that East had this week?"

We turned the corner and made our way down the path towards Sidney's cabin. Elliot and I had a change of clothes there, so we would get ready together. Though it might take a while because I had a feeling that Elliot and I wanted to try a few new things with Sidney before dinner. From Elliot's heated look, he knew exactly where my mind went.

"The family has a table in the corner that is sort of reserved for us. If none of us have plans to use it, we let reservations take it, but since we only have it reserved once a week, we usually end up there for special occasions since there's so many of us."

"So let me guess, you arm wrestled?"

"I don't know if I like your tone when you said arm wrestle, as if you don't think I could beat East." Elliot flexed, and Sidney fake fainted into me, swooning for full effect. I caught her and put my free hand over my chest, mimicking a heartbeat.

"Don't do that to us, not in public."

"Assholes. No, I just asked. I switched with East since Lark's out of town."

"Anyway, we totally believe that you could have beat him in an arm-wrestling competition."

Elliot narrowed his gaze at Sidney, who looked unrepentant in the least.

Elliot looked like he was about to say something, but then his eyes widened, and I turned to follow his gaze.

I really wished I had already showered because I stood there covered in hay and dirt and sweat, holding one woman and flirting with a man, who were both equally sweaty and dirty, as my parents and my ex-girlfriend-nearly-forced-fiancée walked towards us.

I cursed under my breath and was thankful I had already explained to Elliot and Sidney about the relationship. I'd been with Alicia to make my parents happy. Only there was no making them happy, and it had taken far too long for me to realize that.

Then I realized I wanted more. Because of Elliot. And from seeing Sidney stand up for herself. The fact that these two were here at all at the same time made things a little complicated. I didn't want my family to be here. I didn't want them to be part of this.

“Trace, I don’t know why you made us find you,” my mother mumbled under her breath, while my father glowered, but Alicia beamed.

She was gorgeous, her hair in a perfect chignon at the base of her neck, dressed in a full business-suit dress that made her look as if she was ready for brunch with high society or to take down a courtroom. She could probably do both.

Alicia was brilliant, sexy, and so not my type and so not the woman that I wanted to be with.

The woman that I wanted to be with was currently standing up straight, fixing her shirt as she stood next to me.

“Hello, Elliot,” Alicia said as she held out her hand.

Elliot looked down at it, then wiped his hands dramatically on his jeans as if he were some dirty farmer and shook her hand.

“Hello, Alicia. I didn’t know you’d be stopping by today.”

“Oh, the family just wanted to stop and surprise Trace.” She turned to Sidney and narrowed her gaze briefly. “I know your face, but not your name. Hello, I’m Alicia. Trace’s...friend.”

Sidney smiled wide and nodded before she slid her hand into Alicia’s. “Sidney Flowers. It’s lovely to meet you, Alicia.”

She sounded so cultured. Maybe this was her business voice, or maybe this was the Flowers’ voice. After all, the Pritchetts and Flowers were sometimes in the same circles, though I hadn’t met Sidney before. But I knew that my parents knew of her parents.

This wasn’t awkward at all.

“Sidney Flowers. I know your parents.” Alicia tilted her head and her eyes widened. “And now I know where I’ve seen you before.” She looked at me and winked. “But that was a while ago.”

“Sidney, Elliot, these are my parents,” I said as I gestured towards them. My mother smiled politely as my dad reached out and shook their hands.

My mother didn’t shake hands, I don’t know why, but she never had.

“I didn’t realize you guys would be out here, I would’ve planned something. We were working on setting something up.”

“I see. There seemed to be hay involved?” my mother asked, tsking under her breath.

“A couple had the idea of a farm-like wedding. Since we don’t actually keep hay on the premises, it took a little extra work on our part,” Elliot said with an easy grin. He looked like the customer service planner that he was so

good at pretending to be, but he had that fake sneer on his face that he sometimes had with unruly guests.

My mother looked between the three of us, curious, before she sighed openly. My dad didn't speak, just put his hands in his pockets and glared.

"Trace, we need to speak with you privately."

I looked at Elliot and Sidney, who looked back at me. I nodded and Elliot frowned. Then each of them reached out and squeezed my arm, the motion not missed by anyone, before they walked off down the path, leaving me alone. I had a feeling if they had been able to find a way to, they would've stayed. And I liked that, I wanted that. Which meant I had to figure out how to keep that. But first I need to deal with this.

"Trace. Son. What are you doing here?"

I sighed and gestured around the retreat.

"I'm working. I'm standing at one of the most elite wedding venues and wineries in Texas. Not South Texas, but Texas. And it's a pretty big state. Your friends' children were married here. You've been to a wedding here."

"Yes, as a guest. But never as staff."

"I own my own business and I run security through here. And even if I was staff, who cares? People need to work."

"And you could have worked with me, son," my dad finally said.

"Mr. and Mrs. Pritchett, why don't we go someplace a little more private to talk?" Alicia said, ever the mediator.

I liked Alicia. Okay, I didn't like every aspect of her, for example the fact that she was faker than fake and used whatever she could to get far in life and business, but I didn't hate her. I didn't resent her. I just didn't want to marry her—despite what our families wanted.

"Alicia, it's okay. You don't have to put yourself in between me and my family anymore."

"She should be family," my mother said furiously.

"Then you marry her, Mom."

Alicia snorted, and I glared at her. "You know what, I'm going to go over there and find a nice bench to sit on. It is clear that I shouldn't be here."

"Why are you here, Alicia?" I asked. "You don't want to marry me as much as I don't want to marry you."

"Trace Pritchett!" my mother snapped.

"What? You wanted us together because you wanted to merge the bloodlines or some shit. We aren't in medieval times, it doesn't matter. Each



family has its own money. Us marrying isn't going to make any more. If anything, it's just going to make everything complicated because of the lawyers involved in drafting prenups. Alicia doesn't love me, I sure as hell don't love her." I winced and looked over at Alicia. "I should say sorry."

"No, no. You're doing a great job. As for why I'm here—it's because I have family duty. And I don't like being the person that's thrown away."

"Alicia, I didn't throw you away."

"Well, you went back on your word, and I think you should rectify that."

I stood there, floored.

My father shook his head. "You see, son, Alicia's getting in line. You should do the same. I can't have it known that I can't control my own son."

"You never could. And I'm fine with that. Alicia? You don't want me. You just want my family's reputation, but you're not going to get it."

"And that woman will?" Alicia asked, finally showing her true colors. Oh yes, that reminded me, I *did* have a problem with her. She was just really good at pretending to be sweet. "She's the jilted bride. You know, the one that was dumped by her own fiancé for her twin?"

"Sidney Flowers, well, even with the reputation stain, she would be good for family connections," my mother muttered. Alicia glared daggers at her.

I winced. If Alicia set her sights on Sidney, it would make things even worse. I needed to nip this in the bud, and end it all.

"I don't like the way that you were standing so close to the Wilder, though," my dad said and I froze, now wishing we would've gone somewhere private. Nobody was around, but voices carried.

"You all are going to stop right there. I don't need you. I don't need your money or your reputation—we all know this. I have the trust from Grandpa, but I've never touched it. I've built everything I have from scratch because I don't want the ties and connections through you guys. Alicia, you want to marry me every other week, and then you change your mind. You think you want the connections, and then you think you want independence. Make up your mind, but you're not going to have me. Mom? Stop trying to corral me. I don't know why you guys are here other than to make a scene, which is something you guys hate. Just go away. I don't care anymore. I love you guys, but I don't really like you right now. Remember, I'm not one of you. I'm as blue-collar as they come these days, I protect other people for a living, and I'm not going to marry who you want me to."

"And you're going to what, be with *them*?" Alicia asked, having sensed at

least part of it.

My parents' eyes widened. I sighed. "It's none of your business."

"You will ruin this family," my mom whispered.

"Then I'll do it. I don't really care." I turned to walk away, and could hear them all talking quietly and furiously behind me, but I ignored them. They truly did not matter. That might make me a bad son, but they weren't part of my decision process. It had taken me long enough to figure out what the fuck I wanted. Where I wanted to be.

I wanted to be here. I wanted to be with my friends, and the family that I chose.

I wanted Elliot and Sidney. I had wanted Elliot for longer than I cared to admit, and I was just now finally figuring out how to make that happen. And as for Sidney? She was the spark that had ignited it all.

Now, I just needed to prove to them that all of this was worth it, and I could finally walk away from all the problems that had gotten me here. The old connections, the old responsibilities, I was no longer going to step into the line of fire, whether it be a bullet to protect someone I didn't know, or from my own family, throwing their expectations into my face.

I needed to find a way to keep Sidney here, and to keep that look of worry and loss out of Elliot's eyes.

The problem was, I had no idea how to begin doing that.

# Chapter Thirteen

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## Elliot

I slid my hand over her hip, between her legs.

“Hold onto the headboard.”

“Elliot,” she whispered against me, and I plunged deep, my cock filling her. She groaned, her pussy quaking around me. She was still so damn slick, so hot. I needed her, craved her.

I slid my fingers over her, feeling her clit swell, she groaned and came, her ass pressing against my hips.

We were on our knees, her ass pressed against me, my cock balls deep inside her pussy. I slid my fingers over her breasts, plucking at her nipples.

“You’re so beautiful.”

“I’d say the same, but you won’t let me look behind me. You just want to fuck me from behind.”

“Damn straight.” I leaned down and bit her shoulder.

“We should hurry before Trace gets back. That way he can join us later.”

Trace had to deal with some unruly guests and had left our bed, leaving us awake and horny.

“Are you ready?” I said softly, licking up her neck to bite her ear lobe. She shuddered and reached around, fingernails digging into my hips.

“Always.”

I didn’t know why that one little word nearly shot me out of this moment, this dream that wasn’t a dream. But I ignored it, because I knew always and forever didn’t happen. I had seen that firsthand. So I pushed those from my mind and reached for the plug. She bent over a bit more, my cock still deep inside her, as I lubed up the plug and carefully worked it into her ass.

“Relax and breathe.”

“I’m so full,” she said through gritted teeth, but then she listened and the plug slid right in, the flared base keeping her safe.

“Such a good girl. You’re almost ready for our cocks.” I leaned down and kissed her shoulder, before I looked back at the pretty pink jewel between her cheeks.

“I wish you could see this. So fucking beautiful.”

She arched into me, her knees shaking, and I knew she was close again.

I gripped her hips and pounded into her, needing to focus on just this. And nothing else.

I came hard and groaned, holding her close, before sliding out of her and taking care of the condom.

She was still lying curled up and I shook my head, a smile playing on my lips.

“You look so beautiful all sweaty like that.”

“I can still feel that in my ass. I like it, and I’m kind of surprised that I do.”

I patted her ass softly and gently twisted the butt plug. She groaned, her toes curling. When I leaned down and kissed her softly, I wrapped her up in my arms with the throw blanket that had been at the edge of the bed.

