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LIZ
ISAACSON

Gabriel



CORAL CANYON COWBOYS

GABRIEL

A YOUNG BROTHERS NOVEL

CORAL CANYON COWBOYS

BOOK 6

LIZ ISAACSON



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THE YOUNG FAMILY



Welcome to Coral Canyon! The Young family is BIG, and sometimes it can be hard to keep track of everyone.
The graphic on the following page might help you with that.

Young Family Tree

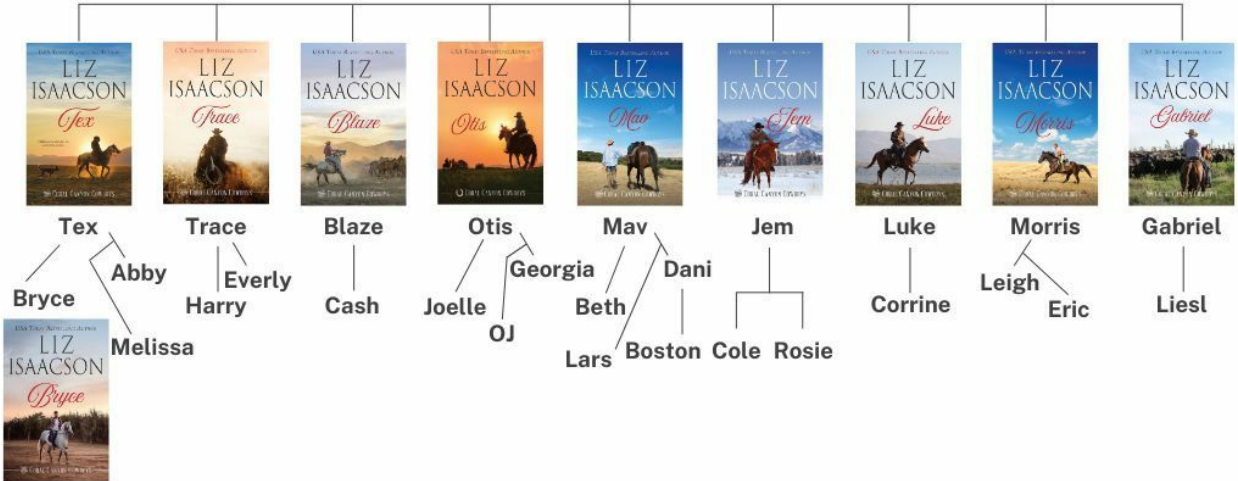
As of BLAZE, Jan 31, 2023



Jerry
Father



Cecily
Mother



This is updated through Gabe (April 18, 2023).

Here's how things are right now:

JERRY AND CECILY YOUNG, 9 SONS, IN AGE-ORDER:

1. TEX

Wife: Abigail Ingalls

Son: Bryce (20)

Children he and Abby share: Melissa (15 mo)

2. TRACE

Engaged to: Everly Avery

Son: Harry (15)

3. BLAZE

Dating: Faith Cromwell

Son: Cash (12)

4. OTIS

Wife: Georgia Beck

Daughter: Joelle (Joey / Roo, 11)

Children he and Georgia share: OJ (Otis Judson, 5 mo)

5. MAV

Wife: Danielle Simpson

His daughter: Beth (8)

Her son: Boston (10)

Children he and Dani share: Lars (3)

6. JEM

Son: Cole (7)

Daughter: Rosie (4)

7. LUKE

Daughter: Corrine (6)

8. MORRIS

Wife: Leighann Drummond

Children he and Leigh share: Eric (4), Rachelle (3 mo)

9. GABRIEL (GABE)

Daughter: Liesl (4)



Gabriel Young sat on the piano bench and resisted the urge to look at his phone. He knew what time it was—time to teach Liesl her lesson. His darling daughter came skipping into the living room with both hands wrapped around a Winnie the Pooh cup with a straw poking out the top.

“Come on, baby,” he said to her, patting the bench beside him. “It’s time to practice.”

She wasn’t quite old enough to protest yet, to know that practicing the piano would be something they’d fight over, to give him the stink-eye before she huffed and then did what he asked. Not that he’d ever done any of those things. A smile spread through him internally before appearing on his face, because his momma had tried to teach all of the boys how to play the piano.

Only Gabe had truly enjoyed it, and he’d still argued with her over practicing, glared when she wouldn’t pass off his pages, and gave her the silent treatment if she insisted he play in church when he’d rather not.

Liesl set her cup on the floor and climbed onto the bench beside him. “Twinkle, Twinkle?” She looked at him with pure light in her face, and Gabe’s love for her tripled, expanded, and grew until it had no end.

“Yep,” he said before leaning down and pressing a quick kiss to the top of her head. “But first, we do the warm-up. Remember that?”

They’d just started lessons a couple of weeks ago, and Gabe had only done it so Momma wouldn’t. Gabe did everything he could to be both mother and father for Liesl, and he already hated having to drop her off for someone else to take care of, even his mother.

As Liesl put her tiny fingers on the keys, and Gabe prompted her through how to move them up and down the ivory in a scale, he wondered—not for the first time—if he should move his office to Coral Canyon completely.

He'd been operating out of Jackson Hole for the past five years, and he'd gotten a lot of high-profile clients who liked to keep things on the down-low when it came to their personal lives by being the one and only firm that focused on father's rights. There were a couple of others now, but everyone knew Young Family Law was the place to come to get a dadvocate. No, he hadn't named his firm something cutesy and punny.

He wasn't cutesy or punny. He was a no-nonsense, single father lawyer who fought for the rights of other single fathers who wanted to be involved in their children's lives. He lived the life. Walked the walk. Knew the law better than anyone.

As Coral Canyon had expanded, and as his brothers had returned and brought with them the family name, Gabe had picked up more clients here, in his hometown about an hour from his office in Jackson.

He'd taken on another lawyer last year, the first at his firm. It was just the two of them, and an office manager, and he loved providing the personal attention and utmost privacy his clients wanted and needed.

Can't leave Jackson, he told himself as Liesl finished the warm-up and looked up to him again. His firm had roots there. He had a partner there. His *life* was there.

He nodded at her and watched as Liesl opened the book. She was such a tiny waif of a child, and the book dwarfed her as she brought it to her lap.

"This is a C," she said, pointing to the note. Her high-pitched voice, so proper and so perfect, made him smile again.

"Play it," he said.

She did, and then she proceeded to name all the notes and play them on the piano, one finger at a time. "Let's write them in today," he said. His optimism remained cautious, because while Liesl attended a private daycare that had preschool built into it, she hadn't advanced much in the way of writing.

Most children her age could write their names and knew their ABCs. Liesl could sing the song, sure. She could scrawl her name, but the curvy S still gave her a trouble or two. Her fingers, small as they were, couldn't seem to hold the pencil right.

He gave it to her anyway, his thoughts drifting to the next problem on his

list as Liesl got down and put the book on the bench. She knelt in front of it, and Gabe watched as she drew a clunky C in the line below the note.

Hilde O'Dell ran through his mind. Trace and Everly's wedding had aged over a month now, and they still hadn't gotten together for dinner. Heck, he'd take coffee at this point. Of course, he'd promptly left Coral Canyon and returned to his work in Jackson, and when he'd come back to this three-level townhome that doubled as his office space here, Hilde had had an emergency at her furniture store.

As Liesl sang *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* Gabe pulled out his phone and texted the beautiful brunette who hadn't left his mind for longer than five minutes in the past several months. He wasn't even sure how or why she'd infected him so strongly, only that she had.

How's the store? he asked, quickly following it with, *I'm just finishing with something, and then we could grab a bite to eat if you're not busy.*

He'd dated very little since his divorce, because anyone he started to get to know had lots of questions about his ex-wife. Hilde already knew he had a daughter, though Gabe hadn't introduced the two of them formally. He wouldn't do that until very deep into the relationship, because he held Liesl very close to his heart. She was the last door for him, and if he unlocked and then opened that to let a woman in, he might as well drop to both knees and propose.

Hilde had a daughter too, Gabe knew, because he'd represented her ex-husband in a hearing a month or two back. The man had not won the hearing, and Gabe had passed his case to Brian, his partner in Jackson. Not that Hilde's ex had any reason to want something different than his custody documents gave him, and Gabe didn't expect to hear from him again.

"I play, Daddy?"

"Yes." He twisted and groaned as he lifted his four-year-old back to the bench. He swiped the book out from under her quickly and set it on the piano. "Sing with it, okay?"

She grinned, her joy filling the whole living room, then seeping into the kitchen. All of the living accommodations sat on this second floor above his office space, with the three bedrooms in this townhome all on the third floor.

His phone buzzed as Liesl's pitch-perfect voice filled the air, and Gabe ignored it. This moment filled his life with beauty, and for half a breath, he wished Kendra was here to see their daughter. The girl had his ex-wife's nose, and the slope of her chin. She'd been an excellent singer too, and Liesl

had surely gotten that from her mother.

A mother she'd literally never met.

Gabe's heart sagged in his chest, because he had loved Kendra once-upon-a-time. For a brief hour or two after she'd been arrested, he'd even thought he'd stay with her. They'd work through things. Then he'd looked at his precious newborn, and he'd known he couldn't do that to one of God's choicest children.

So he'd left. He'd filed for divorce. He'd made sure the law was on his side, protecting Liesl—and him—from Kendra's reach.

And now, he sat listening to his daughter sing a nursery rhyme while he thought about going out with someone else. She finished the song, and Gabe beamed down at her. "Amazing," he murmured, placing another tender kiss to her head. "Do it again, okay? I'll record it for Grandma."

He stood from the bench, so it was just Liesl taming the huge piano as she played and sang. Momma and Daddy would love that, and Gabe even had the fleeting thought to put the video on the brothers' text. His eight brothers shared about their families and lives constantly, but Gabe usually only hearted their pictures or congratulated them on something. He rarely contributed anything of his own.

Morris, his twin, had been encouraging him to attend more family functions, and if Mav texted any more, Gabe might have to start billing him for the time it took Gabe to go through the messages. Even so, he loved that he had a lifeline to his brothers.

For now, he thought, because five of his brothers—including Morris—would be leaving for the summer tour of Country Quad in less than a month. Gabe tried not to be bitter, but the back of his throat narrowed slightly. He pushed himself to swallow over and over, and it finally subsided as Liesl finished her song.

He stopped recording and started clapping for her. She got to her feet right there on the bench and launched herself into his arms. The two of them laughed, and Gabe held her close to his chest. "You're so good," he told her. "Always be good, okay, baby?"

"Okay, Daddy." She squirmed to get down, and he lowered her to her feet. "I go swing?"

"Sure." He watched her grab her cup of Winnie the Pooh water and skip out of the living room. She pulled hard on the sliding glass door and went out onto the balcony, letting in a blast of brisk spring air, to the swing he'd

installed for her there. With her toeing herself back and forth, Gabe extracted his phone from his pocket.

Hilde had texted and said, *The store is drying. There are fans everywhere, and the noise is going to drive me mad. I'd love to get out of here. I need to check on a couple of things, and then I'll let you know.*

That had come in ten minutes ago, and Gabe hadn't answered. He started tapping, and another message popped up. *I'm good anytime now, Hilde said. If you still are, I think I'm close to your place.*

Gabe looked up and toward the door that led down the stairs to the first floor, as if Hilde would be there. Of course she wasn't, and Gabe still needed to text his mother and ask if she could take Liesl for a couple of hours.

I'm good now, he said. I've got to take my daughter to my momma's, though. So maybe like 20 minutes?

You live in the new townhomes off Beaver Dam, right?

Gabe had multiple conversations with multiple people regularly, so he said, *Yep, I'm on the end.*

I see your truck.

Gabe's heartbeat started pounding through his body like a big steel drum. Hilde was here. He was really doing this—whatever this was.

"It's starting to get to know a woman," he told himself. He was only twenty-seven years old, but he'd been married before. He and Morris had dated a lot in high school, often pretending to be each other just for kicks. He'd dated a lot in college too, and all through law school. He'd graduated and started his firm as the youngest lawyer in the state of Wyoming to have ever done so.

He could go grab dinner with Hilde. It would be fine. Just fine.

"You need to tame your inner grump," he told himself as his fingers flew to get a call going with Momma. Her line rang, and his impatience grew in the time it took her to answer.

"Hey, baby," she drawled. "How are you?"

"Good," he bit out. "I need you to take Liesl for a little bit. Can you?"

Momma didn't answer right away, and Gabe pressed back another sigh. "I just...there's this woman I've been trying to meet up with, and she's actually here now."

"Daddy and I are on our way to get ice cream," Momma said. "We'll swing by and get Liesl."

"Two hours, tops," Gabe promised. "Sorry I was a little barky there."

“You’re going out with someone new,” Momma said. “I should’ve known when you called and didn’t text.” She laughed lightly, but Gabe couldn’t join in. He strode toward the steps, then doubled back. “We’ll be there in ten minutes,” she said.

“Okay.” He practically threw the phone as he opened the sliding door. “Liesl, Gramma and Gramps are on their way to take you for ice cream, okay? Come inside and get your shoes on.”

“Ice cream!” She cheered and left her cup on the ground as she came running inside. Gabe fought the urge to tell her to get it. They had very little time, and he suddenly wanted to shower.

He didn’t, but he sent a quick text to Hilde to keep her updated on what was going on, and then he changed out of his white shirt and tie and into a light blue button-up. He brushed his teeth and helped Liesl sweep her hair up into a ponytail.

They barely had that done before the doorbell rang and his mother’s voice called from down the steps. “Go on,” he said to his daughter. “Be careful on the steps. You walk, not skip.”

“Okay, Daddy,” she said, already running away from him. She barely broke stride to open the door, and Gabe grabbed it to keep it from crashing into the wall.

“Come on, my precious pretty,” Momma said at the bottom of the steps, her arms outstretched for Liesl. The girl launched herself from the third step, and Momma laughed as she caught her. Daddy looked up the steps as Gabe came down them, and he too grinned like having Liesl was the best thing that could happen to them.

“Thanks, Daddy,” Gabe said, giving him a quick hug.

“Of course,” Daddy said. “We love having her.” He leaned closer. “Plus, now Momma will let us go to The Real Cow, and I love their butter pecan.” He practically glowed, and Gabe wished he got that excited about a treat.

His parents left with Liesl, and Gabe stood on the sidewalk in front of his townhome and waved them down the street. Only then did he turn toward the navy blue sedan that he’d not seen parked on this road before.

The tall, dark, gorgeous Hilde O’Dell rose from it, the breeze clawing at her long skirt enough to reveal a knee-high pair of black leather boots. Gabe’s throat went dry at the sight of those, and his eyes snapped back to Hilde’s.

A smile curved her lips, and her hips swayed left-right, left-right as she walked toward him. His pulse increased, and Gabe tried to remind himself of

who he was and why he was worthy of going out with a goddess like her with every hammering beat of his heart.



Hilde O'Dell couldn't stop smiling as she approached the mysterious cowboy in front of her. Gabriel Young. He didn't wear a cowboy hat like the multitude of other men in this town, but Hilde could picture one perched on his head just-so. After all, she'd seen it there recently, at his brother's wedding.

He tipped his head as if he wore one, and his hand even rose as if to touch the brim. His mouth curved ever-so-slightly, like he was trying to fight the smile. He won, of course, because a man like Gabe didn't lose. "Ma'am," he said. "Thanks for waiting."

His breath rode the air, and Hilde caught mint with the whiff of his cologne. The man could bring a woman to her knees, that was for certain. Hilde locked her legs and kept her smile in place as she paused about an arm's length from him. "Finally," she said, immediately regretting it.

Her smile faltered, but Gabe closed the distance between them and brushed his fingers along hers. "It's good to see you again," he said as if she hadn't spoken at all. He pulled his hand away, leaving hers cold though the spring weather had already started to warm considerably.

Wyoming weather could be fickle, and Hilde wouldn't be surprised if it snowed again before summer truly set in, as it was early May, and stranger things had happened.

May.

Her birthday month. Hilde was turning thirty-nine this year, and her gut gnawed at her. She'd been lying awake at night, thinking about this very

man. “Gabe, I wanted to ask you something,” she said at the same time he said, “Should we go?”

He unleashed the smile now and gestured for her to go back to her car. “You drive,” he said. “I’m not as familiar with the city as I once was. Then you can ask me whatever you want.”

She had not anticipated being the one to drive, but she didn’t let her step hitch as she turned and went back to her car. Gabe opened her door for her, and Hilde sank into the driver’s seat. An exhaustion pulled deep in her bones, and she wasn’t even sure why.

Lynn timer had been sick this week, and that always tore at her mother’s heart. The store had been getting new shipments every single day as they anticipated their pre-summer sale, and then the Memorial Day sale Hilde hosted every single year.

This year, she’d coordinated a sort of Market Faire too, and other vendors, food trucks, and local artists were coming to set up booths in her parking lot over the long, Memorial Day weekend.

Then, the store had flooded. She’d spent long days and nights trying to get things cleaned up for all the events she had going on, and it felt like someone had tied a couple of cinder blocks around her shoulders.

She hitched her smile back into place as Gabe slid gracefully into the passenger seat. For once, she’d like to see a hair out of place on him. He glanced over to her and paused. “You don’t want to go.”

“I’m just a little tired,” she said.

He didn’t pull his seatbelt across himself. “Then let’s not go.”

She leaned her head back against the rest. “What were you finishing up?”

“Excuse me?”

“You said you were finishing something up, and then we could go to dinner.”

He looked away, as if he needed to study the seatbelt system to get it right. “Yeah,” he said. “Something with my daughter.”

A flash of irritation bolted through Hilde. “Yeah, I’ve got a million things with mine too.” She put the car in drive and perhaps pressed on the gas pedal a bit too hard.

Gabe yelled—actually yelled—and threw his hand up to grab onto the handle there. “Whoa, where’s the fire?”

“Nowhere,” she said as casually as she could. She came to an abrupt stop at the end of his street and looked at him again. “How old are you?”

He blinked at her, clearly confused. “I’m sorry?”

“How old are you?” She said each word crisply.

“Uh, twenty-seven.” He looked out the windshield and to the rearview mirror. He lived on a street with plenty of other people, but there wasn’t another car in sight at the moment.

Just as Hilde had feared. Over a decade. He was more than a *decade* younger than her. The image of a cougar prowled through her mind.

“Why?” he asked.

“How old do you think I am?”

More blinking, as if he’d never thought about it before.

“I can’t believe you’re only twenty-seven,” she said. “Did you graduate from college when you were eighteen?” She looked down to his lap and back to his face. “You’re a lawyer, for crying out loud. Doesn’t that take years and years of schooling?”

She eased onto the gas pedal more carefully this time, and Gabe lowered his hand from the bar above the window.

“Yes.” He straightened his jacket—a lightweight windbreaker. Sensible. Not too brightly colored. Nothing flashy, but definitely well-made. His daughter had been wearing the cutest flowery jacket too. “I took an... accelerated course of study.” He cleared his throat and said nothing more. “And I’ll be twenty-eight soon.”

Of course. Because twenty-eight was so much older than twenty-seven.

Gabe wasn’t exactly verbose, and Hilde’s mind suddenly blanked on what they could talk about. That wasn’t entirely true; she had plenty to talk to him about, she simply didn’t want to.

You’re sabotaging, she told herself, and she’d have to report to Mindie and Rhea in the morning. Heck, maybe even tonight. The fans at the store did drive her crazy, and she could’ve left for any reason this afternoon. Lynn timer was home sick. It was almost time for her to leave anyway. She wanted to swing by the grocery store.

Instead, she’d told two of her best employees that she’d gotten a text from Gabe and was going to dinner with him. Mindie had even made her switch shoes with her, saying she’d gotten asked out on more dates wearing these ridiculous boots than any other piece of footwear.

Hilde wasn’t twenty-five like her front-end manager, but she’d put on the boots. She wasn’t trying to get a date with just anyone. She was trying to get another one with Gabe.

Then say something!

She wanted to spend a couple of hours with him, lazily ordering five courses from a delectable menu. Instead, with Linnie home, she needed to choose somewhere fast and casual. “Italian okay?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said quietly.

She glanced over to him and found his attention out the window. Hilde nearly rolled her eyes, and she wondered if this would take off. If it did, would a relationship with him work? It didn’t feel like it would; they didn’t even have anything to talk about.

“How was work today?” she asked, finally bringing his attention back to her.

“Good,” he said. “I just had client meetings this morning.”

“So you must’ve been finishing...dinner with your daughter.”

He shook his head, those milk chocolate eyes so mesmerizing she nearly drove into the curb. Thankfully, she managed to save the turn into a fast-casual place with the best pasta carbonara in town. He still didn’t say what he’d been doing, and for some reason, that annoyed Hilde to no end.

She pulled into a parking space, put the car in park, and faced him. “Listen,” she said. “I know you’re really protective of your daughter. In the few texts we’ve exchanged, you’ve said that, oh, fifteen times. I know you don’t want me to meet her right away. That’s fine. I’m like that too.”

Gabe nodded a couple of times, and she wanted to reach out and grab his chin. Make it go up and down as she mimicked talking.

She drew in a breath. “I’m thirty-nine, Gabe. Or I will be, in a few weeks. That’s a whole decade-plus-some older than you.” The extra air in her lungs whooshed out. “And this is never going to work if you’re just going to sit in the passenger seat, silent. You have to at least *talk* about your daughter. You have to talk about your life.”

“I know,” he said, the words filled with a defensive bite.

“Then why did you even ask me out tonight?” she asked. “So we could sit in awkward silence while you refuse to answer my very simple questions?”

Those eyes fired at her, and she’d swear in a court of law they darkened by one degree. “Piano lessons,” he finally said. “I was giving Liesl piano lessons.”

Surprise caught Hilde completely off-guard. “Oh,” she said. “I—you play the piano?”

“Yes,” he said. “Do you?”

“A little,” she said. “I made Lynnie take lessons up until a couple of years ago. She’s pretty good.”

He nodded again, and said, “I don’t care about the age difference.”

“It’s weird,” she said.

“Is it? Why?”

“I think it technically qualifies us as an age-gap couple. Society looks down on those.”

Gabe scoffed. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

She shook her head, her mouth as straight as her hair. “I’m not kidding. I don’t normally date men younger than me at all.”

“Ever?”

Hilde hadn’t dated in a while, but Gabe didn’t need to know that within the first fifteen minutes of their first date, when he wouldn’t even say he’d been giving his daughter piano lessons. Honestly, the way he held back information, she could assume he was doing much more nefarious things inside that brand-new townhome.

“Ever,” she confirmed. “Given our tense ride over here, and how hard it was for you to tell me you *play the piano*, I’m not convinced we should even go in.”

Gabe folded his arms, and that made his presence in her car twice as big. “What do I have to do to convince you?”

Hilde allowed a small smile to curve her mouth. “You can drop the Mister Grumpy attitude, for one. Smile when you see me. Say hello and act like you’re glad to see me.”

“I *am* glad to see you,” he said. “I said it right out loud.” His brow furrowed. “Didn’t I? I swear I did.”

“Actions speak louder than words, Mister Young.”

“I really don’t want you to call me that,” he said, back to his dark, dangerous persona. “We’re not in the courtroom. We’re on a date.”

“Almost,” she said.

He sighed, the sound of it hissing through her whole car. “I may have certain protections in place, Hilde, that’s all.”

“Protections? From what?”

“With a woman like you?” He cocked his eyebrows, and Hilde had no idea what he meant. A woman like her? She wondered what he saw when he looked at her. He leaned closer, the lightning that seemed to zip around his person so electric and so, so hot. “From falling completely on the first date.”

With that, he got out of her car, the resulting slam of the door closing loud enough to jolt her back to her senses. She'd been leaning toward him too, and she hadn't even realized it. She hadn't even seen him go around the hood of the car before he was opening her door.

He took her hand, and while she still wasn't sure she should go inside and continue this date with him, she had no other choice but to stand. He pressed her into the small space between his body and the car, and Hilde's pulse jumped into the back of her throat.

"I don't want you to call me Mister Young," he said.

"Okay," she whispered.

"I don't care about the age difference."

"Okay."

"I think you're gorgeous and smart, and maybe I was nervous when you first showed up. I was rushed getting ready, and I hate that. But I'm *thrilled* to see you. I can't wait to tell you more about myself, and Liesl, and whatever else you want to know." His hand moved up her back to her neck, where he curled his long fingers around to her ears.

She nodded, her throat too dry to even enunciate a two-syllable word, as she fought an entire rainstorm of shivers.

"Your turn," he said.

"My turn?"

"What do you want?" he asked. "And what don't you want?"

Hilde came back to her senses. She was a tall woman, but Gabe still towered over her. He had both hands on her body, and Hilde let her eyes drift closed so she could really feel where they connected.

His hand along the skin of her neck. His hand on her waist, appropriately high, but with enough pressure to keep her right where he wanted her.

"I want you to talk to me," she said, opening her eyes. "I've been in relationships where I'm digging and digging for conversation or how you feel. I hate it."

He swallowed. But he said, "Okay," without a hitch in his voice.

"I'm busy. You're busy. I get that. We both have children and very demanding jobs. But if we do this—if we really are going to do this—we have to find a way to make time for one another. I have to come first sometimes."

He nodded. "I can do that."

"Not all the time," she said. "I get it. Sometimes my store comes first."

Sometimes you'll have a case that comes first. Our daughters are both important to us. But how long did it take us to get here?"

"Well, someone wouldn't text or call me back," he said. "So a while."

Hilde lifted her hand, quelled the shaking in her fingers, and ran them up the front of his shirt. "I've apologized for that. Are you going to hold it against me forever?"

"No," he said simply. His pulse beat against her fingertips, and it did seem a bit frenzied.

"Do I really make you nervous?"

"One hundred percent," he whispered as he leaned in. "And I will deny that to my dying breath if you tell anyone until we're ready for them to know it."

She couldn't help the very girly giggle that came out of her mouth. "Deal," she whispered back, because she believed Gabe wholeheartedly. The man didn't do anything halfway, so he wasn't testing her out. But he was cautious, and he would go slow. He wouldn't be texting anyone about this date, despite the fact that he had eight brothers and his parents had just taken his daughter for him.

"Anything else?" he asked. "Have I convinced you to go inside yet?"

"Almost," she said, enjoying this game.

He pulled back, and his very serious eyes searched hers. "Name it," he said. "And if I can do it, I will."

Hilde smiled at him, feeling brave and completely out of control at the same time. "Gabe, this won't be for a while, but I expect a really, really, *really* amazing first kiss. If you can't deliver that...maybe we shouldn't even start this journey."

His eyes widened and his eyebrows nearly shot off his face. The pulse beneath her fingers accelerated for a couple of seconds, and then it quieted again. "I have a couple of follow-up questions for that," he said.

Hilde stepped to the side, her hand falling naturally to meet his. She laced her fingers through his. "Ask away."

"How long is 'a while' in Hilde-time?"

"It's more than physical," she said. "It's emotional too. A man has to really earn the right to kiss a woman, don't you think?" She looked over to him, not sure what she'd find. It wasn't to see him nodding. "She—I—have to feel cared for. It's not something cheap, not when you're my age."

"Okay," he said. "So I'm hearing that's an undetermined amount of

time.”

“Correct.”

“Is there a scale or rubric for first kisses you can provide me?” He smiled at her, and oh, he kept that thing hidden for a reason. The glory of it rivaled the sun, and Hilde wanted to bask in the light and joy of it. “A man would like to be prepared as much as possible if he’s expected to get all the way to ‘really amazing’ on the first try.”

Hilde laughed and shook her head. “It’s subjective.”

“I don’t like that answer.” He reached for the door of the restaurant and opened it. “I feel like you’re setting me up for failure.”

Hilde let herself look at his mouth for only a moment, because any longer would have her knees weakening and a sigh coursing through her lips. “Gabe, I don’t think a man like you knows how to fail.” She squeezed his hand and tugged him inside. “See? You got me into the restaurant when I was sure we’d end the date after fifteen minutes.”

They joined the line, and Gabe leaned into her again. Hilde definitely pressed back into him too, though she told herself not to be so obvious. The man addled her brain, and she couldn’t think properly around him. She knew this honeymoon phase of her hormones would wear off, but it felt exciting and fun to be here now.

“Do I get a second chance if I mess up the first time?”

“I can allow for a do-over,” she said with a smile. She scanned the menu, though she’d been here scads of times and knew exactly what she wanted.

“Good,” Gabe said. “Because I’m really good at do-overs.”

Hilde was sure that was true, and she found a ribbon of anticipation running through her. Not for her first kiss with this man...but the second.



Gabe flipped over his phone and pressed the button on the side as hard as he could. “I’m so sorry,” he said as it asked him if he wanted to turn it off or restart it. He tapped on the bright red button to shut it down.

When he looked up again, Hilde was sliding her spoon out of her pressed-together lips, and oh, Gabe couldn’t look away. He’d downed three full glasses of diet cola in the past hour just to keep his throat from sticking together as it was.

“I have eight brothers,” he said by way of explanation. “They drive me to the brink of sanity most days.”

She gave him a small smile. “You love them though.”

“They grow on you,” he said dryly. “Sometimes I think they’re a fungus.”

Hilde rewarded him with a laugh, and then she scooped off another bite of the black tie cheesecake they’d gotten to share. She paused with the spoon in mid-air though. “Did you use law school to escape them?”

“No,” he said honestly. “I’m the youngest in the family. They all left me here. I did law school to try to keep up with them.”

She slid her bite of dessert into her mouth, and while Gabe knew he wouldn’t be tasting the chocolate on her lips, he still wanted to. He told himself to stop staring, and he focused on the dessert between them. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Siblings?” He looked at her again. “You’ve had quite the interesting career, but you haven’t said anything about brothers or sisters.”

She nodded, her eyes glowing now. "I've got them. One of each, actually."

"Older? Younger?"

"Both."

"Ah, the middle child." He grinned at her and watched her blink rapidly. He wasn't sure why, but she'd done it a couple of times tonight. He couldn't believe she cared about their age difference. He'd suspected she had to be somewhere in her mid-thirties to have a fourteen-year-old daughter, but even then, he couldn't be sure. People had babies young all the time these days.

Heck, he'd only been twenty-three and married for a year before Liesl had come into his life.

"You and Mav should talk," he said. "He calls himself the ultimate hinge, trying to keep peace between the older brothers and the younger ones."

"Who's the younger ones? You and Morris, of course."

"Right." Gabe finished his last bite of dessert, having eaten way too much already. He'd liked this fast-casual Italian place, and he and Hilde had managed to find enough to talk about to make the date easy and comfortable. "Luke's just older than us, and then Jem."

"Which leaves Mav in the middle." She waved her spoon as if to say, *Of course*. "And then Otis, Trace, Blaze, and Tex as the older four."

"Not that order, but yes."

Hilde held his gaze for an extra beat and then set down her spoon. They still had about half of the cheesecake left, but she seemed finished as well. "And you all have kids." She didn't phrase it as a question.

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

Her right eyebrow cocked up. "I don't like it when you call me ma'am."

"No?" He reached for his nearly-gone soda as she shook her head and that brilliant, shiny straight hair swung a little bit. She wore it quite long, and Gabe was already fantasizing about running his fingers through her hair while he kissed her. "All right, I won't do that anymore."

"Thank you," she murmured. She glanced at a couple as they sat down at the table next to them. She quickly looked away, even turning her shoulders. But Hilde was a tall, lithe woman, and she couldn't hide much with shoulders as slight as hers. "Oh, no," she muttered at the same time the man said, "Hilde?"

Gabe looked at him. He obviously knew it was Hilde, so the question in his tone made no sense. Gabe had plenty of experience in awkward and tense

situations, and he hadn't even realized how explosive the car ride here had been for Hilde until she'd threatened not to go on the date with him.

He watched the man as he looked at Hilde. She turned back toward him, a completely false smile blooming too big on her face. "Thomas," she said with all the diplomacy in the world. Her eyes didn't even flicker to the blonde across from him. "Hello, dear. How are you?" She spoke to him like the man needed to be in an elderly care facility.

Thomas blinked and looked at Gabe. Gabe smiled and gave him a two-fingered salute. "Fine?" Thomas guessed.

"That's great," Hilde said. She looked across the table to Gabe. "Are you finished, cowboy?"

His eyebrows could've flown off his face. Hilde had never called him *cowboy* before, not even in a text. Gabe didn't wear the hat. Out of all of his brothers he, in fact, was the least cowboy-ish. "Sure," he said anyway and started collecting their trash.

This place served food on real plates and in ceramic bowls, but he still had to clean it all up himself. He and Hilde went toward the big trash can beside the soda fountain together, and then only he returned while she feigned filling up her lemonade again.

"How do you know Hilde?" he asked Thomas and the woman at the table.

"Oh, uh." Thomas fidgeted in his seat, looked at his dinner companion, and couldn't meet Gabe's eyes again. "We worked together for a bit."

Gabe picked up the last of the silverware and wrapped it in hardly used napkin. "At the store?"

"Not exactly."

Intriguing, Gabe thought. The woman had said nothing, and she wore a blank mask on her face. So this work relationship wasn't something either of them wanted to talk about. It probably wasn't something they even wanted to remember. Gabe rejoined Hilde near the drink machines, and he put his hand on her lower back to guide her out of the restaurant.

"They're watching, aren't they?" she asked.

"Maybe I just want to touch you," he whispered back. "But yes, they're definitely watching."

By the time they spilled from the restaurant, Gabe and Hilde were practically running. He dropped his hand to pull up the zipper on his jacket, because it had gotten dark while they'd been inside. A chill stung his lungs, and he quickly smiled over to Hilde. "That was pretty funny."

“What part?”

“The part where you thought you could hide from a man sitting two feet away from you.” He started to laugh as he saw Hilde turn and curl into herself in his memory.

“Stop it.” She swatted at his arm, and Gabe dodged away from her, then moved right into her personal space and took her hand in his. “It was awkward, not funny.”

“Who is he?” Gabe asked.

Hilde sighed like a worse question couldn’t have been asked. “He’s a former partner.”

“Like a business partner?” Gabe asked. “Or a romantic partner?”

“Both, if you must know.” She held her head high. “Thomas is the lesson I learned not to mix business and pleasure.”

Gabe chuckled, though he’d represented fathers who’d said the same thing. “Are they married?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “Sometimes I hate that I know everyone in this town.”

“Everyone?” he asked. “Coral Canyon has grown a lot since I was here.” He opened her door and paused. “You grew up here?”

“In Rusk,” she said.

His eyebrows did go up then. “Wow. That’s a drive.”

She nodded and sank into the driver’s seat, this conversation clearly over. Gabe didn’t mind, because by his standards, this dinner had gone well enough to get a second date. The real question would be was if Hilde’s standards were the same as his.

He decided not to badger her with more questions on the way back to his house. Instead, he talked about growing up with an identical twin and how much trouble they’d given their momma. “We should’ve been nicer,” he said with another chuckle. “She’d been trying for a girl for a while, and we were the youngest. We were sort of relentless, though.”

“I can imagine,” Hilde said. “Rusty was the class clown. He still thinks he’s a laugh a minute.” She gave Gabe a withering look, and Gabe’s smile stuttered.

“Rusty’s your brother?”

“Yes,” she said. “It was just the two of us for a while. My parents didn’t want to be outnumbered.”

“Mine should’ve gotten that memo,” he said.

She did smile then. “Eliza is seven years younger than me.”

“I love that name,” he said, his heart brightening. “We almost—I almost—named Liesl Eliza.” His throat started to narrow, and he couldn’t believe what he’d just given away.

Hilde watched him for an extra moment before the road took her attention again. Her grip on the steering wheel tightened, then loosened, and Gabe definitely felt the tension now.

“I’ve obviously been married before,” he said quietly.

“Me too,” she said.

“I’ve only recently started dating again.”

“You don’t say,” she said with a ton of sarcasm in her voice.

“Funny,” he said, though he didn’t think it was funny at all. “I didn’t think tonight was too bad, actually.”

“That’s your assessment of tonight? It wasn’t too bad?” She looked over at him, her eyes wide, dark, and deep. They both had dark features, but his eyes held plenty of green and gold, while hers were made of only brown and black.

“I had a great time, actually.” He told himself not to say *actually* again. He could *actually* hear Morris giving him a hard time about it.

She turned down his street without saying she’d had a good time or not, which irritated Gabe. His daddy’s truck sat in his driveway, and that meant the date was literally seconds away from ending. He couldn’t invite her in, and he wouldn’t anyway.

She rolled up to the curb and looked at him. “Thank you for dinner.”

He nodded, because it almost felt like a dismissal. “I’m going back to Jackson tomorrow. We’ll be there through Thursday, and then we’re back here that night. The band is having a big concert for family and friends before they leave on tour.” He let the words hang there, almost hoping his country-music-famous brothers would get her to volunteer going out with him again.

Hilde only nodded, her smile staying steadfastly hidden.

Gabe wasn’t used to having to work so hard to impress women. Morris’s manager had been all over him, and the only other woman he’d gone out with before her had been impressed simply because he was a lawyer.

Hilde didn’t seem to care at all. Of course, she’d told great tales about her own career, as she’d done everything from working in human resources, to managing a real estate office, to buying inventory in a high-end boutique in downtown Jackson Hole.

Gabe knew what those types of stores were like, as well as the rich and

famous who came to shop there. Hilde herself put off the air of someone who wanted to wash her hands after every interaction with another human being. Or maybe that was just him.