“Are you okay? Do you need me to take it out?”

She shook her head and sighed, nuzzling into me.

“No, Trace already threatened to bend you over and make me watch without being touched if I’m not ready. I kind of like when he gets all growly and boss-like.”

“That’s Trace,” I said with a laugh. My hand rested on her hip.

This felt right, a little too right.

She was leaving in the morning. I had to remember that. She wasn’t going to stay, and I didn’t need her to stay. Because if she did, then it would be too real. And we weren’t ready for that, were we? At least, I didn’t think we were. No. We needed to remember that this was just a moment, fun for all three of us, and then she would walk away and remember what she was good at. As in she’d have the perfect life, and she’d find the perfect man for her. Whether it be Trace or someone else.

It wasn’t going to be me.

Because the one person I had ever loved had died in my arms, and I wasn’t going to go through that again. And I wasn’t going to make Sidney live in a triad where people would judge her more than they already did for

being who she was. It wouldn't be safe, especially not here. So we would have fun, and I would let her leave.

She fell asleep in my arms, and I swallowed hard. She was so damn trusting. And it fucking worried me.

Because I was falling. Falling way too fast. For a woman who made me smile, for a woman I knew I could love.

But she was at a changing point in her life. She was ready to go back home and face her demons. Face her family in a town that only saw her as a jilted bride. The woman who had been left at the altar for her twin.

Those were labels that her town had put on her, and I wasn't going to add any others.

I finally fell asleep, still holding her, and yet oddly bereft that Trace wasn't with us.

I should've known the nightmares would hit hard.

Fire scorched my skin as I moved towards Miles.

He wasn't broken, not yet. He stood at the edge of the sand dune and looked out at the rising sun.

"I always found it funny that I liked sunrises more than sunsets. And I was never a morning person."

I wanted to reach out and touch him, but I knew I couldn't. He wasn't real. This was another dream. And I knew how it would end. How it always ended.

"You saw more sunsets than you did sunrises."

"Kind of sucks that I'll never get the chance to change the math on that. But life is what it is. I guess that's death, right?"

"Miles?"

I didn't know what I was supposed to say, what I needed to say. This was just a dream, but it felt like he was here. What if he was here, coming back to yell at me? Or to tell me something I needed to know. Or maybe I'd lost my mind and nothing was real.

"What is it, baby?" he asked, and I nearly flinched at the use of the word 'baby.' Baby. Not anymore. But he'd called me that in secret. Because we'd always had to be a secret. Not just because of our jobs, but because we put our lives on the line for each other and our people. And if they couldn't trust us, what was the fucking point?

"I'm sorry. About everything. You weren't supposed to die. You were supposed to be here. To start the next phases of our lives. Don't you get

that?”

“We were never going to make it. You know that. I mean, I loved you in the way I could, but we were different people and you were always going to choose your family, always going to choose a normal life. We had fun, and I miss you. But you weren’t my forever. You were never going to be. We both know that.” Then Miles looked over his shoulder and I staggered back. Half his face was gone, blown away, and the rest of him looked as if he’d been put through a shredder.

“I was never yours. Just like they aren’t.”

He gestured to the side, and I turned to see Trace and Sidney standing there, Sidney in her original wedding dress, Trace in a suit that seemed tight around his shoulders.

“They could be, don’t you think?” I asked, and he smiled at me, that macabre smile of death.

“No, baby. They’re for each other. She’s hurt, and don’t you see the blood on his shoulder? He is, too. They come from the same background, and they’ve been looking for some kind of happiness this whole time. It’s not going to be you, baby. Just like I was never going to be yours.”

Blood sprayed over Sidney’s white dress, over Trace’s face, but they didn’t flinch, instead, they continued to say their vows. I screamed, screamed for them, trying to get them to understand, but they didn’t hear me.

Nobody did.

“I’m sorry, baby,” Miles said softly. “But you should know how it goes now. I’m not yours and I was never going to be. But you had fun. With me, with them. Be the bigger man. Let them have each other. They don’t need to choose if you walk away. And they won’t leave you behind if you do it first.”

Miles fell to his knees, blood pooling around him, as Trace hit the ground, a bloody Sidney laying on top of him, a doll etched in blood and bone.

I sat up, a hoarse scream ripping from my throat. Sweat slicked my body and I ran my hands over my face.

“Elliot? Elliot.” Sidney was there, brushing my hair from my face as Trace ran into the room and turned the lights on.

“What is it? Are you okay?”

Embarrassment crawled over me as I tried to push away the fucking nightmare. I knew it was just a nightmare. I knew that I would just have to get over it, and not listen to whatever dream-Miles said, but it felt so fucking

real.

Trace reached out to grip my shoulder and I flinched. I didn't mean to. I shook my head.

"Sorry. Just a weird dream."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"That's the last thing I want to do. Ever. Sorry," I said, and I knew my voice sounded harsh. But I didn't want to talk about it. Didn't want to think about it. Because all I could do was imagine them lying there in their own blood, but together. Even in death, together.

I had fucking lost my mind.

"Elliot," she said quietly, and I shook my head.

"I'm fine. I just need a minute. I need to go shower. I'm glad you're back, Trace. Our girl was missing you."

I rolled out of bed, closing the bathroom door behind me. But not before I saw them look at and reach for each other.

I wasn't jealous of them. They were exactly who they needed to be with each other. They fit.

And I had just watched them die in front of me.

I didn't want them to die.

So when she left tomorrow, I wouldn't ask her to stay. I couldn't. Trace could, and it would make sense. But if I did, she would die. And I had no idea why that made sense in my brain, but I blamed the dream.

She had to go home. To start her life.

Time was up.

And I was good where I was. The last single Wilder, the one who could clean up the pieces. The one who could plan our futures.

The one who didn't get a future of his own.



# Chapter Fourteen

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## Sidney

I had made my bed, lain in it, and now left it. Of course, that metaphor would probably make more sense if I was at home, rather than sitting at my counter, counting roses for a bouquet that would never be mine.

Honestly, I wasn't even sure if I wanted to try to get married again. But the overwhelming sense that I had lost something, that I had left something behind and was never wanted back? No.

They hadn't asked me to stay.

How odd, that I had wanted them to.

Here I was, thorns sliding into my skin as I wrapped yet another bouquet for a beautiful wedding that I was proud to be a part of, and yet the two men I had spent the weekend with, had smiled with, had slept with, had fought for, hadn't asked me to stay. They hadn't asked when I would be back. Elliot had kissed me on the cheek, his lips barely brushing the corner of mine, before saying he needed to head out on an emergency. He grumbled something about traveling safe, but I had seen the worry in his eyes and didn't know what it meant. Worry that I would want more? Or worry about whatever else was going on inside him?

Trace had been forced to leave soon after, a paparazzi photographer trying to climb through cacti of all things. The man had ended up waking a cabin full of twenty-somethings on their spring break as he bellowed for help.

Trace had been forced to deal with the interloper and had left me with a hard kiss on the mouth, and a request to call or text when I arrived home.

They had gone about their days, work and family coming first. I understood that.

I had seen the way that the Wilders loved them. Just like I had seen the

way that Trace's parents and ex truly did not understand him.

But I thought I was closer to doing so. Or perhaps that had been all in my mind because it was what I had wanted, and not what truly was.

Why was I so worried about it? I had told myself over and over again that it was just for a moment and this was just for fun and everything would end once the weekend was over.

Only I hadn't wanted reality. Reality was for suckers. What I wanted was to bury myself in my high-fiber and low-carb ice cream-like pint and pretend that I hadn't accidentally fallen in love with not one, but two men.

I grumbled to myself as I set the bouquet in the refrigerator and went to work on the next one.

I had done the worst. I'd fallen in love with both of them.

They each had their own issues and didn't want more. I understood that. Hell, I had been the one going in fully ready and expecting to walk away alone. And be stronger for it because I had done what I wanted. I was fully over my ex, and ready to stand up to my family and make my own decisions. And all of that was still true. Only, I had made the monumental mistake of wanting. Of craving. Of falling.

Before I set down my next bouquet, I ran my hands through my hair and pulled it out of its bun, before putting it back up again, scratching my scalp in the process.

I was edgy, annoyed, and oddly worried. Because I had no idea what I was supposed to do in this situation. I didn't know if putting myself out there would help anything. Not when my own life was in flux, and the guys were dealing with their own issues.

I just wanted to know exactly what I was supposed to do.

"Hey, Sidney, we got those daisies in for the proposal coming up. Do you want me to work on it?"

I looked down at the mountain of roses from intake at my hands and nodded. "You've got this, Jess."

"I know I do. It's why I'm the big boss." She winked as she said it and I nodded, knowing that Jess and I would have a talk soon. Because I wasn't ready to close down this shop completely. Especially when I needed the income. Jess and I had been talking over the past year about expanding, and what that would mean. Because Jess's home was here. She was damn good at her job, and she would make an amazing manager for this shop. And that meant I could move on and finally open that place in Austin. That is, if I

wanted a storefront there.

I could look at the location Alexis had casually mentioned over wine the night before I left. But that would be too much, wouldn't it?

I didn't need to be the Wilders' florist. I didn't need to be near the two men I had accidentally fallen for when I still didn't even know what exactly they wanted from me.

No, I would just stick to the plans I already had, and not throw my life into the fire for a man yet again.

The bell on top of the door rang and I looked up and around the pillar and sighed.

I really didn't want to deal with this today. I wasn't sure I could. But I had to. I was done feeling like I was in the wrong. And I was done having this ache in my gut whenever I saw them.

My mother and sister walked into my shop. Jess's eyes widened. I waved her off, thankful that my family couldn't see my hand movements, and Jess scurried to the back, daisies in hand.

We were the only two in the shop today, as my other staff members would come in for the big wedding at the end of the week.

We would also all have an employee meeting once Jess and I talked, and I figured out which location I would open. And how my life would change forever.

But first I had to face the past.

And then another person walked in, and I held back a groan.

Jeremy smiled as if he had made a thousand women swoon, and as if he hadn't broken my heart without a second glance. And the worst part? It wasn't that he left me. While that hurt, what stung was that I shouldn't have said yes in the first place.

I could not believe I had fallen for that pretty face.

"You're here," Sam said as she looked around. "This place is always so much smaller than I remember it. How can you work in here with so many flowers? I mean, they're pretty and all, but don't you get dirty?"

I looked down at my dirt-covered apron and the two Band-Aids on my finger from a vicious thorn.

"Hi, Sam. It's been a while. How are you?" I asked, my voice dry.

"Jeremy and I are just fine. Right, honey?"

Jeremy smiled at me as he wrapped his arm around Sam.

"It is a lovely place, Sidney. It always has been."

Sam glared and I looked at my twin, wondering if I had the same expression when I glared. When I looked sullen, and unhappy.

I wanted my sister back. But I didn't think that was going to happen anytime soon. Or ever, not if I really thought about it.

I wanted something of my own, and I had it. It was this building, and the second location I was planning. It was working with brides and companies and places like the Wilder Retreat. It was making people happy. It was finding love when you least expected it.

It wasn't looking at the woman who wore my face but didn't have an ounce of the heart I held.

It wasn't looking at the man I thought I loved, who hadn't even had the balls to say something to me before running.

"Sidney, it's time to talk. We are done letting you be the drama of this little entendre."

"What are you trying to say? Entendre doesn't mean anything in that sentence."

She ignored me, like always. "We are becoming a laughingstock. And the Flowers family will not have that."

"How am I the laughingstock? I'm working. I'm literally working with roses right now for a wedding."

"If you would just come to the club with us so everyone knows you're okay with how things happened, it would go a long way."

I looked at my sister and laughed. I couldn't help it. A deep belly laugh, it was that, or scream and cry. "Really? You want me to go to your club, a club that I hate because of their views and how they treat people, not to mention that they have horrible flower arrangements."

"Seriously? You're judging them on their taste?" Sam snarled.

"I love you, Sam. I do. I love you too, Mom." I looked at Jeremy. "I don't love you."

He waved me off, looking down at his phone. He wasn't even paying attention to Sam, and I figured that marriage would be over soon. I had always known that Jeremy's attentions wandered when it came to work and life, I hadn't realized it applied to everything else.

It had been a slap in the face, and I felt like an idiot for thinking I had loved him.

But I didn't love him. I knew now what that emotion could be.

That would break me later once I actually thought about it, but I would

deal with that after I finally stood up for myself.

“I love you both. But I’m not going to parade myself in front of your friends where they’ll know it’s a lie. They know that I was left at the altar. That embarrassing crap isn’t going to go away because you want it to.”

“And yet you seem to relish it,” my mom snarled.

“Of course I don’t. I’m forced to work in this stupid small town where they already judge me because of your actions and because of what our family has always done. We lord who we are over them.”

“This family has done everything for this town,” Mom snapped.

“Maybe? Or maybe we aren’t in the good-old days, and we don’t have to use the family name to get what we want. Maybe we could actually work for it.”

“I do work for it,” Sam added.

I nodded, because she was right. Sam was taking over for our dad, following in his footsteps. She did work. And my mom worked really hard to maintain our image.

I was the black sheep. The one covered in roses. And I didn’t care anymore. “What is me going to your club, pretending that I’m okay with this marriage, going to do? What’s it going to accomplish?”

“It’ll get people to stop whispering.”

“No, it won’t. Don’t you see that? It’ll just bring it back to the forefront. Sam and Jeremy can do whatever they want, I really don’t care. But I’m tired of you throwing their decisions in my face. You may think that I wasn’t good enough, but I was the one hurt. He was not good enough.” I looked at Jeremy, who finally put down his phone to stare at me. “You are an asshole. You didn’t have the grace to tell me you were also sleeping with my sister. You didn’t have the balls to break up with me so you could actually be with her. You’re so lazy and weak that you couldn’t fucking tell people that you wanted my sister instead. Beyond my own emotions and beyond what it does to me, you are an asshole for putting Sam down and hiding her. You made her run after you, because you couldn’t even just not show up to the wedding. You had to make it a fucking grand spectacle.”

“Stop cursing, Sidney.”

I threw my hands up in the air, a single rose petal falling in front of me.

“Seriously? The word ‘fuck’ is the problem? Your precious son-in-law was fucking both of your daughters, and you don’t seem to care.”

“Sidney!” my mom snapped.

Sam stared at me and shook her head. “That’s where you’re going with this?”

“Why don’t you have the self-worth to realize what he is?”

“You were going to marry him.”

“And it would’ve been the worst decision of my life.”

“I am standing right here, ladies,” Jeremy put in, and Sam and I both put up our hands.

“Not now,” we said simultaneously.

I wanted to laugh at that. I wanted to scream.

“I’ve never been the prom queen like you. The class president. I wasn’t the valedictorian. I’ve always been middle-of-the-road. And I am just damn fine with that. I run my own business, and I’m going to move out of this fucking town. I’m tired of having to have you in my space all the time so I can’t move on. I don’t want Jeremy. I don’t want your club. I don’t want the life that you thought I needed. I just want to make my own decisions. I don’t care anymore. Do what you want. Tell them that I’m a scorned woman or tell them that I’m a perfect saint who stepped aside. Lie. I don’t care because that’s not on me. Those are the decisions that you have to live with. And, Sam? You have to live with him, for however long he wants you before he finds another skirt to fuck.”

“How dare you,” my mother said, her voice low and icy. “After all we’ve done for you.”

“Thank you for doing the bare minimum to take care of me. I appreciate it. But I got the business loan for this place on my own. I don’t rely on you. I had privilege because of you, and I will pay it back as much as I can by doing better than you wanted me to be. But just leave. I’m done. I’m done with you, and I’m done with this town. Maybe one day I can stand to be in the same room with you. But I don’t want you in my life right now.”

I turned and went back to work, hastily putting together a bouquet and hoping that it actually looked somewhat decent.

They were talking again, but finally they left, Jeremy mumbling something about being sorry.

But I didn’t care.

He’d left me at the altar, but my family had gone with him. And I should have felt more heartbroken about that, but I had always been on the outside looking in.

I was building who I needed to be.

And that meant I needed to stand up to more than just my family. I pulled out my phone and looked up the group text.

ME:

I'm sorry we didn't get to see each other before I rushed out of there for work. Let's do something soon?

Phones dinged behind me and I whirled, not realizing that anyone else had walked into the shop.

My chest heaved and my pulse raced as I looked at Elliot and Trace, and wondered what the hell I was supposed to do now.



# Chapter Fifteen

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## Trace

**W**e'd only caught the tail end of the conversation and had witnessed the most beautiful takedown I'd ever seen in my life. She'd stood up to that asshole, as well as her mom and sister. Thankfully they hadn't seen us. I wasn't sure if I would've been able to hold back my anger, and from the way that Elliot had been glaring, I was pretty sure he wouldn't have been able to either.

Sidney stood there, roses in hand, and blushed.

"I didn't realize you two were here. Or that you were coming here. And wow. Talk about the worst timing ever."

I stuffed my hands in my pockets, now wondering if this had been such a good idea. When Sidney left, in my mind it had only been for the week and then we would find our normal routine, only it didn't feel like that. When I had gotten back, there was no note, only a quick perfunctory text when she got home safe. And I felt like I had stepped in it, that I hadn't done enough to explain to her that I wanted her to come back. I had been dealing with the security issue and hadn't made sure Sidney knew she was wanted, just like I hadn't done enough to make sure Elliot understood that, too.

So, when I asked Elliot to come with me to see Sidney's shop and surprise her, Elliot had looked worried.

That same worry that was in my gut when it came to making sure these two knew what they were to me. And what I wanted. I just didn't know what the fuck they wanted, and that was what I was here for.

I could have done it separately, explained to Elliot what I wanted, and then come and done the same with Sidney. But I wanted them both to be here. For me to actually step out over the ledge like Elliot had done over a

year ago. For me to jump off that cliff. And hope both of them would catch me.

It was a dumbass metaphor, and I had no idea if this was going to work. I wasn't emotive or sensitive. I growled and ordered and got what I wanted through sheer grit and determination.

But here I was, hoping to hell that this worked.

Only, I wasn't sure it was going to.

Which did not bode well for the drive home.

"I hope it's okay that we came," Elliot said after a moment, and Sidney smiled a little awkwardly, as we just stood there on opposite sides of the counter, a tension between us that hadn't been there before.

Had I read this wrong? Had Sidney not wanted us to visit ever? Did she not want to come back?

We needed to fix this. *I* needed to fix this.

The only way I knew how was to just open up.

I wasn't sure that was going to work.

"Should we leave?" Elliot asked, voicing the question in my head.

That seemed to break her out of her trance, because she moved around the counter and threw her arms around both of our waists.

"I'm just surprised to see you here. And I'm still in a little bit of shock from cursing out my family. So, sorry."

I kissed the top of her head then pushed her hair back from her face, using my thumb to wipe away some dirt on her cheek.

"Do I need to go chase them down for you?"

She grinned then, her eyes filled with laughter. "Not in the slightest. If they come back, I'll deal with them. I did pretty good myself."

"Damn right you did. But I'm still kind of sad I couldn't punch your ex for you."

"He doesn't matter," she said, and I leaned down and brushed my lips against hers. The kiss deepened and she groaned before Elliot took her away from me, laughing as he did, and kissed her just as hard.

"Hello."

"Hello," she said, a little dreamily. "Seriously though, he doesn't matter. He didn't matter before. I was marrying him because I thought that's what I was supposed to do. I thought I loved him. It's clear now that I loved the *idea* of him. But we had nothing in common. He wanted to be part of my father's company. He'd made his million, but wanted more. He wanted a name for

himself. And I was it, except he wanted my sister all along. And now, I don't care. I was hurt at first because of the embarrassment, but he did me a favor."

I raised a brow. "Really?"

"Not in the way he did it, because he can fuck himself right there. Same with my sister. But I don't care about them anymore. Which might make me callous, but I can't care. They don't get to be part of my narrative. They're not my story. I am."

I looked at Elliot and we both smiled wide.

"Damn straight you are," I growled.

"And it was nice seeing you fighting for yourself."

"I have been trying to all year. Trying to move on from their mistakes, and my own. Because I did make a mistake. For saying yes to him and going on with that farce of a wedding. I had my heart shattered, but it was my own fault for even allowing him to get close when I shouldn't have trusted him. That wasn't love, that was infatuation and dependence, and I'm never falling into that hole again."

"I don't think you ever could."

She looked at me and smiled. "I won't. And I won't let my family put me in a position where I feel like I need to. I'm not going to be at their back. I'm going to go out and expand this business like I was planning. I'm ready to get out of this town, to leave this place behind. To let my team do what they've been trained to do, and move on."

My heart raced, because this was going exactly the way I needed it to. Albeit in a completely different way than I thought it would.

"So you'll move but still keep this place?" I asked.

She nodded. "That was the goal. It has always been. For myself though."

I nodded, understanding. "And you'll be closer to us," I said after a moment. Elliot swallowed hard, and I knew his heart was on the line, just like mine. Maybe we should have had this discussion separately, but I needed to do it as the three of us. I knew it. It would be better for all, but why was this so damn terrifying?

"You want..." she started, before taking a deep breath and starting again. "You want to keep seeing me?"

I scowled. "Of course. I'm sorry I didn't ask you before you left. Things got a little confusing and I felt bad. And then we've had issue after issue with weddings at the resort, and a celebrity on property. So I didn't get to call you like I wanted these past few days. But I'm here now, and I'm asking both of

you.” I turned to Elliot, and then looked back to Sidney. “I’m asking both of you to keep this going. Not just for fun. Which is really fucking scary to say out loud.”