At the same time, she was kind, down-to-earth, and he'd seen her be vulnerable once-upon-a-time.

In court, he thought.

“Did you want to—?” His question got cut off by the shrill ringing of her phone, and they both looked at it in the console. Her daughter's name sat there, and Hilde practically lunged for the phone.

“Hey, sweetie,” she chirped, a completely different side of the woman emerging now. “Yes, I'm on my way home now.”

Their eyes met, and Gabe knew when he was being rejected. His nose stung, and he mimed that he'd text her. She nodded, and he got out of the car. It felt like he was doing some strange, ritualistic dance—all the things one should do after a date—because he waved as Hilde drove away from his house, her phone still stuck to her ear.

“What are you waving for?” he grumbled to himself as her sedan disappeared around the corner. She'd have to come back this way to get out, because the development was new, and there was only one way in and one way out right now.

He did not want to be caught standing on a tiny patch of front lawn he owned here in Coral Canyon like a lovesick puppy, so he spun on his heel and marched toward his townhouse. He could've gone right upstairs to ask Liesl about what flavor of ice cream she'd gotten, but he keyed his way into his office space instead.

Without turning on any lights, he walked over to his desk and sat down. He caught Hilde's headlights as she went by again, and he knew he'd only imagined her driving slower past his place, as if she'd eased up on the gas pedal to see if she could see him as she did.

He wasn't sure what he'd done wrong, and as his pulse settled, Gabe pressed his eyes closed in the near-darkness of his office space. “Lord,” he prayed. “What did I do wrong?”

No immediate answer came to his mind, and he wondered if it wasn't so much something he'd done wrong, but a matter of Hilde not being ready to date someone like him. Someone his age. Someone who didn't live here. Someone with a small daughter.

He had so many more questions to ask her, and he genuinely wanted to

keep getting to know her.

“What do I do next?” he inquired of the Lord. He thought of the lesson he’d heard at church a few weeks ago. The Sunday School teacher had been talking about Jesus’s invitation to “come and see,” and Gabe knew immediately that he needed to invite Hilde on another date.

His heart pushed against the idea, because she’d literally lunged at her phone instead of letting him ask her out again.

Still, he wasn’t one to ignore a prompting—not anymore. So he pulled out his phone and nearly blinded himself as he awakened it in the dark room. Then he started typing furiously.



Hilde looked up as Lynn timer came into the kitchen. Her daughter wore a dress with a plunging neckline, which she barely had the chest to support. Hilde’s eyebrows rose. “You’re wearing that without a shirt underneath?”

Lynn timer looked down like she didn’t know what she had on. “It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not fine,” Hilde said. “We’re going to church, and the pastor stands above you. He’ll be able to see to your navel in that.” She gestured back toward the bedrooms in the house. “Go put your white cami on underneath it.”

For a couple of terrifying heartbeats, Lynn timer stood there and stared at Hilde. Locked in a battle of wills, Hilde wasn’t sure who would win. Finally, Lynn timer groaned, rolled her eyes, and turned to stomp back down the hall.

Hilde sighed. “That was close,” she muttered. She hated being the bad guy with her daughter, but she often had to be. She tried to balance every no with ten yeses, but that was getting harder and harder as Lynn timer got older.

She looked back to her phone, at Gabe’s text from last night. *I’d love to take you to the concert on Thursday night. It’s out at my brother’s place on the northeast side of town. What do you think? They’ll have dinner there. Music, dancing, and a whole bunch of people.*

It sounded like small-town second-date perfection, but Hilde hadn’t answered him yet.

Lynn timer could come, he’d said next. His third text had said, Let me know. I know things get crazy at the store sometimes. Even just that afternoon would

be fine. I'm coming back to Coral Canyon in the late afternoon that day.

"He'd love to take me," she whispered.

"You're still staring at your phone," Lynn timer said, and Hilde jumped. She hadn't even heard her come back into the kitchen. "It's not the store, is it?" She peered over Hilde's arm to her phone on the counter, and Hilde slapped her palm over the screen.

"No."

Lynn timer flinched and backed up a step. "Wow, that was a violent reaction." She'd put on the undershirt, and Hilde felt much better about letting her daughter leave the house now. "Come on. We're going to be late."

Hilde slid her phone into the pocket of her dress and grabbed her sweater from the barstool before following her daughter out to the garage. "You're not driving," she said when she found Lynn timer lingering by the driver's door.

"Momma," she whined.

"You're fourteen." She shook her head.

"Lots of people drive when they're fourteen here."

"Farmers," she said. "Ranchers. We're neither."

Lynn timer pouted, but she rounded the hood as Hilde unlocked the car. "I could have Gavin teach me."

"I will call his mother right now." Hilde wasn't kidding either. She knew Sheri Henderson, and neither of them wanted their teenagers to date exclusively. Sheri had said Gavin and Lynn timer could go out, but he had to take a different girl out in between. Every time. She'd come into the store to devise a plan with Hilde, but Lynn timer still didn't know about that.

"Mom," Lynn timer complained again.

"You don't need to drive anywhere," she said. "Gavin shouldn't be either."

"He's fifteen," Lynn timer said like he'd be elected President of the United States next. "He works for the Pullman's. They let him drive all over their ranch."

"Good thing you work at the store, then," Hilde quipped.

Lynn timer didn't respond, and Hilde's mind moved back to its favorite topic: Gabe. If she didn't answer him soon, he'd know something was wrong. *As if he doesn't already*, she thought. Of course he did. A man didn't become the youngest lawyer in the state of Wyoming by not being able to read a room.

And she'd answered her daughter's call while he was asking her out again.

I had a great time.

She had too, but she hadn't admitted it. She also wondered which part of the slightly acidic date he'd liked. The part where she'd told him she wouldn't go in? The part where she'd literally given him impossible expectations to meet for their first kiss? Or maybe the amazing conversation over dinner, how easily they did get along once both of their walls had eroded a little bit, or the sound of his laugh....

Of course he wouldn't enjoy the sound of his own laugh, but Hilde sure did.

I'm coming back to Coral Canyon in the late afternoon that day.

She didn't like being reminded that he didn't live here. She also cursed her luck that she'd run into Thomas Fitzgerald. "Of all people," she muttered.

Lynn timer didn't even ask who she was talking to. When she was younger, she had, and Hilde told her that sometimes adults talked to themselves when they had a lot of their mind.

Of course, it was just her who did that, but Lynn timer, in her five-year-old innocence, hadn't questioned it.

Gabe had said that Thomas had only said they'd worked together, and that much was true. There simply existed an entire, jagged block of ice beneath that surface too. Her mind flowed and warped as memories from a few years ago flooded her brain, and before she knew it, she'd brought the car to a stop in a parking space at the church.

Lynn timer got out, her voice chirping cheerfully to her friends, and she walked away with two other girls in pretty spring dresses. Hilde smiled then, because Morgan and Katie were good girls, and Lynn timer had been close with them since babyhood. She stuck out with her dark hair while the other two had blonde, but she didn't seem to hurt for male attention.

Hilde watched behind glass as Gavin Henderson joined the girls, and while he didn't touch her daughter, it wasn't hard to tell he wanted to.

She wondered if Gabe looked like that around her. Could other people see it? Something existed between them, and Hilde couldn't identify it. A buzz, maybe. A pulse. A horrifyingly electric jolt that made her heart beat in a way it hadn't in a decade.

Sighing, she got out of the car to follow her daughter inside. She'd never seen Gabe at church, and she didn't expect to today either. His brothers attended, and because Hilde owned the biggest—and best, in her opinion—furniture store in town, she really did know a lot of people in the community.

She'd also grown up with Coral Canyon as the town where she came to buy groceries and hang out, and while she'd left for several years to attend college and work in Jackson, she'd been back for a while now. She attended small business owner meetings and had served as the president of the organization for a year.

"Hilde," a woman said, and she slid a silky smile on her face as Georgia Young's gaze met hers. She bounced a dark-haired baby in her arms, but the infant wailed nonetheless.

Without thinking, Hilde reached for the child. With a somewhat surprised look on her face, Georgia slid the baby into her arms and stepped back. She wore a pale pink dress that flared around her waist and fell in a matching straight skirt to her ankles. She had makeup on, and her eyes broadcasted friendship with a hint of apprehension as Hilde curled her son into her chest.

Everyone in town knew Otis and Georgia had adopted the boy from Otis's nephew. Everyone knew Bryce Young and Bailey McAllister had come home from college pregnant, and now they were both gone again after choosing to place their boy with Otis and Georgia.

"When's the court date?" Hilde asked as she wrapped the boy tighter and began to bounce him. The five-month-old baby quieted and looked up at her with deep, dark eyes, so much like Hilde's. She smiled softly at him, part of her soul lighting up.

She did love children, and she'd only gotten the one.

"Not for another few months," Georgia said quietly. "After the tour."

People moved past them and into the chapel, but Hilde didn't want to go in. She came to church because she was supposed to, but she couldn't remember the last time she'd felt moved to be here. Moved by anything the pastor said. Moved to incorporate more of the Bible into her life, or more of the teachings of Jesus.

She wanted Linnie to come, and they sat by her mother every week, then went back to her place for lunch. Hilde then usually wandered over to the store or walked around the lake if the weather permitted it. Right now, the snow still remained, and Hilde's legs ached for a good, long walk without mud, gravel, snow, or muck.

Hilde gave Georgia a smile as her son's eyelids fluttered closed. "How do you do that?" Georgia whispered.

"I'm the baby whisperer," Hilde said, still focused on the precious boy in front of her.

“Hon?” a man said, and Hilde looked up to find Otis Young joining his wife in the lobby. They looked at one another, surprise registering on Otis’s face. “Hey, Hilde.”

“Morning, Otis.”

“She got him to sleep.” Georgia leaned into Otis’s chest, and he put his arm around her. Love radiated from them, and Hilde wanted to stand there and bask in it too. She had people who loved her, of course. Lynn timer had chosen to live with her time and again. Several of her employees had become good, loyal friends as they’d worked at the store for years now.

Still, she felt like what other people saw of her didn’t match who she really was on the inside. She portrayed what people wanted her to be, but she wasn’t that person.

Standing in the church, listening to the organ prelude music piping through the open door behind Georgia and Otis, and watching them smile at one another, Hilde knew she wasn’t even happy.

“Can I hold him?” she asked. “If he fusses or wakes, I’ll bring him to you.”

“I’m not going to say no to that,” Georgia said. “He’s been teething for a week, and I swear none of us gets more than an hour of sleep at a time.”

Otis didn’t argue, and they turned to go back into the chapel. Hilde followed them, their beautiful baby OJ in her arms. She didn’t care who saw her, but she did glance left and right to find her family. They sat in a different place every week, while the Youngs congregated together, right in the middle-front rows.

She met Georgia’s eye after the woman sat down several rows in front of Hilde and turned around. Hilde nodded; Georgia smiled, and Hilde lowered herself gently to the end of a pew where her mother and daughter already sat.

“Oh, he’s the cutest thing ever,” Lynn timer whispered and leaned over to see OJ.

Hilde found that same soft smile on her face, and something that had been seething inside her settled. The services started, and OJ slept. Hilde’s arms grew tired, but Lynn timer helped her by allowing her to rest her elbow on her arm.

She needed to text Gabe and tell him she’d love to go to the concert with him. *It’s a big deal*, she told herself, glad she had a good reason today to miss the sermon. Usually, she just couldn’t tune in and ended up feeling guilty afterward. *It’s a family concert. Only family and close friends will be there.*

Four of the Youngs were big country music stars, and they were leaving town for the summer to tour the US and Southern Canada for the release of their latest album. They'd made a loud splash when they'd started moving back to Coral Canyon, but the ripples of that had settled pretty quickly.

Mostly because Tex, Trace, Otis, and Luke Young were down-to-earth men. They had wives and families. Kids they cared about. Their lawns had to be mowed like everyone else's, and they had problems just like everyone else.

Hilde had watched one of her best friends fall in love with Trace Young, and he and Everly had just gotten married and enjoyed a luxurious European honeymoon after years of trying to make a relationship work.

She thought of Gabe again, and she managed to get her phone out of her pocket without waking OJ. She swiped to open Gabe's texts, using the baby to shield her device from the prying eyes of her mother and daughter.

Lynn timer knew Hilde dated, but it had been a while since she'd gone out with anyone more than once. Sitting in church, she could admit she wanted to go on a second date with Gabriel Young.

She started to type the best she could while holding her phone with her right hand and using her thumb to peck out the letters one by one.

Her phone started to vibrate, and adrenaline punched through her. Startled, she dropped her phone. Lynn timer automatically reached for it, and when she came up, she whispered, "It's Uncle Rusty."

"We can call him back."

Lynn timer nodded and swiped the call to voicemail. Ten seconds later, her brother called again. Anxiety built behind Hilde's heart. She nodded to Lynn timer, who swiped on the call and whispered, "We're in church, Uncle Rusty. My mom's going out now."

Hilde stood and headed down the aisle with baby OJ. She sank onto the bench beside Georgia and whispered, "My brother has called twice. I'm so sorry."

"Not at all." Georgia took the sleeping baby, smiling at him in a way only mothers can, and Hilde headed back up the aisle. She took the phone from Lynn timer, who wore wide, worried eyes, and headed out into the lobby.

"Rusty," she said once she wouldn't be disturbing anyone. "What's going on?"

"AnnaBelle just kicked me out," he said, his voice full of agony. "She wants a divorce, and I don't know what I'm going to do. The girls...." He let

his words hang there while he sniffled and wept.

Hilde's heart broke right in half. "Divorce?" was the only thing she could think to say. Rusty and AnnaBelle had been married for twenty years. They couldn't get a divorce.

"I need a lawyer," he said next. "She's going to take my girls from me."

Hilde knew a lawyer. A family law lawyer. A dadvocate. A father's rights lawyer.

"I know someone," she said. "Don't worry, Rusty. Gabriel Young is the best there is." Never mind that he'd already told her his firm was burgeoning and couldn't take on more clients.

She just needed to call him and get him to take her brother's case.



Gabe held the book with his hands, his arms around Liesl. His voice whispered the words of the rabbit and fox story she loved to pieces. His heart wasn't in it, though, nor were his thoughts trying to get back to the sermon playing out in front of him.

Hilde had consumed his every waking moment, and that only irritated him further. He'd texted her last night after her rejection, and as the clock drew closer and closer to noon, his eyebrows pulled closer and closer to his chin.

He wouldn't call her. He had some dignity, even if his text-fest before Hilde had even left the parking lot of his townhome community spoke otherwise.

"Daddy," Liesl said in a whisper-that-wasn't-a-whisper-at-all. "Another book." She twisted to look at him, and Gabe realized the story about the fox and the rabbit had ended. He set it down next to him, where his phone sat too. As he picked up another book for his daughter, he willed the device to brighten with a call. A text. A social media message from Hilde. Something.

To his great surprise, the black screen did bloom to life, and his heart dang near jumped out of his mouth. *Momma* sat there, the message whisking away before Gabe could get his eyes to focus on letters that small.

His shoulders had come up in preparation of Hilde's rejection, and he lowered them now, consciously pressing his breath out of his lungs, because it hadn't been her. That only left room for more frustration at her, at the situation, at himself to fill his chest cavity on the next inhale.

He read another book. Church ended. Gabe packed up his daughter's toys, treats, and time-passers, and he took her hand on the way out of the building. She skipped alongside him, and Gabe wished he could remember what it was like to feel that carefree.

His phone rang as he buckled Liesl in the back of his truck, and since his device had already connected to the Bluetooth, the speaker system said, "Call from Blaze."

"Answer it," he commanded the vehicle, and the ringing stopped. After the appropriate pause to wait for the line to connect, he added, "Hey, Blaze."

"You comin' to Momma's for lunch?"

Gabe pressed his teeth together. "No," he said. "Liesl and I are already back in Jackson."

Blaze sighed like this was the worst news he'd heard all year. "I shoulda bought a place in Jackson."

For some reason, that tickled Gabe's funny bone, and he started to laugh. Through the chuckles he said, "Live and learn, brother."

"What are you havin' for lunch?" Blaze asked.

"Isn't your fiancée cooking for you?" Gabe shot back. He didn't believe for even two seconds that Blaze would load up himself and his son and make the hour-long drive to Jackson Hole for some of Gabe's cooking. Not only that, but Jem and his kids still lived in Blaze's lakeside mansion, and if Blaze came, so would they.

That really wasn't happening, and Gabe had been so sweet all weekend that he couldn't help the sour that came out in his question.

"She bakes," Blaze said in a deadpan. "And her sister has something today."

"You're engaged," Gabe said. "You don't go to things with her sister?"

"They're trying to get her mother to come to Coral Canyon for the wedding," he said, his voice careful and slow. Gabe wondered if Faith was standing right there listening. "Apparently, it's been a fight already, and she thinks it'll be best if it's just her and Trinity."

"Sure, okay." Gabe backed out of the doorway and closed the rear passenger door. "Sorry, Blaze. I—" He didn't know how to articulate why everything—literally everything—annoyed him.

"I was hoping to come see you about my portfolio," Blaze said now, his voice definitely on the lower end. "One day this week?"

"We can go over it Thursday night or Friday," Gabe said, opening his

own door. “Or this weekend. I’ll be back in town then. That’ll give me enough time to check on things and pull the reports you like to see.” He swung behind the wheel and tossed the key into the middle console.

“Sure,” Blaze said. “You tell me when a good time is.”

Gabe shook his head, not really irritated with Blaze. “You have to call my office manager to get on my schedule,” he said. “For here or Coral Canyon.”

“It’s Sunday.”

“Yeah,” Gabe said dryly. “The day of rest. Set a stupid alarm in your phone for tomorrow morning, Blaze. Jeez.”

“Wow, you are grumpy today,” Blaze griped back at him. “What’s your problem?”

Gabe nearly shouted *Hilde O’Dell!* but thankfully, he bit back her name at the last moment. He and Blaze were close enough. Besides Morris, and out of the rest of the brothers, Gabe could handle him the best.

He loved Mav too, and Otis, Tex, and Trace had been nothing but amazing since they’d returned to Coral Canyon. Jem had never had a problem with Gabe, but he was deep in the throes of his own healing right now, and he didn’t have room for Gabe in his life, as blunt as that sounded.

Gabe understood, because his studies and now his work had been all he’d been focused on for years now. He tried to make more room for family, but his was huge, and loud, and sometimes he wasn’t sure he fit in with any of them.

Outside of Morris, he thought. His identical twin was Gabe’s best friend, and he always had been, even when they’d gone their separate ways.

“Nothing,” Gabe growled as he put the truck in gear. “It’s...nothing.”

“Family, work, or dating?” Blaze asked.

Gabe clenched his fingers around the steering wheel. “C,” he said.

“Oh.” Blaze gave a light laugh, but Gabe found nothing funny. “I don’t know why,” Blaze said. “I wasn’t expecting you to say that.”

“Well, now it’s A,” Gabe griped at him. “So you’ll call my manager and get on my schedule. I’ll have the things you need, and you’ll meet me in my home office in Coral Canyon?”

“Sure,” Blaze said easily, and he wouldn’t push Gabe on his “dating problem.” “You can’t come to the house?”

“Depends on when it is,” Gabe said. “I have clients I have to see in Coral Canyon, and I’m due in court on Friday morning.”

“Yeah, okay.” Blaze either didn’t hear or didn’t care about the crispness

to Gabe's voice. "I'll talk to your manager, and I'm sure I'll be in touch with you too."

Gabe was sure he would be too, and since Blaze didn't immediately hang up, Gabe hung on the line too. "Blaze," he said, not sure where his mind currently ran. "I know you won't, but I don't need anyone knowing about... well, everything that we just talked about."

"Which part?" Blaze asked innocently. "The part where you manage my money? Or that you're seein' someone and it's not going as well as you'd like? That's an assumption, by the way. Or the part where you're the grumpiest man on the planet?" He coughed, but it sounded like he was trying to cover up a laugh.

"All of it," Gabe said. "It's not like you've been Mister Sunshine in your life, and I never once gave you grief for pining over Faith."

Instead of firing back with his own dark attitude, Blaze laughed again. "You're right on all counts, brother." He sobered quickly. "If there's something I can do for you, you'll tell me, right? I don't do much during the day."

That wasn't even remotely close to true, and both Gabe and Blaze knew it. Gabe wanted to throw something witty and sarcastic at Blaze about his service hours and donations to the Justin Cowboy Crisis Fund, but he didn't. Instead, he said, "I'd tell you."

"Okay, then." Blaze blew out his breath. "Wish you were comin' to lunch today, because it's just going to be me and Jem—who is still not himself—" The last part was muttered. "And the band brothers. Joy of joys."

"Then don't go," Gabe said.

Blaze barked out a laugh now. "I've told Momma no too many times in my life," he said. "Talk to you later this week."

"Yep." The call ended then, and Gabe finished the drive home, finally keying in the code to get through the gate at his exclusive, mountain-view subdivision southeast of town. His house loomed on his lot, the dark brick combining effortlessly with the gorgeous wood that spoke of slower times, the mountains, and nature.

Inside his gourmet kitchen, he made apple pancakes for Liesl, with plenty of bacon and sausage for himself. She fell asleep in his bed while a cartoon played on the TV mounted to the wall across from it, and Gabe changed into a pair of basketball shorts and a T-shirt, checked on his daughter, and slipped over to the other side of the house and into his home gym.

He drew in a deep breath, held it, and then let it release.

When he thought about his ex-wife, he wanted to pound the stress into the treadmill. When he thought about some of his clients and their exes and their lawyers, he had to crunch his abs and lift as much weight as possible.

He looked around the room and saw his own wealth in the built-in weight sets, the rowing machine, the brand-new treadmill he'd just had delivered because he'd run out the motor on the first one. He had a recumbent bike and a stair climber, as if he could use all of this equipment at the same time.

Gabe had never done anything small, and his house matched, despite his family being tiny compared to those who needed a five-bedroom, five-bathroom house.

He stretched, his mind on Hilde. He put in ten minutes on the bike, his mind on Hilde. He started doing chest flies, his mind stuck on the gorgeous Hilde.

No matter how many reps he did, no matter how much sweat poured down his face and stained his shirt, no matter that he then punished himself for five miles on the treadmill, Hilde would not leave his mind.

He toweled himself off, wiped down his machines like there'd be someone else to use them, and went into the kitchen. He got out a filtered bottle of water and cracked the lid, taking slow, measured gulps of the ice-cold liquid.

Liesl slept on in his bedroom, and he'd regret not waking her later tonight when she wouldn't be tired enough for bed. So he'd let her stay up. It wouldn't be the end of the world, and heaven knew Gabe could stand to loosen some of his routines, schedules, and strict standards for things.

He showered, got dressed in a comfortable sweatsuit, and found Liesl sitting up in his bed, a bowl of pretzels in front of her. He crawled toward her, his smile growing with every second. "Hey, baby doll," he said.

She grinned at him and giggled. He grabbed the bowl of pretzels and moved them so he could hug her. "Love you, Daddy," she said in her cute, little-girl voice.

"I love you too, baby boo," he whispered. He watched the bright colors change on the TV, wondering why he felt so lonely when he had this precious girl in his life.

His phone buzzed and then chimed out a specific notification, and Gabe wanted to pick it up and throw it. "That's Uncle Mav," he said to Liesl, already reaching for the phone, which he'd left plugged in during his workout

and shower.

“We go play?” she asked.

“No, baby,” he said. “We’re back home. We can’t just run over there. It takes too long.”

She said nothing, and Gabe slid over even further so he could lean against the headboard too. Mav had texted, but as Gabe saw the messages from Hilde, his breath clogged his throat.

The lack of oxygen went straight to his head, because he couldn’t think. Couldn’t read her messages and make sense of them.

I need to talk to you, Gabe. My brother’s wife is saying she wants a divorce, and I know you’re not taking on new clients, but he needs your help.

Several minutes later, she’d said, Lynn and I are coming to Jackson. I’d love to stop by and see you tonight, if possible.

“Stop by and see me?” he wondered aloud. That text was an hour old, and he cursed himself for trying to put distance between him and his device.

Gabe? she’d sent only a few minutes ago. *I know you’re mad about how last night ended, but I need you. Will you please call me when you get these?*

His thumb hovered over the call button. Part of him wanted her to know what it felt like to be left out to dry. At the same time, he never wanted her to feel like that, not when it came to him.

The doorbell rang at the same time he tapped to call Hilde. He immediately ended the call, because he couldn’t very well start a conversation with her and give his next-door neighbor a cup of whatever they’d come for. They came almost every Sabbath afternoon, and Gabe didn’t complain when the treats showed up an hour or two later.

He hurried down the hall and through his expansive living room to the door just as the bell started to chime again. “I’m here,” he griped as he opened the door. “Just come in, and—” He cut off when he saw the tall, lithe beauty of Hilde O’Dell standing on his front porch.

“Hilde,” he gasped out, trying to take in the added wave in her hair and the way her floral skirt hugged her waist and hips. A black blouse and jacket topped the brightly colored skirt, and Gabe’s eyes watched the silver hoops in her ears sway slightly. He glanced over to the man at her side, but his gaze got drawn right back to her dark one. Those deep, red lips....

“Hello, Gabe,” she said smoothly. “May we come in?”



Hilde reached for Rusty and grabbed onto his arm, because she sensed he was about to flee. He hadn't wanted to show up on Gabe's doorstep, but Hilde had insisted. Why she'd insisted, she wasn't sure, but she stood here now, and she couldn't rewind time.

"Yes," he blurted out. "Yes, of course." He fell back a couple of steps, taking the door with him. "Yes, come in." He wore a look of pure shock on his face, but he smoothed it away a couple of moments later. Twice as long as normal, she noted, but she said nothing as she nearly dragged her brother across the threshold of Gabe's house.

"How did you find my house?" he asked.

"Funny story," Hilde said as she took in the grandeur of his home. She expected it to be cold, clinical, and uncaring. White walls, stainless steel, and maybe furniture in gray with a black metal frame.

She saw none of that, though. The big front windows let in a lot of the afternoon light, and it spilled across a set of warm, brown leather couches. A brown, blue, cream, and navy rug covered the dark hardwood floor, and a couple of colorful quilts had been draped over the arms of each couch.

A slim table sat against the wall, with two bright pink lamps flanking a framed piece of art that a very small girl had clearly done. Hilde spun back to Gabe as the front door—double wide and taller than normal in this custom home—clicked closed.

"I'm sorry," she blurted out. Gabe had told her he didn't introduce his daughter to his girlfriends very early in the relationship, and she'd literally

just shown up on his doorstep. She didn't see the little girl, but she existed everywhere—right down to the bunny rabbit drawing she saw taped to the back of the door.

“You must be Rusty,” Gabe said smoothly as he extended his hand toward her brother. He flicked his eyes back to hers. “I just got your texts, Hilde. I was about to call when the doorbell rang.”

Her phone beeped at her, and she lifted it in case it was Rhea at the store. They closed early on Sundays, and Hilde sometimes went in after close to help Rhea do the new staging for the week. She hadn't texted her about the impromptu trip to Jackson Hole, so Rhea might be wondering where Hilde was.

It wasn't Rhea, but her device alerting her that she'd missed a call from Gabe. She lifted her eyes to his, her heartbeat hammering because he'd actually called.

“My brother,” Hilde said, indicating Rusty, though Gabe was already shaking his hand. “Rusty. Rusty, this is Gabriel Young. He's my...he's...he's the best father's rights lawyer in town.”

Gabe stared openly at her, and Hilde wished she'd spoken to him before bringing Rusty here. She had a lot to say to him, and he looked about to burst with words. He recovered quickly and indicated the sofa. “Why don't you sit down, Rusty? I'll go make some coffee, and we can talk.”

He nodded to Rusty and then Hilde, and Gabe marched off. He didn't go into the kitchen, however, but down the hallway. Hilde watched his strong back in that soft, seemingly well-worn T-shirt and black sweat pants, and when he went around a bend in the hall, she turned back to Rusty.

“Sit down,” she said. He did, and he put his head in his hands. Hilde wanted to tell him to stop acting like the world was coming to an end. She couldn't bring herself to do it, because she'd been in his position, and it really did feel like the sky was falling.

“Stay here, okay?” She gave Rusty a moment to confirm, but he didn't. She went into the kitchen anyway, where once again, Gabe surprised her by having a perfectly normal kitchen. Maybe not normal in the way hers was, with a single oven and regular cabinets. His were clearly custom-built, as they seemed to stretch twice as tall as hers, and they were a pale green instead of white or oak.

His appliances were black stainless steel, but they didn't feel stuffy or pretentious. A coffeemaker sat next to the fridge, and Hilde opened the

cupboard above it to find filters and grounds. She made coffee on autopilot, and she'd opened his double-wide fridge to find cream before he returned.

He came up behind her, and every cell in Hilde's body froze. They stood at the island together, her hand literally still on the container of cream, and his body heat melting into hers.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"I really don't have room for another client right now," he whispered back, his breath falling across her shoulder. "Especially one just starting out at the beginning of his case."

"You don't want clients from the beginning?"

"It's just a lot of hand-holding," he says. "I have my office manager handle a lot of the beginning stuff."

Hilde finally got her head to nod, and she pulled her hand away from the cream. She ducked her head, tilting it toward him. "I wasn't sure where to find the sugar."

"You didn't see it in the cupboard you already opened?"

She detected a hint of teasing in his voice, but this was Gabe, so she couldn't be sure. She turned toward him, and sure enough, he wore a sparkle in his eyes despite his mouth still being flat. "I must've missed it," she said.

He turned and got it down. When he faced her again, he made no move to put it on the counter with the cream. "Are you just going to ignore my other texts?"

"No," she said.

"So?" he challenged. "Thursday at my brother's?"

Hilde didn't dare turn to check on the status of her brother. Number one, Gabe's house could swallow four of hers and still have more room, so there were dozens of feet between her and Rusty. Number two, she couldn't use him as an excuse anymore.

She folded her arms and cocked a hip. "I'd like to go to your brother's for the concert."

"Fine then," he said. "That wasn't so dang hard, was it?"

Hilde deflated, her chin dipping toward her chest. "It was a little hard for me."

"Why?" Gabe stepped closer and slid the sugar bowl onto the counter. Then that hand slithered along her hip to her lower back. He brought her body closer to him, and everything felt dangerous and forbidden. Rusty might see them slow-swaying in his kitchen, or his daughter could come skipping

down the hall at any moment.

Gabe didn't seem to think any of it was a problem, and he used his other hand to push her hair back off the side of her face. "What's this thing between us?"

"I don't know," she whispered.

"Why did you go cold on me in the car last night?"

"I don't know."

"Hilde."

She sighed and finally put her arms around his body too, if only to get that disappointment out of her name in his voice. It felt so good to sink into his embrace, accept his warmth, and let him hold her. He breathed in deeply, sending a feeling of being cherished right into Hilde's heart.

A small smile touched her face, and she realized she'd have to do the same thing she wanted from him. "I don't like that you live here when I live in Coral Canyon," she said.

"I actually have houses in both places," he said easily.

"I got a little annoyed when you mentioned how you almost named your daughter Eliza. You obviously slipped and said 'we,' and I'd love to know about your first wife."

He sighed, drew in another breath, and stepped back. "It's such a long story, Hilde."

"I'm sure that's true," she said, reaching to slide her fingers up his arm. Sparks popped between them, and she could at least identify those. "That's why people date."

"Yeah, if they can get something lined up." He gave her a dry look and turned to open the cupboard with his mugs. The absence of his body so close to hers stung and sang through her, and Hilde definitely couldn't remember the last man who'd made her feel like this.

He got down three of them, then moved to the end of the island to get spoons. "And I don't want to be rude or anything, but I live in a private community for a reason, and it's Sunday."

Guilt hit Hilde right in the gut. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"I'll pull up my calendar," he said as he reached for the coffee pot. As he poured cups for all of them, he added, "And I'll schedule something with your brother this week. But this can't be our initial meeting." He glanced over to her. "Okay?"

"Is your daughter here?"

“Yes.” He bent and opened another cupboard before getting out a tray and loading the sugar bowl, cream, spoons, and mugs onto it. “This has to be fifteen minutes or less, though I’d love to spend more time with you.” He gave her a look filled with heat, picked up the tray, and headed into the living room.

Hilde’s mouth dried up as she watched Gabe greet her brother with kindness and serve him a cup of coffee. He put the tray on a beautiful table made of polished, smoothed, blonde wood, and it fit with the comfortable, expensive furniture, the color palette, and the refined man who glanced her way.

He said nothing, but she got the distinct impression she better get over there. Her feet practically flew across the floor until she perched on the cushion of the loveseat, a cup of coffee gripped in her hand too. She tried not to allow her fingers to choke the ceramic, but she was afraid she failed.

“So,” Gabe said, only holding his coffee, not drinking it. He’d stirred sugar into it, nothing more. “I just have a couple of questions, so I won’t keep you.” He made it sound like he was the problem here, when Hilde knew for sure it was the other way around.

She wasn’t one to squirm, but she found her skin itching and the couch suddenly too hard. Sitting very still, she lifted her mug to her lips and took a sip. She made good coffee, and a small smile touched her mouth as she set her cup back on the tray.

“One for you first, Hilde,” Gabe said, and she could’ve imagined the softness with which he spoke her name. The fire in his eyes blazed as hot as ever, and Hilde swallowed, her anxiety rising with the pause he took.

“Yes?” she prompted.

“How did you find my house?” he asked. “Get past the gate security?”

That was what he was worried about? She held that powerful gaze, but he didn’t back down this time. She suddenly realized that he’d allowed her to win all the other times she’d silently challenged him, and he’d looked away first.

She did squirm now, her eyes flitting to Rusty. He looked lost in another world, and he’d be no help here. He probably wasn’t even listening. “Morris, okay?” she blurted out. “I called Morris, and he gave me your address and the gate code.”

Gabe’s eyes widened as shock marched through them. “You did?” He too flicked a look at Rusty, who lifted his coffee to his mouth absently. “I

thought we weren't telling anyone anything until we were ready for them to know."

Hilde pushed her hair back off her face, suddenly feeling very hot.

"Not that we have anything to tell them," he added somewhat bitterly. "I mean, you wouldn't even let me invite you on another date. I had to do it through a text." His eyebrows went up, and that only made him sexier than before. "Again."

Oh, so he didn't like that. *Of course he didn't!* Hilde chastised herself. *Look at this place.*

Gabe was proper. Wealthy. Sophisticated and classic and yet somewhat down-to-earth too. Sure, he'd been wearing designer suits every time she'd seen him, but she now knew he owned and wore designer sweats too. He had his daughter's artwork everywhere, beautiful and comfortable home furnishings, and more color in his house than she'd thought he would.

And he wanted to ask her out like a gentleman. He wanted to treat her right. He wanted to help her. How she knew all of those things, she wasn't sure, but they rang true like a bell on a clear, crisp morning calling everyone to church.

"I didn't tell him anything about...us." She snuck another look at her brother. Rusty was a real estate agent here in Jackson. He and AnnaBelle had plenty of money too, and they lived in a mountain mansion too.

For some reason, Hilde hadn't expected Gabe to have an enormous house behind a gate. Rusty's was big, but not gated.

"I simply said I had an emergency with my brother, and we needed to get in touch with you. I was in town, because Rusty lived here...and he said you might kill him, but he sent me the address and the code."

Gabe's face definitely testified that Morris was going to get skewered. Hilde understood complex familial relationships, and she took another sip of coffee to wet her parched throat. Her tongue felt too big for her mouth, and thankfully Gabe nodded once and looked at Rusty.

"And a question for you, Rusty."

Her brother blinked and sat up straight. "Oh, uh, sure?" He wasn't usually so clueless or lost. The news that AnnaBelle wasn't happy in their marriage—to the point of wanting a divorce—had stunned him mightily.

"Where are you in this process?" Gabe asked. "She's filed for divorce? You have a court date? There's—?" He stopped talking, because Rusty had started shaking his head after the first question.

“She hasn’t done anything,” he said. “She walked in today and said she’d met someone else, and she wanted to be with him.” He cleared his throat as his eyes turned glassy. He blinked and blinked and blinked.

Hilde reached over and put her hand on his knee, and he looked at her. Pure compassion flowed out of her, and she nodded. He did too, and Hilde met Gabe’s eyes.

He’d softened considerably, and she felt the empathy coming from him too. “She says she’s going to file for divorce,” Hilde said. “And she wanted him to move out.”

“Absolutely not,” Gabe said, his voice quite forceful. “Rusty, I know it’ll be tough and awkward, but you don’t have to move out of your house. Is your name on the mortgage?”

Rusty nodded somewhat numbly.

“Then it’s your house. Sleep in another bedroom, sure. But you don’t have to leave your house, especially if *she’s* the partner having an affair.” He spoke with such passion, and he came alive when talking about this in such a way that made him so much more attractive than Hilde already found him.

She’d been drawn to him like bees to honey before, and now it felt like someone had tied a tether around her waist and anchored it to him. She couldn’t look away from him as he started swiping on his phone.

“You live here,” he murmured to himself. “Carrie handles my schedule, but I can see it...” He swiped and frowned, and Hilde hid her smile behind her mug lest he look up and see it.

“Ah.” He looked up. “Here it is. What does Wednesday look like for you? I can squeeze you in for about forty minutes before another appointment.” He looked from Rusty to Hilde and back. Her brother wore a vacant expression, and Hilde nudged him with her foot. “Two-thirty?” Gabe prompted.

Hilde quickly added it to her own calendar. “Yes,” she said loudly. “Rusty will be there.” She noticed him flinch on his name, and her frustration flared as she stood and collected his cup. She put hers alongside his on the tray, added Gabe’s since he clearly wasn’t interested in drinking coffee when it was nearly evening, and glided back into the kitchen with everything.

She rinsed cups and put away the cream and sugar. When she turned around, Gabe had Rusty on his feet, and they were talking as they stood very close to one another. Okay, Gabe was talking, his mouth moving fast as he issued instructions. Hilde wanted to know what he was saying, but she could ask Rusty once they made their escape.

Gabe turned toward her as she approached, and Rusty moved to the front door. Gabe skimmed his hand along her waist, his entire demeanor softening. “Will you call me later?” His whispered request sent shivers racing from her scalp to her toes.

She didn’t trust her voice not to break, so she simply nodded. He did too, and then the seal on his house broke as Rusty opened the door, and she had no choice but to leave the warmth and safety of his touch and follow her brother outside.

Rusty lived on the northeast side of town, about a fifteen-minute drive. They made it in silence, Hilde’s mind churning on the image of Gabe’s broody eyes, the softness that had come into his mouth, and the brilliant look into his personal life he hadn’t wanted to give her.

Well, she had it now, and she’d committed to another date with him that she couldn’t wait for. As she and Rusty pulled into his driveway and the garage door started to lift, he said, “Thank you, Hilde. You don’t have to stay. I need to face this myself, Gabe said.”

She nodded, wondering what else Gabe had told him. “I understand,” she murmured, because she had plenty of things she needed to face herself—including her feelings for Gabriel Young.



“Shh.” He comforted his little girl as she started to whimper while he slid her into her own bed. “Go back to sleep, baby.”

Liesl settled right down, pressing her cheek into her puffy pillow, and Gabe covered her with the starry comforter his mother had made for her. Gabe watched her for an extra heartbeat, then another, and then he turned and left the room.

He didn’t close Liesl’s door all the way, because she didn’t like it. She didn’t end up in his bed every night when they lived in this house, but in the townhome in Coral Canyon, she did. Her bedroom sat next to his bathroom and master closet, so he left the sleeping areas of the house they used and went into the guest wing of the house.

He kept an office over here too that he used when he had to stay home with Liesl. It had a separate entrance, so he could see clients here and run the firm if his daughter was too sick for someone else to watch her. Sometimes, his nanny stayed over if the weather was particularly bad.

He went into the office and left the door ajar two inches. With the light on, if Liesl came looking for him, she’d know he was in here. “Can’t stay up late,” he muttered to himself, but he had two people he wanted to talk to before retiring.

Morris.

An instant anger filtered into his bloodstream, and he could just see it spreading through him the way someone might put a drop of red food coloring into clear water. He sat at the computer and opened the video call to

his brother. His phone rang, and while Liesl had stayed up an hour past her bedtime, and then fallen asleep in the theater room downstairs, it wasn't too late to have a conversation.

"Gabe," Morris said. "I'm surprised it took you this long to call."

Gabe said nothing while Morris got his video working. Looking at his twin was like looking into a mirror, and Gabe was still surprised sometimes that they had such different personalities when they'd come from the exact same genes.

"You're mad."

"Yes," Gabe clipped out. "My worlds collided, so of course I'm upset."

Morris tilted his head to the side, clearly hearing more than what Gabe had said. "She said it was a legal problem, and she was quite adamant she see you. She said she'd tried texting and calling, and you wouldn't answer."

"It's Sunday," Gabe said. "I have this work-life-father balance thing I'm trying to do."

"So she came over?"

"Yes."

"And you're mad this gorgeous woman you like showed up at your house?" Morris smiled while Gabe's emotions continued to storm through him.

"Who says I like her?"

"You did." Morris chuckled. "You've complained about how she won't get back with you. That you can't get a date set up. I thought, maybe...." He didn't finish the sentence, but he didn't need to.

"We went out last night," Gabe admitted, because this was Morris, and he'd always told his brother and best friend everything.

Morris's eyebrows rose. "Oh."

"I was in the process of asking her out again when her daughter called. She took the call, dropped me off like an errant child, and drove away."

Morris's face and shoulders wilted. "Oh."

Gabe sighed, letting go of the past twenty-four hours of worry. He'd beaten himself up plenty for not being able to open up the way Hilde wanted. "She doesn't like that I live an hour away."

Morris took a drink from a black water bottle. "You're here two or three days a week. It's almost half the time."

"It'll still be a challenge," Gabe said. "I'm there to work. My days in Coral Canyon are packed full." Maybe taking on a relationship with Hilde

simply wasn't in the cards right now. Bad timing. Wrong place. Something.

"Now your evenings will be too." Morris grinned at him. "I can see you ending this before it even starts, Gabe. I don't think you should do that."

Gabe's mind spun with all the things Hilde had said to him in the past two days. *I expect a really amazing first kiss.*

Really, *really* amazing.

A tremor ran through his body he didn't think Morris would notice. At least he hoped not. "I'm bringing her to the concert on Thursday."

Morris's smile widened and widened. "You're ready for that after one date and then a drop-in?"

"It wasn't even a personal drop-in." Gabe dropped his head, his shoulders leaving their power stance. "This is probably a huge mistake."

"I think some brothers will be surprised," Morris confirmed. "But that doesn't mean you shouldn't bring her. She'll fit in with the wives for sure."

Gabe agreed, but part of him bucked against that. Why, he wasn't sure. He should be able to date who he wanted, without worrying how they'd fit in with the other women who'd joined the Young family in recent years.

Yeah, and his first wife *should've* stopped using and selling drugs while she was pregnant. Sometimes *should* didn't meet up with *reality*, and Gabe knew that so well. He'd seen it and experienced it in his own life, as well as the hundreds of lives of men he'd worked with over the past few years to help them keep their kids when things went wrong in their marriages.

His brothers included.

"Hilde is friends with a lot of people in town," was what he said instead. "That alone might make this a bad idea."

"Gabe," Morris said, leaning forward. "I love you to my core. You are part of me. Right?"

"Yes," he murmured. Even when no one besides Mav was talking to Gabe, he'd never lost touch with Morris. Ever.

"So I can say this, and you'll know it comes from a place of pure love. Pure desire for you to be happy."

"Just say it," Gabe growled. "I have another call to make tonight."

Morris smiled at him, the soft, fraternal smile that spoke of love and friendship. "You are an incredible man. You have a beautiful home, and a pretty little girl. You literally fight for dads and kids to stay together. You are worthy of a woman like Hilde." He spoke the last sentence with such fervor that Gabe thought for a brief moment he might be right.

“I don’t like people looking at me,” he said.

Morris chuckled, but not in an unkind way. “Brother, that’s such a lie. You live to have people look at you.”

“Not in my personal life,” he said.

“And we all know that,” Morris said almost on top of his last word. “The concert is all family. No one is going to bother you.”

Gabe hoped for that, but he knew it wasn’t true. Morris would have himself and Leigh on super-friendly mode just for Hilde.

Tex and Otis would be all smiles. Trace would be his same watchful, observant, quiet self. He’d hold his tongue until he could talk to Gabe alone, but the eyes that man had. Gabe felt them on him now.

Mav would be an over-eager puppy, nearly desperate to welcome Hilde to the family—something neither of them could commit to right now.

Jem would stick to Blaze, who’d be cordial and kind, but aloof. That wasn’t quite the right word, but he wouldn’t cause a scene. He’d barely speak to Hilde, choosing instead to side with Trace and stare from a distance.

Luke....

Gabe didn’t even want to consider what Luke would do. He felt left out of the family for absolutely no reason whatsoever. Of the younger boys, he was the only one in the band, and he’d lorded it over everyone for a decade now. He’d used it as a shield to make himself mightier than Gabe, and now that everyone was back in town, Luke had once again taken on the challenge of proving to everyone that he was the best.

He worked out the hardest. He fathered better than everyone. He took care of his body, his house, his everything the best.

Gabe was tired of competing with Luke, and trying to find someone he loved and wanted to marry—and thus incorporate into the family—felt like a competition. Luke would certainly view it that way.

“Luke won’t care,” Morris said, as if reading Gabe’s mind.

“He’ll just glare knives in my direction all night.” Gabe gave Morris a sarcastic tilt of his mouth.

“Then confront him about it.”

“Yeah,” Gabe said while shaking his head. “That’s what I’m going to do. Make a scene on the second date, in front of the whole family. That’s insane.”

“Then do it before Thursday,” Morris said.

Gabe said nothing, because that wasn’t a bad idea. He’d been trying to

find a bridge to Luke, because right now, they just circled each other like predators waiting for the other to make the first move.

“I’ll let you get back to Leigh and the kids,” Gabe said, a hint of jealousy surging up his throat. Morris had the life Gabe wanted, and as the call ended with good-bye’s and I-love-you’s, all Gabe could see in his future was a family unit with him as the father...and Hilde at his side.

“THESE DON’T LOOK SO BAD,” BLAZE SAID, LOOKING UP FROM THE documents Gabe had brought with him. “Even with the market being how it is.”

“I’ve got you in long-term mutual funds,” Gabe said. “It’s a twenty-twenty-sixty percentage. The whole goal of that is to weather market volatility.”

Blaze smiled at him and tucked the papers into a folder, which he then bent to put in the bottom desk drawer. “So what do you think I should do next?”

“You’re going to get killed on your taxes if you don’t contribute the full amount to the SEP.”

“I’m planning to do that.”

“You have enough income?” Gabe asked.

“Seem to,” Blaze said easily. “I can talk to Karen about it, but she’s got me on a salary that should last into retirement, and then I’ll have those accounts.”

“And Cash?”

“Front door, open,” the security system said, and both Gabe and Blaze turned to see who’d just walked in.

“Luke,” Blaze said as he got to his feet. He’d had back surgery over a year ago, and he still took a moment to settle on his feet before he took a step. That allowed Luke to come into the office Blaze kept off his front entry.

“Hey.” Luke’s gaze swept over Gabe to Blaze. “What are you guys doing?”

“Nothing,” Gabe said as he stood too.

Unfortunately, Blaze said, “Financial stuff. Investments,” right over the top of Gabe’s statement.

Luke's dark eyes narrowed, and he zeroed in on Gabe. "Financial stuff? I thought you were a lawyer."

Gabe reached for his suit jacket. "I am."

"He's got a ton of experience in investing," Blaze said.

Gabe gave him a scathing look—at least he hoped so. Fire flowed from his fingertips and up his arms before shooting out of his eyes. "Blaze," he said quietly.

"You do?" Luke asked.

Gabe drew his shoulders into his power stances. "I interned for about nine months with a hedge fund manager," he said. "I learned a lot."

"He's been handling my investments for years," Blaze said.

"Blaze." Gabe didn't try to hide the chastisement in his voice. "This is not common knowledge."

Blaze glared right back at Gabe, not chastised at all. "He needs help."

Gabe looked at Luke, who stood perfectly framed in the arched doorway, his fists clenched. "He does?" He cleared his throat, wishing with every fiber of his being he wasn't so called to help others.

"You do?" he challenged.

Luke stood there, swallowing, and Gabe waited for him to say something before he made an offer he might regret.



Luke Young stood staring at the brother he didn't get along with all that well. He shouldn't be shocked that Gabe knew the ins and outs of investing. He also didn't want to admit that he was so stupid as to not have done anything to secure his financial future. Literally nothing.

He reasoned he was only thirty years old. He had plenty of time to get his finances straightened out and invested somewhere. It had been niggling at him in the back of his mind, and he didn't even know what to do with the checks Morris deposited in his bank account. The money just sat there, and Luke had never been all that good with numbers.

Rhythms, yes. Beats, sure. He could count to four over and over again. But decimals and percentages and actual math? No.

"Yeah," he said in a burst of air. "I need help." He drew in a deep breath the way the woman on the online training he'd been doing did, and he blew it out his nose too, trying to find a calm place inside himself.

He looked over to Blaze as the man drew closer to him. His older brother had become such a safe place for Luke, and he'd stopped by to see if Blaze wanted to get some lunch before the kids got out of school. Another truck had been here, but Blaze's house had a revolving door, and Luke knew he'd find a brother or another cowboy here. Or maybe he wouldn't. At Blaze's, he never knew.

"How much money is in your bank account?" Blaze asked.

"A bank account?" Gabe's eyebrows couldn't get any higher, and that only irritated Luke enough to spiral him back to his shallow breathing.

His fists tightened. “A lot,” he said.

“How much you makin’ on this tour?” Blaze asked next.

Luke gritted his teeth and glared at his brother. Blaze only gave him a small smile, a pat on the back, and his retreat. He called over his shoulder, “We can all go to lunch when y’all are done talking.”

“I can’t go to lunch,” Gabe said, nowhere near loud enough for Blaze to hear from further inside his house. “I have a client meeting in thirty minutes.” He bent and picked up his briefcase.

“Gabe,” Luke said, swallowing down his nerves. “I’m a big mess. If you can help me, I’d really appreciate that.” He cleared his throat and folded his arms. “I’d really like it too.”

Gabe stared at him, and Luke knew why. He was closest in age to the twins, but he’d treated them poorly when he’d joined the band straight out of high school. He knew that now.

“I’m really sorry about...things,” Luke said.

His brother shook his head. “It’s fine.” He took a step toward the door, but Luke darted in front of him.

“It’s not fine.” He held up both hands. “I’ve been needing to apologize to you for a long time. Will you let me do it?”

Annoyance rode Gabe’s brow, but he nodded.

“Thank you.” Luke cleared his throat. “Look, I’ll just say it. I was a real jerk to you and Morris. To you, specifically. Of course you’re talented, and any of us could join this band and be millionaires.”

He had no idea what he was saying. Luke had practiced this apology a bunch of times, but it hadn’t gone anything like this in his head.

“I was wrong to say I was better than you, and I don’t think that. I’ve never thought that.”

Gabe didn’t react at all, and something inside Luke told him to wrap this up. He squeezed his fingers together for a final time and released them. “I’m so sorry, Gabe. I hope you can forgive me and...yeah. Maybe we can start to be friends and get to know each other as real men and fathers and...stuff.”

He cursed himself for not knowing exactly how to apologize to his brother, and as the moment between him and Gabe lengthened, Luke grew more and more awkward.

Then Gabe stepped forward and drew Luke into a hug. Luke didn’t really hug anyone but his daughter and his momma, but he relaxed fully in his brother’s arms and embraced him back. His emotions broke, and he said, “I

love you, Gabe. I'm so, so sorry," as tears wetted his eyelashes and the corners of his eyes.

"It's all over," Gabe said. "Done, okay?" He stepped back and held onto Luke's shoulders as they looked at one another. "Heaven and everyone in the family knows how cruel I was to you."

Luke shook his head, because that was over too.

"Have you forgiven me for that?" Gabe asked. He'd apologized for the things he'd said about Luke's ex-wife, daughter, and paternity, and as Luke looked at his brother's dark eyes, his long eyelashes so characteristic of the Youngs, and his perfectly styled hair, Luke felt the cleansing wash of forgiveness flow over him.

It felt like someone putting a hot blanket straight from the dryer over his entire body at the same time. Head to toe, he was instantly warm, and he knew.

"Yeah," he whispered. "I forgive you for that."

Gabe closed his eyes and leaned his forehead against Luke's. "And I forgive you for this."

"So we're good," Luke said, and for the first time in a decade, it wasn't a question.

"We're good," Gabe said as he pulled away.

Luke opened his eyes and nodded as his brother came back into focus. He hated having hard conversations like this, and he had another one jiggling around in his mind. He'd take care of that when he went to see Sterling for his massage.

Maybe, he thought.

No, no maybes, he told himself. *You're going to talk to her about coming on tour with you.*

No more chickening out, the other half of his brain said.

Country Quad left in a little over two weeks, and his window to talk to Sterling about coming as the band's full-time masseuse was long overdue. It wasn't just for *him*; it was for everyone.

"So...how much money are we talking about?" Gabe asked.

Luke stiffened, but Gabe turned him toward the front door as they took a step in that direction. "If I'm going to manage your money, you have to trust me. I will not talk to anyone else about your finances. I will look at what you have, what you've done, and you'll tell me what you want. Then I'll devise a plan for you from there."

Gabe reached the door and extended his hand to open it. “And I’m not taking on anyone else. Don’t people understand that I’m running a busy law firm with two offices now? And I’m a single dad?” He shook his head. “I can’t be everyone’s investment advisor.”

“If you can’t—” Luke started.

“I can,” Gabe said quickly. “I want to, Luke. Just tell me point-blank.” He didn’t look over his shoulder to see if Blaze or Jem were lingering within earshot.

Luke blinked and decided he didn’t care if they were. “Each of us in the band will get about two hundred million for this tour alone,” he said. The number sounded absolutely ridiculous said out loud. He cleared his throat and kept going. “I have about five times that sitting in a bank account down the road a bit.”

“You are not serious,” Gabe hissed, his eyes narrowing.

Luke nodded, not sure which part bothered Gabe the most. The fact that Luke had almost a billion dollars and certainly would after this summer tour? Or the fact that the Bank of Coral Canyon held every dime he owned?

“Luke.” Gabe shook his head, the disbelief mingling with the disappointment.

“I know,” Luke managed to croak out.

“I’m not cheap,” Gabe said. “I earn a full percent of all the money I manage, and this will be a *huge* account.”

“Not as big as Blaze’s.”

“Yeah, and he’s complicated,” Gabe shot back. “I should charge double for his account.”

Luke drew in a breath through his nose at a count of four, held it for four, and blew it out for four. Gabe still stood there, and all Luke could think of to say was, “Please, Gabe.”

His brother’s strong, boxy shoulders fell. “Will you call my office manager and set up an appointment? If we can do it before you leave on tour, I can spend the summer putting something together for you that you can review afterward.”

Relief like Luke hadn’t known since he’d opened the envelope holding his paternity test flooded through him. “Thank you, Gabe.” He gripped his brother in another hug. “I’ll call right now and get on your schedule.” He stepped back, and Gabe stepped outside.

“Great,” his brother muttered, and then he strode away and down the

steps. Luke knew now that Gabe was always just a little bit grumpy, even when he was happy. He smiled at his retreating back and then closed the door and faced Blaze's house.

Somehow Blaze knew exactly when to show up, and he appeared down near the turn that led into the kitchen. "Well?"

"I'm going to call his office manager." Luke pulled his phone out of his pocket, wondering if he could prime Sterling for his request for her too. "Thank you, Blaze."

"You need help," Blaze said. "Gabe's amazing."

"Yeah," Luke said absently. His thumbs flew over his phone while his mind short-circuited. He read over the message, freaked out, and started to erase it.

"What are you doin'?" Blaze asked, and Luke looked up from his phone. At least now it only said, *Hey Sterling, I have a wild idea I want to*

"Are we going to lunch or what?" Blaze held up his keys. "You can call from the truck. I'm starving."

"Yeah." Luke followed his brother, shoving his phone in his back pocket. It wasn't until he got in the truck and Blaze backed out of the garage and went up and around the house that he looked at his phone again, and only to call Gabe's office and get his appointment set up.

That's when he saw his partial message to Sterling had been sent. To her. And she hadn't responded yet.

Panic hit him square in the chest. "How can I unsend a text?" he asked Blaze.

"You can't do that, bro," Blaze said. "Who'd you text?" He looked over to Luke, interest in his eyes.

Luke shoved his phone under his thigh and stared out the passenger window. "No one."

"Mm," Blaze said, which really meant he didn't believe Luke. Which was fine. Luke could tell him—Blaze wouldn't make fun of him—but he didn't want to. Sterling didn't check her phone very often, because she didn't take it into the treatment room with her clients.

Great, Luke thought. Just more agony to what I'm already experiencing.

He'd been harboring a small crush on his massage therapist for a while now. Six or seven months maybe. Fine, almost ten.

She was tall and curvy and blonde, all the things Luke liked upon first glance at a woman. She had curly hair that she hated and he liked. Strong

hands that tortured him and relieved him all at the same time. A quick smile, and a soothing voice. She cared about people and animals, and Luke wanted to get to know her better than he did.

But it was awkward to go from silently getting his entire body rubbed down by the woman to asking her out. He hadn't been able to find a way to connect the two that didn't leave him standing in front of her, possibly getting rejected, wearing a robe with nothing on underneath.

"So," Blaze said. "Are you bringing anyone to the concert tonight?"

Luke swung his attention toward Blaze. "Why would I be doing that?"

"Maybe this person you 'accidentally' texted."

"It *was* an accident," Luke said. "And you have no idea who I texted."

Blaze smiled and made a lazy right turn. "No, but judging by how white your face still is, I'm guessing it's a woman."

"It's no one," Luke said, and a bigger lie had never been spoken.



Hilde left her bedroom while her left earlobe refused to take the earring. Lynn timer's voice filtered down the hall from the front door, so Hilde didn't hear everything she said. She managed to slide the hook on her earring through her ear, and that was the final piece she needed to be presentable for the concert that evening.

"Bye, Mom!" she called just as Hilde arrived in the living area. She looked toward the front door, caught the tail-end of Lynn timer's wave before her daughter ducked out the door with her father, and flinched at the resulting slam.

"Bye," she said to the empty house. She and Lynn timer had no pets, as they weren't home for longer than dinner, breakfast, and sleeping. Sometimes not even on the weekends, though Hilde did close the store every Sunday and early on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings.

Not Thursdays, though, and she'd already told her evening manager to handle whatever happened. "Short of a fire in the building," Hilde had said. "Don't call me."

She'd arranged with her ex-husband to take Lynn timer on a daddy-daughter date that evening, and she'd informed Gabe that she needed to be home by ten-thirty. He'd said, *If we stay until ten-thirty, I will literally be homicidal, so no worries there.*

He'd followed it with a crying-so-hard-it-was-laughing emoji, but Hilde detected some truth to the statement. And he'd made it to her, which really showed he had started to kick down at least some of the walls between them.

She hoped.

She moved into the kitchen to make a quick cup of tea, mostly because she needed to settle her nerves. Honey and lemon should do it, and she enjoyed the peaceful silence in her home as she set about putting on the kettle and rolling the lemon to get the juices released from the pulp inside.

A sigh slipped through her lips as she sank onto the barstool, the teacup already on its arc toward her lips. The scent of sweet lemon filtered through the steam and into her nose, further settling her. Then the doorbell rang before she could get a taste of her homemade stress relief.

Startled, she jerked, and hot honey-lemon water slopped over the side of the cup and onto the back of her hand. She cried out and stood all in the same motion, working not to throw the teacup and break it.

Torn between answering the door and getting cold water and then ice onto her hand, Hilde stood frozen in the kitchen for a few moments. Then she flew toward the sink and flipped it to cold. "Come in!" she yelled, wondering if Gabe really would or not. With the water running, she wouldn't hear if the door opened, but she sensed more than heard Gabe's approach, as if the cells in his body and the cells in hers needed to be close to each other so badly, they strained to get there.

"Hey," he said as Hilde turned to greet him.

"I just burned my hand on my tea," she said, trying to drink in the sight of him and focus on her stinging skin at the same time.

He moved to her side, and her nerves rejoiced to be so close to him. "Is it bad?"

"It's fine," she said. "The doorbell startled me."

He wore a frown between his eyes, but the most spectacular thing on his person was that dark, deep, deliciously black cowboy hat.

Hilde couldn't move. Her heartbeat hammered like one of those big steel drums. Or the big kettley ones in symphonies and orchestras. All four of them at once.

The man was absolutely beautiful already, what with his strong, clean-shaven jaw and that straight, sloped nose that ended in the most perfectly, narrow point. His eyes seemed to see anything and everything at once as they landed on hers, and neither of them moved after that.

Hilde had half a mind to kiss him right now. Her emotions swirled and heaved, because it was really more like a full mind to kiss him right now.

The water continued to run, but her hand didn't even sit in the stream

anymore. She blinked, and the gorgeous lines in his face dissolved into something softer as he smiled.

“You look amazing,” he whispered.

“Thank you,” fell from her lips, an automatic reaction to the compliment.

Gabe reached over and pushed her hair back off the side of her face, his eyes tracking the movement of his hand. A path of fire trailed from her eyebrow to her neck, where he then dropped his hand. “Do you need a Band-aid or something?” He focused on the sink, and Hilde jolted for the second time in only a few minutes.

“No.” She quickly reached to turn off the water. A pink splotch sat on the back of her hand, but it barely hurt anymore. “I’m fine.” She turned away from him, but not before the sharp, tangy, woodsy scent of his cologne hit her nose.

She wanted to bury her face in his shirt and inhale the deepest breath of her life. The desire to do so screamed through her, but she reached for a kitchen towel to dry her hands instead.

“I wasn’t sure if there’d be dancing,” she said, her mouth trying to keep up with her racing thoughts. “But I thought a skirt would be prudent.” She glanced over to him to find him leaning back against the sink, those magnificent arms folded and that hat tipped low over his eyes.

That so wasn’t fair. He wore a pair of black slacks—slacks, not jeans—and a button-up shirt the soft, pale, white color of peach fuzz. It wasn’t quite white, but it wasn’t yellow, and orange was way off the mark.

No tie. No cufflinks. No dress shoes. Oh, no. Those had been replaced with black cowboy boots, and Hilde would swear in a court of law that the stitching on them matched the shirt to perfection.

Cowboy perfection, that was what this man was.

And he was standing in her kitchen.

“There might be dancing,” he admitted.

“Do you dance, Gabe?” she asked, facing him fully. She wondered what he saw when he looked at her. She’d chosen a black skirt with ruffles from hip to hem, and she’d paired it with big, floppy leather earrings and a floral-patterned blouse that had a lining over the bust and torso, but left the fabric sheer from shoulder to wrist.

She folded her arms too, mirroring him. His mouth blipped up into a smile. “Yeah,” he said. “I can dance. My momma taught us, and Miss Everly sure does think we could all use some lessons.”

“Do you take dancing lessons from your brother’s wife?” Hilde asked. Everly Avery—now Everly Young—was one of Hilde’s best friends in town. She would positively die if Hilde and Gabe started dating.

You have started dating, Hilde told herself, because she was too old to pretend she and Gabe didn’t have something between them. The man had asked her out on more than one date, and they’d completed one already. Tonight made a second, and that meant *dating*.

Gabe shook his head, that smile only increasing. “No, she hasn’t convinced me I need it.”

“I guess we’ll see,” Hilde said as if she alone would determine Gabe’s dancing ability. “You look handsome in the hat.”

He looked up to it like maybe he’d forgotten it was there. “Thanks,” he said before his eyes settled on hers again. Gabe pushed away from the counter and took the single step into her personal space. He took one of her hands in his and said, “Should we go?”

Her mind blanked at the pure pleasure radiating from where he touched her. “Yes.” It almost felt forbidden and special to be holding this man’s hand, and as they moved toward the front exit, she asked, “Will you hold my hand out at the farm? In front of everyone?”

“Do you not want me to?”

“I want to know if you’re going to.”

A soft, almost imperceptible, sigh met her ears. “Yeah,” he said. “I’d like to.”

She turned back to him as she opened her hall closet to get a jacket. Just because it was the middle of May didn’t mean it would be warm, especially once the sun went down. “Everyone will see us. They’ll have questions.”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t think....” She turned back to the closet and selected a black jacket with a tie around the waist.

He took it from her and helped her into it. With her back to him, he leaned down and whispered in her ear. “I just said I wouldn’t be telling them anything until we were ready for them to know it. I’m okay with them knowing we’re seeing each other.”

“Is that what we’re doing?”

“You know it is.” He chuckled and swept his lips up on her cheek. “You can call it dating if you want. You can call me your boyfriend. Whatever is fine with me.” He turned her in his arms, and Hilde looked up at him as he

moved his hands to her waist. “Do you mind if I call you my girlfriend?”

She honestly hadn’t been expecting to define everything tonight, on the second date. Gabe was a no-nonsense type of man, though, and Hilde could operate inside boundaries she understood.

Gabe gazed down at her, something soft and pleasant in his eyes she’d only seen one other time. The man had a million faces, and she wanted to see and get to know them all. “All right,” she said quietly.

The excitement building inside her shouted—which wasn’t quiet at all—but at least Gabe couldn’t hear it.

A boyfriend.

Hilde hadn’t had one of those in years. Even when she’d been married to Ethan, they hadn’t been.... He’d never looked at her the way Gabe currently was, and the love between them had shriveled only a couple of years after Linnie had been born.

Gabe finally allowed a smile to come to his face. “All right,” he repeated, though his voice drew out the word into a cowboy drawl, which made Hilde grin too.

“I love you in the hat,” she said, only realizing what three words she’d spoken after they’d flown from her mouth. “Very sexy.” She stepped out of his arms and started adjusting her coat, or she might do something horribly rash and kiss him before they even left.

Everly would’ve done something like that. Maybe even Faith, especially after that video that had circulated through the gossip mill of her kissing Blaze in the outdoor market a few months ago.

But Hilde wasn’t like other women. She held her energy and her emotions and her feelings close to her heart. That way, no one could scatter them across the floor and stomp on them with spiky shoes.

“I know how to dress a part,” Gabe said, his hand sliding down her arm to settle his fingers between hers. Crackles and pops shot up to her elbow, and this touch electrified everything female inside her.

Suddenly, she wished they had a reservation at the busiest restaurant in Coral Canyon, if only so everyone could see her with him.

As it was, she let him guide her out her own front door and to his truck. The pick-up towered above the ground, and he put pressure on her lower back as she boosted herself up and into the passenger seat. The soft cushion held her, and she fastened her seatbelt before he got behind the wheel.

Dusk had fallen, with darkness less than a half-hour away. Hilde shifted

and cleared her throat, wondering if she should ask a question first, or if Gabe had something he wanted to know.

“Tell me about Ethan,” Gabe said.

Hilde’s heart crashed to the soles of her feet and burst into flames. “You want to know about my ex-husband?”

Gabe cut a look over to her. “How long have you been divorced?”

“Five years.” Hilde folded her arms, this topic sending itchiness along her skin. “I’m sure he told you plenty when he hired you for the custody hearing.”

“A little,” Gabe said, his voice the forced kind of casual that suggested otherwise. “I don’t believe everything my clients tell me, Hilde.” He reached over and took her hand again, this time drawing it all the way to his lips, where he pressed a kiss to the inside of her wrist.

Her skin positively sizzled, and a sigh moved through her body when he settled their joined hands on his thigh. “I know Ethan’s case was a joke,” he said. The low timbre of his tone, combined with the low volume, made him nearly impossible to hear. “I passed him to Brian, but we won’t represent him again. We don’t have time for nonsense cases.”

Hilde’s shoulders lifted. “I’m glad you know it was nonsense now.”

“I knew it then,” he said. “I do what I’m paid to do, however. I try to advise my clients to the best of my ability, but in the end, I do what they pay me to do.”

She watched him as he navigated the turn at the end of her block. Her lungs softened, which allowed her chest to relax. Along with that, her internal organs stopped vibrating, and she sat fully in her seat, grounded now.

“I trust you,” she whispered.

Gabe nodded. “Thank you, Hilde.” He came to a stop at an intersection and looked fully at her. “That means a lot to me.”

Hilde could really only navigate her relationships—and her life—based on how she felt. She tried not to make rash decisions in the heat of the moment. Emotion never played a part in the way she ran her business. She tried to keep it out of her parenting too, but that was much harder, and she often failed in that regard.

“Lynnies with Ethan tonight,” she said. “They’re on a daddy-daughter date. Dinner, movie, bingsu.”

“I love bingsu,” he said, his voice lighting up. “Do they have a place here now?”

“Yes,” she said. “It’s only a couple of blocks from the store. I walk over there sometimes if I need an escape.”

“Good to know,” he said, finally reaching the eastern-most block and turning left. This road would eventually leave behind the residential neighborhoods and branch out into a highway dotted with ranches and farms.

Tex and Abby lived about a mile from the junction that led west-and-east across the northern-most edge of town, and if they stayed on the road, they’d get to Dog Valley in only another twenty minutes.

From there, a right turn and another half-hour would land them in Rusk.

“Anyway,” Hilde said, sighing as she pulled herself out of her childhood memories in the old, square brick house in Rusk. “Ethan traveled a lot. I got pregnant within the first year, and I managed Linnie and my job the best I could. My corporate job didn’t work out, but being a buyer for the boutique also required travel and retail hours.”

Her mind flowed to her younger years, but she didn’t allow it to wander for long. “When the furniture store here went up for sale, I had a friend I’d been to college with who wanted to buy it. Thomas Fitzgerald—the man we saw at dinner over the weekend.”

“Yes, I remember him,” Gabe said faintly.

“It would give me more time at home. I could set my own hours. I’m good at curating product for a store, and this was closer to Rusk, where my momma still lived at the time. So I wanted it. When I told Ethan, he....”

Freaked out were the words she wanted to say. She also didn’t want to be the person to complain about their ex. She’d been protecting Linnie from the worst of her thoughts for a while now, and Hilde didn’t like the negativity in her own head as it was. Letting it come out caused stains she couldn’t get out, and she’d rather just keep them to herself, work through them in therapy, and move on.

“He didn’t want to leave Jackson,” she said. “He accused me of cheating on him, and it didn’t help that my first relationship once the divorce was final was with Thomas.” She sighed, remembering how foolish she’d been. “Turns out, he was the one with a girlfriend in Chicago, one in Phoenix, and one in Raleigh. Once I learned that, I wanted the divorce too, and the judge agreed with me that I should have full custody.”

“Unbelievable,” Gabe said.

Hilde looked at him. “Which part?”

“I don’t understand men who cheat,” he said simply. His eyes grazed

down her body. “Especially on a woman like you.”

Warmth moved through Hilde, but she still said, “I’m going to take that as a compliment.”

“Good,” he said, his voice gruff. “Because it was one.”

“What about you?” she asked, feeling herself stepping out onto icy, glass ground. If she leaned her weight too far into it, it would shatter, and she felt certain she’d lose Gabe forever. “Do you want to share a little about your ex-wife?”

There. She’d stepped out from behind the tree and onto the ice. Now, she hoped she wouldn’t slip and fall to the horrible death of this relationship.



No, Gabe did not want to share anything about his ex-wife. He shifted in his seat. Left and right. Right and left. He also wanted to trust Hilde the way she'd said she trusted him. Not only that, but she'd shown him she trusted him by telling him the horrible things Ethan had done.

"Kendra," he said, his tongue barely able to form the name. "She's my ex." He cleared his throat, and Hilde's fingers in his tightened. He focused on the warmth there, the tight lock of their fingers. He imagined a light to start there, and he forced it to move up his arm and into his throat.

"She's in prison," he said slowly and carefully. "We'd only been married for a couple of years when Liesl was born. The nurses—they—" He'd literally only ever texted this to a few people. Not even all of his brothers knew. Pieces, sure. But not everything.

"It's okay," Hilde said in the most velvety voice on the planet. "You'll tell me when you're ready."

"I want to," he said. "I can." He drew in a deep breath and tried again. "The nurses, they took the baby, you know? It was a girl, and we hadn't decided on a name yet. I went with them while the doctor continued with Kendra, and one of the nurses—I will never forget her face. She had these bright blue eyes, round as the full moon. She wore pink lip gloss, and I had to focus on that to stay in the moment after she told me."

He could still smell the antiseptic in the room. The softness of baby powder as it floated through the air. The sharp scent of betrayal and the nauseating smell of a marriage falling to pieces.

“Told you what?” Hilde prompted.

“Liesl wasn’t—isn’t—normal. Kendra had been using drugs during her pregnancy. The baby—Liesl—wasn’t addicted, but she had some other signs. The nurse—I still see her sometimes—asked me if I wanted them to test Kendra. I said yes.”

Gabe swallowed, thinking of how he’d once thought he’d betrayed his wife. “She came back positive, and she was arrested right there in the hospital only a couple of hours later. She’d been dealing and using drugs for our entire marriage. I—I didn’t know. Hadn’t known.”

Pure humiliation filled him. He hated this feeling of absolute idiocy. Anger quickly followed, and while he’d been pointing it more and more at the appropriate sources, some of it inevitably came back to him.

He should’ve known.

He should’ve been around more. Then he’d have known.

He should’ve been less ambitious. More attentive. Less this. More something.

“Gabe,” Hilde said, her voice quiet and powerful at the same time. “I’m so sorry.”

“She’s never met Liesl,” he said. “Not even one time. I knew the law, and I made sure she wouldn’t be able to hurt my daughter.” He glanced over to Hilde, wondering what she thought of him now. She wore a surprised expression on her face, but nothing resembling fear or horror.

“I named her myself. I took a month away from everything, and when I came back, I got a newborn nanny, threw myself into finishing my studies for the bar exam and building my practice.”

He’d been working like a dog to make sure Liesl wanted for nothing. To be mother and father for her.

He was so, so tired.

“Do you still have a nanny?”

“Yes,” he said.

“One of Ethan’s mistresses was a nanny,” she said.

Gabe’s gaze flew to hers, his heart pounding for a reason he couldn’t name. “Well, mine is a man, and he’s been married to his partner for four years.”

Hilde’s eyebrows went up. “You have a male nanny?”

“Waylon is a manny,” Gabe said. “He and Paul don’t have kids, and he’s absolutely fantastic with them. He mostly works from my house, but

sometimes he takes Liesl to his when he has his niece and nephew with him.”