Sidney’s eyes widened and she took a step back. “Are you kidding me?”

“Would that be so wrong?” I asked, worry etched into my bones.

“I just, I thought you two were just having fun and then planned to move on. And I was preparing myself for that.”

“We can still have fun, but I don’t want to move on.” I decided that if Elliot wasn’t going to say anything, it was my turn to speak out. I’d never put anything on the line like this before and maybe it was time. Maybe it was time to stop hiding behind my job. Stop hiding behind protecting everyone else when in the end I was protecting myself.

It was time to stop hiding.

“I want you both. I want a future. I want you to come out and stay near us so we can figure out who we are together. I’m not saying that everything will be easy and perfect, because nothing worth living for is. But I’d like to try. Because I want to be with both of you.”

“Trace,” she whispered, and I steeled myself, ready for her to say that we were just her rebounds. And I would understand it. She literally just said she wanted to be in charge of her own narrative, so why would she add us?

“I was so afraid the two of you didn’t want something like that. And I was preparing myself to stay away even if I moved out there. Which would’ve been insane, to be near you guys so many times and hear about you. I’m a damn florist, and you guys work at a wedding venue. So the inevitable time where I’d have to work with you would’ve killed me. But yes, I’d love to continue this. To see how this goes. With both of you. Which is insane because I never thought this could actually happen, but here I am, standing between two very sexy men.”

It didn’t escape my notice though that Elliot hadn’t said anything, he just stood there, waiting. Shock covered his face, and I didn’t understand it. Elliot had wanted to come here with me. If anything, Elliot had brought it up first. But now he looked so fucking weird.

“Elliot?” I asked, as Sidney slid her hand into mine, squeezing for comfort.

“I hadn’t wanted to be the one to stand in your way,” he whispered. “I thought I’d be the one to help you shine, and to watch you two grow. I just, I don’t know.”

It felt like the world crumbled beneath my feet. I wasn't good at this. I wasn't good about feelings and emotions but here I was, having to bare everything over and over again. It was time that I did. I needed to figure this out, because Elliot was putting a shell around himself, and I knew why, or at least part of it. I looked down at Sidney and saw the way she narrowed her gaze, and hoped that we were on the same page.

"No," Sidney said before I could.

"Elliot, we're going to talk about this," I added.

"I just, I kept thinking that soon you two would realize how great you are for each other. And yes, I came out here because I can't stay away. I can't lose you."

"Do you see how contradictory that sounds? You don't want to lose us, so you don't want to be with us?" Sidney asked.

"I've seen the way you two are with each other. There's such chemistry there."

"With the three of us," I corrected. "Yes, between Sidney and me." I turned to her and pressed a kiss to her palm.

"Just like there's a connection between you and me, Elliot, and between you and Trace." Sidney continued. "That's why this works, and I've been so afraid that you guys didn't want this. But you're here, and I want to make this work. You're here, Elliot. So be here."

"What do you want, Elliot?" I asked. "I know this is only the beginning, but it's the three of us, so there has to be some form of communication. Which is very fucking weird for me to be the one saying, by the way."

Sidney laughed, and it was a soft one, genuine. "Usually, I'm the one to do that, or you, Elliot. I know you're hiding. And I know why."

Elliot's face fell, and Sidney and I both reached out to touch him. Sidney wrapped her arm around his waist, as I pushed his hair back from his face.

"Elliot," I said softly.

"I don't know why I'm like this. It's not like you guys are ever going to be hit by a roadside bomb. I know that. It makes no sense why I'm so worried that you guys are going to die in my arms, but here we are. My subconscious is being a dumbass. All I do, even with my family, is either be the bright one so they never worry about me, or I push you guys away before I can get hurt. And I hate it. And I don't know how to fix it."

"It's okay," Sidney whispered again. "We've all been through our own twisted weirdness. But we can work on it. You don't have to run away from

us because you're afraid. But if you don't want us—"

Elliot cut her off. "I want you both. And that's what's so scary."

"So fucking scary," I said with a laugh.

"And we're going to have to figure out how to work this together," Sidney added. "Because while this has been great, as we've just started out, we're going to have to figure it out. Because I want you both. The idea of choosing has never been an option between the two of you and I never will. So I'm going to have to figure out how to start my whole new life with you two and on my own. It's complicated, but I know I can make it work because I've been working towards this. I just need to make sure that you both want this, too."

"With everything."

Elliot nodded. "Yeah. I want this too."

I looked at Sidney, and I knew we would have to find a way to prove to Elliot this could work.

Which was odd because I had been the one holding back at first, and then it was Sidney.

And now we had to keep Elliot.

I leaned down and brushed my lips against Sidney's, then Elliot's, before they kissed. We held each other, and I knew this was another beginning.

It was just us laying things out there, saying we wanted to keep going. We wanted a future.

And while Sidney's life plans were changing, and she had new obstacles in her way, she wasn't going to do it alone.

But now, we had to prove it to each other. Prove that this was what we wanted, and that it could work. None of us had mentioned beyond wanting, beyond needing. There were no declarations of love and forever.

It was too early for that, even though something coiled in my belly that said maybe it wasn't. Now we were at the point that we had said what we wanted. But we had to prove it.

# Chapter Sixteen

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## Elliot

Screams erupted, fire burning, and Trace and Sidney reached for me. Only they were gone in an instant, bleeding out at my feet, but together. And I was apart, left behind.

“Elliot. Elliot. Wake up.”

Someone gripped my shoulder, and I looked up to see Ridge and East standing there, worry in their eyes.

I swallowed and shook off Ridge’s hand, wondering what the hell I was doing. I had fallen asleep in my damn office. And apparently had another fucking nightmare.

I hadn’t slept much the night before, mostly because we were welcoming Sidney back to the retreat. She wasn’t moving in—we weren’t ready for that yet—but we had been looking at spaces for her to open up a shop. The I-35 corridor wasn’t that spread out anymore, not with so many people moving in. She wasn’t planning on truly moving to Austin, but if she picked somewhere in New Braunfels, or even San Marcos, it would be close enough to us that it would feel like living next door. In fact, depending on traffic on I-35, it would take the same time, if not less, to get there versus downtown San Antonio.

That’s how spread out the city was, and why we had such an influx of people wanting to stay here. We were close enough to the highway that the Wilders could market to many major cities. It was just a hop, skip, and a jump away from I-10 to get to Houston.

Sidney could find a place anywhere, start her new business, and still be here.

If only my dreams would let me get through that. Or rather, my

nightmares.

“Here, drink this.”

I looked up to see Ridge handing me a glass of water, and I nodded in thanks before I drained half of it in one swallow.

I set the glass down, telling myself to breathe, as Ridge stared at me, arms over his chest. But he didn't say anything. Because I saw the haunted look in Ridge's eyes. Oh, he had secrets. Why the hell would he want to move out here, away from his brothers, away from his family, if he wasn't hiding something?

I wasn't going to be the one to pry, especially considering I couldn't even sleep without screaming these days.

“Are you okay?” East asked, and he shook his head before I could answer. “Actually no, you're not. You should tell us what's going on.”

“Tell you what?” Eli asked, and I cursed under my breath as the rest of my brothers, and my sister, walked through the door.

I immediately stood up from my chair, slid past the others, and wrapped Eliza in my arms. She sank into me, my little sister, and I inhaled the sweet smell of her shampoo.

“You're here.”

“I am.”

“Where are Lexington and Silas?” I asked of her two kids.

“They're with Beckett and the rest of the Wilder spouses. Getting spoiled and fawned over like they should be. Why are there dark shadows under your eyes? I heard there was good news in addition to this reunion.”

I looked around, and as Elijah softly closed the door behind him, I realized all seven Wilders, and Ridge, were now trapped in my small office.

“You know we're too big now to be stuffed into a small room like this. It's like a damn coffin.”

That was the exact wrong word to use, and I flinched as I said it.

“I can leave if you want?” Ridge said quietly.

“No. I should be the one to leave.”

“No, you're going to sit down and tell us what's wrong,” Eli ordered, and Eliza rolled her eyes.

“Take a seat, and talk to us. I heard that you, Trace, and Sidney were now in a real relationship. That's great. And I can't wait to get to know them both. I mean, I know Trace decently well, but Sidney? I want to meet the woman that can handle both of you.”

“She’s a pistol all right,” East grumbled, and I glared at my brother.

“That better just be talking smack about me, and not about her.”

“Of course that’s what he’s doing,” Everett put in. “Plus, you’re with one of my best friends, I would say Trace is like a brother to me, but now that saying would be weird,” Everett said.

Everett married Bethany, who had brought Trace into our lives, so I understood the connections, and I hoped I didn’t fuck things up.

“I just have this feeling, you know? That things feel too good. Then they’ll all go to shit.”

Something passed over Eliza’s and Ridge’s face, but it was Eli who spoke.

“It’s really hard to hope. Remember that favorite show of ours? How they say it’s the hope that kills you? That’s it, isn’t it?”

I snorted and nodded. “Yeah. But I just feel like things are starting to make sense. This business is doing great, our family is growing, and we’re here for a fucking reunion with Uncle Carlos and Aunt Rebecca here, along with Ridge’s brothers. At least, they’re coming, right?” I asked, and Ridge nodded.

“They’re on their way now, actually.”

“You see? We’re going to show off the place to the rest of the family and it’s going to feel good. I just, I don’t know. It feels like everything’s on a precipice and if I make one wrong move, it’s all going to explode.”

I rubbed my hand over my chest, as everyone spoke up, but East held up his hand. “What else? I know those nightmares. They’re the same ones I have.”

“Same here,” Everett said.

Evan cleared his throat. “Same.”

Each of my brothers had seen the worst, had been through the worst. And I wasn’t sure how we were supposed to deal with that. We were out. Only Eli had gotten in his twenty, the rest of us had gotten out and now had nothing to do with government work or the military. The only thing we had connections to were the VA, our insurance, and those who came to visit. It just didn’t make sense I would still have these dreams.

“You’ve been like this for a while, since before Trace and Sidney,” Elijah added. “I was hiding in my own grief at the time, so I didn’t really realize it.”

“And I was dealing with PTSD from hell, making it impossible for me to realize that I’m not the only one feeling it.”

Eliza reached out and gripped my hand, and I didn't let go. Ridge stood against the window with his arms folded over his chest. He didn't have to say a thing, but he was watching the way we worked.

As children, the Wilder cousins had been decently close. But we had never lived near each other. The military didn't really allow that. Not when we were kids, and definitely not when we were older and stationed all over the world. I was glad to get to know Ridge now, and maybe even his brothers, but it must be odd to feel like an outsider looking in.

Then again, I had put myself in that position with my own damn family even though I shouldn't have.

"I never told you guys about Miles," I said quietly.

Eliza squeezed my hand, and I hated making her feel this way. Remembering what she had lost. She had gained something in the end, something greater, but she had felt loss. All of us had.