“That’s great,” Hilde said easily, and Gabe started to relax. Tex’s place sat up the road only another couple of miles, and Gabe’s fight-or-flight reflex jumped back into high gear. His brothers. Their kids.

Their wives.

Oh, yes, the wives would be the real issue, as Gabe’s brothers would hug him hello, greet Hilde cordially, and that would be that.

The wives...they’d flock over, gushing and complimenting Hilde, and he’d lose her to them while they all giggled and gossiped. Gabe hated giggling and gossiping more than about anything. Maybe not as much as chili, but enough to have it on his Top Ten Dislike List.

“Where’s Liesl tonight?” she asked. “I’m assuming your family will all be here.”

“Yeah,” he said. “She’ll be here too.” He glanced over to her. “I barely see her at things like this. Morris and Leigh had her and they’re bringing her. She’ll be stuck like glue to Eric, Corrine, and Beth. Sometimes Joey, but Otis’s daughter is getting older now.” He gave her a quick smile and when he looked out the windshield again, he could see Tex’s place in the distance.

As he pulled up, turned around, and then faced back toward town along the road, Hilde said, “Thank you for telling me about Kendra.”

Gabe stopped half on the road and half off and put the truck in park. “Thanks for telling me about Ethan.” He started to unbuckle. “Stay there. You’re on the lawn, and I’ll come help you, so you don’t trip and die.”

She nodded, and Gabe flew from the truck. The sun had gone behind the Grand Tetons, bathing the land in gray shadows while gold and pink stuck in the sky. It faded even as Gabe rounded his truck, and it would be dark in a matter of minutes.

He ignored the music coming from the direction of the house, doing his best to tamp down his nerves too. Of the dozens of people who’d be here tonight, only a few knew Gabe wouldn’t be arriving alone.

He was arriving near the end of the pack, the way he always did. That way, people would be into their appetizers and conversations, and he could just sidle up and join them. That was his philosophy, anyway.

Upon opening his door, he realized how far down the lawn was from the road. His eyes met Hilde’s, and she had to look down at him. “Easy,” he said. “It’s a bit of a drop.” He eyed it, but Hilde twisted, put one hand on his shoulder and one on his chest, and she slid from the truck as she used him as

a support.

Sparks exploded through his body, even through the fabric. Her touch burned everywhere, and Gabe only wanted more of it.

His good sense told him to back up and give her room, which he did. She stumbled for a single step, and then they were on level ground. “Not my most graceful moment,” she said as she pulled down the bottom of her coat.

Gabe closed the door and faced the house. “Bad parking job. I might have to move so you can get back in.”

Hilde smiled as he stepped to her side, and this time, instead of Gabe reaching for her hand, they moved toward each other at the same time. That made his heart beat in a way it hadn’t since his teen years, and he wondered what that said about Hilde. Or about himself.

“Sounds like everyone’s here,” she commented mildly.

“Yeah.” He led her across the lawn toward the front door. Tex and Abby had been clear that the party would be outside, at least partially, and a round of laughter rose from the backyard testifying as much. “I almost always arrive late,” he added as an admission.

“Really?” Hilde glided along beside him, seemingly not even touching the grass. “That surprises me, Mister Young. A lawyer who’s late?”

“Just to family functions.” He reached up and pulled at his already loose collar. He hadn’t even done up the top two buttons. “My family and I...we... a lot of us are still learning to like one another.”

Mostly him. They were still learning to like him, and he was learning to like them.

“Your family is really big,” she said. “That’s to be expected.”

“Big,” he agreed. “And really loud.” He reached the sidewalk and went up the steps to the porch, sudden panic filling every available spot inside his body. He ducked in front of Hilde. “I should’ve given you a warning about them.”

Hilde surprised him by smiling. “Honey.” She put her free hand flat against his chest. “I’ve met a lot of your family already. I know who they are.”

“You know their names,” he muttered. “That’s different than knowing who someone is.”

“True.” She leaned into his weight, extracted her hand from his, and wrapped her arms around him. “It’s fine. We already agreed what we are. We know who we are.” She tipped her head back and looked at him.

Gabe struggled to comprehend her words, what with how close she stood to him, how...intimately she'd hugged him. He hadn't had this level of sophistication and...emotion in a relationship in a while.

It scared him right to his core, if he were being honest. His last relationship had been a fling, and they'd both known it. Lots of giggling. Lots of kissing. Nothing more.

No real conversations. No hard admissions. Absolutely no talk of children, exes, or family.

This felt like his first adult—truly adult—relationship, and he had no idea how to navigate it.

Ask for help.

The words came into his mind unbidden, and he instantly wanted to push such a thought away. He didn't, though, because the image of Luke standing in front of him, fists clenched as he admitted he needed help filled his mind.

Images of Blaze moving back to Coral Canyon, this town he'd hated for so long, flooded his memories. Images of Jem, sobbing and broken at a family intervention only several months ago reminded Gabe that he wasn't alone.

He could ask for help and get it, and no one would think poorly of him for it.

He took a deep breath and nodded at Hilde. "All right, then. You ready to go in?"

"So ready." She smiled at him, and Gabe reached to open Tex's front door. The music grew louder, the sounds of chatter and laughter reaching the front of the house though the party was definitely in the back.

The house opened into the living room, and Gabe stepped inside, tugging Hilde after him. No one sat in the living room, where a playpen sat along with the usual furniture. The dining room opened up in a direct line of sight from the front door, with a hallway moving left into bedrooms and right into the newly remodeled kitchen.

The whole house had been newly remodeled after Tex had purchased it a couple of years ago. Almost four now, actually.

The sliding glass doors stood open at the back of the house, where twinkling lights lit the deck and outdoor space beyond. Only two people sat at the table, and Mav nearly upended the whole thing when he realized who he was looking at.

"Gabe," he said, righting himself and striding forward. "You made it."

“You make it sound like there’s a snowstorm delaying everyone.” Gabe gave Mav the sharpest look he could muster and then stepped into his brother’s embrace. He already knew he arrived last, and he hated everyone calling him on it.

Harry, the other person at the table, hadn’t moved. He nodded to Gabe and went back to his phone, and Gabe returned to Hilde’s side and indicated Mav. “My brother, Mav. Not sure you’ve met?”

“Dani keeps your store in business single-handedly.” Mav chuckled as he shook Hilde’s hand, and then stepped into her and gave her a half-hug, complete with a light pat on the back. She did the same, her smile brilliant and absolutely beautiful.

Gabe couldn’t believe he’d gotten her to go out with him again. Not only that, but only a few days later, he’d given her a girlfriend label. He’d given no one that label in a long time, and it still felt tight and constraining. He had no idea how to be a boyfriend or have a girlfriend, but he wanted to try.

“I love Dani,” Hilde agreed. “How are the kids?”

“Good.” Mav rocked back onto his heels. “I mean, good enough. We almost left Lars on the side of the road on the way here, but Georgia charmed him back into a human being, so no one’s getting arrested tonight.”

They all laughed together, and Gabe looked toward the doors. “Is Morris here?”

“Yep.” Mav turned toward the table and retreated back the way he’d come. “Most everyone is outside. All the food is out there. Liesl was with Faith last time I saw her.”

Faith? Gabe really liked Faith. Out of all the wives, she was one of the calmer ones. Of course, everyone who’d joined the family in the past few years had calmed the Young men in some way. And Lord knew they needed that.

“She had doughnuts,” Harry said, and everything aligned in Gabe’s head.

“Hilde,” he said. “This is my nephew, Harry. He’s Trace’s son.”

Harry extended his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” She tilted her head. “Your daddy bought some hammocks for your yard. Were those for you?”

Harry’s face brightened. “Yeah, I love them. Me and my friends lay out there all the time.”

Hilde patted his shoulder as she faced the exit. “Good. I’m glad.”

Gabe marveled at her ability to remember what Trace had bought. He

pressed in beside Hilde. “Was that recently?”

“What?” she asked.

“That purchase.” He squeezed out the too-narrow door with her, not wanting to be more than two inches from her for the rest of the evening.

“No,” she said. “Last spring.”

“Gabe!”

It felt like several men shouted at once, and Gabe’s first inclination was to turn tail and leave. His hand along Hilde’s back tightened, and thankfully, she shrank into him too. She was no shrinking person, but he sure did like how closely they stood, her shoulder pressed right into his chest.

“Here we go,” he muttered, and then he pasted on a smile and greeted the first person moving toward him. “Howdy, brother.” He grabbed onto Tex with both arms and pounded him on the back. “You ready for this?”

“Heavens, no.” Tex laughed, his face full of joy as he pulled away. “I’m too old for this anymore.”

“He is not,” Trace said. “Because if he is, I am.” He grinned and took Tex’s place in Gabe’s arms. They chuckled together for a few seconds, and then Gabe pulled in a breath and straightened his shirt.

“Guys, this is Hilde O’Dell.”

She slid her arm through his, and wow, Gabe wanted her to claim him as hers like this over and over. He looked down at her, his throat closing at her nearness, her beauty. “Hilde, these are a couple of my brothers. Tex; he’s the oldest. Trace, who’s right behind him.”

“Good to see you again,” Tex said, and he drew Hilde into a tight hug too. Trace, ever more reserved than Tex, nodded at Hilde and shook her hand.

“You two goin’ out?” he asked. So he wasn’t that reserved.

“Yeah.” Gabe lifted his ribcage and made his chest bigger. “Just barely, so it would be great if you’d try not to scare her away before she realizes how insane we are.”

Tex and Trace both laughed, and while Gabe wore a smile on his face, he wasn’t exactly joking.

“Maybe we should have everyone over here.” Tex twisted and actually started flapping his arms to call the family over to this corner of the deck. “To meet Hilde.”

“Not necessary,” Gabe growled. “Trace.”

“He’s unstoppable,” Trace said. “Just roll with it.”

Gabe didn’t want to roll with it. To make himself feel better, he slid his

hand along Hilde's back and tucked her flush against his side.

"Otis," he said. "Just older than Mav. You know Abby, who's actually Tex's wife."

Hugs and hellos, handshakes and smiles, smiles, smiles.

"Blaze," he said. "He and Jem—who has to be around here somewhere—rode in the rodeo."

"Of course," Hilde said diplomatically. "Blaze bought quite a bit from the store as well."

"A whole house-worth of everything," he said with a smile.

Abby clung to Hilde as if she hadn't seen her for ages, and they whispered as they pulled apart. The brothers hung close by while the introductions continued.

"Ah, here are the young ones like me," Gabe said, grinning at his twin as Morris shouldered through the wall of older brothers staring at Gabe and Hilde. "You've met Morris." He hugged his brother, ignoring the whispers from Morris about being brave to bring Hilde to a family party this early.

"And Luke." He cleared his throat as he looked at him. "Jem's next to him. The kids must be downstairs."

"Georgia's doing a painting class," Luke said. He stepped forward and shook Hilde's hand. "Ma'am."

Jem simply nodded at Hilde, one hand clasped around his opposite elbow. "Howdy."

"Jem." Hilde nodded back at him without missing a beat.

"That's all of us," Gabe said.

"Is it?"

He turned at the sound of his mother's voice, and he grinned as he moved past Hilde and into her arms. "Hey, Momma." With a jolt, he realized he hadn't been the last to arrive. "Did you just get here?" He pulled back and grinned at her.

"Don't even start with me, Gabriel." She cradled his face in her hand for a brief moment and then looked past him. "You brought your date from the other night."

"Yes." Gabe turned toward Hilde and drew her to his side. "Hilde, this is my mother, Cecily." His gaze flicked back to his father, who always stood a couple of feet behind Momma. "My daddy, Jerry."

"It's lovely to see you again, Cecily," Hilde said. "How's that ottoman treating you?"

“Jerry loves it, don’t you, dear?” She turned back to Daddy, and they came together as a single unit.

“It’s great,” Daddy said. He reached out and squeezed Gabe’s elbow, all he needed to say to Gabe about dating Hilde.

“Come on, ladies,” Momma said. “Someone show me to the food, because Momma is hungry.” She moved into the group of women, and the party shifted back to a regular configuration, leaving Gabe and Hilde on the outer edge of the festivities.

She leaned into him, but Gabe nodded to Faith and Everly, who’d just come upstairs. “Your girlfriends.”

Hilde brightened, but she didn’t move away from him. Everly and Faith both stopped in their tracks, their eyes stuck on him. Dani came behind them, froze, and the three of them gaped in Gabe and Hilde’s direction.

Gabe grinned like he was some sort of champion, reached up, and touched the tip of his hat as he ducked his head. “Oh, good. Here they come.” He tensed at the thought of being alone at this party, of Hilde being swept away from him and into the circle of women.

“Gabe,” Leigh said from the direction of the house, and he turned that way so he wasn’t directly in the path of giggling as the women arrived in front of Hilde. They separated, as Gabe registered that Leigh carried Liesl on her hip.

“Hey, baby,” he said, taking his daughter from his brother’s wife. She didn’t seem to be crying. “You okay?”

“She’s fine,” Leigh said. “We just came upstairs to use the bathroom, because the one downstairs is being used.”

“She went already?” he asked.

“Yep.”

Gabe put his hand on Leigh’s shoulder. “Thank you.”

“She’s an angel, as always.” Leigh smiled at him and looked back out onto the deck. “So they’ve surrounded her.”

Gabe turned to watch Hilde as she tipped her head back and laughed with the other women. “Yeah.”

“You like her?”

Normally, Gabe’s irritation spiked whenever anyone asked him anything personal. But Leigh had a special way of caring about people that Gabe knew wasn’t malicious. She was simply curious, and she wouldn’t use anything he said against him, ever.

“Yeah,” he said.

Hilde glanced over to them, her dark eyes shining like stars on the darkest, most gorgeous night.

“She seems to like you too,” Leigh said once she’d looked away.

“Yeah.” Gabe could hope and pray, at least.

“You’re not going to give me anything more than ‘yeah,’ are you?”

Gabe chuckled as Leigh tucked her arm through his. “Nope.”

“You cowboys,” she muttered, but it was done with a hefty dose of love.

“You forget I’m the dark side of Morris,” Gabe said with another laugh.

“He talks. He shares. He’s an open book. I’m not.”

“We’re dancing!” Everly yelled as she spun in a circle out on the deck.

“Everyone, find a partner and get downstairs, because we’re dancing!”

“Oh, that’s my cue.” Leigh left Gabe standing just inside the house with Liesl on his hip, and he watched as she grabbed Morris by his arm and started toward the steps across the deck.

“Daddy, dwink.”

He fell back into the house to find something for Liesl to drink, and he’d barely pulled a Capri Sun out of the fridge when Momma appeared and took Liesl from him. “Go on, now. Don’t keep her waiting. They’re dancing.”

“You sure?”

“I dance, Daddy.” Liesl smiled at him and plunged her straw into the juice pouch.

“I know, baby,” he said. “I’ll come find you when you’re done with your painting, and we’ll dance, okay?”

“Okay,” she said happily.

“Go on,” Momma urged.

Gabe leaned over to kiss his daughter’s forehead, and he glanced out the window and to the deck just as Luke stepped to Hilde’s side. By the time he reached the sliding glass door, he found Luke leading her toward the steps, the two of them talking.

Irritation fired through him, along with plenty of jealousy, and he lengthened his stride to catch up to them before he missed out on dancing with the woman he’d been brave enough to bring to tonight’s party.

Him. Not Luke.



“**L**uke,” Gabe barked from behind them. They both turned at the bottom of the steps, and Hilde got hit in the face with Gabe’s emotions. Swirling, angry feelings.

“Where’d you come from?” Luke asked.

“The house,” he said. “I was standing right there.”

Luke frowned. “Jem said you’d already come downstairs. I was just....” He cut off as Gabe flew down the last few steps and nearly bowled into them both.

Jealousy flew from him, and Hilde could actually smell it.

Luke backed up fast. “I didn’t think you were upstairs.”

“Gabe.” Hilde put one hand on his forearm, and everything inside him seemed to deflate. “He asked if I’d like an escort down to the dance floor. It’s...nothing.” She cut a glance over to Luke, who looked like he might start crying at any moment. In a single breath, he covered it all up and fell back even more.

“Sorry,” Gabe muttered.

“Me too,” Luke said, lifting that square chin. He was a good-looking man, and based on the way his shirt clung to his biceps, he spent a ton of time in the gym. She briefly thought *why hasn’t a woman in this town snatched him up?* before Gabe stepped into him and hugged him.

Luke stood still, obviously shocked, for a couple of moments, and then his arms came around Gabe too. They whispered together while Hilde glanced around the downstairs patio. Tex and Abby obviously had money

too, as everything seemed elegant and sophisticated as it shone in the yellow tea lights.

Everly motioned for everyone to get out on the dance floor, which was an actual wooden floor that had been laid over the grass. Loud music blared from the speakers in the next moment, and Hilde jumped and covered her ears as a reaction.

The noise stopped a moment later, but now a few men were yelling about how loud it had been. "It was an accident!" Jem yelled back. "Jeez! I turned it right off, you animals!"

Hilde jumped again as warm fingers slid into hers, and she pressed one hand to her heart as she swung Gabe's way. He gave her a soft smile. "Do you want to dance, or do you want to eat?"

She watched as Everly lined people up on the dance floor. This wasn't slow dancing, with couples holding one another to a slow ballad. Georgia still worked at a picnic table that held several kids, her baby strapped to her chest, and Cecily had joined her. The older kids stood out on the lawn, as did Dani, Faith, and Abby. Leigh worked with the littles as well, and Hilde wondered which group she'd be in if she and Gabe made it out of this early stage of their relationship.

She knew all of the women here, and yes, she was good friends with Everly and Faith, but Georgia also attended the small-business owner's meetings. She'd gotten to know Dani from her purchases, and Abby had been a long-time resident of Coral Canyon, the same as Hilde.

"Let's eat," she said at the same time Gabe did. He smiled at her and gently led her back upstairs, where his father stood at the railing and watched the happenings going on below him.

"Not gonna dance?" he asked as he turned toward them.

"We haven't eaten yet," Gabe said. "Are you gonna hide out up here?"

"I'm not hiding." Jerry gave her a smile that said he'd totally been hiding, and Hilde returned it.

Gabe handed her a plate, and they went along the buffet table, loading up with the things they wanted. Gabe let her pick a spot to sit, and then he dropped into the chair next to her. The music started up again down below, but it didn't blast anyone off the surface of the earth again.

"Hey," a woman said, and Hilde looked over to see Cheryl Ingalls coming toward her. Her husband, Wade, and Abby's brother came behind her carrying their baby boy. "Oh, good, we didn't miss dinner." She set down her

diaper bag, gave Hilde another smile, and went to get some food.

“Hey, Wade,” Hilde said. “Can I hold him while you eat?”

“Then you won’t be able to eat,” he said.

“I’ll hold ‘im,” Jerry said, and Wade passed the baby to him instead of Hilde. She wasn’t sure why, but she wanted to cuddle that baby close. Watching Gabe hold his daughter had been sweet, and he’d looked so... paternal. So different than she’d seen him before.

Of course, she knew he had a small daughter. Seeing the two of them interact simply brought a new softness to him she hadn’t seen before, and she looked over to him while his daddy sat down the table a little, leaving room for Wade and Cheryl across from her and Gabe.

Cheryl sighed mightily as she arrived across from Gabe. She slid over a bit more, crowding close to Jerry, and then pulled Wade’s chair into a different position before she looked at Hilde. She looked at Gabe. Back to Hilde. Back to Gabe.

“We’re dating,” Hilde said before Cheryl hurt herself.

“I—I didn’t know.” She pushed her hair off her forehead. “I’m exhausted.”

“Are things still crazy at the firm?” Gabe asked.

Cheryl nodded. “Or I have less patience. One of the two.” She looked up at Wade as he arrived, and she gave him a tired smile. “They still have ribs.”

“They do,” he said. “I don’t know why I thought anything would be gone over here.” He smiled at Gabe and Hilde. “Howdy, Gabe.”

“You could’ve come without me,” Cheryl said.

Wade looked at her, and they had a conversation without saying anything else. He turned back to Hilde. “Hiya, Hilde.”

“How’s the farm, Wade?”

“Muddy,” he said before shoving a cheddar biscuit into his mouth.

She smiled and nodded. “I’ll bet. Things are still thawing out this way.”

“Tex shoveled the snow back off the grass to lay that dance floor down there,” Jerry said.

“Oh, did they get it down?” Cheryl asked.

Jerry nodded, his pointer fingers wrapped up by chubby baby fingers. “Miss Everly insisted there can’t be a band concert without dancing, and there can’t be dancing without a floor.”

“Where is the concert going to be?” Gabe asked. “Did Tex build a stage I haven’t heard about?” He grinned over to Wade, who also smiled.

“No,” Jerry said. “They’re going to use the deck.”

“Up here?” Gabe asked. “So we’ll be out on the dance floor while they perform.” He didn’t sound happy about it, and Hilde looked at him to try to figure out why. She couldn’t tell just from a glance, and she decided she didn’t need to understand his family dynamics and how he fit into them all in the first night.

“Right.”

“Otis wanted to get up on the roof,” Wade said dryly. “Of *my* barn, so let’s all be glad that’s not happening.”

Gabe burst out laughing, and Hilde smiled at the joy in the sound. The mood lightened then, but Hilde still had a bunch of questions for Gabe. Why had he gone into super-sonic jealous mode when Luke had led her downstairs. How he moved from cold to hot so fast and how she might get that transition to slow down a little. Where he’d disappeared to earlier when he’d left her side for a couple of minutes that had felt like two years.

She finished eating first, and she stood to clear her plate and then take the baby from Jerry. “His name is Bennett, right?” she asked Cheryl.

“Yes,” she said with plenty of surprise in her tone and her expression. “I’m almost done.”

“I don’t mind.” Hilde smiled at her and then Bennett before she let her eyes skate past Gabe’s as she turned. She went to the railing where Jerry had been earlier, and she watched as Everly gave line dance lessons below.

She did teaching and dancing events every few months, and in fact, she’d be doing her first and last summer event in Hilde’s parking lot as part of the upcoming Summer Faire right before she left with Trace for the tour. Hilde already missed her, because Everly was a vibrant woman with a lot of talent and a lot of love to give.

Bennett babbled, and Hilde bounced him on her hip as she watched the family below. They were fun, and she loved the energy out here on this ranch. The Youngs seemed to carry it with them everywhere, and it only multiplied when they got together.

Gabe came to her side, and Hilde couldn’t help leaning into his warmth. With the sun down, the temperature wasn’t exactly warm. “This is a lot of fun, Gabe,” she said. “Thanks for inviting me.”

“Not everyone can do this with their family,” he said.

“Yeah, it’s just me and Rusty and my mom,” she said. “With everyone, there’s seven people total.”

“I have more brothers than that,” he said with a chuckle.

She switched the baby to her other hip so she could be closer to Gabe. “What happened with you and Luke?”

“Oh, boy.” Gabe blew out his breath. “There’s a lot of water under that bridge, sweetheart. I can’t tell it all in one night.”

“You seemed pretty upset he’d said he’d help me find you.”

“Is that what he said?”

“Yes.” She looked at him. “You dashed off without a word. I wasn’t sure where you’d gone, if I should wait upstairs or what, and Jem said you’d gone downstairs to check on Liesl. Luke said he’d take me.”

“Like you can’t walk yourself.” He kept his gaze out on the dance lesson too.

“So I didn’t *have* to go myself.” She nudged the stoic cowboy with her hip. “It was sweet of him. Nothing nefarious about it.”

“Yeah.” Gabe nodded and sighed again, just with less emphasis this time. “Luke and I...we don’t get along that great. Well, we do, as long as we don’t talk to each other or spend any time together.” He leaned his elbows on the railing and kicked a wry smile in her general direction. “We’re still learning how to be friends.”

“You were jealous of him,” she said quietly.

Gabe nodded, much to her surprise. For some reason, she’d expected him to deny it. “Yeah, I over-reacted, obviously.”

“Has he.... I mean, did he, like, steal one of your girlfriends in high school or something?”

Gabe laughed now, and Hilde was glad she had this version of him now instead of the stomping, barky one from earlier. “No, not at all. Luke was a senior when we were freshman. I don’t even remember him dating in high school.”

“So what’s the rift about? Just, in general.”

“The band,” Gabe said matter-of-factly. “Everything always comes back to the band.”

“Time to play!” Trace yelled, and he made a whirling motion with his hand.

“I’ll take him,” Cheryl said, and Hilde turned to slide the baby onto her hip.

Things started happening then, as the tables up here got taken down or pushed back. Instruments appeared, and Gabe said, “We need to get out of

here.” He took her downstairs, made no move to go over to the kids’ table, and instead, took her over to where an outdoor heater kept the chill of the air at bay.

Abby asked, “Hilde, can I steal you for a minute?” She hooked her arm through Hilde’s and steered her toward the table in the corner with all the kids and paint supplies.

“Abby,” Gabe growled.

“Two minutes,” Abby said over her shoulder.

Hilde wasn’t entirely sure it was the time away that he was worried about. It probably had more to do with his daughter than anything else, but Georgia looked up, saw them, and left the table.

“Hilde,” she said smoothly, her smile genuine. “Abby said you were here.” She hugged her the best she could with her chubby baby between them.

“I’m here.” Hilde looked between the two of them, unsurprised when Everly joined them. She glanced over to her, as she was definitely the friendliest with her.

“Great lesson, Ev.”

“You weren’t even there.”

“I watched from up on the deck,” Hilde said. “We had to eat before the concert.” Her eyes automatically looked for Gabe, finding him very close to where she’d left him on the other side of the patio.

He stood next to Blaze and Faith, and a conversation was clearly happening over there, but Gabe’s eyes never left her.

“So you like Gabe?” Ev asked, and Hilde’s attention snapped back to her.

Her pulse shot through her body, and she knew one thing: She would absolutely not betray Gabe’s confidence. “Oh, honey, you know I don’t say anything about the men I date.” She stepped in and hugged Everly. “I should get back to him, as he looks like—”

“So you are dating,” Abby said.

“Yeah,” Hilde said easily. “Sure.”

Everly’s eyebrows went up. “When did this happen?”

Exhaustion filled Hilde, and she really didn’t want to have this conversation right now. Maybe not ever, but certainly not now. “It’s a long story,” she said, taking a leaf out of Gabe’s book. He’d used water and bridges, but the concept was the same. “I’ll maybe tell it to you later.”

Everly got the hint, and she nodded. “Excuse me,” Hilde said, and she

smile-nodded her way away from the women and right on back to Gabe's side.

He put his arm possessively around her, holding her hip and keeping her ultra-close. He leaned down, his breath washing against the sensitive skin of her neck as he whispered, "You're back."

"You seemed a little lost," she teased.

He scoffed under his breath but didn't deny it. "I grew up in this house," he said next.

"Did you?" She twisted to look at him. "How did Tex get it then?"

"Bought it in an auction a few years back." Gabe glanced over to Blaze as the first notes of music filtered down from above. "Completely remodeled it. Fell in love with Abby. Built the recording studio."

"Pure, small-town perfection," Blaze added, plenty of sarcasm in his tone.

"Be nice," Faith said. "You're getting your small-town perfection too."

He softened when he looked at her. "Am I?"

"You're not?"

Hilde started to laugh, because they were so cute together. She also liked how Faith didn't back down from Blaze, and he was by far the darkest, scariest of the Young brothers. "When are you two getting married?" she asked.

"What a great question," Blaze said, again with the mocking tone in his voice. This time it was fake surprise. "Dove, why don't you tell Hilde here when we're getting married?"

She drilled holes into his face with her eyes, and he did not care one whit. Faith's gaze switched to hers, and Hilde's eyes widened. "Sorry," she said. "I didn't realize there wasn't a date on the calendar."

"There was." Faith swatted at Blaze's chest. "He thinks I'm going to marry him when he's—so—rude."

"Oh, come on." Blaze slung his arm around Faith. "I'm just disappointed. You can't blame me for being disappointed."

Faith looked at him, and Hilde basked in the love flowing between them. Again, she marveled that someone as...rough as Blaze had gotten a refined woman like Faith to go out with him. Obviously more than once.

"My mother has to have surgery," Faith explained. "It got scheduled during her trip here for the wedding. So now I'm trying to figure out something new."

"Where's your mom?" Hilde asked.

“Arizona,” she said. “My parents are in the Tempe area.”

Hilde nodded. “Nice and warm down there.” As if to punctuate the difference between Tempe and Coral Canyon, a gust of wind tugged on Hilde’s hair and chilled her exposed ear. She snuggled into Gabe’s side, and his grip on her body tightened.

“Makes me question why we live here,” Blaze said dryly.

“Blaze dislikes winter,” Gabe said, as if Hilde hadn’t picked up on that clue.

“No,” Blaze said. “I dislike snow and ice and wind and temperatures that don’t even make it to zero. I don’t hate the season as a whole. I hate what it means for Wyoming specifically.”

“Blaze *hates* winter,” Gabe amended, his grin only widening.

Hilde smiled with him. “My daddy hated winter, right up until his dying day.”

“Was it the cold that finally did him in?” Blaze asked.

“Blaze Ty Young,” Faith chastised. “Hilde, allow me to apologize for him. He’s just grumpy, and I’m going to take him home right now.”

“The band hasn’t even played yet,” he protested.

“You’re not fit to be in public,” she hissed at him, her eyes blazing hot. “Ugh!” She marched away from him, and Blaze looked at Gabe and then Hilde.

“You got it was a joke, right?”

Hilde gave him a reassuring smile. “I definitely got the joke.”

“Maybe if you were nicer *before* the jokes,” Gabe suggested.

“*You’re* seriously telling *me* I need to be nice?” Blaze looked one second away from losing his cool. He shook his head and walked away too, leaving the two of them standing together in silence.

“He’s not wrong,” Hilde finally said.

“You—what?”

Hilde started to laugh, turning fully into Gabe, who took her into his arms. “Don’t tell me it’ll be a surprise to hear that you’re a bit...grouchy.”

Gabe gazed evenly at her, but his eyes didn’t harbor the dark edge of irritation she’d seen before. “I prefer grumpy,” he murmured. “Grouchy sounds so...grouchy.”

She pealed out a stream of laughter, because grumpy and grouchy were the same thing.

“Everyone’s staring at us now,” he said, his face right beside hers.

“As if they weren’t before,” she said back.

“I think there were bets on whether I’d make you laugh or cry tonight.”

Hilde giggled quietly into his shoulder. “The date’s not over yet.”

He began to sway, and Hilde simply moved with him. Wherever he directed her to go, she went. She became aware of moving out onto the dance floor, because she lost the warmth of the heater and the protection of the deck overhead. She didn’t want to open her eyes, so she kept them closed and lived within the pine-scented fantasy of dancing with Gabe Young while Country Quad started playing their first song.

She’d never heard it before, which was to be expected. The album wasn’t out for another week, and no one had heard these songs before.

Happiness moved back and forth with her, sending shivers of light across her closed eyelids. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been this comfortable in a man’s arms, nor could she recall the last time this level of contentment had beaten beneath her ribs.

She owned her own business. She set her own schedule. She was the ultimate queen of her life, but none of it mattered if she didn’t have a cowboy to worship her. Nothing mattered if she didn’t have someone to love, and someone to care about, and someone to confide in.

She hadn’t realized any of those things until this very moment.

“I’m gonna have to leave you in a minute,” he whispered.

Hilde’s eyes opened then, and the world seemed colder when she could see it too. “You will? Why?”

“The song is almost over, and I promised another woman I’d dance with her.” Gabe pulled away slightly, his eyes meeting hers.

“Another woman?” Hilde’s eyebrows nearly flew off her face, and her heartbeat did something she couldn’t categorize before she asked, “Who?”

Gabe chuckled and ducked his head in the most adorable way. He looked up from under the brim of his cowboy hat. “Who’s jealous now?”

Hilde put one hand on her hip and cocked it. She liked the way Gabe watched the movement, and then flicked his gaze back to hers.

The shivery reaction told her she really liked this man, and yeah, she didn’t want him dancing with anyone else. Maybe he had complicated relationships with his brothers—especially Luke—but if Hilde could stick around long enough, she’d learn about all of them.

She slid her hand up over his shoulder and to his face. “Maybe I’ll go ask Luke to dance then.”

“Luke’s on the drums, sweetheart.”

She laughed lightly, silent foolishness running through her. “Oh, of course.”

“I’ll get Mav,” Gabe whispered. “Will you be okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” she said, though she mourned the loss of his warm arms and these broad shoulders already. She glanced up into the sky, the stars prickling in the deep, dark expanse overhead. “Wow,” she breathed out. “Look at that.”

Gabe tilted his head back too, and they gazed up at the stars together. Then the song ended, the moment broke, and Gabe passed her to his brother so he could have a few minutes with his daughter.

Hilde couldn’t stop watching them, and after a half-minute, she realized she couldn’t stop watching *him*. He held Liesl in his arms as he grinned at her and talked to her. About halfway through the song, he set her on her feet, and they danced as he held both of her hands in both of his. He twirled her and caught her and lifted her up into the air.

She squealed and giggled and curled into his chest, and they ended the dance like that, with Liesl’s arms and legs wrapped around her father’s chest and neck.

Hilde’s whole heart melted, and she didn’t even realize when Mav slid her hand out of his and into Blaze’s. Her heartbeat tumbled for a moment, and then Blaze said, “He’s a great dad.”

“Yes,” she said through a dry throat.

“He won’t introduce you to her for a while,” Blaze said. “He’s very cautious.”

“Mm, I know.”

“But he also hasn’t brought a woman home before, so he’s definitely considering something big with you.”

“What are you saying to her?” Gabe asked.

Blaze, ever the cool, nonplussed cowboy, stepped back and turned Hilde into Gabe’s arms. “Nothing, brother. She’s all yours.”

“You could’ve kept dancing with Liesl,” she said, feeling whipped around. Blaze walked away, and Hilde couldn’t tell who the couple was dancing several paces away.

“My daddy took her,” he said. “She loves him.”

“I’ll bet she does.” Gabe’s father didn’t say much, but he obviously had a good heart. Hilde could feel it emanating from him.

“When can I see you again?” he whispered, sliding his nose down the

side of her face to the hollow of her throat, where he breathed in deeply.

Hilde clung to him and let her eyes fall closed again. “Come by the store when you have time this weekend,” she said. “I’ll be there all day tomorrow and Saturday, prepping for the Market Faire.”

“Anything I can help you with?”

Before she could answer, the song ended, and Tex yelled into the mic. “All right, folks. Line yourselves up and get ready to dance!”

Everly whooped, and she galloped around the dance floor a little bit while everyone laughed at her, and Country Quad launched into their next song—not a ballad. A rowdy, fun, rock song that would have crowds country-wide cheering for them, Hilde was sure.

It took Gabe another count of four to start clapping his hands, and she wanted to hear all about each and every relationship with each and every brother—especially the band brothers—and how much water he had to wade through to come to family functions like this.



Gabe didn't make it to Hilde's store on Friday, because he had to put in time in the courtroom, and then Luke came by to go over his finances.

As Gabe came to full consciousness in his townhome in Coral Canyon, he couldn't believe Luke had so much money just sitting there, earning point-zero-nothing in a bank account in a small Wyoming town.

He'd sent his brother off with three online institutions that would at least earn him something more than nothing. He'd charged Luke with opening at least a savings account, a money market account, and a CD account at each one. That would give him nine accounts, and when Luke had asked, "How much in each one?" Gabe had said, "As much as you want. You obviously don't need the money."

"Hope he can handle the ambiguity," Gabe muttered to himself as he rolled onto his side and swung his legs over the side of the bed. He checked behind him, but Liesl wasn't in bed with him. His mind fritzed with, *Wait. Is Liesl here?*

"Yes." He got to his feet. Leigh and Morris had taken her on Thursday night, but he'd gotten her back yesterday afternoon, after his last client had left.

Gabe woke early, even on the weekends, and he showered every day, no matter what. Today, he arrived in the second-floor kitchen to start making pancakes for him and Liesl, and only a few minutes later, his daughter came padding down the steps in her bare feet and Eeyore nightgown, a stuffed Winnie-the-Pooh-Bear tucked under one arm.

“Morning, Princess,” he said as he bent to scoop her into a hug.

“Hi, Daddy.” Liesl giggled and hugged him, then snuggled into his chest. “Pancakes?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “Do you want maple syrup or buttermilk?”

“Maple.” She wiggled to get down, and Gabe set her on her feet. “Sawswage?”

“Yeah, we can have sausage.” Sometimes, he felt like all he fed Liesl was pancakes and sausage, but she didn’t seem to mind, and Gabe didn’t need to put together elaborate meal plans for the two of them. “We have strawberries too. You want some of those?”

“With cweam?” Her little face held such hope, and Gabe nodded. He turned to get out the canned cream and strawberries, while she climbed up on a barstool.

Then he gave her a butter knife to get the tops off the berries, he put a cutting board in front of her, and he said, “Watch, baby.” He showed her how to put the berry on its side and then slice off the top with the knife.

She knelt up on the barstool to get into position, but she couldn’t really get the green tops off of the berries. She tried several times, and she did seem like she could hold a knife better.

“I can’t, Daddy.” She tossed the knife down, and Gabe raised his eyebrows at her. “It’s too hard.” She sat down flat on her bottom and pouted.

Gabe pulled a sharp knife out of the block and removed a handful of berries from the plastic basket. He nicked a slice in each one and showed her. “See? Put the knife in there and see if you can do it.”

She lifted herself up again, her dark eyes full of wonder all over again. “Okay.” She picked up her knife, positioned the fruit, and slid the knife through the top of it. She gasped and looked at him with eyes as wide as dinner plates. “I did it, Daddy!”

He chuckled at her enthusiasm, feeling pure joy because she did. “You sure did, Princess. Just do one at a time. You don’t want to cut them unless you’re going to eat them.”

She didn’t acknowledge him, but as he heated a pan and poured round discs of batter into it, Liesl sliced the top off a berry, squirted cream out of the can onto it, and popped the whole thing into her mouth.

Gabe worked in the silent kitchen, his mind trying to find a solution to how he could see Hilde that day, even if just for a few minutes. He and Liesl could stay until tomorrow night. They could go to church here, though Gabe

liked attending the services in Jackson Hole far better than here. That felt like his home meeting, and he was a visitor here.

But if he got to see Hilde....

He glanced over to Liesl. Things would be far easier if he'd just introduce the two of them. Liesl was four years old and wouldn't be five until August. She didn't understand what a *girlfriend* was, and then Gabe could simply take his daughter and show up at the furniture store.

Oh, and pray that Hilde had a few minutes to spare for him. He knew if she'd simply shown up where he worked, he wouldn't have that luxury, and the thought that he might not have another consequential experience with her very soon left him hollow and unsatisfied.

He'd asked her when he could see her again, and she'd suggested he come to the store. He wondered if Lynn timer would be there this weekend, helping with the Market Faire. He'd texted her a fair bit yesterday, and he'd once again asked if he could help with any prep for that.

"Lunch," he blurted, his brain finally seizing onto the pathway it needed to be on.

"No, silly," Liesl said. "It's breakfast, Daddy."

He gave her a faint smile. "Right." But Gabe needed to find somewhere amazing for lunch, so he could take food to Hilde and talk with her again.

He wasn't as well-versed with Coral Canyon as he'd like to be in order to make a dietary decision for Hilde. He barely knew her as a woman, though they'd been talking and texting for a few weeks now.

This would be their third official date—if showing up at the furniture store with food could be counted as a date—and Gabe knew he had leagues to go before he'd truly know Hilde O'Dell.

He flipped the pancakes and pulled his phone out of his pocket. If anyone would know what Hilde would love for lunch, it would be Everly. But that would require Gabe to open himself up to his brother's wife, and he coached himself to make the call. It would be fine. He'd already taken Hilde to the band concert.

After Blaze had fallen and passed out a few months ago, Everly had made it a big deal to have all of the brother's and their significant other's numbers in her phone. She wanted everyone to do the same.

Therefore, he had her number and didn't have to go through Trace. He turned his back on his daughter as if Liesl cared who he texted, and he typed out a quick message to her.

Hey, Ev, it's Gabe. I want to take lunch to Hilde at the store today. What would she like? I'm new to town, and I'm not sure what's available here. Any help would be appreciated.

He sent the message without thinking about it, spun back to the pancakes he'd forgotten about, and cursed under his breath when he saw the smoke.

"Those be burnt, Daddy," Liesl said.

"Yeah," he grumbled. "They sure are."

"I'm full," she said. "It's okay."

Gabe wasn't full, and in fact, his stomach growled. He hadn't started the sausage yet, though, and while he had more pancake batter, he didn't want to deal with it either. His phone chimed, and he dove for it, hoping it would be Everly acting as a savior by providing him with the name of place Hilde liked. Oh, and what he should order for her there would be nice too.

I'm here at the store with her already, Everly had said. *Is this a secret lunch or a she-knows-about-this-date-lunch?*

Secret, he said.

Then I'd go with the salmon tacos from Terras, she said almost immediately. *Hilde loves those, and she doesn't get them very often because Lynn timer doesn't like the restaurant.*

"Terras," he muttered to himself, his thumbs still flying. *I asked her what I could do to help her with this Market Faire, and she didn't really give me an answer. You're over there now? Should I come over?*

He heard the sliding door behind him open, and Gabe turned to watch Liesl go outside in her nightgown, sans shoes. She didn't seem to mind the chill of the shaded concrete as she crossed it and struggled to climb up into the swing there.

Bring lunch, Everly said. *I like the Caesar and kale salad, and you'll win a lot of brownie points with Hilde's employees if you bring the sourdough bread and lots of butter.* She sent a smiley face emoji with that, and Gabe couldn't help reflecting it.

Will Trace be there?

Trace is out in the barn all day today, Everly said.

"Oh, of course," Gabe said to himself. Then he grabbed a couple of strawberries and a protein shake, made sure the stove was off, and grabbed a handful of books as he crossed the living room to the balcony where Liesl sat.

She smiled at him as he went outside, and he held up the books. "Time for reading."

Liesl didn't complain, though she'd rather be read to than have to do the work herself. In the end, Gabe usually read to her anyway, but he liked to pretend that he was the mean dad who forced his daughter to learn to read.

Today, he let her struggle more than usual, because his mind lingered on lunch and Hilde. Once or twice, Liesl tugged on his hand and said, "Help, Daddy."

"The wise man did not know why he could not get the side to rise," he read, and Liesl snuggled back into his chest as he continued the story. It wasn't really a story, because it felt like a lot of long-I words strung together.

Still, he wanted Liesl to be learning, and he planned to enroll her in another preschool this summer, so she'd be even more prepared for kindergarten in the fall. His manny worked with Liesl on her writing and reading too, and all Gabe could do was pray she got a patient teacher and that he could take advantage of the school's services for students who needed extra help.

He'd planned to enroll her in a private school in Jackson Hole, and he'd put her name on the waiting list when she was only a year old.

Right now, though, Gabe's whole life felt like someone had taken all of the cards out of the box, thrown them up into the air, and the wind had come along and scattered them. They fluttered through the air on various currents, without a purpose and a path, and he had no idea where they'd land.

Where *he'd* land.

He sternly told himself he couldn't leave his core firm in Jackson Hole, but the devil on his shoulder—the part of him that looked at everything just a little bit differently—asked, *Why not? Why can't you?*

He banished the thoughts and forced himself to be in the moment with Liesl, here on this balcony, overlooking the playground below.

HOURS LATER, HE CARRIED FOUR BAGS OF FOOD IN HIS HANDS AND KEPT HIS eye on Liesl as she released the handles on the bags where he'd told her to hold as they crossed the parking lot. "Be careful," he called after her as she skipped right up to the automatic doors of the furniture store.

"I open them," she said, grinning for all she was worth.

"Yep." He followed her. "You opened them. Now, baby, come back here

and walk next to me. It's kind of a maze in here."

He could see all the way to the back of the store, but there wasn't a direct path there. He'd learned that Hilde redid certain parts of the store every Sunday afternoon, sometimes herself and sometimes with the help of one of her managers. "Re-staging" she called it, and Gabe had no idea which part of the store she'd done this week.

Liesl didn't return to his side, but he had to verbally tell her which way to go all the way back to the customer service counters where people paid for their furniture and arranged for delivery. He met the eyes of a woman who looked vaguely familiar to him. "Hilde? Is she available?" He lifted the bags slightly. "I brought lunch."

The woman's face broke into a smile. "She's in her office." She slid from her stool and motioned him to move to the side of the counter.

He went that way, herding Liesl in front of him. "I can just go back?" he asked as he walked through the gate the woman opened for him.

"Yeah, her office is straight ahead, and then to the right. You can't miss it."

Gabe thought he probably could, but he only nodded. His heart pounded as he entered the back of the store and everything turned from pristine living room displays and luxurious bedroom setups to crowds of lamps and stacks of dining room chairs. Furniture back here still sat wrapped in plastic, confined with bright yellow zip ties, and the back wall opened up with big doors for even bigger trucks.

He went straight and then right, and sure enough, a door loomed up ahead on his left that said MANAGER above it in all capital letters that had to be at least a foot high each. No one intercepted him or questioned him, and his heartbeat continued to sprint with every step he took.

As he neared, he heard voices that told him he wouldn't be catching Hilde working idly in her office alone. "...don't think you should. If Gabe said to stay in the house, you should stay in the house." She passed in front of the windows of her office, and he saw her on the phone.

"No," she said next.

"This way, Liesl," he murmured, and his daughter looked at him. He nodded to the office, and Liesl moved forward full steam ahead.

"We're not serious," she said. "He's not my boyfriend. He's—" She cut off as she turned toward the doorway of her office, which Gabe now filled. Those big, beautiful doe-eyes looked like he was made of all spotlight, and

she blink-blinked, blink-blinked. “I have to call you back.” She hung up the phone and threw it—positively threw it—on her desk.

It bounced and clattered, and Gabe felt every ricochet deep down inside his chest, every cell, his very soul.

Instead of going mute or raging like the grouchy grump he was, he lifted the bags again. “I brought lunch.”

“Gabe,” Hilde said, her eyes betraying her by shooting toward her phone and then locking back on his.

“Thank goodness,” Everly said as she squeezed past him and into the office. “I’m starving to death, and I thought you’d never get here.” She took the two bags from his left hand before she realized that the tension in the office could suffocate all of them in only a few seconds.

She looked from Hilde to Gabe and back, and said, “Oh, Liesl, honey. Come with me, and I’ll get you a little bag of popcorn.”

Liesl’s face lit up, and Hilde tracked her as she skipped over to Miss Everly and put her hand in hers. “I can have popcorn, Daddy?” she asked.

“Yes, Princess,” he murmured as he ducked his head. He’d put on the cowboy hat to bring lunch today, thinking Hilde sure had liked it earlier this week. “Say thank you, okay?”

After his daughter and Everly had left, he looked at Hilde again. He moved right into the office and closed the door behind him, then took the bags over to her desk and set them down.

He looked right at her and asked, “I’m not your boyfriend?” He reached into the nearest bag and pulled out a container with a clear plastic lid. “Funny, I thought I was.”



Hilde's pulse vibrated through her whole body in a skittish, frantic way. "That was Rusty," she said. "I'm...I'm trying to spare his feelings."

"Ah." Gabe nodded as if he truly understood, but the blazing fiery challenge in his eyes suggested he did not. "Well, I brought salmon tacos. Obviously, I asked Everly for help in knowing what you'd like, but it was meant to be a surprise." He held out a container, and Hilde took it.

She focused on it simply for something to see that wasn't accusing her of something, and her mouth watered at the sight of the thinly sliced jicama, the full leaves of cilantro, and the bright orange sauce that would bring heat and tang to the tacos.

"Thank you." She lifted her eyes back to his. "Gabe, I think you're my boyfriend. It's just Rusty...he wants to come stay with me for a while, and I was trying to get him to stay in Jackson."

"And me not being your boyfriend would influence that?"

"Yeah, because if you're my boyfriend, then of course I'm going to side with you."

"Are you?"

Hilde sighed and sat down in her chair. She'd been at the store since seven-thirty that morning, though the doors didn't open until ten. "There's a lot of food here."

"Enough for me, you, Liesl, and Ev. I brought bread for your staff."

Hilde studied his face, disliking how he'd shut down on her. Closed everything behind a thick, steel door.

“We don’t have to agree about everything, you know,” he said. “Even if we were dating.”

“We *are* dating.”

Gabe removed the containers that would stay here and rearranged the others into two bags. “Where should I put these?”

“Ev will take them out to everyone.” She indicated the chair near his left leg. “Sit with me, would you?”

Gabe sat, and he even reached for a plastic-wrapped set of silverware. He handed it to her and then picked up one for himself. “I got the steak and shrimp po’boy, and I hope I’m not disappointed.”

“Have you been to Terras before?”

“No, ma’am.”

She pulled in a breath, and Gabe’s face colored beneath his scruffy weekend beard. “Sorry, Hilde,” he said.

“Oh, don’t be like this.” She slammed her plastic silverware on her desk.

He, however, remained calm and cool. “Like what?”

“You don’t need to apologize to me,” she said with plenty of bite in her tone. “I can say one thing to my brother and have it be a little white lie, okay? Do you want me to call him back right now and tell him we’re dating? That you *are* my boyfriend?”

Gabe deflated, and she hadn’t even realized how much tension had built up in his shoulders until they went down. “Of course not.”

She felt very near to tears, and she wasn’t sure why. “Do I get to meet your daughter today?”

Gabe’s eyes narrowed. “If you’d like.”

“You brought her with you.”

“I didn’t want to ask someone to babysit her,” he said. “It felt unnecessary.”

“Blaze said—” Hilde sucked in a breath at the ice that filled Gabe’s eyes. Why couldn’t this lunch with him be the opposite of this? She needed an escape, somewhere soft to land, and someone to talk to about the Market Faire and all that had gone wrong today.

“Go on,” he said slowly.

Hilde shook her head, losing the battle with her tears. One slithered down her cheek, and she swiped at it. “I can’t seem to say anything right. Maybe if I just stop talking, things will be better.”

“Hey.” He spoke with such kindness that Hilde’s heart expanded to make

more room for him. He stood and came around her desk, kneeling in front of her. "Hey, I didn't mean to make you cry."

"It's not you." She sniffled. "I mean, I wasn't expecting to see you, and you showed up at the worst time ever, but it's not you."

He took her face in both of his hands, and for one terrible moment, Hilde thought he might kiss her while she cried. She definitely didn't want that. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I should've texted you and made arrangements. I know you're really busy."

"I love having lunch brought in," she whispered. "You can do that anytime, cowboy, no arrangements necessary."

He offered her a small smile. "I'm sorry I'm a grouch."

"I'm sorry I told my brother we weren't dating, because we are. You *are* my boyfriend."

His face moved up toward hers, but he bypassed her mouth and placed a kiss in the middle of her forehead. "Okay," he said.

"I'm just coming in for ten seconds to get the bread," Everly said in a really loud voice. "Gabe, do you want me to keep Liesl?"

"No." He rose to his feet. "I mean, you can if you want. You don't have to run out, Ev." He moved toward her and gave her a light hug. "We're fine." He turned back to Hilde, who certainly didn't feel fine.

"Ev, would you take the bread to the staff room and let everyone know they can have it?"

"Sure," she said. "And I can take Liesl out to the picnic table where we can eat together, right, baby doll?" She smiled down at Liesl, who stood at her side.

Gabe swept her into his arms. "Come meet a friend of mine first, Princess. Then you can go eat with Miss Everly, okay?"

Liesl cowered into her father's chest as he came closer to Hilde. "This is Miss Hilde," he said. "She owns the store here, and it's her popcorn you're eating."

"It's good," Liesl said, the red-and-white-striped bag clutched in her hand. "Thank you."

Hilde's whole soul lit up. "You're welcome, sweetie." She smiled at the little girl and then her daddy, pleased that Gabe had introduced the two of them when Blaze said he wouldn't do such a thing for a while. Gabe himself had told her that.

"Come on, doll," Everly said. "I know where Miss Hilde keeps the jump

ropes, and I can help you get started.”

“A jump rope!” Liesl practically jumped out of Gabe’s arms, but he managed to get her on her feet without any bloodshed.

He turned as Liesl ran for the door. “Everly, she can’t...she might not be able to jump rope.”

“I’ll keep my eye on her.” Everly smiled, lifted the containers of food, and added, “Thanks for lunch, Gabe.” She left, closing the door behind her and sealing Hilde and Gabe in the office together.

He rounded the desk again and took his seat. “Where’s Lynn today?”

“She’s in the back parking lot, helping Mark paint lines on the asphalt for our vendors and guests, so they have somewhere concrete to park when they come next weekend.”

Gabe nodded. “I brought her a turkey and avocado sandwich, and I got them to substitute the nine-grain wheat bread for the sourdough.”

Hilde grinned, feeling much more centered and like herself now. “I see what you’re doing.”

He actually looked confused as he opened the top on his container. “What am I doing?”

“You’re going to charm me with salmon tacos, the perfect lunch for my daughter, and how kind and caring you are.”

His face broke out into a wide smile. “That’s not a bad idea.” He laughed, and Hilde actually felt like she could join in. It didn’t last long, and Gabe said, “Tell me why you’re stressed.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“I’m sure only to me,” he said. “I’ve learned to read people, Hilde. That’s all.”

She nodded and bent her head to take a bite of her first taco. The order came with three street-sized tacos, and the fish flaked perfectly in her mouth, and she got a hefty dose of lime with the creamy, spicy sauce.

“Who’s Mark?” he asked.

“My back-of-house manager,” she said. “And I’m stressed, because I’ve spent all day calling and texting vendors and food trucks to get a final count for next week’s Faire, instead of actually running my store.”

“I just walked through it,” he said. “It was running great.”

She gave him the driest look she could conjure and took another bite of her taco instead of answering. He stabbed into his container and took his first bite of his steak and seafood. Somehow that felt very “Gabe,” and Hilde

smiled at him.

“Let me guess what Blaze told you,” he said, and the mood turned somber and somewhat tense again. His eyebrows went up, and Hilde nodded at him to go on. “He said I’m...closed off. No, over-protective. That I don’t let anyone into my daughter’s life. That I won’t introduce Liesl to a woman until it’s really serious between us.”

Hilde only nodded, because Gabe was talking now, and she didn’t want to interrupt. She’d learned so much about him in that single drive out to his brother’s farm, and she hadn’t stopped thinking about him, about slow-dancing in his arms under those stars, for more than thirty seconds since.

“I don’t want you to think we’re more serious than we are,” he said next. “It’s just...I was making pancakes this morning, right? And I thought—I want to see Hilde today—but I wasn’t sure how to do it. You never did tell me what you needed help with here, and so I texted Everly about lunch and what you might like. Then, I burned the pancakes, and Liesl, as wise as she is, pointed it out to me.”

He paused and grinned, and Hilde could see this picture he’d painted with words inside her head. Sort of. She only knew his Jackson Hole home, not the townhome where he lived when he stayed here in Coral Canyon.

“And I thought—what am I going to do with Liesl? Is it really that big of a deal if I introduce her to Hilde? It’s not like she’ll know what a girlfriend is.”

“And you didn’t introduce me as your girlfriend anyway,” she said.

“She’s young.” Gabe swallowed, his throat working awfully hard for not having anything to swallow. “And...she’s going to struggle with things. She’s a beautiful child, and I love her with my whole heart. But she can’t read yet. She can’t write very many letters. She’s...delayed.”

“Because of her mother?”

Gabe nodded, and Hilde did too. He wasn’t embarrassed, and why should he be?

“I still think she’ll know what a girlfriend is,” Hilde said gently. “And a mother. Or does she...well, what does she know about families? Do you talk to her about her mother?”

His eyes fired pure, flaming bits of coal in her direction. “No,” he said. “I haven’t told her anything about her mother.”

Hilde nodded, hoping she showed compassion and understanding and acceptance in her expression. “So she thinks all families come with just a

daddy?”

“I don’t know what she thinks,” he said. “She’s only ever had a daddy, so it’s what she knows.”

“She spends time with Morris and Leigh,” Hilde said.

“Yeah.” Gabe nodded. “Yep. And my momma and daddy.”

“So she probably knows,” Hilde said. “On some level.”

Gabe took another bite of his sandwich and shrugged one shoulder.

“Well,” Hilde said, trying to decide if she should say the idea that had just popped into her head. She figured she could, and if she couldn’t, she should probably know right now so that she could decide if she even wanted to keep dating Gabe. “When we’re serious, we’ll talk to her about what it means to have a momma and a daddy, and what that might look like when we get married.”

Gabe choked and coughed, his face turning a bright red in under three seconds. He fumbled for a napkin while Hilde sat up straight and watched him struggle. After he finally composed himself by getting the food out of his lungs and taking an enormous drink of water, she raised her eyebrows.

“Which part surprised you?” she asked. “The part where we might become serious? Or the part where serious relationships end in marriage?”

“I...”

“Haven’t thought about it?” she supplied. “Well, remember, Gabriel, I’m almost thirty-nine-years-old, and that’s far too old for a summer fling.”

His face turned another ruddy shade of red. “I don’t do flings either.”

“Really?”

“Fine, just the one.” His dark eyes widened. “But that’s not what this is,” he hurried to add.

Hilde’s chest collapsed. “You’ve had a fling? When?”

He squirmed in his seat, and he even glanced over his shoulder like he might leave her office rather than answer her question.

“Gabe.”

“The last woman I went out with,” he blurted out. “I knew it wasn’t serious, and I didn’t want it to be serious. In fact, I—I—she was Morris’s old manager, and she thought I was Morris, and, uh, I didn’t correct her.” He ducked his head, using that blasted cowboy hat to hide his whole face.

Hilde sat back in her chair, the wind knocked right out of her lungs with his confession. “Gabe,” she said again.

“*Obviously*, I’m not doing that with you,” he said without looking up. “I

promised Morris I'd never pretend to be him again anyway."

"Lucky for me," she said dryly.

Gabe brought his head up, a sheepish look in those dazzling eyes. "Getting back into dating was very difficult for me. I've been trying for the past oh, year or so, and it hadn't been going well. It was easier when she thought I was someone else."

Hilde's heart bled for him, but he didn't need to know that. She pushed herself back up to her desk and picked up her second taco. "I don't even think you and Morris look all that much alike."

"No?" He gaped at her. "You realize we're *identical* twins, right?"

"You don't walk like him," she said. "His hair is shorter than yours. You...put off this magnetic energy, like a rockstar or a powerful politician. He's like...a golden retriever."

Gabe burst out laughing, and that made Hilde relax even more. She finished her taco while he continued to chuckle. "I'm never going to tell him that, but yeah, I agree."

"He's the nicest man ever," Hilde said. "I meant it as a compliment."

"So if it was," Gabe said. "And I'm not like him at all, what does that make me?"

"A grouchy grump," she shot at him. They both laughed again, and that was how Lynn timer found them when she walked into the office.

She came to a stop, her eyes flitting between Hilde and Gabe. "Ev said someone brought lunch."

Hilde indicated Gabe. "He did. This is Gabriel Young, dear. He got you a sandwich from Terras."

Her face fell, but she came forward anyway. "Thank you," she said as diplomatically as she could.

"It's on sourdough, not that wheat bread," Hilde said.

Lynn timer brightened like someone had turned on the switch inside her eyes. "Oh, wow. Thank you, Gabriel."

"You can just call me Gabe," he said. "Only my momma calls me Gabriel, and only when I'm in trouble." He grinned at Lynn timer and handed her the container with her sandwich. "They only had the sweet potato chips, so I opted for the fresh fruit."

"Oh, good," Lynn timer said with a sigh. "I hate those veggie chips." She looked over to Hilde. "Mom likes them, though."

Gabe gave her an appraising look. "Yeah, I can see that."

Hilde wanted to ask him what that meant, but instead, she smiled at Lynn timer. “How’s the lot coming?”

“It’s done,” she said. “And it’s getting hot out there, Mom. Can you drive me home after this? I have some homework, and then I have to do that re-baking for the stuff I missed when I was sick last week.”

“Okay,” Hilde said. “I just have to check with Everly and see where we are with the vendors. And then I need to talk to Rhea and Mindie, or one of them....” She couldn’t even remember who she had managing the sales floor today.

“How long is that going to take?” Lynn timer perched on a folding chair against the wall and took a bite of her sandwich.

“I can take her,” Gabe said. “I’m leaving here after this, and that’s it.”

Hilde and Lynn timer both zeroed in on him, and Hilde wasn’t sure why her first instinct was to say no. It certainly would be easier if Gabe drove Lynn timer the couple of miles from the store to their house. He didn’t have anything else to do, and Hilde had a to-do list six miles long.

He gazed back at her, and Lynn timer switched her gaze to Hilde as well. Gabe gave off nothing but confidence and solidity. Lynn timer looked like she might throw up.

Hilde existed somewhere in the middle, and she had no idea what to say as the seconds continued to tick, tick, tick by.



“It’s a right up here,” Lynn timer said, and Gabe nodded.

He didn’t need driving directions to get to Hilde’s, but he’d let her tell him anyway. Hilde had not told her daughter they were dating, and Gabe honestly didn’t know how to play this. Lynn timer didn’t seem afraid of him, especially with Liesl in the backseat singing to herself about Winnie the Pooh and Piglet too.

She’d even smiled at the girl and held her hand as they all crossed the parking lot to his truck. Hilde had looked worried, what with her arms hugging herself, and she’d told Lynn timer to text her the moment she arrived at home.

He made the right turn, and Lynn timer said, “It’s the white one up there on the right.”

“Yes,” he said. “I see it.” He turned into the driveway as he took in the exterior of the house. Hilde obviously took good care of it, but he suspected she paid a lawn care service, what with how busy the store kept her. “Oh, you painted the front door.”

“We did; we—” Lynn timer’s voice died, and Gabe swung his attention toward her. At the surprised expression on her face, he realized what he’d just said. What he’d admitted to.

Lynn timer recovered quickly, and she folded her arms in a classic Hilde-move. “Okay, I’m not stupid,” she said with plenty of teenage attitude. “You’re dating my mom, aren’t you?”

Gabe blinked, trying to find a way to deny it without denying it. Lynn timer

didn't seem happy about the prospect of him dating her mother, though Gabe certainly was. Because the white-hot pain of Hilde telling her brother he wasn't her boyfriend still emanated through him, Gabe nodded.

"Yeah, we're dating," he said. "It's very new, so I'm sure she would've told you soon."

"How new?" Lynn timer asked.

"Uh, a week," he said. "We went to an early dinner last Friday, finally. I'd been asking her out for a few weeks by then, but our schedules are both a little crazy."

Lynn timer's face softened. "You asked her out for weeks? That's so cute."

Gabe smiled when Lynn timer did, but "cute" was only for bunny rabbits and baby girls. "Our second date was on Thursday. I wanted to see her today before I go back to Jackson Hole."

Lynn timer's auburn eyebrows folded in on themselves, and her smile disappeared. She had a smattering of freckles across her cheeks and nose, and since Gabe had met her father, he knew that was where she got those. "You don't live here?"

"I do," he said carefully. "Part-time. Liesl and I have a house here and one in Jackson."

"Wow, you must be rich," Lynn timer said bluntly.

Gabe gave her the most diplomatic smile he possessed. "I own a law firm, so I've got what I need."

"Daddy," Liesl said from the backseat, and he glanced at her. "Potty." She wore an earnest look on her face, and Gabe flew into gear.

"Can I come in and use your bathroom?" he asked as he slid from the truck. "She's—we're still working on potty training."

"Yeah, sure." Thankfully, Lynn timer didn't waste time getting out either, and she keyed in the code on the garage door while he unbuckled Liesl.

"Hold it, baby," he told her. "We're almost there." He rushed by Lynn timer, a grateful smile on his face, and went up the few steps to enter Hilde's house. He'd been here only a couple of nights ago, but he hadn't used the bathroom. Thankfully, one sat right off the door here, and while it was only a half-bath, it would do just fine.

He took Liesl inside and helped her take care of her business. After he'd held her on his knee so she could wash her hands, they went back out into the kitchen. Lynn timer stood there, texting wildly on her phone.

"Okay, thanks," he said. "You messaged your mom?"

She looked up, her eyes somewhat glazed. “Yes,” she said as she blinked. “And you know what? She didn’t even deny dating you.” She shook her head and refocused on her phone again. “I thought she would. She hasn’t been out with anyone in a long time.”

Gabe chuckled, though his chest felt like someone had tucked something warm and soft into it. She hadn’t denied dating him to her daughter, only to her hurting, about-to-be-divorced brother. She wasn’t ashamed of him.

“I’m sure she doesn’t want me to know that until she tells me,” he said, and Lynn timer whipped her head up.

Her face turned red, which only made her freckles stand out more. “Don’t tell her I said that, okay? She’ll be mortified.”

Part of Gabe wanted to stay and probe Lynn timer for more information about Hilde’s dating life post-divorce. At the same time, he would never, ever do that to either one of them, so he lifted his hand and tipped his hat at her. “If you need anything, Lynn timer, give me a call. I’m just around this afternoon.”

She nodded, and he directed Liesl back out the garage door exit. “Thank you!” Lynn timer called after him, the words reaching his ears just before the door slammed closed.

He grinned to himself all the way back to the townhome. He didn’t want to spend the rest of the day with anyone but Liesl—and his fantasies about what he and Hilde could become...as long as he didn’t mess things up too badly between them.

GABE RAN ON FUMES BY THE END OF THE DAY MONDAY. “CARRIE?” HE called from inside his office.

The manager who ran the Jackson Hole office and Gabe’s schedule for his entire life, clicked her way toward him and filled the doorway a moment later. “Yes, sir?”

“I can’t find the notes I took on the O’Dell divorce. Did I leave them somewhere?” He shuffled through his outbox paperwork, though they shouldn’t be in there. “I swear I had them in a mint green folder.” He looked up as Carrie reached his desk. “You know, the way I do for cases that aren’t even filed yet.”

“He called again today,” she said. “His wife still hasn’t filed for divorce,

but she really wants him to move out.”

“Of course she does,” Gabe snapped. “Then she can have her cake and eat it too. What did you tell him?”

“I told him if he moved out, you wouldn’t take the case.” She plucked the mint green folder out of a black one. No wonder Gabe couldn’t find it. “You’re not taking on Nathan Wadley?”

Gabe frowned. “There’s no way any of us have time to do the discovery on that case,” he said. “It’ll be hundreds of pages of DCFS documents.” He felt bad, because Nathan needed a advocate, but Gabe’s schedule was bursting. “I need another lawyer. Or a paralegal.”

In that moment, he thought of Cheryl Ingalls. He had no reason to have the woman in his head, other than he’d eaten dinner across from her five or six days ago. She worked for a busy firm in Coral Canyon, and perhaps...

Perhaps he could woo her away from that and get her to work on a lot of the initial stages of the cases he couldn’t take because he didn’t have time.

“A paralegal’s not a bad idea,” Carrie said. “Maybe two or three of them. You and Brian take on far more than other lawyers I know.”

“I care about my clients,” Gabe said, frowning even deeper.

“Yeah, and you can still do that after reading a ten-page brief a paralegal has typed up rather than five hundred pages of discovery.” She gave him a look that begged him to challenge her. When he didn’t, she nodded and left his office. “I’m headed home, Gabe. You should too.”

“I will,” he said absently, though he had no idea what time it was. Liesl was with Waylon, and Gabe wasn’t technically late until six o’clock.

He put the mint green folder into his briefcase bag, and he plucked the black one from the outbox tray too. He had meetings out of the office for most of the day tomorrow, as he had to do some negotiations with another lawyer and then teach an online class for the University of Wyoming. He guest-lectured from time to time on family law and the intricacies of it, and then he and Liesl would be making the drive to Coral Canyon once again.

The band left for their tour in only six more days, but Morris was pulling out early. As the manager for Country Quad, he was responsible for every piece of the puzzle from now until Labor Day. All the hotels they needed. The routes they’d drive. Where they could park their trailers. The best places to get food along the way and at the venue.

He’d be in meetings with the country music executives, and he had to deal with all the complexities of the venues, the people who ran them, the

crowds, law enforcement, and more. He'd been nothing but a ball of nerves for the past month, and Gabe had said he and Liesl would come have dinner tomorrow night one last time before Morris and his family left for the summer.

Gabe's gut felt heavy as he collected four more folders from active cases and put them in his bag. He didn't need to be in court this week, but he was meeting with Luke again on Friday, and he'd arranged to get caught up with five more Coral Canyon clients so they knew where their cases stood and what the next step of the process was.

As he drove home, he tapped to activate his hands-free calling, and then said, "Call Tex Young."

The truck dialed and called Tex, and his brother picked up on the third ring, the sound of a baby screaming in the background. "Gabe," he yelled into the phone. "What's goin' on?"

"I can call back," Gabe said.

"No, no," Tex said, and the sound of his daughter's crying lessened as he obviously moved away from it. "Melissa is just mad I won't let her come out to the stables with me."

"Clearly," Gabe said. "I hope I'm not interrupting band practice."

"We're off tonight," Tex said easily, either ignoring the crispness in Gabe's voice or missing it entirely. "What's up?"

Gabe pressed his teeth together and forged ahead. "I'm wondering if I can get Cheryl's number."

"Cheryl?"

"Yes," Gabe said. "Your sister-in-law? She lives next door to you?"

"Yeah, I know who she is," Tex said dryly. "Why do you want her number?"

"Business reasons," Gabe said carefully.

"She'd never divorce Wade," Tex said, plenty of phantoms in his voice. "Gabe—is she—?"

"I represent fathers," Gabe said. "Think about that for a second, Tex."

His brother laughed in the next moment. "Of course," he said. "I—yeah. I can give you her number. But maybe I should ask her first?"

"Okay," Gabe said. "I just want to talk to her about a job."

"A job?"

"Tex." Gabe wanted to press his eyes closed and knead his fingers along his forehead. "Should I call Abby?"

“She’ll just have more questions than me,” Tex said. “Jeez. You act like you’re one step away from breaking into the White House or something.”

“I told you it was for business.” He shook his head. “She’s a paralegal, Tex. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to put the two together.”

“You want to offer her a job.”

“And there you go,” Gabe said.

“I guess I didn’t realize she was a paralegal.”

“You aren’t serious,” Gabe said.

“Not all of us have photographic memories, bro.” Tex chuckled, and that was one of the best things about him. Gabe could ruffle him, cajole him, tease him, and downright poke fun at him, and Tex didn’t get riled up over it.

“Some of us pay attention to the people and situations around us,” Gabe shot back. And he did. He was extraordinarily observant, and he did keep things inside his memory like a vault. “Can you ask her if I can have her number and then send it along if she says yes?”

“Sure thing,” Tex said. “I just went outside to feed Bryce’s horses, but I’ll text her right now.”

Gabe let a couple of beats go by. “How is Bryce, Tex?”

“He’s good,” Tex said in a brightly false tone. “He’s going to be doing the first ten shows with us, and I can’t wait to see him.”

“I’m glad.” Gabe meant that too, all the way from the bottom of his heart. “He’s a good kid.”

“Yeah, he is,” Tex agreed. “A little lost, but I believe he’ll find his way.”

“All of us are a little lost,” Gabe said. “I know I am.”

“Gabe...you are?”

“Every day,” he admitted, looking left and right at the last stop sign before he’d turn into his gated community. “I think we’re all just trying to find our way, brother, but like you, I believe Bryce will find his.”

“Is there something I can do to help you, Gabe?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Ask Cheryl if I can have her number.”

Tex chuckled and said, “You got it, bro. Anything else?”

Gabe thought for a minute as he pulled up to the gate and keyed in the code. “I don’t know what I’m doing, Tex. Every day, I’m just doing my best, but I don’t know what I’m doing with Liesl, and I don’t know what I’m doing with Hilde, and I’m pretty sure it’s all going to come crashing down on me at any moment.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Tex said. “You didn’t say anything about

the law firm.”

“I know what I’m doing there,” he said, hoping he didn’t sound too arrogant. “It’s just—with people, I’m pretty useless.” The gate trundled open, and Gabe eased his truck through it.

“You are not,” Tex said. “I heard you and Luke made up.”

“We had a moment,” Gabe admitted, wondering who’d told Tex. Probably Luke himself, as Luke didn’t like his business being discussed any more than Gabe did.

“He’s real happy about it,” Tex said, his breath coming through the receiver a bit more raggedly now. “I’ve been real worried about him goin’ on this tour without someone, but I think he’ll be okay.”

“Someone?”

“Yeah, you know.” Tex sighed, and Gabe could just picture him out in the barn feeding horses. “I’ve got Abby now. Otis and Georgia. Trace and Everly. Morris and Leigh. And then there’s Luke. This tour...it’s not going to be like any of our others, and Luke resists change.”

“Most people resist change.” Gabe pulled into his driveway and waited for his garage door to lift. “But Luke especially.” He eased past Waylon’s car and into the garage. “I just got home, so I have to run.”

“I’ll text Cheryl right now.”

“Thank you, Tex.” He paused, really trying to listen to his heart. His mind. The Lord. “What can I do to help Luke?”

“I’ve asked him and asked him that,” Tex said. “He’s so sick of me, he’ll barely talk to me. So if you’re going to see him or talk to him, maybe find out how he’s feeling? He bottles things up so much.”

“A Young trait,” Gabe murmured. He was going to see Luke soon, but he didn’t tell Tex that. “Love you, brother.”

“Love you too.”

The call ended, and Gabe slid from his truck, his mind on Luke and the rest of his family. “Guide me,” he prayed as he entered the house and slid his briefcase into one of the upper cubbies just inside the mudroom.

The air smelled like something seared and then baked to perfection, and when Gabe entered the kitchen, he found Waylon standing at the stove, sautéing something while Liesl sat on the kitchen counter with a coloring book in front of her.

“Daddy!” she yelled, causing Waylon to look over to him.

“Evening, sir,” he said before returning his attention to the hot pan.

Gabe hadn't had any divine inspiration for what to do or say to Luke, but he'd keep praying and hope the right thing popped into his head before he met with his brother the following day.

"Hey, you guys," he said to Waylon and Liesl. He smiled at his little girl and went to pick her up and hug her. "Oh, I missed you so much today. Did you do anything fun?"

"We wanted to see the monkeys!" she said as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"The monkeys, wow." He chuckled as his phone buzzed in his pocket. "Daddy needs to change, and then we'll eat."

"Five minutes," Waylon said, and Gabe took Liesl with him to change out of his suit and tie. After he'd put on a pair of basketball shorts and a T-shirt, he checked his phone to see who'd texted.