Hell, our parents were gone. We had all dealt with death.

But I had never told them about Miles. And when I did, tears streamed down Eliza's face, and she wiped away mine, but it was Eli who spoke first.

Forever the big brother.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry you had to go through that, and we didn't know. Makes sense how you got out so early though. I thought you'd be the one to stay in longest."

I shook my head. "I only went in because all of my brothers did. I didn't know what else to do."

"You could have stayed with me," Eliza whispered, and I squeezed her hand.

"Maybe I should have. I want to say then I wouldn't have meant Miles, but this pain? I don't want to feel it."

"I regret that Joy's gone, that I lost her. But I'm never going to regret the time that we had. And I love Maddie. She's my forever. My first forever. But I'm not going to wish away the pain because that means I would lose the part that was good."

"Just like I can't regret meeting my best friends that are gone," Evan put in.

I nodded, then wiped my tears, annoyed with myself.

"Today's supposed to be a good day, a happy day. And I'm just all lost in my feels."

"Well, you are my favorite brother because you actually do have feels,"

Eliza put in, and everyone else denied that—Everett even threw a paperclip at her.

“So violent,” Ridge said with a laugh. “I like you Wilders. We’re still going to beat you in the random games you have set up for us, just saying.”

“Games?” Elijah asked as he turned to me. “I wasn’t told about any games.”

“I’m not playing any games,” Evan growled.

“Not real games. More like trivia things. I wasn’t going to do an egg toss or whatever. And there’s no color-coordinated shirts. But perhaps a game of touch football or soccer?”

“I’ll still kick your ass,” Evan snarled, even as he pointed at his prosthesis. “Just know that.”

“I thought I was going to be on your team?” I asked, and Ridge laughed.

“In-fighting already. This is what I like,” he said as he rubbed his hands together. “But I do call Trace.”

My head whipped to him.

“Excuse me, he’s mine.”

“And you can have him for all the other things, but as he’s my boss, I do believe that he needs to be on our team to at least even out the numbers.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Eliza said with a laugh, and she wrapped her arms around his waist. “It’s good to see you, Cousin Ridge.”

“Good to see you, Cousin Eliza.” He kissed the top of her head and she beamed.

She had been the only girl with all of these boys. I still wasn’t quite sure how she had handled it.

Eli rubbed his chin. “You know, with all of us working together, and so many relationships and marriages within the company, we should probably do something about that boss title with Trace,” he said as he tapped his finger on his chin.

“You’re not going to fire him, are you? Just because he’s my boyfriend?”

“Ooh, you said boyfriend,” Everett teased.

“*And* I have a girlfriend. At the same time. Imagine that,” I said with a laugh.

“See? You can do this. You always were competitive,” Eliza put in.

“Apparently,” I grumbled.

“Just don’t fire Trace because I’m here. And don’t fire me. I’m an asset,” Ridge put in.

His phone went off and he looked down at it as I stood up from my desk.

“That’s your family at the gate, right?” I asked.

“Right in one. The little planner you.”

I flipped him off before I pulled out my phone.

“Let’s get to this Wilder reunion, and the actual jobs that we have, and I want to go see Trace and Sidney.”

“Good. Tell them that we love them,” Everett put in.

I rolled my eyes, because while I was still trying to understand my feelings, we hadn’t actually said those words. Yet. Soon. Eventually.

I hoped.

By the time we made it to the front of the building, two large black SUVs pulled in front.

While we didn’t have full run of the entire retreat, we did have many of the rooms filled. Even those that didn’t live on property would be staying here so we could drink and have a lot of fun and stay up late. It would be nice to have all eleven of our generation, plus our aunt and uncle, in one place together.

While the three other Wilder cousins got out of their SUV, I went up to the first one and helped my Aunt Rebecca out.

“Hey there, Aunt Becky.”

“It’s Rebecca, you know that.”

She kissed my cheek.

“I don’t want to be that woman from *Full House*. Especially not after everything she did.”

“True. I’m sorry.”

I held out my hand to my uncle, who shook it tightly before he pulled me into a big hug.

“We hug in this family. We’re Wilder men. You know I hugged your dad all the time. I miss Rafi.”

“So do I,” I said with a lump in my throat.

“Now, let me go say hello to the rest of these heathens, including the son I see over in that corner, and then we can get started. Time for a Wilder party!” he hollered, and I laughed hard. My uncle was always the life of the party, and my aunt was always right behind him.

Everyone started saying hello, some of us having not seen each other in years. The others had tried to make it to all of the weddings, but it didn’t always work out. Plus, many of my siblings had gone for very small

weddings.

I looked over at Wyatt who winked at me and brought me in for a big bear hug.

“Well. It’s about time you opened up the doors to us poor folk Wilders.”

I rolled my eyes and punched him in the shoulder. “Jerk.”

“Fuck you. But hell, if I’m going to have to drink wine this whole trip, at least it’s Wilder wine. It is quite nice to have my name on something.”

“You still like beer and hard liquor more?”

“Always. But Elijah will teach me his ways.”

“So he says,” Brooks said as he came forward. He hugged me tight, then looked around.

“This place just looks better and better every time I see it. It’s so damn pretty. Good bones.”

“So says the contractor.”

He winked, then moved out of the way for Gabriel. He was the youngest of their siblings, with dark hair, light eyes, and the voice of an angel, according to some.

He was our rockstar, and it still made me laugh to think about.

“Thanks for the invite. I guess I had to slum it for you all.”

I flipped him off, before we were barreled into by a familiar face.

“Jerk,” Lark said as she wrapped her arms around Gabriel.

“There’s my Lark.” He kissed her on the mouth and East came forward, a growl on his lips.

Lark punched Gabriel in the gut and smiled up at him.

“You’re very lucky I don’t kick your ass. But you’re pretty. And I have more Grammys than you.”

“Maybe, and you sure punch harder than usual.”

“I’ve been teaching her. And you may be blood, but I will kick your ass if you touch my girl like that again.”

“Yeah, yeah. Seriously though. Where did you learn to punch like that?”

“We taught her,” all of my brothers, including me, said at once.

We all just looked at each other and laughed, before we helped unload all their bags and began the reunion.

Trace and Sidney would be here soon, as I knew Trace was heading up security, and Sidney had been dealing with business things. Packing up your whole life and starting over wasn’t easy—I knew that from experience. But she was also changing the way her company was run and cutting ties with her

family along the way.

She was so damn strong, and I was grateful that she was mine.

That was, if I could make this work.

I hoped I could. I was just scared. Scared that I'd lose them. And I couldn't. Because what I felt for them was so much more than what I had felt for Miles. That guilt ate at me.

But I had wanted Trace for far too long, and then as soon as Sidney had arrived on scene, even in that billowing wedding dress, I knew there was something there, even if we didn't allow ourselves to think about it.

The wind started to pick up and my phone alerted.

"What the hell? The storms weren't supposed to hit till like midnight."

"And storms don't hit like this where we're at. We are usually buffeted between two different storms and the jet streams," Eli said as he frowned.

"I know we already made sure everything was inside for the storm tonight, and we would set out things tomorrow, but let's make sure we're prepped."

My phone alerted again and I cursed under my breath. "Large hail, high winds, and chance of tornadoes. Fuck."

"I'm done with tornadoes," Elijah put in.

"Let's go check the grapes."

"I'm with you," Evan put in.

"I'm going to go check on the kids," Alexis said, and Kendall agreed as they made their way into the main part of the inn.

I wondered how the storm could have hit so fast. We were all usually better about staying on top of the weather. But our phones kept pinging, and then it started to rain. Hard driving sheets. Everyone went inside and I checked on the staff.

I looked off into the distance, at the dark cabin a couple hundred or so feet away, and cursed. Because I knew who was out there, but at least they were safe. Trace stood in the doorway, frowning, Sidney behind him.

I picked up my phone and called, even as it rang again with another alert.

This time a tornado warning. Not a watch.

"Fuck."

Trace picked up.

"Hey, you want to come over here or stay inside?"

"We'll head over there in my truck. I think it'll be safer."

"Yeah. Let's do that."



But as soon as I ended the call, the tornado sirens went off and the wind picking up speed echoed throughout the valley.

# Chapter Seventeen

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## Sidney

“It’s seriously the cutest cabin. I know everyone likes the little gray one, but I like this one. Probably because all of the crows and raven art everywhere.” I looked up at Trace, who just shook his head.

“Did I know you liked them? The whole murder and unkindness? Those are kick-ass names.”

“And they’re so smart. Crows are brilliant, and really loyal. I’ve always wanted to gift things to one so we could form a friendship, but then I’m also worried that if I create a bond with a crow, then he and his murder will now be part of my family and if someone wrongs me, the crows will be after them, and then it’s a whole thing.”

Trace blinked at me as lightning arced over the sky, the storm coming on quicker than I had thought. “I was not expecting any of that, and yet, I should have. Your mind is brilliant. If a little kooky.”

He reached around and patted my ass as he brought me closer. I rolled my eyes before I went up on my toes and kissed his chin. “You ready to go visit the Wilders at the family reunion?”

“We already know most of the family, and I work with nearly all of them. So it’s not really meet the family for me.”

“I know some of them, but I met most of you guys while trying to rip off a wedding dress.”

“No, the ripping off was just for me and Elliot.”

I blushed, and still couldn’t quite believe that the two men who had been there for my downfall were the two men I had fallen for.

Was it fate, or just a wicked turn of events that actually worked out in my favor?

“Is it okay that I’m staying here? Is there enough space for all the guests and the Wilders?”

“This is usually the bonus cabin, one they keep for family. And since the other Wilders are staying in the inn itself, you’ll be fine here.”

“Good. I kind of like having my own space when I’m here, even though I know both you and Elliot will have me in your beds more often than not.”

“Damn straight. But it’s good to have your space too.”

I nodded, running my hand over my chest between my breasts. “I’m nervous but excited. Alexis showed me a location actually.”

“Yeah?” Trace asked, his voice oh so careful.

“It’s around fifteen minutes from here. Your friend Roy owns it.”

Trace’s eyes widened before his face broke out into a smile. “That would be perfect. And you already know a lot of the other vendors around here, so you can get your wholesale.”

“Exactly. It would have a built-in customer base for me, and not just with the Wilders. I mean, I don’t want to only work with Elliot’s family, you know?”

Trace nodded. “I don’t work only for Elliot’s family, either. I still run the company with bodyguard service around the country. Around the world sometimes. It’s good to have things that are yours. Even within a relationship with three people.”

“Carving out that space for yourself and for others is difficult, and I never did that with Jeremy. I still don’t know what I saw in him.”

“Probably as a way out from underneath your mother’s thumb. Considering I almost got married to Alicia for the same reason. Even though both of us ended up nearly being wrapped into family situations we didn’t want to be a part of.”

“And now we’re with a man with the biggest family out there.”