Tex, with Cheryl's number, which made Gabe grin.

And Hilde, who'd just confirmed for a date the following evening, which made Gabe's heart sing and his fantasies of kissing her roar to life. He wasn't sure if he'd met Hilde's requirements for kissing yet, but he figured he'd keep moving things along one step at a time until the day he did.

And no one could blame a man for dreaming, right?



Morris Young entered the kitchen, where his wife, Leigh, stood at the stove. “Gabe’s bringing Hilde for dinner.”

Leigh turned and gaped at him with wide eyes. “He is?”

“He asked if he could.” Morris held up his phone, where he’d already answered his twin. “I can tell him no?”

“Heavens, no,” Leigh said. “Of course he can bring her. He probably doesn’t get to see her that often.”

With Gabe living and working in Jackson, Morris figured his wife was right. “Good, because I already told him yes.”

Leigh smiled and shook her head. “Of course you did.”

Morris looked over to the table, where the now-eight of them would eat. “I’ll go get the chair from the office.”

“I already brought that one out,” Leigh said. “This is why I wanted that new dining room set.” She clucked her tongue. “Hilde’s going to think we’re animals.”

“I’ve got a chair in my bedroom,” Denzel said as he limped into the kitchen, his dog not far from him. Scout never got too far from Denzel at all. “Why do we need it?”

“Gabe’s bringing a date,” Morris said with a grin. “I’ll grab it.”

“I’ll reset the table.”

“It’s not that big of a deal,” Morris called over his shoulder. Neither Gabe nor Hilde would want a fuss made over them. He pretended not to notice the packed bags in his office as he passed, and he pushed against the rioting

nerves in his stomach as he brought the chair back into the eat-in kitchen.

Leigh and Denzel were indeed making a big deal out of this added guest, and that only increased the anxiety pouring through Morris. Finally, he said, “Guys, it’s fine. Just smash her on the end there between me and Gabe. It’s not a big deal.”

The doorbell rang, and they all spun toward it like the Queen of England would walk in at any moment. Instead, Gabe’s voice called, “We’re here,” and the pattering of little girl feet came toward them.

“Liesl,” Leigh said, her eyes meeting Morris’s for long enough as they skimmed past. She’d just picked up the little girl when Gabe and Hilde arrived in the back living area of the house. Hand-in-hand Morris noted. So his brother *really* liked this woman.

He already knew that, because he’d seen them at Tex’s house last week, and he talked to Gabe every single day. Still, it was new and different to see Gabe smiling instead of scowling, and to see him holding hands with a woman when all he’d done for the past few years was talk ill of them.

Mostly his ex and the exes of the clients he had. Morris had heard some horrific stories, none as heartbreaking as the real-life situation Gabe had suffered through.

“Hey, brother.” He laughed as he approached Gabe and then hugged him. They held one another tight, saying more in that embrace than they could in words, and then they backed up simultaneously.

“Hey, Hilde.” Morris’s step only stuttered a teensy bit before he practically lunged at her to hug her too. “Come on in. Leigh’s almost done with dinner.” He turned to find his wife setting Liesl on her feet at the mouth of the hallway. The little girl ran off toward Eric’s room, and all eyes came back to Gabe and Hilde.

“Do you need help, Leigh?” Hilde asked, and she moved with her into the kitchen.

“You introduced her to Liesl?” Morris asked.

Gabe shrugged about an inch, usually only one shoulder. His eyes stayed fixed on Hilde’s movements in the kitchen, and Morris wanted to wave his hand in front of his brother’s eyes.

“You’re staring,” he whispered when waiting for Gabe’s attention didn’t work.

Gabe blinked and focused on Morris. “I told her Hilde was one of my friends. I didn’t say we were dating. I don’t know that Liesl even knows what

that means.”

“Probably not,” Morris agreed. “How are you going to talk to her about it?”

“I don’t know.” Gabe sighed and sat down on the couch. “She’s only four years old.”

“She’ll be five soon.” Morris sat beside him. “I mean, not that five is that much older than four, but she’ll be going to school. Kids, even young ones, talk.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“You look tired,” Morris said.

“It’s been a long week,” Gabe agreed. “But I’m not thinking about that right now.” He gave Morris a weak smile. “How’s everything going for the tour? Are you ready to leave tomorrow?”

Morris swallowed and forced himself to nod. “Yeah, all packed and ready. Almost.”

“Physically ready,” Gabe said, his dark eyes drilling into Morris now. “Not really what I was asking.”

Morris couldn’t hide from Gabe, and he didn’t want to. “I’m pretty sure I’ve forgotten a dozen really important details,” Morris admitted, his voice rushing over the words. “I’m certain the band is going to fire me after the first tour stop, but...” He shook his head as his mind hummed. “I’ve been over things time and again, and I just don’t see where I messed up. I even had Mav look at everything, and he said it’ll be fine.”

Morris did not think it would be fine. Mav had told him he’d learn as he went, and then he’d know what to obsess about and what to let go. He’d learn who needed to be wined and dined and who simply wanted their talent on stage at the right time, sober and ready to please the ticket-holders.

“I feel blind,” he said, ducking his head and scrubbing his fingers through his hair. “I hate feeling like this.”

“Hey, you’re the best man for this job,” Gabe said.

“No,” Morris argued. “I was the *only* man willing to do it. Mav was out, and you’re a big-shot lawyer, and Blaze and Jem were still in the rodeo.” Morris had literally been the only option left. “If I hadn’t done it, they’d have taken it outside the family, which I know they don’t want to do.”

Gabe’s eyes fired with that hot fire that usually sent brothers running. Morris had been born with it, so he simply stared back. “What’s the worst case scenario?” Gabe asked.

“Dinner’s ready, you two,” Leigh said as she sat down on Gabe’s other side. “What are you talking about so furiously?”

“Nothing,” Gabe said at the same time Morris said, “Managing the band.” He drew in a big breath, released it, and stood. “I’ll get the kids.”

“Hilde went to do it,” Leigh said, but Morris kept on toward the hallway anyway.

He found Hilde standing in the doorway of Eric’s room, and as he came up behind her, she said, “...have two hands, so hurry up and put your stuff away so we can go eat.”

She stepped back and looked at him when he got close enough for her to hear his footsteps, and Morris gave her a smile. “Eric always needs some... persuasion to stop playing and come eat.”

To his great surprise, his son appeared in the next moment, his small hand slipping into Hilde’s. “Ready,” he announced.

Morris gaped as Liesl ran toward them, saying, “No fair. I wanted that one.”

“I have two, honey.” Hilde showed Liesl her other hand, her smile genuine and filled with sunshine, love, and pure pleasantness.

“How’d you do that?” Morris asked. He peeked inside the room, and all of the coloring supplies had been put in the bin. They looked like they’d been chucked there, but they rested inside nonetheless.

Hilde gave him a smile as the three of them started toward the kitchen. “I have magic hands.”

Morris turned and watched her move down the hallway with the kids at her side, and only Eric broke away once they’d reached the living room. He galloped toward the couches, yelling, “Momma! Guess what? Guess what?”

With only Liesl’s hand in hers, Morris had the distinct feeling that Gabe was going to need to talk to his daughter about dating and girlfriends sooner than he’d anticipated. Liesl definitely had a female drought in her life, and all the women in the Young family knew it. He and Leigh had even talked about it previously.

Before anyone could come looking for him, Morris kicked himself into gear and rejoined his family in the kitchen. Gabe was busy helping Liesl into her seat while Eric climbed up on the one next to it, and Leigh put Rachelle in her highchair.

Denzel took an end seat, leaving the rest of the far side of the table for Gabe and Hilde, and Morris managed to slide into his place just before Leigh

sat down. He said nothing until Leigh said, "Would you say grace, baby?"

Then he swept his cowboy hat from his head and pressed his eyes closed. "Lord," he said without waiting for anyone else to be ready. Gabe hadn't been wearing a hat anyway. "We thank Thee for the great and varied blessings in our lives. Bless this house while we're gone from it, that Denzel and Scout will be all right, and that we'll be safe traveling for the tour. Bless those in this company who need extra help right now, maybe an extra nudge in the right direction, or the words they need to express themselves. Bless Denzel to continue to recover, and bless Hilde with her upcoming Market Faire this weekend."

His eyelids shook, and he needed to wrap this up before it got too sappy. "We love Thee, Lord. Bless our mamma and daddy with health and safety while we're gone, and send comfort to us when we need it. Amen."

"Amen," the other adults at the table murmured. Eric yelled the word and stood up on his chair to reach for one of his mother's delicious rolls.

"Eric," Leigh said, swiping the basket of bread out of his reach. "Sit down."

Thankfully, the child did, and Leigh offered him the basket. "Good boy," she said.

Liesl started to fuss, and that drew everyone's attention, because the little girl never presented a problem. "No, Daddy," she said now, her cute eyebrows drawn into a frown. "I want Miss Hilde to help me."

Gabe swiveled his attention from his daughter on his left to his girlfriend on his right. "I can help her," Hilde said in a very quiet voice.

Morris wanted to tell Gabe to *let this go. Don't make it a big deal.* His brother warred with himself for a good ten seconds, which felt like a decade. Then he looked at Morris, who lifted his eyebrows.

"All right," Gabe said. "Switch me places, would you? I don't need help buttering my roll." He grumbled the last sentence, and to Morris's surprise, Hilde laughed.

The light, lilting sound of it tickled his ears, and he noticed the intensely bright red of his brother's face as he and Hilde switched spots so she could help his daughter with her dinner. Liesl settled down after that, and Hilde spoke conversationally and easily with Leigh and Denzel and even Eric.

Gabe had hunkered into his shoulders, and Morris kicked him under the table. "Hey," Gabe barked out. Everyone looked at him too, and he glared knives out at them all. "Uh, I mean, no, thank you, Morris. I don't want any

unsolicited advice.”

Morris burst out laughing too, only quieting when Leigh threaded her fingers through his. Gabe had leaned over to say something to Hilde, and while Morris normally hated whispering in mixed company, he actually found Gabe and Hilde really cute together. Good. Perfect.

Now, if only Gabe would see it and get out of his own way.

“ALL RIGHT,” HE SAID THE NEXT AFTERNOON. “THANKS, FELLAS.” HE started down the line of brothers who’d come to help him and Leigh pack their trailer and truck. The whole band was there, and Mav, Blaze, and Jem had shown up too. Gabe had gotten there late and not done much, but Morris didn’t mind. He knew how busy his brother was, and he didn’t want to be a burden to him any more than he’d already been.

“Call me tonight,” Gabe whispered as Morris hugged him. He nodded that he would, and he moved to Mav, the last brother in line.

The others had started to go back inside, where Leigh had charged Denzel with feeding everyone pizza and salad for coming to help. Her brother hadn’t been able to do much, and every time Morris had seen him in the past hour, he’d worn a storm on his face.

Morris understood; he and Leigh were Denzel’s lifeline. His support system. He’d be living in the house alone now, and Denzel hadn’t lived alone since the car accident that had left him with the injuries he was still recovering from. It had been three years now, and Leigh had cried over leaving her brother here alone.

They’d spoken to Mav and Momma, and both of them had agreed to be sure to check in on Denzel a few times every week. That would only infuriate him too, because he didn’t like feeling like he couldn’t take care of himself. In so many ways, he could. He did without any issues.

Leigh definitely babied and mothered him a little, but they both liked it.

“You’ll be in Cheyenne tonight,” Mav said. “Kansas City by tomorrow night. Nashville on Sunday evening.”

“That’s the plan,” Morris said. “A day there for the holiday, and then I’ve got meetings at King Country on Tuesday.” The tour started next Friday night, and the rest of the band members weren’t leaving until Monday

morning, and they'd be arriving in Nashville late Wednesday or even early Thursday.

Morris had to have everything ready for them before then. Mav had told him he often traveled ahead of the band to make sure their accommodations and venues were set and ready for their arrival.

Mav gave him a kind smile. "Morris, try to enjoy this."

Morris nodded, his throat suddenly so tight. He wanted to enjoy this. He'd dreamed of being part of Country Quad for more than a decade, and his moment was finally here.

Here and now. He couldn't squander it. He couldn't blow it. He couldn't be so nervous that it passed him by.

Please, God, he begged as he hugged Mav again. Help me to pull this tour off without a hitch.

Even as he prayed, Morris knew he'd just asked for the wrong thing. God wasn't going to make sure absolutely nothing went wrong over the course of the next three months. Things were absolutely going to go wrong. Mav had assured him of that, and Morris's own experiences in life testified of it.

As he stepped back and sighed, he amended his prayer. *Lord, help me find a solution for and endure the hard things that will come this summer.*

That felt more authentic, and as he moved to Leigh's side and put his arm around her, he knew without a doubt that God would help him when things went wrong this summer, and that alone helped him to calm down about this tour.

Then he plucked his daughter from his mother and strapped her in her car seat as Leigh wrangled Eric into his. Then, they climbed in the front of the truck, and he laid on the horn as he pulled away from his comfortable, quiet home in Coral Canyon, the months ahead of him filled with unlimited possibilities.



Luke itched as he sat in the tiny “waiting room,” which was really just Sterling’s formal living room off the front door of her house. She’d welcomed him in with a pretty smile, then said she had to go sanitize the table as her last massage had run over and she hadn’t had time.

He didn’t mind one bit. His knee bounced, but not out of impatience. Just pure nervous energy. His mind felt fragmented, and he saw himself jumping to his feet and striding out of the house, never to come back again.

It would be fine, because he hardly ever saw Sterling outside of their massage appointments.

So surprise hit him when she said, “All righty, Lucas, come on back.” He hadn’t walked out after all.

Numbly, he got to his feet and wiped his hands down the front of his jeans. Why had he worn jeans to this? He hated trying to shimmy into them afterward, when he was covered in oils and lotion.

Then he remembered that he’d worn jeans, because he’d helped Morris pack up just before this, and he hadn’t wanted anyone to know he was coming for his massage today. Why, he didn’t know. He couldn’t reason when it came to Sterling.

Her house smelled like lilacs and vanilla, and Luke normally would’ve turned up his nose at such scents. Today, he actually took a deeper breath as he went past her and around the corner to the massage room.

She smelled like strawberries, and he wanted to dive into a vat of them and swim around just to keep the scent close to his skin.

The room had heavy blackout curtains covering the front windows, and Sterling only kept her massage table and a rolling stool in here. A built-in desk also took up most of the wall underneath the windows, where she'd put her essential oils, her lotions, a Bluetooth speaker already playing the sounds of the ocean, and a light that lazily drifted from yellow to pink to teal to purple to white.

"You know the drill," she said, not even coming in the room with him. "I'll ask you what problems you're having when I come back in."

He waited until she pulled the door closed, and then he said, "Strip down, face down on the table." Then he did just that, ignoring the table as it squeaked under his weight. Blissful heat radiated from it, and this was a step up from the massage table he'd laid on last month. The blanket over him was warm and thick, and Luke exhaled all the tension from his body as he drank up the warmth, the peace, the slower pace of everything when he laid on the table.

Then Sterling knocked, and he dang near flew out of his skin. "Yep," he barked anyway, and she slipped inside.

"All right, cowboy," she said, her voice quieter to match the mood in the room. "What's going on in your body?"

So many things, but Luke couldn't tell her about half of them. More than half. "Uh, my shoulder still hurts sometimes," he said. "But it's not been too bad. My trainer says I hold everything in my lats."

"And your neck, usually," Sterling said, putting pressure on his heels with both hands. She held there, then moved up to his calves, almost like she was communicating telepathically with his body. "Mm, you're tight today."

"I've added ten pounds in muscle in six months," he said. "My trainer's pushed me hard."

"Yes, he has," she said, her voice the epitome of neutrality. She didn't comment on his muscles ever—unless it was to say how tight they were. She'd been the one to tell him about the foam roller that he used on his right, tight calf after a workout, and she'd been the one to point him toward the relaxation app he used.

Whole body wellness, she'd called it.

He called himself pathetic for doing every little thing she suggested, just so they'd have something to talk about besides the band and the upcoming tour when he came for his massages.

Just ask her, he told himself, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. She

pressed on his hips, and he tightened. She moved to his lats, then his shoulders, and finally the cranium.

“The table is new,” he said.

“Is it too warm?” she asked in a near whisper as she pulled the blanket back off his body. He always thought she’d go too far, reveal too much of his body, but she never did.

“Not at all,” he said. “I really like it.”

“I’m glad.”

“When did you get it?”

“About two weeks ago now. I saved every last penny I could.” She gave a slight giggle, pumped the lotion into her hands, and swept them down over his shoulders and alongside his spine. He breathed out, the powerful stroke forcing him to give his will over to Sterling’s.

Just relax, he heard her say, though she didn’t vocalize it this time. *Melt into the table, Luke. I’ll take care of you.*

Words she’d said before, that he recited whenever he came for a massage. And relax he did, achieving a level of floatation that usually took half the massage in only a few minutes. He was mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted, and the tour hadn’t even started yet.

His breath catching in the back of his nose near his throat alerted him back to a place of wakefulness, and then embarrassment burned through him. Sterling had assured him many times that he wasn’t the only client who fell asleep on the table, but he still didn’t like that he had.

“All right,” she finally said, pulling the blanket over his chest again. “All done.”

“Wow,” he said groggily. “That was amazing.”

“You were really floating there for a while,” she said.

“Yeah.” He didn’t open his eyes now either.

“Take your time,” she said. “It can take a minute to come back from that far out.” She slipped out of the room, and Luke laid on the table and stretched his arms high above his head. He didn’t want to leave the safety and warmth of this table, this room, but he eventually did pull back the blanket and swing his legs over the side of it.

Since he’d passed out in the gym a while back, Luke listened to his body better. He held still while he found his balance and his feet, and then he got redressed, pulling on the sticky jeans and cursing every second of it.

He finally opened the door, and Sterling stood there, her pretty pink lips

turned up in a smile and a fresh bottle of water in her hand. She extended it toward him, and he took it and twisted off the lid.

“How are you feeling?”

“Good,” he said. “Really good.”

She nodded like he’d just paid her the best compliment in the world. “I suppose I won’t see you for a while,” she said.

Luke frowned, and it took his brain a moment to process why he wouldn’t be able to come back for another massage. “About that,” he said.

Sterling waited, her smile flattening with every passing second. “Yeah?”

Luke could only stare at her. No matter how many times he’d practiced this, the words just weren’t there. He hated his inability to talk, to say what was on his mind. An image of Gabe flashed through his mind, and how stilted and awkward Luke’s apology had been.

Then, he’d just opened his mouth and trusted that God would put in the words he needed.

Now, he needed to do the same.

“I want you to come on tour with me.” The words just blobbed out there, and Luke couldn’t call them back now.

Sterling’s blue-green eyes widened as surprise turned to shock and then maybe even a little horror. “I’m sorry. What? How could I possibly come on tour with you?”

“I just need someone to work me over,” he said, hating how that sounded too. Was it sexual? Surely Sterling understood what he meant, though she’d been hard at work in his fantasies too. “I mean, my shoulder still aches, especially after we run the show. I do these weird theatrics every night. Sometimes I do round-offs and flips and the worm. I don’t even know what’s going to happen until it happens.”

He forced himself to stop talking, and they stared at one another in her too-small hallway, both of them blinking like it was the only thing their bodies could focus on at the moment.

Sterling possessed more brain cells than Luke did, because she said, “I can’t come on tour with you, Luke. I’m just building my studio here.”

“I can pay you,” he said. “Lots.”

Oh, how he wanted to disappear. Why couldn’t the floor just open up and swallow him whole? *Please, God*, he prayed inwardly, with a groan attached to the words.

Her eyebrows shot off her face again. “Lots?”

“That makes me sound so arrogant,” he said. “You know I’m not.” He let out a sigh mixed with a nervous laugh. “I’m just saying—it’s not like you wouldn’t be paid well. I’d make up for all of your lost income this summer.”

Plus some, he thought but didn’t say.

Sterling folded her arms, but it wasn’t in an aggressive way. She seemed to be protecting herself, and one of those delicious curvy hips pouted out. “How much do you think you’d pay me?”

His heart leapt, and now his eyes widened as full as moons. “Are you seriously considering it?”

“No.” Sterling laughed and shook her head. “Of course not. I’m being silly.” She looked at him as her laugh faded faster than it had started. “*You’re* being silly. You’re not going to hire me to come on tour with you this summer. You leave in three days. I have clients booked for the next three weeks.”

She gave him a glare now and strode into her kitchen. “You can just pay me through the app. It’s the same price as before.”

“Sterling,” he said, desperate now. He hadn’t said her name a whole lot, and he liked how it rolled out of his mouth. “Just listen.”

“Luke, I really can’t go with you,” she said from the other side of the peninsula in her kitchen. “I’m building my client-base here. I’m trying to run my own thing, and closing up shop for three months is the exact opposite of what I should be doing.”

He nodded, because he couldn’t argue with her. He *wanted* her to build her business here and be successful. He gave her a hundred-percent tip every time he came. Swallowing, he stuffed away all of his protests and arguments. She wasn’t going to come, and he wasn’t even sure how it would all work anyway.

He hadn’t mentioned it to Morris, and he had them in hotels in some cities and living out of their trailers in others.

As Luke stood in Sterling’s house and looked at her, he simply didn’t want to go on this tour alone. He’d have Corrine, of course, but everyone else had a spouse. He didn’t.

He fit in the band. He was closer to those brothers than ever before, but he still felt completely out of the loop. He felt left behind in the worst way possible, and he couldn’t bang any harder on the glass separating him from his growing family.

And to be clear, he loved his new sisters-in-law, and he loved the new

babies coming to the Young family. Everyone in his family helped him with Corrine, and he was more than willing to take any of his nieces and nephews if one of his brothers needed him.

But there were only three of them left without a spouse, and Gabe was already dating Hilde. Luke didn't even have a dating prospect on the horizon—other than the woman he currently watched as she turned to her fridge and pulled out another bottle of water.

When Sterling faced him again, she'd drawn all of her shutters closed, and Luke had never seen her expression like that before. It told him so much—how open she'd been with him previously, the level their friendship had reached, and why his heart currently boomed big beats at him.

They each said, *Don't mess this up, Luke. Walk away now, Luke. Be kind, Luke.*

"I'm sorry, Sterling," he said, and truer words had never come out of his mouth. "I'll call you when I'm back to set something up?"

"Yes, of course," she said diplomatically.

He wanted to donate thousands and tens of thousands of dollars to her new venture, but he wouldn't offer. The money would only come between them, and then she'd feel beholden to him, which was exactly the opposite of what he wanted their relationship to be.

Luke nodded and turned to leave. "Thank you, Sterling. I hope you have a great summer."

"Thank you, Lucas," she called after him. "Good luck on the tour!" she added as Luke let himself out.

Lucas, he thought, his mental voice almost a scoff. No one called him Lucas except for his mother, and even she hadn't done it in a decade. The name spoken in Sterling's voice burrowed into his heart and found a nice, fleshy place to live, as much as he wanted to root it out and toss it away.

He couldn't.

He thought of her on the way back to his parents' condo, and all through dinner with them. He smiled at Corrine as she came out of the bathroom after her bath, and he managed to braid her hair so it would be "curly" in the morning when they went to the Market Faire at Hilde's furniture store.

But Sterling did not leave his mind for long, and never willingly. Luke didn't know what that meant, and now he had three long months of solitude to figure it out.



Sterling Boyd pulled up to Hilde O'Dell's furniture store at eight a.m. on Monday morning—the third and final day of the Market Faire. Her hands already ached, as she'd been giving thirty-minute massages for ten hours each day for the past two days.

She didn't have employees that could segment up this work. She didn't have more than the single traveling table. She'd lost most of her friends when she'd left the Red Carpet Boutique, and she now competed with them for every customer.

Her emotions welled in the back of her throat, and she lifted the strawberry banana smoothie she'd picked up on her way here this morning. She'd break for lunch later in the day, when the crowds started to thin and families moved on to feed themselves and their kids.

Then, there'd been a rush in the late afternoon and early evening until the Faire had closed at six, and Sterling expected the same today. School was out for the summer, and families wouldn't need to be headed home early for anything tonight.

She regretted booking a client for nine a.m. tomorrow, and it was a lesson she was learning the hard way. "All of my lessons lately seem to be like that," she muttered as another vendor pulled up beside her.

Gourmet Gardens brought a packed trailer and five employees to get things set up, and Sterling counted her blessings that all she had to do was mellow out her booth, set up her table, and connect her phone to the Bluetooth speaker.

Mellowing the booth did take some time, thus why Sterling had shown up two hours before the Memorial Day festivities got kicked off.

Hilde had done a fabulous and impressive job of organizing and carrying out the Market Faire, and Sterling could see why the woman had run the Small Business Owner's Association here in town. Sterling felt like she could learn a whole heap of a lot from Hilde, and she'd been honored and tickled to be invited to this Faire.

She didn't see anyone else setting up yet—even the guys from Gourmet Gardens had stayed in their truck—so she pulled out her phone and picked back up on the research she'd been doing for the next thing she wanted to bring to her wellness studio.

Meditation. She'd been taking classes in yoga and mind work for a year now, and she loved meditating with the help of her online lessons. She wanted to provide that same framework for people who lived busy, chaotic lives. She wanted to give them an hour of peace and healing and teach them ways they could take the breathing exercises home with them to implement into their daily lives.

Specifically, Sterling wanted to offer floating guided meditation classes at her studio. She'd taken them at her retreat in February, and she'd fallen in love with the wrapped, cocooned feeling from the silk as it formed to her body and adapted to her every move. She adored the gentle sway of the hammock and how she'd felt like she had gotten so close to the earth that she could feel the gentle hum of the rotation. She loved the crystal singing bowls, and the way she'd learned to breathe and calm her mind.

She wanted to give that same experience, that same gift, to her clients here in Coral Canyon. No one else in town did anything like floating silk hammocks and meditation, and Sterling wanted to be the first to bring the class to the people here.

But silk hammocks cost a lot of money. The crystal singing bowls were anything but cheap. She could take more classes, but none of these were the real problem.

The real issue was space. A place to hang the hammocks so that they could support five hundred pounds—the torque of a bigger person getting in and out—without failing.

And to have the space and facilities to accommodate the hammocks, Sterling would need commercial space. Such a thing in Coral Canyon was easier to come by, what with the recent growth of the town, but it was still

expensive, and Sterling had certain requirements. Darkened windows and doors leading to treatment areas, lots of parking, and a central location to name a few.

“This is a dream,” she whispered to herself. And it was. A great big out-there dream that she couldn’t stop thinking about. Her brother knew about her hopes and dreams, and Steve had looked up small business loans and even sent her some applications.

Sterling hadn’t done anything with them yet. She’d established her personal studio with savings, but that money was all gone now. She had a fairly steady schedule, and she could pay her bills with relative ease. But expanding? That wasn’t happening without a major shift in her clientele or a huge loan.

Both made her nervous, because Sterling was a one-woman operation. If her schedule got too full, she’d have to bring on another masseuse, and where would she house them? It always came back to the commercial space, and Sterling sighed as she looked up from her phone.

She turned to look out the window and yelped as she came face-to-face with someone unexpectedly. Georgia held up both hands and danced backward, and as Sterling’s pulse went from *we’re-being-attacked!* to *it’s-just-a-friend*, she rolled down her window.

“Sorry,” Georgia said with a smile. “I was about to knock, but you turned too fast.”

“Hey.” Awkwardness descended on her, and she didn’t want to make Georgia bend over to have this conversation. Sterling hastened to unbuckle, and then she got out of the car. “What’s up? You ready for this?”

“I’m exhausted is what I am.” Georgia lifted a to-go cup of coffee to her lips and took a sip. “But it’s been a good fair. I’ve handed out a lot of cards, and our summer classes are booked through the end of July.”

“That’s amazing,” Sterling said, truly happy for Georgia. She’d met the woman about a year ago, when she’d started attending the small business owner meetings.

“What about you?” Georgia asked, looking over to her. “I was going to ask you if you’re full, or if I can schedule a time to come in when I get back from Nashville.”

“I’m not full,” Sterling said. “I’ve booked about six people from this though, so I’m going to count it as a win.”

“It’s your first fair,” Georgia said.

“I didn’t have any expectations,” she said. “And it’s not something for kids or families. I’m really counting on women to want some alone time and self-care.”

“Which is why I’m here.” She rolled her neck. “I think this tour is going to bring me to my knees, and when I get back, I have to deal with the shop and what hasn’t been done there.”

Sterling bent to reach back into her car to get her phone. She couldn’t quite reach it and stretched further. When her shoulder felt a moment away from popping out of the socket, she managed to grab her phone. “When are you back?” she asked as she straightened.

“I’m just doing the first month,” she said. “Then I’m coming back here for the Fourth of July—we’re very busy in the shop then—and a couple of our busier summer reading programs. I’ve got an author coming the third week of July and both of her events are sold out. Then I’m going to go back out for the last leg of the tour.”

Sterling pressed her lips together. Since Luke had asked her to go on the tour with him as his personal masseuse, she hadn’t been able to stop thinking about what that life would be like. Just massaging his body—and he had a beautiful body—every couple of days? No worries about her facility or how to drum up more business? Experiencing summer on tour with a famous country music band?

It all sounded too good to be true—because it was. Thus, why Sterling had said no. Not only that, but she didn’t want to lose the small client base she’d been building. Why should she even be here, giving out free massages and cards, hoping someone would book with her?

Oh, but not until September. Sorry!

She couldn’t tell them that. It made no sense.

“So July,” Sterling said, swiping to open her calendar. “I’ve got some openings in July. You tell me, and let’s see what we can work out.”

It took several minutes for the two of them to align their schedule, and Sterling happily scheduled Georgia for a massage. Right as they finished, Hilde approached, with Everly Young in tow.

Sterling became hyper-aware of how many of these women had Young as their last name, and the third one was dating a Young. Her pulse bounced at her, because she’d harbored feelings for Luke once-upon-a-time.

Way last year, she told herself. After the Fourth of July concert Country Quad had done. She’d continued with his massages as normal, never letting

anything personal get in the way of being professional, and the feelings had subsided.

They hadn't died, though, and Sterling wasn't sure what to do with them now as they resurged up her throat.

"Do you need any help getting set up?" Everly asked Georgia. "I notice your muscle is gone."

"Otis is packing everything today," she said. "We're leaving right after this. We're driving a lot of the night so OJ will sleep." She yawned. "I'm so tired already, but Otis promised me I can sleep in the trailer while he drives."

"I don't think that's exactly legal," Everly said with a smile.

"When are you leaving?" Georgia asked.

"Tomorrow morning," she said. "Bright and early. Trace wants to get to Kansas City in one day instead of two."

"Oh, boy," Georgia said. "Sounds like you have an overachiever on your hands, the same way I do." They laughed together, and even Sterling smiled along with them.

The ladies fell into silence, and Sterling experienced a level of comfort with them she hadn't with women for a while. She wondered if she could be friends with them the way she used to be with her fellow masseuses as Red Carpet.

She'd been attending the meetings, and all of them went too. They all owned small businesses. *Why not?* she asked herself.

"So." She cleared her throat. "Can someone tell me about Luke?"

"Luke?" Georgia and Everly said at the same time, one of their voices pitching up in screeching surprise. Hilde simply looked at Sterling, who suddenly felt hot from head to toe.

"What about Luke?" Hilde asked, the perfect tag-team to the other two women.

"It's just..." Sterling sighed, not sure how to phrase her thoughts. The way the three of them watched her made her fingertips tingle. Maybe she shouldn't say anything. She didn't know any of them super well, and she wasn't sure she could trust them.

She looked out into the parking lot, which had started to see more activity. "He asked me to go on tour with him," she said. "As his personal masseuse."

"Oh, my goodness." Everly covered her mouth, her eyes going as wide as dinner plates.

“What did you say?” Hilde asked, completely nonplussed. Sterling yearned for that kind of maturity, though she liked Everly’s more dramatic reaction too.

She tucked her hair behind her ear and then pushed both hands through it. She’d need to braid it to keep it out of her way, as the nearly-June sun would warm things up really quickly that day.

“I told him no,” she said. “I’m just getting started here. I can’t leave my business and go on tour to massage him every few days.” She scoffed, because hearing it out loud was worse than in her head.

“Smart move,” Georgia said. She turned away as she said something else, and Sterling was pretty sure it was, “At least for your business.” She took a couple of steps and said, “I’m not going to say no to anyone who wants to help me schlep boxes of books.”

“Be right there,” Everly said, but she didn’t look away from Sterling or move a muscle at all. “Sterling, do you...you could come on tour for a week or something.”

“What good would that do?” Hilde asked in a calm, quiet voice. “One massage? There are places for him to get massaged all over this country.”

“Exactly.” Everly turned to look at Hilde, and then they both focused on Sterling again.

She caught on very quickly, and she sucked in a breath. “No.” She shook her head. “He doesn’t. He’s never once....” Her voice trailed off as she remembered the flush in Luke’s face when he’d asked her to come with him on tour.

Could he be interested in her?

“No,” she said again, shaking her head. “Nope. I know the man, and no. No way.”

“I’ll see what I can find out.” Everly’s eyes danced with mischief, and she turned to go help Georgia.

Sterling grabbed onto her arm. “Everly, do *not* say anything to him.”

“I agree, Ev,” Hilde said. “Luke doesn’t seem like the type to appreciate being talked about behind his back.”

“He’d hate that,” Sterling said. “I wasn’t talking about him. I just wondered if you guys thought that was a normal request?”

Everly faced her again, her shock and awe subsiding. “I mean.” She shrugged one shoulder and looked at Hilde. “He’s what? Gonna be a billionaire after this tour? So yeah, I think it’s probably a normal request for

someone like him, who can pay for what he wants without thinking about it.”

Sterling’s mouth dropped open. “A what?”

“Probably normal for him,” Hilde said. “How much did he offer to pay you?”

Sterling closed her mouth and swallowed, finding her throat abnormally dry. “We didn’t make it that far. He just said he could pay me, and I told him no strongly enough to end the conversation.”

“Mom!”

Hilde turned at the sound of her daughter calling her, and both she and Everly turned to leave. They also both turned back and waved to her, and Everly said, “Good luck today, Sterling. I’ll stop by if things are running well.”

She smiled and waved to them too, the words *gonna be a billionaire after this tour* ringing in her ears.

Maybe she should’ve said yes to going on tour with him.

“No,” she muttered to herself as she rounded the back of her car and opened the hatch. “You can’t be the personal masseuse for a man you have a raging crush on—and who may possibly like you.” She bent to pull out her folding massage table.

“Can I help you?” a man asked, and Sterling dang near knocked herself unconscious as her head jerked up and hit the top of her car.

“Whoa, whoa,” Luke said, and then his warm hands touched *her*, when she’d always been the one to handle him. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” She stumbled back from her car, which made him drop his hand. She left her table where it sat as she reached up and probed the spot where she’d hit her head. “And sure, I’d love your help with the table.”

Luke pulled it from the back of her car, gave her a tight smile that didn’t say one bit that he liked her for more than his masseuse, and said, “Show me where this goes.”



Jem Young trailed behind his children as they galloped and ran ahead with Blaze, Mav, and Luke. Mav held Dani's hand and they walked slower than a snail as they let Lars dictate where they went and how fast.

Boston and Beth walked with Blaze and Cash, and Cole and Rosie—Jem's kids—stayed close to them, even if they veered a little bit.

Luke broke off from the group after saying something to Mav, and he went to help a pretty blonde woman with something in the back of her car. Jem shoved his hands in his pockets, content to follow along the other brothers at the Market Faire today.

He'd been doing that for months now, and he didn't hate it. He'd been living with Blaze for a while now, but he had a handful of showings later this week. He hadn't told anyone he'd met with a real estate agent and that he'd be looking at houses to purchase on his own.

He wasn't nearly as broken as he'd been last year. He didn't get his feelings hurt as quickly, and he hadn't had a drink in almost six months now. He got up every day and got his children where they needed to go. He fed them, bathed them, and took care of them.

When they were off at school, he attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, therapy, and met with a personal trainer. He saw a dietician once a month, and while Jem took care of his physical body, he'd felt himself healing mentally and emotionally too.

He'd fallen away from his faith while riding in the rodeo, but being back

in Coral Canyon had shown him how hollow his life really was. He'd tried to fill it with women and drink, but that had only left him even more shell-like than before.

Jem glanced around at the other people wandering the Faire. Booths lined one side of the parking lot, with food trucks on the other. Furniture sat out in front of the store, which made up the top of the square at the Faire where they all walked.

He'd expected the asphalt to be boiling hot, but the clock had barely struck ten, and the Faire had just opened a few minutes ago. Some of the booths still had the flaps drawn closed, and Jem saw Luke and the blonde woman step behind one of them.

Blaze turned and nodded to where Luke had gone, but Jem didn't get the significance. He didn't exist inside the inner gossip circles of the family the way Blaze did. Everyone in the family came to him—literally everyone—with their problems and woes.

Jem lived in the basement, but he was looking forward to a place of his own, so he didn't have to endure the revolving door which existed at Blaze's house.

If he were honest with himself, which he strove to do more and more, Jem wasn't sure where he fit inside his family. Tex was the oldest, and he led the brothers and their wives. He led the family band too, and when he struggled, Trace and Blaze stepped up without even thinking about it.

Trace was a little more unapproachable than Blaze, and because of his past, people trusted him with their secrets. Jem included.

Otis came next in the family, and he seemed content in his life fourth down the list. Mav was the hinge between older brothers and younger, and then Jem had come along. He wasn't a peacemaker like Mav. He didn't play in the band. He wasn't dark and dangerous and the black sheep of the family like Blaze.

He wasn't one of the twins, and he didn't have a temper that made him stand out in the family like Luke. Although, Luke's temper had mellowed a lot in the past year, and Jem watched as he ducked back out of the booth and headed his way again.

He approached, his face not unhappy but not happy either. Jem considered asking him about the woman, then he wondered why he cared. Luke didn't like to talk about personal things, and Jem could respect that.

At the same time, Jem had started to learn that to build the relationships

he wanted to have with his kids, his brothers, his parents, he had to communicate.

He thought of Sunny and the texts they'd been exchanging for the past couple of months. He'd kept those completely to himself, not even telling Blaze about them. Blaze wouldn't care, and he wouldn't ask questions Jem didn't want to answer. But for some reason, Jem had wanted to keep his reforming friendship with Sunny to himself.

"Who was she?" he finally asked as he and Luke rounded the corner at the top of the row of booths. Desks and dinette sets started to take over the scenery, with the food trucks up ahead. Jem spotted the bright pink one with sprinkles, and he knew they'd be stopping at Faith's truck for their second breakfast.

Which was fine with him. The fireman's pancake breakfast was still as disgusting as ever, with cold, barely done pancakes, icy syrup, and greasy bacon. Not only that, but Jem had missed the memo about bringing extra money for a donation, so he'd paid for three lame tickets when he could've donated so much more—the way Blaze had.

Everyone looked at Blaze with hearts in their eyes, and while Jem loved his brother with his whole soul, he needed to start making his own way in the world.

"Who?" Luke asked.

"That woman you went to help," Jem said, only a stitch of irritation in his voice.

"Oh, she's my masseuse," Luke said, looking ahead, his chin tilted back and his sunglasses catching a lot of sunshine.

Jem grunted to let Luke know that he'd heard him. He also noted that Luke didn't give the woman's name, and Jem wondered why. Maybe Luke didn't know it, as he really only paid attention to details he cared about.

In his back pocket, his phone buzzed, and Jem reached to pull it out. Sunny had texted, and he shot a quick look at Luke and then shoved his phone back out of sight. He could read and answer her later.

His pulse sped, and he wasn't sure why. Sunny's auburn hair framed her face, and she'd cut bangs about six weeks ago. She'd sent him a funny selfie, her bright teal eyes full and round, and a caption that had said, *What do you think? Mistake or evil genius?*

He'd chuckled and told her she looked great, bangs or no bangs. They hadn't started to "hang out" yet, and Jem had not asked her on a date. She

hadn't brought it up either. She'd been back and forth between Coral Canyon, her old place in Kansas City, moving here, selling there, changing jobs, and taking care of her daddy.

She hadn't had time for a date, and Jem wasn't sure he was ready. If he was ready, he'd like to go out with Sunny. They'd been good friends in high school, and he'd love to prove to her that he wasn't the player she'd labeled him as.

He'd laughed it off then, but he hadn't realized how much her opinion of him had formed his future dating habits, nor his opinion of women. He was working through all of that with his therapist, and because of his hard work, his views had been changing and improving.

Just in time too, because he had to take the kids down to Vegas to their mother for the next couple of months. He didn't even know what he'd do with himself, and he questioned whether or not moving out on his own right now was as wise as he thought.

It is. The thought entered his mind again now, as it had in the past. He seized onto it and let it revolve around, trying to find the source of it. As his life had become slower and steadier over the past several months, Jem had been able to acknowledge the hand of the Lord in his life.

This thought belonged to God, and it was meant to guide Jem in his life. He wasn't going to ignore these thoughts and promptings anymore, and his therapist would be so proud.

He approached the pink doughnut truck as Blaze twisted toward him. "What'll you boys have?"

"I want the one with the Oreo cookies," Luke said.

"Cookies and cream," Blaze said to his fiancée, who leaned halfway out of the ordering window.

"Howdy, Luke," Faith called. "Jem."

"Ma'am," they said together. Jem even reached up to touch his cowboy hat in sync with Luke. They looked at one another, both of their faces breaking into a grin.

"I'm gonna miss you this summer," Jem said, and Luke's smile faltered.

"You should come on the tour with me," he said, his face lighting up. "Why haven't we thought of this before?"

Jem shook his head. "I can't."

"Why not? Your kids are going to Vegas this weekend. Fly from there to Nashville. You can stay in my trailer with me and Corrine, and it'll be great.

Anytime you need to come back, you can.” Luke had started to talk really fast, and Jem tried to hear the real reason Luke wanted him to come on the tour with him.

Something inside him told him not to say no, so he didn’t. Instead, he said, “I’ll think about it.” He had plenty of money, and he could fly wherever he wanted after dropping his kids off at their mother’s in Las Vegas. London. South Africa. Nashville. No one would know.

Well, Blaze would, and his momma would, because Jem told the two of them everything. His phone buzzed again, reminding him that he told them *almost* everything.

“Will you really think about it?” Luke asked at the same time Blaze said, “Jem, order up, cowboy.”

He turned from Luke to face Blaze. “I want the one with all the fruit.”

Blaze grimaced slightly but turned back to Faith. “Berry Good Morning.” It was cute how he knew the names of all of Faith’s doughnuts. Their engagement was still on, but they’d yet to finalize a date. With more than half the family on tour until Labor Day, and then school starting, and her mother’s surgery, it was looking like they wouldn’t get married as soon as either of them wanted.

Blaze had never been the most patient of men on the planet, but Jem had witnessed a complete turn-around from the man he’d known and traveled with on the rodeo circuit. They saw the same therapist, though he never said a word about Blaze to Jem.

They milled about in the sunshine, and Jem managed to put a bit of space between himself and the other brothers, especially when Gabe showed up and added another cookies and cream doughnut to their order.

Sunny’s name on the screen made him smile, and he paused to examine that feeling alone. His therapist had asked him to get really granular about things—and this was a prime example. Why was he smiling? He hadn’t even read the text yet.

When he did, he turned his back on his brothers, well-aware that a quick glance his way would show his mega-grin.

It’s a beautiful, sunny day, Jem! I don’t know why, but I just wanted to talk to you. Maybe we can catch up this week now that I’m finally settled and won’t be leaving town for a while.

“Catch up,” he whispered to himself. A lot of their previous texts had been about former classmates and the trouble they’d each gotten into in high

school. Jem had told her very little about his life now, and he knew she was a nurse and that her father had fallen and hurt himself, prompting her return to Coral Canyon.

Ask her out, he thought, and his thumbs flew across the screen as Faith called Blaze's name to come get his doughnuts.

Yeah, I'd love to get caught up, Jem typed. *Now that you're settled and once I take my kids to Vegas, maybe we could try going to dinner to get caught up...*

He even typed out the ellipses, wondering if Sunny would be able to read into the rest of the sentence. It was definitely open-ended, like maybe they'd get along in person and maybe they wouldn't.

"Jem," Luke called, and he jabbed his thumb against the send button, imagining it to be his brother's face as sudden irritation struck him right behind the heart.

He turned and went to collect his doughnut. He could barely see the golden fried dough, because there were so many berries and whipped cream piled on top. Raspberries, strawberries, blueberries, and blackberries—and they were all beautifully ripe.

"Wow," he said, looking up. "Thank you, Faith. This looks so good."

She smiled at him, and Jem focused on his breakfast again. This was going to be so much better than the disgusting pancakes from a couple of hours ago.

They started to move away from the truck, and Blaze called, "There are tables over here, guys."

Jem turned in that general direction—and ran smack dab into a soft body. He grunted, bobbed his cardboard tray holding his oversized, berry-topped doughnut, and ended up smashing it into the chest of the woman he'd collided with.

Horror filled him, and he quickly pulled his hands back. The cardboard tray dropped to the ground with a horrible *plop!* of whipped cream and soft berries against hard, hot asphalt.

When Jem looked up, an apology died on his mouth when he looked into the gorgeous teal eyes of the woman he'd just texted—Sunny Samuelson herself.



“I’m so sorry,” Jem gushed at Sunny, and she simply stared down at her bright red shirt that was now smeared with white cream. She reached up and flicked off a stuck strawberry and then watched it dive bomb to the parking lot.

When she looked up, Jem wore panic on his face. For some reason, she started to laugh.

“I’ll get some napkins.” He didn’t take more than two steps before his brother shoved a handful of brown paper napkins into his hands.

“Come find us in a little bit,” Blaze said. “Miss Sunny.” He tipped his hat, and Sunny grinned at him and gave him a salute. He practically rolled his eyes, but Sunny didn’t care at all.

Blaze focused on Jem again. “Mav wants to take his kids down to the face painting.”

“Okay,” Jem said, his voice somewhat disheartened.

“Just go tell Faith you dropped your doughnut,” Blaze said in a dark tone. “She’ll make you another one.”

“Okay,” Jem said again. His brother left, muttering something under his breath, but Sunny couldn’t erase the smile from her face.

Jem turned back to her, looked at her chest, and quickly brought his eyes right back to hers. “Uh...here.” He thrust the napkins toward her, and Sunny took them.

“My knight in shining armor.”

“Hardly.” He scoffed. “I almost knocked you down, ruined my breakfast

—and your shirt.” He pulled in a breath, and Sunny could listen to him talk in that sultry, tenor voice for hours. “You’ll send me the bill to clean it.”

“Please.” Sunny scoffed this time. “I’ll throw it in my washing machine, and it’ll be fine.”

“Will it?”

“Sure, yeah.” She dabbed at her shirt, cleaning off the majority of the whipped cream, and when it started to get rubbed in, she stopped. She looked up to find Jem staring at her from beneath the brim of that sexy, dark brown cowboy hat. He licked his lips, and Sunny’s face heated more than it already was.

Jem cleared his throat as Sunny moved over to a nearby trashcan. Several tables had been set up under a series of shades, and she fantasized about grabbing a bite to eat with him and settling down there to snack and chat.

“Are you going to get another doughnut?” she asked.

“I’d like to,” he muttered. He looked at the bubble-gum pink truck and then her. “Do you want one? Got a few minutes to hang out with me?”

Sunny’s eyebrows went up, but she nodded almost immediately too. “Yeah, sure.”

Jem turned toward the truck. “Did you get my text?”

“When? This morning? I texted you.” She fell into step beside him, and they joined the line that had formed in front of Hole In One.

“Jem,” a woman called from inside the truck. “What are you doing in line again?”

“Nothing,” he called to her, and Sunny marveled at the way his neck flushed, the redness seeping up his throat and into his face. He wore a dark beard, trimmed neatly, and mustache, and Sunny really wanted to feel it against her skin, maybe get a little beard burned as he kissed her and kissed her and kissed her.

She heated again at her forbidden thoughts, cleared her throat, and folded her arms. “You texted me?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Literally seconds before I ran into you.” He cut her a look out of the corner of his eye and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

Sunny took out her phone, but Jem hissed at her. “You don’t need to read it right now.”

“I’m going to see it,” she said with a giggle. “What difference does it make if it’s now or later?” She peered at him, enjoying the discomfort as it crawled across his face. He was so...different than he’d been in high school.

She told herself that was a good thing. They'd both doubled their age since high school, and she'd have been disappointed if Jem Young had been exactly the same now as he'd been as a seventeen-year-old.

"Do you want to recite it to me?" she teased.

"No," he muttered.

Sunny honestly hadn't been sure if Jem would answer her text. Sometimes he did, and sometimes he didn't. He always had a good reason why he didn't, but some of his reasons had sounded like excuses to her. She hadn't wanted to come on too strong, though she'd definitely like to take things out of this casual space where she and Jem had set up camp and into something a bit more...romantic.

So she'd suggested they get "caught up," since they hadn't texted for a couple of weeks as she finalized her move and got unpacked in her new place here in town.

Yeah, I'd love to get caught up, he'd said. *Now that you're settled and once I take my kids to Vegas, maybe we could try going to dinner to get caught up...*

"Try going to dinner?" Sunny blurted out, unable to censor herself. She loved being around people, and she usually had no problem speaking her mind and making friends. She had to work with people at their worst—as they lay in the hospital, in various degrees of sickness and pain—and she loved it. She loved serving them, and getting to know them, and bringing any amount of sunshine to their lives that she could.

One look at Jem, and anyone could see that he needed all the extra rays of light he could get. Her curiosity raged at her to find out what the last seventeen years had done to the devastatingly handsome cowboy she'd known in high school, but she miraculously held her tongue.

"Yeah," Jem mumbled again, shuffling forward with the line. "If you want."

"When do you take your kids to Las Vegas?" Sunny knew he had two kids, but she hadn't met them or seen them. Every time she'd seen Jem, he'd been with Blaze and no one else. Well, until today. He'd been with a few of his brothers, and there had been several children with them. Given more time, she probably could've matched him with his, but she hadn't been paying that much attention.

"We fly out Friday," he said. "I'll take them to Chanel's on Saturday, and I'm planning to fly home on Sunday."

“Wow, that’s a quick trip.”

“Yep.” Jem didn’t say anything more, and Sunny wondered what haunted him in Vegas, for something clearly did.

They reached the window, and Jem said, “I smashed my doughnut into Sunny. Can I get another berry one?” He looked at her. “What do you want?”

“Uh.” Sunny hadn’t eaten a lot of doughnuts in her spare time, and she hadn’t looked at the menu at all. “The same as Jem, please.” She grinned at the woman standing in the truck, unsurprised to see her smile, write something down, then pass the slip to the ordering board. She then studied Sunny for a moment, then looked at Jem. Back to Sunny, her gaze volleyed a few times before Jem said, “Are you going to charge me or stare at me and Sunny?”

“It’s on the house,” she said.

“Faith.” Jem shook his head. “No way. You think I want Blaze slitting my throat while I sleep?” He shook his credit card at her, and Faith grinned again and took the payment.

“He won’t slit your throat.”

“When it comes to you, Miss Faith,” Jem drawled. “You’ll be surprised what my brother will do.” He tucked his card back into his wallet and put that in his back pocket. He looked at Faith, who blushed inside the truck.

“Jem,” she said with a giggle. “You really think so?”

Jem smiled fully, and how Faith didn’t get knocked backward from the beauty of it surprised Sunny. “Of course, Faith. He loves you.” He glanced over to Sunny, seemed to realize he wasn’t all closed off and polished up, and promptly did so.

He scribbled his signature on the receipt and handed it back to Faith. She looked at it and shoved it back to him. “No.”

“No—what?”

“You can’t tip us that much.”

Sunny tipped up onto her toes to see what he’d tipped Faith and the man working the truck with her. “A hundred bucks? You can tip me that, cowboy. Come by the hospital anytime.” She giggled, and while Faith wore a smile on her face, she didn’t budge an inch.

“Your brother already tipped generously,” she said. “Make it a zero or I’m going to spit in your whipped cream.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Jem said, laughing now. A surge of jealousy moved through Sunny, because she wanted to be the one to make Jem laugh like

that. “You have too much pride in your doughnuts to do that.”

“Maybe so,” she said, her eyes narrowing. “But Jem—”

“Let him tip us,” the man said. “Thank you, Jem.” He grinned at Jem, then Sunny, and she nearly fell over.

“Joe?” she asked.

“The heavens have opened,” Joe Pullman said, switching to his preacher’s son’s voice. “It’s Sunny Samuelson, back in Coral Canyon.” He laughed, and Sunny joined him. “I’m coming out.” He turned toward the end of the truck, and Sunny went to greet him.

He laughed as he spilled out of the truck and grabbed onto her. “What are you doing here?”

“I live here now.” She hugged him hard and stepped away. “My daddy fell a while back, and he needed more help than my momma could give. So I had to sell my place in Kansas City, and I...moved here.” The story contained so much more than that, but Sunny grew tired just thinking about the past four months.

She couldn’t believe it had only been four months. It felt like she’d aged four years and lived through four decades of tough decisions, spilled a lot of tears, and had more arguments with her parents than she had as a teenager.

“How do you two know each other?” Jem asked, and Sunny spun back to him. He stood very close to them, having followed Sunny along the side of the truck. He wore knives in his eyes now, and Sunny hadn’t dated anyone in a while, but she knew jealousy on a man’s face when she saw it.

“Joe lived next door to me,” Sunny said, linking her arm through Joe’s. They both faced Jem, two mega-watt smiles beaming down on him. He didn’t so much as flinch or blink. “He’s a few years older than us in school. Probably Blaze’s age.”

“I was between Mav and Otis, actually,” Joe said. “Blaze is forty, Sunny. How old do you think I am?” He pushed against her bicep and stepped away from her. “Anyway, I have two Berry Good Morning doughnuts to make. We’ll have to catch up later.” With that, he climbed the steps to get back on the truck, leaving Sunny to face Jem alone.

He took the glaring down a notch, then another, and his voice sounded like rusty nails being pulled from wood when he said, “I hope it’s not the same kind of catching up we’ll be doing.”

A soft smile touched Sunny’s mouth, and she controlled it so it wouldn’t explode onto her face. No need to give Jem all the ammunition up front.

“Depends,” she said as she moved a little closer to him.

“On what?”

“On if you’ll take one of those hands out of your pocket and hold mine while we stroll around here today.”

Jem’s eyes widened, and he actually glanced out into the parking lot. “Oh, I don’t know about that, Sunny. My family is here. My kids.”

Ice filled her lungs on her next breath. “Oh, so you’re only interested in me if we keep things a secret?”

“No,” he said.

“That’s what you just said.”

“I said I’m—” He sighed, obviously flustered. “Maybe I just want to keep private things private until I’m ready to make them public.”

Sunny watched him, saw the way his emotions ran through his expression like wild stallions, unbridled and utterly free. He wasn’t lying to her, and she’d had some experience with that in the past.

Or so she’d thought.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“Dinner next week,” he said. “After I get back from Vegas.”

“What will you tell your brothers?”

“Well, only Blaze will need to know, and even then, it’s not an absolutely-need-to-know system we’ve got going.”

“Why would Blaze need to know at all then?”

“I, uh, live with him right now.” Jem scuffed his boots along the hard ground. “I’m looking at houses this week, though.”

“And this dinner next week.” Sunny ran two fingers up his bare forearm, the arc of current between them definitely alive and well. “It’ll be a date?”

“Yes.” Jem ground his voice through his throat. “You want it to be a date, don’t you?”

She saw no reason to deny it. “Yes.” She followed her fingers up to his shoulder, and then her gaze jumped to meet his.

He smiled, which made Sunny smile. “Great,” he said. “Then I think we’re on the same page, even if I don’t hold your hand today.”

“Jem,” Faith called, and he turned to go get their doughnuts. Sunny went with him, unable to keep the sunshine-y grin off her face this time. Faith saw it, and her eyebrows went up, but even then, Sunny couldn’t erase her smile.

For she had a date with Jem Young next week.



Hilde paced in her house, sure tonight was going to be a complete disaster. She shouldn't even be home right now, but she'd been so stressed at the store, she'd had to leave. She didn't want to treat her employees badly, because she had tension ever-present in her life.

Things with Rusty had not improved in the past couple of weeks, but the Market Faire had ended yesterday.

Just in time for her birthday.

Gabe had been in town all weekend, and when he'd learned it was her birthday, he'd insisted he'd stay for another day and they could celebrate that evening.

"Hey, Mom," Lynn timer said as she came in from the backyard. "I'm going to get started on your cake. Wait." She halted on her way into the kitchen and turned toward Hilde. "What are you doing home? Trying to spy on my baking?" Her eyes flashed with lightning, and Hilde couldn't even process the teen attitude.

"No," she said, feeling slow and sluggish in her mind.

"You think I'm going to have Gavin over." Lynn timer folded her arms and cocked her hip.

"No," Hilde said again. "One, I know Gavin has a full-time job. Two, I trust you." She moved toward her daughter and hugged her. Lynn timer melted into Hilde and wrapped her arms around her too.

At least until Hilde said, "I have a confession."

Lynn timer stiffened and tried to step back. Hilde wanted to keep her close,

but in the end, she released her daughter. “I, uh, remember how I’m seeing Gabe?” She ran her hands down the front of her blouse, pulling on the bottom of it though it already lay correctly. “He wants to celebrate my birthday with me.” She shook her head when she realized what she’d said. “With us.”

Lynnie’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. “He’s coming here tonight?”

All of the teen drama and disbelief registered with Hilde now. “Please. You tried to get me to go out with someone last winter. Don’t act like me dating Gabe is this extremely shocking thing.”

“Yeah, I tried to get you to start dating last winter,” Lynnie said. “And you wouldn’t. So this *is* a completely shocking thing, and I’ve said nothing about it because you’ve been so stressed about the Faire.”

“And now that’s over,” Hilde said. “So what’s the problem? You don’t like him? I thought you said the ride home was good. He was great, if I remember right.” She cocked her eyebrows in challenge.

“It was,” Lynnie said. “He’s a nice guy.” She turned to go into the kitchen. “And I guess he can come over tonight. Maybe I can invite Gavin?”

Hilde resisted that idea immediately. “It’s my birthday.”

“It could be a double date.” Lynnie opened the fridge and pulled out the carton of eggs.

Hilde slid onto a barstool, her heartbeat throbbing in the vein in her neck. “It could,” she said miserably. “And Gabe could practically be here for you.”

Lynnie paused, her hand still wrapped around the package of butter. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you have Gavin over, Gabe is only eleven years older than him.”

Lynnie blinked, clearly doing the math. “He’s twenty-seven?”

“Yes.” Hilde put her head in her hands, finally realizing the source of all of her stress. “And how old am I today?”

“Thirty-nine,” Lynnie said quietly.

Hilde closed her eyes. “I don’t even want a celebration.”

“I always make you a cake.”

“I want the cake, but I don’t want this to be a big deal.”

“Did you tell him that?”

She shook her head in a limited way, smashed as it was against her forearms. “He lives and works in Jackson Hole. Runs this big father’s rights firm. I couldn’t just tell him to go on home.” She lifted her head. “It’s my

birthday.”

Lynnie nodded, though she was only fourteen years old. Hilde sighed again, wishing she knew what to do. She wasn't normally a praying woman outside of church, but she found herself pleading with God for just a hint of guidance. A flash of light in the right direction, so she could see enough to take the first step.

Her daughter started putting together the cake batter, and after she'd slid the two round cake pans into the oven, Hilde said, “Come sit by me, sweetheart.”

Lynnie did, and Hilde put her arm around her. “I like him.”

“I know you do, Mom.”

“He says he doesn't care about the age difference.”

Her daughter nodded. “He's like the mean between me and you.”

Hilde knew what a mean was, but it still took her a moment to get what Lynnie had said. But Gabe was the mean between them. Thirteen years older than Lynnie. Twelve younger than her.

“Does it bother you?” she asked Lynnie.

“I don't know,” she said.

Hilde didn't want to make a big deal out of something that wasn't, and Gabe didn't care about the age difference. She did, though, and she and Gabe would have to have some serious conversations about raising their daughters if their relationship got serious at all.

It's already serious, she thought, and that felt like the flash of light she needed to know which direction to go.

“So he'll come over tonight,” she said. “We'll see how it goes.”

“Is he going to have his daughter with him?”

“He didn't say. Maybe. He's brought her with him a couple of times now.”

Lynnie nodded and added, “Text him and see if he can bring some ice cream to go with the cake.”

Hilde smiled and said she would, then she escaped to shower and get ready for her birthday dinner party later that evening.

GABE RANG THE DOORBELL RIGHT ON TIME. HILDE KNEW IT WAS HIM,

because the food had been delivered ten minutes prior. She'd been texting him all afternoon, hidden away in her master bath with her phone, and she knew he wouldn't have Liesl with him.

She'd told him Lynn timer would be joining them, and he hadn't acted like he cared at all. In fact, he'd be glad to have a chance to get to know her better. Hilde hadn't dated a man as seriously as she was with Gabe since the divorce. She normally didn't include Lynn timer in her dates at all, and she hadn't met any of the men she'd been out with in recent years.

Gabe was definitely different, and while they both had rules for romantic partners and their children, it felt like they were kicking down those walls and redefining them.

Lynn timer's phone rang as Hilde turned toward the front door, and she said, "It's Gavin, Mom. Can I invite him?"

"Sure," she said, because she didn't want to argue with her daughter right now. Lynn timer squealed and ran down the hall to her bedroom before she answered the call.

Hilde sighed, trying to capture the magic of a fourteen-year-old girl with her first boyfriend. When she opened her front door to the dark, delicious sight of Gabe Young standing on her stoop, the magic bloomed to life right in front of her.

It mingled in the air around him and came toward her in the form of a bouquet of bright white roses. "These are for you," he said in that tingly, bass voice. "Happy birthday."

She took the flowers from him, automatically leaning over to smell them. "Thank you," she murmured. "Come in. Lynn timer just got a call from her boyfriend. I hope it's okay that I said she could invite him."

"Of course," Gabe said, and he stepped up and into her house.

She didn't move, and he swept one hand along her waist, pulling her close so she couldn't back up even if she'd wanted to. She didn't, and he took the flowers from her before she could protest.

He draped them over the back of the wingback chair in the formal living room and gently pushed the door closed with his foot. He never once let go of her, and in fact, he brought her flush against him as his other hand moved up into her hair.

"I just have one question," he whispered, his breath cascading over the exposed skin on her neck, and his lips practically nibbling her ear.

"Okay," she said, her mind suddenly on vacation. Every nerve-ending in

her body had been lit on fire, and all of her attention went to experiencing everything she could in this man's arms.

The warmth in his touch through the fine fabric of her shirt. The way he pushed her hair off her face and behind her ear. The scent of his cologne, and the weight of his breath along her skin.

She shivered though it wasn't cold, and her eyelids drifted closed.

"Has enough time passed for me to kiss you?" he asked.

Hilde wanted to shout out, "yes!" but she managed to swallow the word. "Do you think that's wise?" she asked. "Trying for that first kiss on my birthday?"

"I don't know if it's wise or not," he said. "But I think I'm going to combust if I don't try."

Hilde giggled quietly, her head ducking down as she did. He put a couple of fingers under her chin and lifted her face up to his. She opened her eyes and looked into his. She had no idea what he saw in her expression, but she saw pure male desire dancing in his. She saw compassion lingering there. She saw hope and fear and confidence and doubt all at the same time.

His vulnerability only made her more attracted to him, and she prayed as she let her eyes drift closed again. *Please let this be the most amazing kiss of my life.*

She didn't want to lie to Gabe, and she wanted to keep dating him. She'd set the bar so high already, and he'd met it over and over and over again.

Both hands came up to cradle her face, and Hilde barely flinched at the touch. He took his sweet cowboy time matching his mouth to hers, but when he did, the heavens opened and angels sang down from above.

He didn't move too fast, but he didn't linger too long either. He kissed her like he was desperate to do so, but he held back in such a refined, sophisticated way that left her wanting to move quicker, go deeper.

He finally allowed her to, and oh, Hilde could get lost in a kiss like this. She did, over and over again, until she wasn't sure which way was north, south, east, or west. She only knew she wanted to keep kissing Gabe—and that it was an absolutely amazing first kiss.



Gabe wasn't sure if he'd met Hilde's requirements, but the way she kept kissing him and kissing him and kissing him back suggested he might have.

"Okay," her daughter said from somewhere inside the house. "Gavin is on his way here."

Gabe pulled away, his heartbeat pounding through every vein in his body. How could he have forgotten about Lynn timer? Had she seen them? She walked right past the hall that led to the front door, and Gabe took the opportunity to put a couple of feet between him and Hilde.

"Mom?" Lynn timer called. "Where are you?"

"Right here, dear." Hilde swept the roses into her hands and went toward the back of the house as if nothing had happened.

Gabe felt the earth swaying beneath his feet—the kiss was that good—and he took a moment to make sure his shirt sat tucked in appropriately before he followed Hilde. After two steps, he stopped suddenly when he remembered the deep red lipstick Hilde had been wearing when she'd answered the door.

Surely he was wearing it now too. He reached up and touched his mouth, feeling the way his lips had swollen. They tingled too, with a heat he hadn't felt in forever, and he quickly wiped his mouth and then stuck his hand inside his pocket to get rid of the evidence before Lynn timer could see it.

"Look at what Gabe brought me," she said as she rounded the corner. Gabe automatically reached into his other pocket too, where her gift still sat.

He hadn't been upset that her daughter was going to spend dinner with them. It was her birthday, and Gabe had thrown himself into her existing plans at the last minute. Once he'd learned today was her birthday, he couldn't just drive away and pretend it didn't exist.

It had cost him something to rearrange his schedule, move clients, and deal with Carrie's displeasure about him not coming into the Jackson office today, but one thought of that scorching hot kiss with Hilde, and he'd do it all over again tomorrow. And the next day. And the next.

Now, though, he wished he and Hilde were alone tonight. He wanted to kiss her again, and he didn't think he'd get to do that with Lynn timer—oh, and her boyfriend—here.

He entered the living room at the back of the house and turned toward the kitchen. Lynn timer smiled at her mom and took the roses from her. "Gavin is on his way."

"Okay," Hilde said, turning back to Gabe. Her eyes met his, and a firestorm burst to life in the air between them. He wanted to ask if he'd scored well on her kissing rubric, but he didn't have to.

The knowing look shining in her eyes told him that he had. She reached for him too, that gorgeous mouth curving up into a smile. "Thank you for the flowers. We love roses around here."

"Mom grows them in the backyard," Lynn timer said as she bent to get a vase out of a low cupboard.

"Is that right?" Gabe looked at Hilde, who smiled to go along with the blush in her face. He wanted to look at her forever, but he switched his attention back to her daughter. "What do you like to do, Lynn timer? Gardening?"

"Heavens, no," she said, and she sounded exactly like Hilde when she did. "That's Mom's thing."

"Lynn timer paints," Hilde said. "She likes Four-H. She took a drama class this year she enjoyed."

Lynn timer simply nodded, her expression pleasant.

"Who's the boy coming over tonight?" Gabe asked, and instant tension flew into the room. "I mean—"

"He took Lynn timer to the Sweethearts dance at school," Hilde said smoothly. "Since she's not old enough to date, they're...friends."

"He's not my boyfriend, Mom." Lynn timer could've rolled her eyes to go with that tone, but she didn't. She looked at Gabe. "I do like him. I think he

likes me. But he's older, and I..." She shook her hair over her shoulders as if she had something hard to say. Gabe and Hilde waited, and Linnie finally said, "I happen to agree with my mother."

"What?" Hilde gasped out the word. "Why am I not recording this?"

Linnie smiled but she did roll her eyes this time. "Stop it. I like Gavin. But I think it would be nice to go out with other boys too." Her face turned a shade of red only someone with auburn hair could accomplish, and Gabe started to chuckle.

"What does that mean?" Hilde asked, looking from Linnie to Gabe. "Why are you laughing?"

Gabe met Linnie's eye, and they looked at one another for a few moments. "Should I tell her?"

Linnie tried to play it cool by raising one shoulder in a casual shrug. "If you want."

"Hilde, honey, your daughter likes Gavin, sure. But she also likes someone else, maybe more than Gavin, and she's hoping that by *not* dating Gavin, she's left the door open for this other boy to take her out." He lifted his eyebrows at Linnie. "Right?"

Linnie didn't have to say yes or no. She flushed even more, and Hilde scoffed. "Well, who is this other boy?"

"Mom, no." Linnie groaned. The doorbell rang, and she ran from the room yelling, "That's Gavin! Be right back!"

Hilde watched her go, turning all the way around to do so. Gabe kept his position at her side, and he barely moved his mouth as he said, "So? How was our first kiss?"

The confident, strong version of the woman he'd first met in the furniture store while he was shopping for a desk barely moved. Her eyelids fluttered, and Gabe's stomach did the same thing.

"Be honest," he said. "You said I get a do-over if it wasn't really, *really* amazing."

Voices echoed back to them from the foyer, and their time alone would end any second now. Gabe wasn't sure how much he'd be able to enjoy himself if he didn't at least get something verbal to sustain him until he could be alone with her again.

Hilde turned her head toward him, her dark eyes like liquid pools of mystery he wanted to dive into. He'd swim around forever, until he knew everything about this woman.

“Scale of one to ten,” he said.

“Mom,” Lynn timer said. “Look at these pictures of the puppy the Pullmans got.”

“Ten,” Hilde said, and then she smoothly walked away from Gabe and toward her daughter. The exclamations over the cuteness of the dog filled the house, and Gabe smiled. And smiled. And smiled.

He gushed over the dog too. Greeted Gavin like they’d be old pals soon enough.

But really, he couldn’t stop smiling because his first kiss with Hilde had been categorized as a ten.

A ten.

That doesn’t bode well for future kisses, he thought, and his smile slipped. If he’d gotten all the way to the top of the scale on the first try, where did that leave him?

Nowhere to go but down, he thought. Immediately after that, he realized the negative self-talk and tried to correct it through prayer. *Lord, I don’t want to mess this up. Help me to be approachable and kind tonight, to everyone here. Help me to only settle deeper into this relationship with Hilde.*

He paused, because he wasn’t sure he should pray for what he wanted to.

“Gabe?” Hilde’s hand landed on his arm, and he blinked his way back to her kitchen. “You okay?”

“Yes,” he said, realizing that Lynn timer and Gavin had moved over to the dining room table. He hadn’t noticed it was already set, with food waiting for them. “Sorry.”

“What were you thinking?” she asked quietly.

“Just praying,” he said.

Her eyes widened, and Gabe wasn’t sure what to make of that. She went to church, he was almost positive. He shouldn’t make assumptions, but he slid his arm around her waist and said, “What are we having for dinner?”

He could ask her about prayer and faith later. Tonight, it was her birthday, and he reached into his pocket for his gift. “Do you guys do food first and presents later? Or can I give this to you now?”

He held up the envelope, which bore no writing, as they moved over to the dining room table too. Lynn timer and Gavin sat next to one another on one side of it, leaving two spots across from them. Gabe pulled out Hilde’s chair and waited for her to sit while Lynn timer said, “I already gave Mom her present.” She grinned. “Open it now, Momma.”

Gabe handed her the envelope and sat down. Hilde looked at him with suspicion in her eyes, but she ran her finger under the flap of the envelope. “Is something going to pop out at me?”

“Am I the type of man who would give you something that will pop out at you?”

Hilde looked appropriately cowed at his question, and she pulled out the papers he’d stuffed in the envelope. “What is this?” She flipped them over and read, her eyes moving left-right, left-right as she tried to comprehend.

She pulled in a breath. “These are gift certificates for bingsu,” she said.

“Two of them,” he said, glancing over to Linnie. “One so you and Linnie can go together. The other so we can.” He cleared his throat, familiar heat rising to his face.

“That’s so cute,” Linnie said.

“Yes.” Hilde tucked the gift certificates back into the envelope. “That’s adorable.” She gave him a smile when he really wanted a kiss, but she put her hand on his thigh as she looked across the table to her daughter. “All right, Linnie. Your turn to say grace.”

Linnie flicked a look at Gavin before she ducked her head, and Gabe closed his eyes and bowed his head too, but not before he noticed that Hilde did as well. That, combined with the fact that she’d just asked Linnie to pray, told him she shouldn’t be too offended by him saying he’d been praying.

He’d still have a conversation with her about it. Later. Tonight was her birthday, and Gabe wanted it to be the best birthday dinner of her life.

A couple of hours later, and Gabe knew he was in real trouble. He still had to stop at Mav’s and get Liesl, and then he had to make the drive back to Jackson Hole. Not only that, but he sensed he’d worn out his welcome at Hilde’s. Gavin had left thirty minutes ago, and Linnie had gone to shower. He’d been cuddling with Hilde on her couch, asking her for her favorites in between kisses.

He now knew her favorite color was red, her favorite season was fall, her favorite thing to do was garden—though Linnie had given that one away earlier in the evening—and that her favorite thing to do was read in front of a roaring fire.

“In the winter, obviously,” she’d said.

“Obviously,” he’d agreed before kissing her again. He’d lost count of the number of times he’d kissed her now, but the number was much higher than one. Or even two. Or ten. She certainly had no complaints, and Gabe felt like

her mouth had been created to be against his.

“I should go,” he whispered. “It’s late, and you’re sick of me.”

“I am not,” she whispered back. She did tuck her head into the circle of his throat, and they breathed in and out together.

“I have to get Liesl and get back to Jackson,” he said. But still, he didn’t move. Neither did she. “When can I see you again?”

“You’re the one who lives out of town.” Hilde checked her phone. “Wow, Gabe, it’s really late.” She leaned up and looked at him. “You’re going back to Jackson tonight?”

“Yeah.” He stifled a yawn, because he didn’t want her to know how tired he was. “I have meetings that can’t be moved tomorrow.”

They moved together, and Hilde stood first, then Gabe pushed himself to his feet. His head swam, and he took a moment to steady himself. “I’ll be back on Friday this week. Maybe. I have to check with my office manager.”

Being gone today had caused some rearranging, but again, he didn’t want Hilde to know that.

She walked with him to the front door, where she leaned into him for another kiss. Gabe enjoyed the sweetness between them, and he took his time exploring her lips. “Call me when you get home so I know you made it safely,” she said. “I grew up out in Rusk, and that was a rule of ours.”

“Who’s ‘ours’?” he asked.