“There might be bigger, especially one set of Elliot’s in-laws.”

My eyes widened. “Do I want to know?”

“If you’re ever in Colorado, you’ll figure it out.” He smiled, then leaned down and brushed his lips across mine.

“Do you think Elliot will stay?” I asked, finally saying the one thing I was afraid to. I bit my lip and turned away, afraid of the answer.

“I think he will. I think we all need time to make sure that not only is this what we want, which we do, but that it’s something we can also believe in. I sure as hell didn’t expect this.”

“And yet, here we are, somehow making it happen.”

We stood in the doorway, the wind increasing. Trace pushed my hair back from my face, something he did often for both Elliot and me. I had long hair, but Elliot was starting to give me a run for my money. It was the hottest thing ever. It was really hot when I tugged it when he was eating me out. Not that I was thinking about that right then.

“From that blush, and the way that your hips are wiggling, you’re thinking about something.”

I pushed at Trace’s chest and laughed.

“You read me too well.”

“I’m figuring it out. Between you and Elliot, it’s difficult.”

“Oh yeah? Mr. Tall, dark, and broody? You scowl so you don’t have to show your emotions. I see how you work.”

“Ouch. But true.” He leaned down and kissed me as more thunder rumbled overhead. Our phones blew up with notifications. I pulled my phone out and my eyes widened.

“Tornado warning. Does that mean something’s touched down?” I lived in Texas my whole life, but not in Tornado Alley. I knew they existed, but we rarely got them down here. At least rarely compared to North and East Texas.

Trace cursed under his breath. “That whole line of storms is three times as big as it was twenty minutes ago. We should probably take shelter.”

Trace’s phone rang, and as he answered, he gestured towards the main inn. Elliot stood underneath an archway, waving at us. I waved back, worry sliding through me.

“That’s a lot of wind. And hail.”

“Yeah. We’ll head over there in my truck. I think it’ll be safer for everyone.”

I looked up at Trace and grabbed my bag. “Yes, there’s no basements down here, but that building will be more secure.”

“Okay, let’s head out.” Then the sirens went off, and Trace tugged me to his side as a huge branch flew past. “Second thought, get inside.” His voice was deep, dangerous, and I leaned into him, knowing he needed comfort from me even if he didn’t say so.

“Oh my God. What about Elliot? The others?”

“They’re safe inside, but I need to get you underneath something a little more sturdy. Fuck.”

“What is that howling?” I called out as we hunkered down in the closet,

the only place without windows.

“I don’t know, baby. Just hold on.”

I leaned into Trace as the wind howled and sirens rang. Rain slammed into the windows, and the whole house shook, and it felt as if the pressure changed in an instant, making my ears pop. I gripped Trace’s shirt as he held me close, covering my body with his. And then there was a loud noise like I had never heard and suddenly wind was touching my face, and Trace and I were screaming, or maybe that was the wind.

And then everything went dark.

It was over faster than it had begun, and had come out of nowhere.

Trace pulled me to my feet and wiped my face. “Are you okay?” he asked, as he shook his head and rubbed underneath his ear, as if his had popped just like mine.

“I’m fine. What about you?”

“I’m fine. Closet’s still standing, but we lost the fucking door.”

I turned and nearly fell, my knees going weak as I saw what had once been a cabin, but was now just part of a roof and a few walls.

“Oh my God. Elliot. We need to get to Elliot.”

“Be careful, you’re not wearing the right shoes for this.”

“Shoes for a tornado slamming into the cabin?”

“I don’t think it hit our cabin. I think we just got hit with debris. I think the tornado hit the inn.”

I staggered, my heart racing.

“We need to get Elliot. Oh my God. The babies are there.”

“I know, babe. I know.”

The Wilder kids were at the inn, as was all of Elliot’s family. They were here for a fucking reunion. And a tornado had just slid through the Wilder Retreat and Winery.

We made it out of the small cabin just as part of the roof caved in.

Rain still slicked down, the wind howled, but it was no longer hailing, and the slight green tinge of the sky was gone.

I looked around, my heart racing, as Elliot came running towards us. He had a cut on his forehead but otherwise looked okay. He jumped over logs

and remnants of what had once been a stone walkway.

A few of the cabins were gone, just blinked out of existence, and I could see some damage over in the inn area, but I couldn't tell anything else, all I could do was look at Elliot as he ran towards us, and Trace and I pulled each other out of the wreckage of the cabin.

And then Elliot crushed me to him, and Trace put his arms around us, all three of us shaking.

The reality of the situation just hit me.

We had just been through a tornado. The three of us had survived.

I could hear others shouting, so I knew they had too. But who else? Was everyone okay? And then Elliot pulled back and cupped my face.

"I'm so fucking glad you're okay. I almost had you get in your truck and come over in this."

"We're okay," Trace said as he slid his hands over Elliot, and looked him up and down. "What about you? Please don't tell me you were out in this."

"No, Ridge pulled me back, and we were inside for the worst of it."

"But you're not hurt?" I asked, as tears slid down my cheeks. I noticed the bruise on his jaw and another on his arm.

"Well, part of the roof caved in," Elliot said, as he looked at us. "What about the two of you?"

"I think the cabin's gone," Trace said solemnly as he looked around the remnants of the Wilder Resort, but all I could do was look at Elliot.

"You're okay. You're okay. I was so worried, and part of me had wished you were with us, so I'd know you were okay, but I needed you not to be in whatever the hell just happened."

"Not a scratch," Elliot lied, because I saw the blood trail from his forehead, but he would be fine. He had to be.

"All I could do was picture you two out alone in this storm, and I wasn't there for you. I never want that to happen again. I love you both so fucking much. I can't lose you."

Tears slid down my cheeks again and I went up to my toes and kissed him soundly as Trace held us close. He kissed me when I pulled away, before leaning over me to kiss Elliot.

"I love you both too," I blurted.

Trace swallowed audibly "I love you both. Now, let's get out of the fucking rain and figure out what just happened. The sirens aren't going off anymore, but our family's in there."

I followed him as he turned towards the inn.

The inn that wasn't exactly how it had been before. The inn that Elliot's family had put so much of their heart and soul into. But he just squeezed me close to him, his other hand in Trace's.

"My family's all accounted for. Even those at the winery."

My gaze shot to him. "Some were at the winery? I thought they were all at the inn?"

"Elliot and Evan had gone off on a fucking golf cart to the winery. But they checked in. Everyone's fine. That's all I know. But now I guess we should go check the damage."

I pulled him close as Eli came out of the inn, his face ashen as he took in the sight of what the Wilders had built. There were others there, others that looked like Elliot, but I didn't recognize them. They must be the cousins.

"It'll be okay. We're alive. That's all that matters."

"It's a damn fucking way to welcome you to your new home," Elliot grumbled, and we stood there in the rain, trying to deal with the fact that a tornado had just hit the Wilders.

We were whole. We were relatively unharmed. And we were together. Whatever happened next, we could face it. And whatever choices we made, we would do it together, and for each other. Because even Mother Nature couldn't keep us apart. Even when the world seemed set against us. We would always find each other, no matter the road it took to get there.



# Chapter Eighteen

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## Elliot

**B**umps and bruises be damned, it was all I could do not to pull Trace as close as possible, the same with Sidney.

We lay in bed, the three of us, naked, but we hadn't had sex. Instead we had showered, washing the dirt off each other, but not the memories. I didn't think the memories would be going away anytime soon.

We had cleaned up as much of the damage as we could, and now lay in bed, exhausted but not asleep.

I had almost lost them, and felt as if I could have lost everything.

How the hell had this happened? How could I have nearly lost my family, the two people I loved most in the world, and everything we had built?

"You're thinking so hard I can feel it," Sidney whispered against my chest as she snuggled into me. Trace lay on the other side of me, spooning me from behind.

"I'm sorry. I've never been the middle spoon before. It's kind of nice." I nuzzled into Trace, his cock pressed against my ass, and he smiled against my shoulder.

"You just like that my dick is pressing against you."

"I'm not going to lie, I do like the fact that Elliot's dick is pressed against me."

Trace reached around and gripped Sidney's hip, and I put my hand over his.

"I was just thinking about how I could have lost you two today. I don't like thinking that."

"But you didn't. We didn't. We're okay," she whispered.

"Yeah. We are."

Trace kissed my shoulder again, and I groaned, wiggling back into him. He let out a rough chuckle and patted Sidney's hip.

"I do believe our man here needs a little touch to make sure that we're here. That we're alive."

"I think we can do that," Sidney said as she wiggled down.

My eyes widened as Sidney slid under the covers and wrapped her mouth around my cock.

I groaned, shifting in bed so I could reach to the side and grip Trace's cock.

"That's a good boy," he whispered, kissing my temple. He slid his hand over my chest and down the blankets. He tossed the blankets aside, revealing Sidney's head bobbing up and down, sucking my cock, as Trace gripped her hair.

"A little slower, love. We don't want him to blow too quickly." And then he angled her head, taking charge as he moved her head up and down over my dick.

I nearly came right then, the action almost too much to bear.

I continued to move my hand along Trace's cock, wanting more, but Trace just lay there, moving all of us around so we could have the exact angles we needed.

When Sidney moved up again and licked her swollen lips, Trace sat up and kissed her hard.

"You're so beautiful with your lips wrapped around his cock."

"Oh yeah? I want to see what your lips look like."

Trace winked and leaned over me, sucking my dick into his mouth. I shuddered under his touch and gripped the bed sheets. When Sidney moved to lick at my balls, I shot off the bed, coming before I could hold back. Trace hollowed his cheeks and swallowed me whole, before Sidney moved and swallowed Trace's cock.

I had no idea how we kept moving around, kept touching, but I angled so I could slide my fingers between Sidney's legs, and then we were in almost a triangle, sucking and licking at each other. When I found my head between Sidney's legs, finally eating her out and tasting her sweet cream, she came on my face, squeezing her thighs around my neck.

"Don't suffocate the man, sweets," Trace whispered as he slowly fucked Sidney's mouth. She laughed against him before she pulled back to lay on her back, her hands over her breasts.

“You know, we’ve tried nearly every way possible, but there is something we haven’t tried.”

“Oh?” I asked, wrapping my hand around the base of my cock. I was hard again already, as I usually was around these two. Trace stood at the edge of the bed, pumping his hand over his cock, as we all played with ourselves.

“I want someone to fuck me while he gets fucked. What do you say?”

“I think I can do that,” I whispered and leaned down, sucking one taut nipple into my mouth.

“I’ll get the lube,” Trace said as Sidney moaned.

“And then I need someone in my ass, and someone in my pussy.”

She blushed hard as she said it. I gave her a quick kiss on the lips and slid my hands over hers between her folds.

“Such a beautiful heart of mine, making sure she gets exactly what she wants.”

“I just hope you guys can last the whole night. Because I never want to think about losing you two again. You’re stuck with me. In every position.”

The tightness in my chest eased as she kissed me.

And then I was between Sidney’s legs, sliding in and out of her hot pussy. She was so sweet, so tempting. I groaned as Trace slid his fingers between my cheeks.

“Are you ready?” Trace asked.

He penetrated me with one finger, then stretched me with a second.

“Your cock is fucking huge, so we’ll see.”

“As I’m going to have Trace’s cock in my ass later, thanks for that info,” Sidney teased, as she clamped her pussy around my dick.

My eyes crossed, and then Trace had the tip of his dick at my back entrance.

“Now, breathe out, and push.”

I nodded tightly, as Trace’s lube-covered cock slid into me.

He was so big, the stretch burned, but it was a good kind of burn. I was still, so fucking still as Trace worked slowly in and out of me, taking enough care that I knew he wouldn’t hurt me. Sidney also lay still beneath me, my cock deep inside her. She slid her fingers through my hair then down my sides.

“Are you okay, baby? Are you okay, Elliot?” she whispered.

I nodded, unclenching my jaw.

“Fuck yeah.”

And then she smiled so brightly that I saw stars, or that could have been from Trace ramming into me.

It took a few strokes before we found our rhythm, and then Trace was fucking me as I fucked Sidney, and somehow we were all touching each other.

Sidney came first, and I followed quickly, my toes curling, everything feeling like I was going numb. Trace kissed the back of my neck, and then leaned over me to take Sidney's mouth as he followed, filling me, a roar escaping from his throat.

We lay there for a moment, holding onto one another, shaking and sweaty.

There didn't need to be any more words then. There had to be a future, because we were going to make one.

We cleaned up, then slowly brought each other back up to temptation. Sidney hovered over me, her face pale.

"We don't have to do this tonight, or ever. You know your limits."

She smiled and slid down my cock. Her pussy was once again so tight over me as she rocked her hips, her clit pressing against my pubic bone.

"Jesus, you're fucking sexy," I growled out as I cupped her breasts, my thumbs going over her nipples. She tossed her hair to the side, her hands on my chest as she rocked back and forth over my dick.

"I'm so swollen, so wet. I think I only have one more orgasm in me."

"Then we're going to have to make it the best," Trace said as he kissed the back of her neck, and bent her over me.

"Now be good, and be still. I'll take care of you. We've been preparing you, but if this is too much, you let us know."

"I just need you. Both of you. I want to feel you both at once. Please."

"We've got you," Trace said.

The feel of his dick sliding into her ass as mine was still in her pussy was almost too much. I gritted my teeth, and counted to ten, telling myself if I came now it would be over far too soon. And we needed Sidney to come, to feel the fullness of us both.

She let out a little whimper, so Trace and I slid our fingers over her clit, keeping her wet and steady. And when he was in to the hilt, Sidney shook between us, but smiled lazily.

"I've never felt like this before in my life. And I want to feel like this again and again and again. You two are my drug, and I can barely breathe."

“Then let’s get moving before we lose you to your own temptations,” Trace teased, and then he was moving, and I followed his lead.

It was everything. I couldn’t hold back, and I didn’t want to. We found a rhythm, Sidney arching between us as we took our turns filling her, and when we found each other deep inside at the same time, it was too much. I finally came, filling her, and with one last stroke, Trace growled out her name. Sidney clamped around both of us, coming so hard that her eyes rolled back, and she dug her fingernails into my chest.

She smiled as she slumped over me. Trace slid out and began to clean us all.

Sidney found herself between us, Trace somehow holding both of us, and I let out a happy sigh, content and blissed out.

“I love you. Both of you. And I’m never letting you go.” I sighed as I said it and Sidney smiled against my chest.

“I love you both as well. And I will say something more eloquent later, but I do believe you fucked my brains out.”

“I thought that was my line,” Trace said with a growl as he tightened his hold on us, and we finally fell into a deep sleep.

Reality would settle in in the morning. But for now, we had this moment. We had each other.

And we would deal with the aftermath...and whatever came next.

The next day we dealt with the authorities, cleaned up, and a thousand other things that came with a tornado.

I still wasn’t quite sure how all of my family had survived that, and though we were physically mostly unscathed, I knew I would have nightmares added to my repertoire.

We all gathered in the part of the inn that hadn’t been damaged. We had lost a couple of shingles, but that was it. The windows were intact, and the building was fully habitable. The conference room was the only place big enough for us all these days, with our cousins added to the mix. Their parents had headed back that day, needing to see the damage to their place as well. Some places were unscathed, some places had lost everything.

I sat between Trace and Sidney, Sidney speaking in quiet tones to Maddie

as they went over things for the winery. Trace was talking to Ridge, going over details they would need.

I would be bouncing around between each group, helping with plans for how to rebuild, and to keep the events we had scheduled on the books.

I knew each of us would be dealing with hell for the next few months, and it wasn't going to be easy. But we would find a way. We were Wilders, after all.

Eli cleared his throat and addressed the room. "Part of the Northwest Inn is gone. Sunken in, and we lost a few of those rooms. But we'll rebuild. The spa? Gone." I looked over to East. His eyes had clouded, but Lark held his hand tightly. East had put so much of himself into that damn spa, and now it was gone. I couldn't believe in a single moment, everything but the infinity pools were gone, and we would have to destroy those to rebuild.

"Many of the cabins are gone, though the little gray one doesn't have a nick on it," he said, looking at Alexis.

Over the years, nearly all of us had stayed in the little gray cabin, but that was where Alexis had first stayed when she came to us. The fact that it was intact felt like an omen. A good one.

"The winery is fine. All the damn vines are in perfect condition," Elijah said, looking a little shocked.

"I still can't quite believe it," Evan said. "Amos and I are going to go through the vines again, and I know Maddie has a thousand things to do with the winery, but that's going to be bringing in business."

Everett nodded. "Yes. That'll be good financially. And Signature is unharmed. As are the kitchens here."

Kendall sighed, looking relieved. She had her phone on the table, and I knew she was watching the live feed of her kids. The twins and Eli and Alexis' daughter were safe. But they had still been scared. A tornado was scary for anyone, but for a child? I couldn't even imagine. They were with the sitter now, but as was evidenced by the fact that all of the parents kept looking down at their screens to see live footage of their kids, things would be iffy for a while.

"The land itself needs repair. Some places have actual gouges dug into the ground. We did it once before, and we'll do it again."

Ridge cleared his throat. "You've got me. I am decent with a saw," he said with a shrug.

Evan beamed, and the fact that it reached his eyes spoke of how much we

had all changed over the years. “Good. I might need all of you,” he said, and the cousins nodded.

I cleared my throat. “I’ve already started making lists, and we’ll get the contractors on board, and we’ll do what we can. We have insurance for this, and between all of us, we’ll make this happen. Our family built this place. Yes, the bones were here, but it is what it is because of us. And we’re going to make sure that the world knows that the Wilders aren’t going away.”

“Damn straight,” Trace said so quietly only I could hear, and Sidney sighed and squeezed my hand.

“As you all know, I was planning on moving my business out here, at least a satellite version of it, and I still plan to do that. But, that does mean I’ll be here to help. And you’ll have a florist on hand. Which, as I say it out loud, sounds a little weird, but you are in the wedding business.”

Eli smiled at her and then winked at me.

“Thank you for bringing a florist into the family, next thing we’re going to need is a dressmaker or something.”

“You’re just going to have all of the Wilders marry into the wedding business?” Alexis said with a laugh.

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” Ridge grumbled, but I held back my laugh. We needed the ease, the jokes, and the conversation, because this wasn’t going to be easy. We started going over plans, as many of us had already dealt with the insurance companies.

We would rebuild. We were Wilders. It was our way.

We would make the resort even better than it was before. We still had income coming in, and according to Alexis, and from my notes, every single wedding we had planned was still able to take place. Albeit with some adjustments.

We weren’t going to back down. We weren’t going to break apart and find new jobs or new ways to cope.

I had nearly lost all of my brothers once before, had forgotten what it was like to be the baby Wilder.

But I wasn’t going to let us forget again.

I leaned into the two people that I loved, the two people I would be spending the rest of my life with once we were ready for that, and I knew I would never be alone. We would never be alone.

It had taken forever for me to find them, to find my family. And along the road, I’d lost my way.



But I wouldn't do it again.  
I had fought for them. Fought for myself.  
And we would fight for the Wilder way.  
Every single time.

# Chapter Nineteen

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## Ridge

I was going to like it here. Eventually. At least as well as I liked it anywhere else.

I sat on the edge of a rock, looking off into the hills, my forearms on my knees, breaths coming a little choppy as I tried to breathe through the pain.

The Wilders needed to rebuild. I let out a harsh laugh, though nobody could hear me.

We all needed to rebuild, and not just the place that had been destroyed by a fucking tornado. I still couldn't quite believe that something could come in with so much destruction, and then leave as if nothing had happened.

I wasn't ready for any of this, I didn't think. But my cousins had built this place because they needed a way to connect. A way to be with each other when there wasn't anything else. Maybe they had done the right thing. After all, I didn't know what the fuck I was doing. I might as well follow in their footsteps. They had laid the path, and it looked like they were happy.

They had lost friends, loved ones. Hell, my parents were still alive, but I remembered when my aunt and uncle had died. My parents had done their best to figure out how to step in, but Eli, the eldest, hadn't really let them. They had banded together, the seven Wilder siblings.

They hadn't needed us. They closed ranks, then joined the rank. My lips twitched at that horrible pun, but I figured there wasn't much else I could do.

Gravel crunched behind me, but I didn't turn. I knew who it was. There was no way they were going to leave me alone here, but that was just as well. Because I had a proposition.

"Why the hell are you out here all alone without a damn beer?" Wyatt

asked as he came forward and pressed the ice-cold beer against my arm. I didn't flinch. I would have when we were younger. Wyatt was a full five years younger than me and had always tried to make me flinch. I loved the asshole. Even if he was a jerk sometimes.

"Didn't think about it. I brought water though." I gestured towards the reusable water bottle. "Figured that was enough."

"You're going to sit out here on a muggy night watching the landscape, knowing the whole world is in shambles behind you? You need a beer." I snorted as Brooks came to sit next to me. We were the closest in age, and he was exhausted just like I was. But then again, we were going down the same path, even if he didn't know it.

"Seriously, the mosquitoes are terrible out here. Why *are* we here?" Pretty boy Gabriel slapped his arm, and then cursed under his breath before he laid his guitar next to him and grabbed the beer that Brooks held out to him.

"You out here to play music and serenade us?" I asked, sipping my beer. It was cold down my throat, exactly what I needed. Wyatt was good like that, figuring out exactly what I needed.

"Really though, what are we doing out here?" Gabriel asked, as he swatted another mosquito away.

"The good thing about you being here is that the mosquitoes will find you. You're just so sweet they can't help but want you."

"Fuck off," the baby of the family snarled, and my lips twitched. Here I was, smiling. That was good. It was good to smile.

"The cousins are going to need to rebuild."

I turned to Brooks and nodded. "Yeah. They are. You okay with that?"

"It's not really my place to say. If they want to rebuild, they will. It was a damn beautiful place before the tornado got it. And there're many buildings that are just fine. But they've got it."

"Without you?" Gabriel asked, and I stared down at my little brother, wondering why he got me so easily, even if we didn't get along all the time.

"What, you want me to move down to the outskirts of wilderness no-name yet big-city Texas? Sounds great."

"I'm doing it." They were quiet after I spoke.

Wyatt cleared his throat. "I thought that was the case. Are you going to work for Trace?"

"Yeah. Though he offered me partnership." I raised a brow as Gabriel

smiled and Wyatt and Brooks gave each other a look.

“What’s that look for?” I asked, honestly curious. It wasn’t geography and military service that had split us apart like our cousins. No, it was our own damn demons. But we used to be just as tight as our cousins. And I wanted that again. As long as they didn’t ask too many questions. I could not deal with any more questions.

“They have a contractor already,” Brooks said into the silence.

“Their contractor is moving out to Austin to be with his expectant wife. Her family wants her closer. And while we’re pretty close to Austin comparatively, it’d be better if they had someone local. Someone that could deal with something like this.”

I turned to Gabriel, holding back a grin. The voice of an angel, our typical bad boy, always understood me, even when I didn’t want him to.

“You want me to close up my business and start new out here?” Brooks asked.

I hadn’t understood before. I hated the fact that I did now.

“Yeah. And we all know it’s time.”

Brooks sighed and nodded. “I’ll talk to Eli. You’re right. If you’re going to be out here, it may be nice to keep an eye on you.”

My lips twitched, but there wasn’t much humor in it. “I’m the big brother, I’m supposed to keep an eye on you.”

“And Eli is older than all of us, so he gets to watch us like a hawk.”

“He’s not that much older,” Wyatt said after a minute. “I’ve an idea, something similar to what they did.”

I turned to Wyatt, who shook his head. “Not ready to really talk about it yet. But I’ve talked to Eli a bit.”

“So you picked that big brother over me?” I asked, only joking.

Wyatt just grinned. “Not exactly. But while they’re rebuilding, there’re a few things that they could add to make this place special, to fit us. They’ve got room for us here.”

Gabriel lazily played with the strings on his guitar, not really focusing on us I thought, until he spoke. “I have some things in the fire. Some things that are good. But it’d be nice to have a home base where home is y’all.”

I reached out and squeezed his shoulder.

“Good. I think the Wilders could use us.”

Wyatt laughed. “I’m pretty sure we’re the ones that need them. But there’s enough of them, and enough space. We could figure things out. And

let the world know that they're not the only Wilders that matter.”

“Oh, there's not a rivalry at all,” Brooks said into his beer, and I just listened to them joke. I knew that things might happen for a reason, but I still hated that they'd had to happen at all.

I missed them more than I could breathe, and I wasn't talking about my brothers. My hand went to the pocket of my shirt, over the small photo there, but I didn't bring it out. They didn't know, they didn't need to know. But I knew.

We all needed to start over for various reasons, though we never really talked about it. I would never forgive myself for what I had done, I couldn't. The others wouldn't forgive me either, if they knew.

But we needed a fresh start, and maybe this was the place for it.

I just hoped I didn't bring any more trouble to the Wilders. They had enough as it was. It was a time for rebuilding. Not a time for pain. Not a time for remembering.

I just had to keep my head down and start over.

Even though I knew that, no matter what, trouble usually followed me in the end. It was what I was good at.

**NEXT IN THE WILDER BROTHERS SERIES:  
Ridge and Aurora are ready for a happy ever after in [MOMENTS FOR YOU](#).**

**IF YOU'D LIKE TO READ A BONUS SCENE FROM THE TRIO:  
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## A Note from Carrie Ann Ryan

Thank you so much for reading **FINDING THE ROAD TO US**.

When I figured began thinking of this series, I wanted Elliot to find happiness with someone he wasn't expecting. I always thought it would be Sidney, a woman who was strong on her own, but stronger with him.

Then I met Trace and I knew what was missing...much like Elliot and Sidney felt!

I loved writing this triad and I'm so blessed that you readers seem to love my triads too!

Thank you for following along and don't worry, the Wilder Brothers series isn't ending any time soon. You see...there are a new set of brothers and Ridge is next!

You get to find out his secrets in [Moments for You](#)! And after that, Naomi and Amos FINALLY get their story in [A Wilder Wedding](#)!

### **The Wilder Brothers Series:**

Book 1: [One Way Back to Me](#)

Book 2: [Always the One for Me](#)

Book 3: [The Path to You](#)

Book 4: [Coming Home for Us](#)

Book 5: [Stay Here With Me](#)

Book 6: [Finding the Road to Us](#)

Book 7: [Moments for You](#)

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Happy Reading!



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Book 5: [Inked Temptation](#)

**The Montgomery Ink: Boulder Series:**

Book 1: [Wrapped in Ink](#)  
Book 2: [Sated in Ink](#)  
Book 3: [Embraced in Ink](#)  
Book 3: [Moments in Ink](#)  
Book 4: [Seduced in Ink](#)  
Book 4.5: [Captured in Ink](#)  
Book 4.7: [Inked Fantasy](#)  
Book 4.8: [A Very Montgomery Christmas](#)

**Montgomery Ink: Colorado Springs**

Book 1: [Fallen Ink](#)  
Book 2: [Restless Ink](#)  
Book 2.5: [Ashes to Ink](#)  
Book 3: [Jagged Ink](#)  
Book 3.5: [Ink by Numbers](#)

**Montgomery Ink Denver:**

Book 0.5: [Ink Inspired](#)  
Book 0.6: [Ink Reunited](#)  
Book 1: [Delicate Ink](#)  
Book 1.5: [Forever Ink](#)  
Book 2: [Tempting Boundaries](#)  
Book 3: [Harder than Words](#)  
Book 3.5: [Finally Found You](#)  
Book 4: [Written in Ink](#)  
Book 4.5: [Hidden Ink](#)  
Book 5: [Ink Enduring](#)  
Book 6: [Ink Exposed](#)  
Book 6.5: [Adoring Ink](#)  
Book 6.6: [Love, Honor, & Ink](#)  
Book 7: [Inked Expressions](#)  
Book 7.3: [Dropout](#)  
Book 7.5: [Executive Ink](#)  
Book 8: [Inked Memories](#)  
Book 8.5: [Inked Nights](#)  
Book 8.7: [Second Chance Ink](#)  
Book 8.5: [Montgomery Midnight Kisses](#)  
Bonus: [Inked Kingdom](#)

**The On My Own Series:**

Book 0.5: [My First Glance](#)  
Book 1: [My One Night](#)  
Book 2: [My Rebound](#)  
Book 3: [My Next Play](#)  
Book 4: [My Bad Decisions](#)

**The Promise Me Series:**

Book 1: [Forever Only Once](#)  
Book 2: [From That Moment](#)  
Book 3: [Far From Destined](#)  
Book 4: [From Our First](#)

**The Less Than Series:**

- Book 1: [Breathless With Her](#)
- Book 2: [Reckless With You](#)
- Book 3: [Shameless With Him](#)

**The Fractured Connections Series:**

- Book 1: [Breaking Without You](#)
- Book 2: [Shouldn't Have You](#)
- Book 3: [Falling With You](#)
- Book 4: [Taken With You](#)

**The Whiskey and Lies Series:**

- Book 1: [Whiskey Secrets](#)
- Book 2: [Whiskey Reveals](#)
- Book 3: [Whiskey Undone](#)

**The Gallagher Brothers Series:**

- Book 1: [Love Restored](#)
- Book 2: [Passion Restored](#)
- Book 3: [Hope Restored](#)

**The Ravenwood Coven Series:**

- Book 1: [Dawn Unearthed](#)
- Book 2: [Dusk Unveiled](#)
- Book 3: [Evernight Unleashed](#)

**The Talon Pack:**

- Book 1: [Tattered Loyalties](#)
- Book 2: [An Alpha's Choice](#)
- Book 3: [Mated in Mist](#)
- Book 4: [Wolf Betrayed](#)
- Book 5: [Fractured Silence](#)
- Book 6: [Destiny Disgraced](#)
- Book 7: [Eternal Mourning](#)
- Book 8: [Strength Enduring](#)
- Book 9: [Forever Broken](#)
- Book 10: [Mated in Darkness](#)

Book 11: [Fated in Winter](#)

**Redwood Pack Series:**

Book 1: [An Alpha's Path](#)

Book 2: [A Taste for a Mate](#)

Book 3: [Trinity Bound](#)

Book 3.5: [A Night Away](#)

Book 4: [Enforcer's Redemption](#)

Book 4.5: [Blurred Expectations](#)

Book 4.7: [Forgiveness](#)

Book 5: [Shattered Emotions](#)

Book 6: [Hidden Destiny](#)

Book 6.5: [A Beta's Haven](#)

Book 7: [Fighting Fate](#)

Book 7.5: [Loving the Omega](#)

Book 7.7: [The Hunted Heart](#)

Book 8: [Wicked Wolf](#)

**The Elements of Five Series:**

Book 1: [From Breath and Ruin](#)

Book 2: [From Flame and Ash](#)

Book 3: [From Spirit and Binding](#)

Book 4: [From Shadow and Silence](#)

**Dante's Circle Series:**

Book 1: [Dust of My Wings](#)

Book 2: [Her Warriors' Three Wishes](#)

Book 3: [An Unlucky Moon](#)

Book 3.5: [His Choice](#)

Book 4: [Tangled Innocence](#)

Book 5: [Fierce Enchantment](#)

Book 6: [An Immortal's Song](#)

Book 7: [Prowled Darkness](#)

Book 8: [Dante's Circle Reborn](#)

**Holiday, Montana Series:**

- Book 1: [Charmed Spirits](#)
- Book 2: [Santa's Executive](#)
- Book 3: [Finding Abigail](#)
- Book 4: [Her Lucky Love](#)
- Book 5: [Dreams of Ivory](#)

**The Branded Pack Series:**

**(Written with Alexandra Ivy)**

- Book 1: [Stolen and Forgiven](#)
- Book 2: [Abandoned and Unseen](#)
- Book 3: [Buried and Shadowed](#)

## About the Author



Carrie Ann Ryan is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of contemporary, paranormal, and young adult romance. Her works include the Montgomery Ink, Redwood Pack, Fractured Connections, and Elements of Five series, which have sold over 3.0 million books worldwide. She started writing while in graduate school for her advanced degree in chemistry and hasn't stopped since. Carrie Ann has written over seventy-five novels and novellas with more in the works. When she's not losing herself in her emotional and action-packed worlds, she's reading as much as she can while wrangling her clowder of cats who have more followers than she does.

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