“I always had to call my friends when I got home, so they knew I’d made it,” she said. “When I came to town, I had to figure out a way to call my mom for the same reason. It’s a long, dark road between here and Jackson.”

He smiled at her. “All right,” he said. “I’ll call you when I get home.” He started to back out of her front door. “See you later this week.”

“Yeah,” she said, sighing as she held onto the door and watched him go. He finally had to turn around or trip backward down her front steps, and Gabe told himself not to look back. He didn’t until he was backing out of her driveway, and then he checked his phone as he drove away.

Mav had texted a few times, and Gabe came to a stop at the end of Hilde’s street to read them.

Liesl’s asleep, Mav had said. But no rush. Dani and I will be up for a bit yet.

Several minutes later, he’d texted to say, *If you want, you can leave Liesl here this week. It’s Tuesday already, so it’s only a couple of days.*

Gabe immediately bucked against that idea. One, Liesl was his

responsibility, not Dani's and not Mav's. Yes, she loved playing with her cousins, and Mav had his daughter for the summer. There were three kids to entertain her at his house, and Gabe only had his manny and long work hours to offer his daughter.

But that only led him to his second point. He employed someone to take care of Liesl, and if she stayed with Mav, then Waylon didn't have a job. "You still pay him the same amount," Gabe muttered, because he did. Waylon operated on a salary, no matter the hours, because sometimes Gabe had court dates and times very early in the morning, or he had to stay at the office very late. Taking care of a four-year-old certainly wasn't a nine-to-five job, no matter who was doing it.

So Waylon wouldn't care. He'd still get paid, and Gabe struggled to come up with another feasible reason for why Liesl couldn't stay at Mav's without him in town. A reason that didn't make him feel inferior, that was. A reason that didn't make him feel like a complete failure would be nice. A reason that wasn't just him trying to prove to everyone how amazing of a dad he was.

He tapped to call Mav, and several seconds later, the ringing came through the speakers of his truck. He'd started driving again, because he didn't have time to be sitting at the end of dark streets while he figured out what to do.

"Hey," Mav said, and it was very obvious he'd been asleep.

Horror filled Gabe. "I'm so sorry," he said in a rush. "I just lost track of time at Hilde's." Pure humiliation filled him. He hadn't meant to act like a hormonal fifteen-year-old. "It's late, and you're in bed. If you really will keep Liesl, I'll be back on Friday evening for her."

"It's no problem," Mav said, his voice drifting as if he'd fall back asleep at any moment. "We like having her. She's no trouble."

Gabe would have to text him about the potty training tomorrow morning. "Okay," he said. "Thanks, Mav. Sorry again."

"Mm hm." Mav said, clearly nonplussed about the whole thing, and then the call ended. Gabe gripped his steering wheel, trying to decide what to do.

He really was tired, and if he went to his townhome tonight, he could get up early, fully rested, and make the drive to his firm. He had clothes, food, everything he needed. A yawn filled his chest and widened his mouth, and he just wanted to find somewhere dark and quiet to rest.

So instead of turning to get on the highway toward Jackson, he made a few easier turns and wound up back at his townhouse.

He practically floated up the two flights of stairs to his bedroom, his mind back on kissing the lovely Hilde O'Dell, and when he dreamt that night, it was all about building a family with her.

He couldn't quite see where they were, though, and that left him unsettled and nervous. In the dream, he wasn't sure why, but when he woke to his alarm the next morning, Gabe understood.

"She lives here," he said as he blinked up at the ceiling. "She runs a successful business here. You own a successful law firm in Jackson."

The unspoken question hung in the air like thick fog on an autumn morning. *Where will the two of you make your home if you end up together?*

It was a question Gabe didn't have the answer for...yet.



Hilde sat in church again, this time babyless and daughterless. Lynn timer had gone to her father's this weekend, and the majority of the Youngs in town had left for their country music tour.

She'd seen Gabe on Saturday night only, as he'd dedicated Friday night to his daughter, whom he'd left with Mav and Dani for the entire week. She'd been surprised at that news, but Gabe continued to pull surprises from his shirtsleeves, it seemed.

He sent her sweet texts every day, and he didn't mind talking on the phone while she puttered around in her backyard after work. She hadn't anticipated that, because Gabe was so no-nonsense in every other way. He shouldn't be able to tolerate a meandering, long conversation about the customers who'd come into the store that day, Hilde's frustrations with her staffing issues, and her worries that she wouldn't be able to keep Lynn timer as busy as she needed to be this summer.

She'd been coming into the store with Hilde in the morning and doing some custodial work, then leaving in the afternoon to go hang out with friends. Coral Canyon was still small and safe, and Hilde felt comfortable letting her daughter be out on her own, as she had her pin pinging to Hilde's phone all the time. She could literally see where Lynn timer was at every second of every day—as long as her phone was on.

They'd made it through the first week of summer, and Ethan, Lynn timer's dad, was taking her on a West Coast vacation at the beginning of July. He'd keep her for most of that month, actually, and Hilde told herself she just

needed to get through the next five weeks.

Her mother looked over to her, and Hilde smiled at her and reached for her hand. She tuned in to what the pastor was saying from the pulpit, something she hadn't done for weeks. Fine, months.

"We must know Christ better than we know Him," Pastor Abraham said. "We must have a deeper relationship with Him, our Lord and Savior, than we currently do. We must serve Him more faithfully than we serve Him." He smiled as he said these admonishments, and while Hilde had heard snippets of sermons in the past, none struck her as powerfully as these statements did right now.

Tears flooded her eyes, and she couldn't even reach up fast enough to brush them away. They flowed down her face, and her mother extended a tissue to her without a word. Hilde took it, wondering why she'd been affected so strongly by the pastor today when she'd been so numb for so long.

"What can you do?" he asked now. "To cultivate a better relationship with the Lord? Dig into the scriptures, and really get to know Jesus Christ. He doesn't walk on the earth today, but you can get to know Him through the stories about him. We see him as an advocate for the sick, the afflicted, the downtrodden. Brothers and sisters, that's all of us!"

He spread his arms wide and then pulled them in close again, as if gathering together a huge armful of wildflowers. "It is *you*."

When he said it, Hilde felt the truthfulness of his words pierce her right to the core. It was her, personally. Jesus Christ loved her and advocated for *her*.

She couldn't look away from the animation on the pastor's face, and she'd never thought him to be all that dynamic of a speaker.

"He will heal us, if we let him. He wants to walk beside us, but we must open the door and invite him into our lives. He wants you to know him, and he wants to call you his. So what can we do?"

The pastor went on to encourage his congregation to read the scriptures more diligently. For Hilde, that meant even a little bit. She was so busy most days, she never took time to sit down, the weight of the Bible in her lap, and read the words of God. Sitting in the chapel this morning, however, Hilde renewed her goal to do exactly that.

He said they could seek out ways and people to serve. Hilde knew she had a huge reach in the community, and she could easily find people and ways to serve. She could donate used furniture or offer more discounts to

those she knew needed them. She could meet with Pastor Abraham himself and find out which families sitting right there with her needed a new bed, a dining room table, or anything else from her huge store, and she could donate it quietly. She could even give it to him and tell him to distribute it anonymously.

She thought about her relationships in her life. They hadn't gone from zero to fully fledged in a matter of minutes. They took careful building, over a long time, to develop into truly caring relationships.

She had to build the same thing with God, and she'd been neglecting that relationship for far too long.

Her tears finally stopped, and Hilde wiped her eyes the best she could, hoping she hadn't smeared her mascara too much. Embarrassment crowded into her awareness, especially when she sniffled and it sounded as loud as the bells which rang out on Sunday morning.

Then, all of it went away. Hilde didn't care if others knew the pastor's words had touched her. Wasn't that why they all came to church? To feel the cleansing power of God in their lives?

Hilde had felt it, and her release had come through tears. So be it.

Her momma took her hand, tucking it carefully into her own, and Hilde gave her a watery smile. "I love you, Hilde," she whispered.

"I love you too, Momma." Hilde laid her head against her mom's shoulder, feeling like she was in exactly the right place—and that had never happened at church before. She thought of Gabe, who said he'd been praying while standing in her kitchen, right before her birthday dinner, and she smiled to herself.

It seemed like he had a good relationship with Jesus and God, and Hilde figured she better put in the work so she did too. She also couldn't wait to call him and tell him about today's sermon, something she'd never wanted to do with anyone before.

The meeting ended, and Hilde stood with everyone else to sing the closing hymn. She barely got two words out before her tears took over again. She couldn't sing in such a nasally, awful voice, so she simply listened to the parishioners around her, marveling that they sounded like a choir of angels.

She went to her mother's for lunch, and she helped her mom in the kitchen to get the chicken breasts into the oven. While her mom peeled and chopped potatoes, Hilde went out into her yard to get the early-summer weeding done. Her momma was too old to bend over and get the weeds out

herself, and she only let her landscaping boys do the front yard.

Hilde loved her time with the sunshine, the scent of dirt on her hands, and the whispering of the breeze in the trees. She'd always disliked bare branches, and when the leaves came back in the spring, she found the center of her happiness again.

She liked refinishing old furniture for the same reason. It felt like a renewal, like the earth coming back to life after a long, cold winter's sleep.

She could let her mind wander while she weeded, moved starts from one plot of ground to another, or trimmed back overgrowth into something more contained and controlled. She thought about her daughter and the relationship she was building with Linnie.

Hilde thought she'd done a decent job so far, and she loved that she could have Gabe over for dinner and not have to hide anything from Linnie. She liked that Linnie talked to her about things that troubled her, school, her friends, and boys. "Most boys," Hilde muttered, as she still hadn't been able to get Linnie to divulge who her secret crush was.

She examined her blooming relationship with Gabe, and the heated way he looked at her every time he saw her after some time apart. He'd opened up a little bit, and he could talk to her about anything she brought up now. He spoke of Liesl all the time, but he hadn't brought the little girl on any of their dates.

She didn't really expect him to. In the beginning, he'd had to, because they were going to his brother's house for a concert, and then another brother's house for dinner. Without his family on the dates with them, he had somewhere to take Liesl so they could be alone.

Hilde wanted to spend time with Liesl, but she didn't want to push Gabe. She wouldn't. She knew what it was like to be a single parent, and he was even more ferociously protective than she was.

"Hilde," her mom said, and Hilde looked up from the corner of the yard which she'd steadily worked toward. She hadn't realized how far she'd come, and the backs of her thighs burned as she straightened. "Lunch is ready, dear."

Her mother disappeared back inside, and while Hilde wanted to finish up the weeding, the thought of bending over again had her bones creaking. So she left the back fence to get done another day, dusted the loose dirt from her hands, and headed inside.

The water in her mom's kitchen sink ran like mud for the first few

seconds, and Hilde scrubbed to get everything off her skin. She'd have to get under her nails later, because her mother already sat at the table.

Hilde took her place, very much missing Linnie, who usually sat across from her. Her mother said grace, and Hilde actually paid attention to the words today. She felt her mother's faith in every word, and Hilde fed off of it.

She knew she couldn't live off of it for long, but maybe for the next little while until she'd had a chance to build her own.

"Amen," she said quietly when her mother finished. She never gave herself much time to consider religious things. She prayed for help with her store and with her daughter, and Hilde had never done much more.

She had a very strong moral compass, and she was a very decisive person, so she usually didn't waffle for very long—giving herself a place to pause for prayer.

Her Sunday conversations with her mother usually focused around the store, Linnie, or an employee, but when her momma said, "So, Hilde. What's new with you?" the same way she always did, Hilde felt like she should tell her mom about Gabe.

Walls came up instantly, but Hilde pressed against them. Her relationship with Gabe was still new, sure. But it was a relationship, and if Hilde didn't say something this week, Linnie was sure to spill the beans next Sunday.

Hilde took a bite of her oven-fried chicken. She had no idea how her mother got it to be so juicy, as Hilde usually dried it out, though she used the same techniques. She moaned and scooped up a bite of buttery mashed potatoes to go with the meat.

"This is so good, Mom."

Her mother simply smiled, and Hilde returned it. "I started seeing someone."

The clattering of a fork against china filled the house, and Hilde flinched. "What?" Her momma stared at her. "You are? Who?"

Hilde laughed lightly. "You make it sound like I've never been out with someone before."

Her mother scooped up her fork and licked the gravy off the stem of it. She was so proper in some ways, and then she'd do something like that, and Hilde was reminded her mother was very human. She grinned at her, because she loved her in quiet, simple ways like this.

"You haven't dated since your divorce," her mom said.

“I have too.”

“No one serious,” she said. “A date here or there, Hilde. This is you *dating* someone. Right?”

Hilde saw the difference, and while she wanted to argue with her mom, she couldn't. “Yes,” she said.

“So who is it?”

“Uh, Gabriel Young,” she said. “Gabe Young.”

Her mother's eyes rounded, growing as big as apples and then pumpkins. “You're kidding. One of those handsome Young men? Oooh.” Her mom grinned like she'd just shaved fifty years off her life. “What a development, Hilde.”

“It's not that big of a deal,” she said diplomatically. “He's not in the band, Momma. He's a lawyer.” She didn't bring up his age. Momma would assume he was older because Gabe had earned a law degree.

“Tell me more about him.” Her mother genuinely wanted to know, and she smiled as she took another bite of her chicken, gravy, and potatoes.

“Well,” Hilde said. She drew in a long breath, felt the pause at the top of it, and exhaled it out slowly. “I might as well start with the thing you'll like the least.”

“I only care that he treats you right,” her mom said.

He did, but Hilde didn't get into the details of *how* Gabe treated her like a queen. A ghostly sensation of his lips against hers swept unbidden across her mouth, and Hilde ducked her head.

“He has a daughter too.” She looked up and met her momma's eyes. “A four-year-old daughter.”

Her mother's eyes did indeed widen, but she dismissed Hilde's statement a moment later with the wave of her weathered hand. “Okay. You know what to do with four-year-old girls.” She took a drink of her ice water. Hilde couldn't remember the last time her mother had drunk anything but ice water. “When can I meet him? Maybe you can bring him to lunch next weekend?”

Her eyes shone with hope, and Hilde didn't want to dash her dreams. At the same time, she wasn't sure accelerating things with Gabe was the right move.

“I'll talk to him,” she said. “We're not moving very fast, Momma. It's a second marriage for both of us—not that we've talked about marriage.” She laughed again, this time the sound full of nerves. “I mean, we've only been out a few times. He lives in Jackson Hole part-time. He's only here on the

weekends.”

Her words sounded like excuses to her own ears, but her mother didn't call her on them. She simply said, “You're a smart woman, Hilde. You bring him by when you're ready.”

She said she would, and later, once she'd left her mother's and returned home, she sent a text to Gabe.

I told my momma about you today. About us.

Wow, he sent back in record time. And?

She's my mother. What do you think she said?

Gabe took a little longer to answer this time. The seconds turned into a minute, in fact. Then his message popped up on her phone. *She wanted to know how serious it was?*

Close, Hilde said, smiling to herself. She said she wanted to meet you. Even suggested you come to our Sabbath Day lunch NEXT WEEK.

His response came in only a few seconds later, and she wasn't even sure how he could text that fast. *I'll do whatever you want, Hilde. Just tell me, so I can make arrangements for Liesl.*

Hilde didn't want to share her precious weekend time with Gabe with her mother. He'd also opened the door to his daughter, and Hilde decided to walk through that one. *I think we need a few more weekends together before I'm ready to unleash my mother on you.*

With that sent, she added, *I would love to talk about what you're thinking about me and Liesl, though. I'd love to start getting to know her too.*

Gabe didn't answer this time. He called, and Hilde swiped over the green phone icon. “Hey, stranger.”

“I—I didn't mean to be a stranger this weekend.” He wore the frown in his voice, and that was the opposite of what Hilde had been trying to do.

“I know,” she said simply. “It was a joke.”

“Oh, okay.” He exhaled. “I don't know about Liesl, Hilde. What do you think?”

She thought for a moment, then looked out the window to her backyard. Darkness had already fallen, though, and she couldn't see much outside. “I think we're getting along really well,” she said slowly. “You've had a few experiences with Linnie, and I'll give you that it's probably more important for you to have a relationship with my teenager than for me to have a deep bond with your four-year-old, but...”

Gabe wasn't a stupid man, and he finished her sentence with, “You're

ready to meet her.”

“Yes.”

“Whenever I’m ready for you to meet her.”

“Yes.”

“Okay,” he said. “I understand. I know that. I do.”

Hilde got up and pulled the blinds closed so she couldn’t stare into the darkness. “It doesn’t have to be right now. Or even soon. I just—maybe you could—how are *you* feeling about us?” She pressed her eyes closed and returned to her bed. She sat cross-legged on it, anticipating his answer.

She’d sort of blurted her question at him, and she wasn’t surprised that he took his time answering it.

Especially when he said, “I feel really great about us, Hilde,” in that low, sexy voice that sent warm shivers down her spine.

“So we’ll keep doing what we do,” she said. “And when the time is right, I’ll get to be in her life more.”

“Yes,” he said again. “Thank you, Hilde.”

“You can thank me with bingsu on Thursday,” she said.

He chuckled and said, “It’s a date.”



Bryce Young looked up as someone opened the door to the trailer. He expected to see his father or Abby, but his uncle Jem came inside.

“Hey.” Bryce’s grin jumped to his face as he leapt to his feet. “Howdy, Uncle Jem.” He grabbed onto his uncle and pounded him on the back. “I didn’t know you were comin’ on the tour.”

“It was very last-minute,” Jem said, glancing left toward the bedroom in the back of the trailer, and right, where Bryce had been sitting at the dining table.

“This is it,” he said, turning. “The table goes down flat and another bed can be put up here.” His half-sister, Melissa was sleeping in that bed, though Abby had told him that she usually ended up in bed with her and Dad.

Bryce was only going to be on this tour for the first three weeks—ten concerts total—and he was sleeping in Otis’s trailer. His uncle had an eleven-year-old with him, as well as a six-month-old, and he said a one-bedroom trailer with a dining room bed wasn’t going to cut it. They stayed in a hotel close to the venue, and Bryce was sleeping in their trailer.

Jem too, now that he was here from Vegas.

“You can have the bedroom,” Bryce said. “I’m used to sleeping out here.” He’d gone on tour with his father before, when it was just the two of them, and he knew how to put the table down and get the bed setup in under a minute.

“I’m fine wherever.” Jem exhaled heavily as he sat on the bench seat across from where Bryce had been. “Luke said I can stay with him too, but

he's got Corrine."

"She might sleep with him," Bryce said.

Jem only nodded, and Bryce wasn't sure what that was about. He wasn't sure why his uncle had come on this tour at all. He didn't sing or play an instrument, and he looked pretty ragged right now.

Bryce didn't ask him any questions, though. Number one, he didn't want people asking him questions, and number two, Uncle Jem was older than Bryce. He certainly didn't have any of life's wisdom to offer a man like Jem.

"So how was the first concert?" Jem asked.

Bryce nodded, glad the topic was on music and not himself. He'd been at work when his father and step-mother had rolled into Nashville, and they'd surprised him at the sports bar while he'd been setting down a plate of cheese and bacon fries.

He'd been thrilled to see them, of course. Just the fact that his daddy wept as he hugged him every time he saw him made Bryce more and more aware of how much his father loved him. But with their arrival came a certain... weight that Bryce didn't know how to shoulder very well.

"Good," he said. "Really good. I sang a duet with Dad, and it was really...good."

Jem grinned at him. "Just good? I heard it was amazing."

"That's because my dad brags too much." Bryce smiled back at his uncle. "I played off to the side for the rest of the concert, and it was really fun." He felt like a five-year-old trying to describe quantum physics. He wasn't using very good vocabulary or adjectives, because he didn't know how to put how he felt into words.

"Do you like performing?" Jem asked, and Bryce blinked at the question.

He hadn't really thought of it before, but he did now. He'd been playing a game on his phone when his uncle arrived, and Bryce looked back to it. It was a math game, one that had several different iterations, and he played all of them every single day. He wasn't sure why he got so much satisfaction from it, only that he did.

"I don't know," he finally said. He hated that answer more than anyone else on the planet, but it was the truth. He'd been in Nashville for just over five months now, and he was still no closer to knowing what he wanted to do with his life.

Through his therapy, he'd learned to accept himself for who he was now, and that he wasn't the same person who'd gone to Montana State, slept with a

girl, and gotten her pregnant. He knew more about himself now. He knew more about who he wanted to be and who he didn't want to be. He knew how to handle challenging situations in a different way.

He thought about Bailey McAllister every single day. They texted every now and then, and he knew she only had one more year of veterinary residency to do before she'd graduate and become a lettered vet. Her dream.

He smiled thinking of her, her work ethic, and her strong sense of self. She'd known from the very day she'd found out she was pregnant that she couldn't keep the baby. She hadn't blamed Bryce, and while he'd tried to make a relationship with her work, the fact was, it hadn't. In the situation they'd been in, it couldn't.

Bryce actually held onto some shred of hope that someday he and Bailey.... Yeah. Someday.

"You're a heckuva guitar player," Jem said.

"Yeah." Bryce nodded. "I still teach the lessons. Make way more doing that than waiting tables." He chuckled, because it was true. Having a famous country music father helped a ton, and Bryce could only imagine what his teaching business could become if he became a country musician too.

"Really?" Jem asked. "Even at the bar?"

"Yep," Bryce said. "Not everyone tips the way you guys do. Lotsa college students or starving artists here."

"Yeah," Jem said, and nothing more. The silence draped between them, and Bryce went back to his game. He didn't mind the quiet. In fact, his therapist had told him he *needed* it every day.

You have to find a way to exist within your own self, he'd said. *No noise. No screens. No entertainment.*

True, he was playing a game, but he could turn his phone off and turn it over and leave it for a while if he had to. Bryce lived with two other young men, but he had his own bedroom. He could find quiet time when he needed it, because he wasn't going to school and working a nearly full-time job the way Denver was.

He wasn't interning for a real estate firm and training for a marathon the way Rich was.

He simply got up in the morning and worked out a little, if he felt like it. He usually worked the lunch shift at the sports bar—which also made his tips less, as the lunch prices weren't as high as the dinner ones—and he taught lessons in the afternoons when he didn't work.

Doing the lunch shift allowed him to serve less alcohol too, because not a lot of people ordered beer and wine with their chicken salad at eleven-thirty in the morning. Since Bryce wasn't twenty-one yet, he technically shouldn't even be allowed to work at the sports bar, but his boss was Denver's dad, and he pulled some strings for Bryce.

It helped that Bryce never showed up late, never asked for much time off, and got along with everyone.

He would be gone for the next three weeks, however, and he'd earn as much in that time as he did in three months at the sports bar. *So maybe you should consider a career in country music*, he thought.

His father had plenty of money, he knew, especially after the last tour. This album was doing even better, and Bryce expected the tour was as well.

He definitely had a door open for him in this industry. He simply didn't know if he wanted to walk through it.

YOU'RE PLAYING TONIGHT, RIGHT? BAILEY'S TEXT INTRODUCED A RAY OF light into Bryce's night.

Yep, he tapped out quickly. *The band is going on stage now. I play in the second half, once everyone is ready for a breather.*

He and Dad played a slow ballad together. Real country music, with twang in their voices and both of them playing live guitar. No drums. No amps. Acoustic country.

Okay, well, call me tomorrow maybe, she sent back. *I have some news I want to tell you about.* She included a smiley face emoji, so while Bryce's pulse knocked against the back of his skull, he reasoned the news couldn't be bad. Right?

Good news or bad news? he asked anyway. He wanted to be prepared for the conversation when he called.

Good, she said. *It'll be too late tonight.*

When are you working tomorrow?

I'm not working tomorrow, she said. *It's Saturday, silly.*

Bryce had no idea what day of the week it was. That was life on tour. If he wasn't driving to the next location, they were setting up. Checking out the venue. Practicing there to "get a lay for the stage," as Uncle Trace liked to

say.

Then, the actual performances ate up hours every time they did one.

Bryce had been on stage four times now, with the fifth concert starting right now as screaming and applause filled the air around him. Trace played their opening riff, and the man was an exceptional guitar player.

The crowd noise swelled again, and that would be Uncle Luke doing one of his physical stunts to get them all riled up. Otis came in next, then Dad, and by then, Luke had made it to the drum set up on the platform that sat above the band.

And they were off, his father coming in with the opening lyrics of their number one single from the new album.

I don't get up early after we play, he said. So it'll be later.

Later's fine, she said, and the conversation ended.

They were playing in Atlanta tonight, and wow, the crowd was ready for it. Bryce fed off their energy as Country Quad continued through their rehearsed set. He'd once asked his father if he ever got bored of doing the same show night after night, but Dad had said no.

When Bryce had asked how, Dad said that every crowd created a different experience. No two shows were ever the same, even if the music was. Even if the dance moves were. Even if the jokes and the chatter between him and the rest of the bandmates was.

"It's the people there that make it different," he'd said.

Now that Bryce had performed a few times, he could see what his father had meant. No two concerts were ever quite the same, because while Country Quad had practiced their show to perfection, the lights were always a little different. The air temperature was too. Guitar strings broke, and people sang along in different ways to different songs.

Soon enough, his turn to go out on stage came, and he waited just off to the side with Morris as Dad started talking again. "All right, Atlanta!" he bellowed into the mic. The crowd went wild.

Dad grinned out at all of them—at least Bryce assumed he did. He couldn't actually see his father's face. He shifted his feet, his nerves pounding at him again. They'd done the same thing in these few seconds right before his cue to go on stage.

"It's time to slow things down a little bit."

"Good luck, Bryce," Uncle Trace said as he stepped past him. "Hoo-ee, it's hot out there tonight."

Someone emerged from the darkness backstage and handed him a bottle of water. Otis and Luke came off the stage too, leaving Dad out there alone. He could charm entire nations on his own; Bryce didn't worry about that.

He did worry that his father never got a break the way the other band members did. He led them from beginning to end, and if something didn't work, he was the one who covered it up. He'd joked last night that his Dad Jokes had finally come in handy, and everyone else had groaned, Bryce included.

"We've got a special treat for you tonight," Dad said. "A real talented guitar player, with a voice straight from the country music of yesterday. Of course, I might be a little bit biased, because...he's my son."

The crowd noise usually rose during this part, and Atlanta was no exception. The cheering started out quiet at first, but it grew and grew and grew until Bryce was beaming and shaking his head. "They don't even know me!" he yelled to Morris.

"Your daddy talks about you all the time," Morris yelled back.

Bryce wanted to know what that meant, but he didn't have time to ask. His dad said, "So, let's welcome him to the stage, where we'll be doing a father-son duet with just our voices and a good, old classical guitar. Bryce?"

That was his cue, and Bryce tightened his grip on the neck of his guitar and broke into a jog as he left the shadows backstage. The audience roared for him, and he lifted his free hand in a wave of acknowledgement, his smile absolutely huge on his face.

He did love the rush of a crowd. He gave his father a hug, and he liked that too. They sat down together on two stools that the stage crew had made magically appear right where they needed them, and Bryce adjusted his guitar mic and then his singing one.

His daddy did the same, and then they looked at one another. They didn't have any pithy rapport to get through before they started playing. Since Bryce had been rehearsing with his father via video leading up to this tour, they'd decided to go simple.

So Dad nodded, indicating that he was ready whenever Bryce was, and Bryce started playing without saying another word. His fingers knew exactly where to go over the strings, and his guitar sounded amazing in this outdoor stadium.

He smiled out at the crowd, and they responded by whooping and whistling. He chuckled to himself and ducked his head, which caused a

couple of women to yell some inappropriate things. Bryce hadn't anticipated that, but now that he was a few performances in, he almost expected a few comments like this.

Dad leaned forward and said into his mic, "He's single, ladies."

Bryce shook his head, because he'd only done that one other time. Even if he'd wanted to refute his father's statement, he wouldn't be able to be heard. Not even with a mic.

The crowd had seriously lost its mind, and Bryce played through the opening measures of the song again. Then again, waiting for the audience to calm enough that he could start singing. In the end, he simply inched forward and opened his mouth.

The crowd responded by hushing enough to hear him, and Bryce sang the first verse of the song Otis had written for the album.

He did love singing and playing the guitar. He loved it even more when getting to do it with his father. They sang the second verse together, and the song about being friends and always having a place to call home when you had a friend finished with a beautiful chord that his dad played.

A beat of silence filled the stadium, and Bryce felt closer to his dad, closer to God, and closer to himself than he ever had.

Then, as his fingers came off the strings, the stadium went crazy. He waved and bowed and ran off the stage, and right into his uncles' waiting arms. All four of them wrapped him up, just like they had every other time he'd finished and come off stage, but this time Bryce found himself bawling like a baby as they held him.

Dad said something, but none of them left to go rejoin him on stage. He made a lame joke the crowd laughed at anyway, then tried again to get his band back. This time, Morris said, "Go on, you guys. He's out there alone," and even his voice was pinched and nasally.

He stayed with Bryce, who managed to stem the flow of tears. Morris kept his arm around Bryce's shoulders through the next song, and then he said, "You're a real special young man, Bryce," as he stepped away to check on the light change coming up.

He had no idea what to say to that, and his tears had at least stopped fully now. He scrubbed his face with his hands, getting some of the dried saltiness off. He still felt way too hot and way too overstimulated, and he moved further back into the recesses of the stage.

He wasn't sure what had just happened. Something powerful, but it

eluded him.

The show finished, and Bryce helped pack up the way he had every other night. He was getting paid, after all, and he didn't want anyone to ever think he hadn't pulled his weight on this tour.

Abby and Melissa had taken the truck to head back to the trailer, and Bryce and his father had been planning to ride with Uncle Luke. They all piled into his truck, Uncle Jem included, and Dad looked over to Bryce once all the doors were closed and the vehicle had started to move.

"You okay, son?" he asked.

Bryce shook his head, that feeling returning to his soul.

"What's wrong?"

He really wanted to have an answer for his dad. Lord knew he deserved them—a lot of them. "I don't think I know," he said. "When we finished playing, I just had this...moment where I could feel literally everything."

Luke glanced at him from the front seat, but Jem kept his attention out the windshield. Probably a good thing, as he drove. "He was cryin' when he came off-stage."

Bryce didn't mind that Jem had told his dad about the crying. He watched his dad for a reaction, and his eyebrows went up. "Son?"

"Yeah," Bryce said. "It was just so overwhelming, you know? Now that I think about it, I remember thinking, These people are going nuts over a guy who plays the guitar." He shook his head again. "There are a million people who can play the guitar."

"Not like you," Dad said quietly.

No one argued with him or called him biased.

Bryce looked out his side window, trying to find the right words. He bit back the *I don't know*, because he was so tired of saying that. "I don't want this to be rude, but as you guys finished up, I had this feeling like I need to be doing more with my life than playing the guitar."

No one said anything, and Bryce took another moment to try to examine those feelings. "Not that what y'all do isn't important, but that it's not what *I* should do." He turned toward his daddy, his heartbeat suddenly flinging itself against his ribcage. "Dad, I don't want to be a country music star."

His father's face split into a wide grin. He started to laugh, the big, hearty sound of it filling the cab of the truck easily. Bryce laughed with him, and while he still didn't know what the cry-fest had been in his uncle's arms, he'd figure it out.

“All right,” Dad said. “So there you go. No country music for you.”

“You’ll still do your leg of the tour, right?” Uncle Jem asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Bryce said. “I’m committed to that.”

“Good,” Dad said. “Because you get more fan love on social media than Luke and his entrances.”

“Bite your tongue,” Luke said. “Did you see those women in the front row tonight?” They all laughed then, Bryce right along with them.

They made it back to where the trailers were parked, and Bryce hugged his father long and hard. “I love you, Dad,” he said. “I’m sorry if anything I said upset you.”

“It didn’t.” His father pulled back, his smile already in place. “I want you to be on your own path, whatever that is. Wherever it takes you.”

Bryce nodded, and they separated. He set up his bed over the dining room table, and after he’d finally changed into his pajamas and laid down, the question that had been waiting in the wings sauntered forward.

So if you don’t want to be a country music rockstar...what do you want to do with your life?

And it was a very good question that Bryce didn’t know the answer to.



Gabe looked up as the door to his Coral Canyon office opened. “Morning, Cheryl,” he said, lifting a pile of folders.

“Good morning, Mister Young,” she chirped.

Gabe lifted his eyebrows and his eyes, but not his head, as he looked at her. “I told you, you don’t have to call me Mister Young.”

She wore a black dress that covered her from shoulder to hip, with bright white and lavender flowers all over it in a big, splashy pattern. And a smile. “I know,” she said. “I’m still working on that.”

She swung her purse over the back of her chair, which Gabe had set up closer to the door and matched with another desk like his. “You’ve got the files I need?”

“Yes.” He handed them to her. “I’ll be meeting with David Sails at his office this morning,” he said. “I’d love for you to come and take notes, so we can put together the last of his custody case and present it to his wife.”

“Sure, no problem,” she said.

“And then, it’s just discovery and phone calls. I need a couple of those by next week.” He nodded to the folders. “I marked them, so you know which ones to prep first.”

“Here or Jackson clients?”

“Jackson,” he said. “You can work from home—or anywhere you have the Internet and a phone.” He’d presented that part of the job to her in-person, and he could clearly see the way her face had lit up at the mention of being able to work from home.

Gabe understood, because being a parent wasn't predictable and having a flexible schedule could make up for a lot of things. But he wanted Cheryl at his firm—he needed a good paralegal like her—and he'd waited two weeks for her to start.

He'd been in Coral Canyon all week to go over things with her, get her up to speed with his office manager and partner at the Jackson Hole firm, and answer all of her questions. He anticipated that she'd work out of this office whenever she wanted, and he'd be there on Thursdays and Fridays. Sometimes just Fridays, but with Hilde here, Gabe had definitely been spending more time in Coral Canyon than he would have otherwise.

"One of the clients in that stack is here in town," he said. "Are you okay with that? Or would you rather do all the prep on our Jackson Hole clients?"

"I'm fine with whatever," she said. "It's not like the news of a divorce stays secret for long in either town, right?"

Definitely longer in Jackson Hole, Gabe thought. Especially if the man getting divorced had a lot of money and didn't want his private details splashed around to the neighbors. Gabe had represented plenty of those men, and those cases were settled out of court, with Gabe almost acting as a mediator.

Cheryl settled down at her desk, flipped open a folder, and began to read the pages inside. Gabe answered his emails, only letting himself get distracted when his phone chimed with a certain tone. He'd assigned Hilde a specific trilling series of music notes, and every time it went off, a dose of adrenaline shot through his body.

Today, when he looked at his phone, he caught the first few words, which read, *Hey, Gabe, this is Linnie...*

He picked up his phone and swiped to get it open. He tapped in the four-digit PIN and navigated to her text.

Hey, Gabe, this is Linnie, and I was wondering if you could come pick me up a few minutes early for the babysitting job today? I didn't go to the store with my mom, so I'm just at home, and I can get to know Liesl before you have to leave.

Gabe's throat tightened. He'd talked to Hilde about having Linnie babysit his daughter on days like today, where he was working out of his townhome office but had to leave to meet a client. For an hour or two, he didn't want to ask his brothers or parents to take his daughter, and he'd thought about hiring a babysitter here in town.

But his schedule was irregular, and he couldn't really hire someone full-time like he did in Jackson Hole.

A teenage babysitter had seemed like a great idea, and most teens about fourteen years old wanted to work but couldn't actually get a job. And of course, his first idea had been Linnie.

She worked for Hilde at the store a little bit each day, but not much. She was a good girl, and Gabe had gotten to know her a little better over the past three weeks since Hilde's birthday dinner.

Liesl would love her, and today was their first time trying the babysitting thing between the two of them. Gabe wasn't sure how to answer, because he was suddenly doubting whether this was a good idea.

What if he and Hilde ended up married? Would Linnie always feel like Liesl's babysitter instead of her step-sister? And what if they broke up? Would Liesl get too attached to Linnie and then wonder where she'd gone?

Gabe had tried to keep as many people, places, and things as consistent as possible in Liesl's life. Waylon had been helping with her care since she was a newborn, and Gabe himself had always been there, of course.

His brothers and parents were staples in her life. More-so in the past couple of years, and Gabe found himself frowning. Why hadn't he just asked Mav to take Liesl for his meeting today?

Another message popped up, and Gabe scanned it quickly. *This is Hilde. Linnie just took my phone to text you, because she's very excited about babysitting today.*

He couldn't cancel on her now, because if he did, she'd want to know why. Gabe couldn't lie and say the meeting had been canceled.

Are you home then? he asked, deciding to leave Linnie's question for a moment.

We don't open for another hour, Hilde said. So I decided to go in late today.

Gabe certainly couldn't complain about walking down a flight of stairs and arriving at work—and he could show up whenever he wanted to. But he still texted her, *Living the high life.*

She sent laughing emojis back, and Gabe smiled at his device. *I can come get Linnie anytime,* he said.

I can drop her off, Hilde said.

My place isn't really on the way to the store.

We're leaving right now.

That was Hilde's way of telling him not to argue, so Gabe didn't. He needed to review David's case before he left for the meeting, and he flipped his phone over and got back to work. It didn't chime again, and the next time he got interrupted was when Hilde walked into his office and said, "Good morning, Cheryl."

"Hilde, hello." She stood and hugged Hilde, who pressed her eyes closed as she embraced Cheryl in return. When she opened them again, they met Gabe's.

He rose from his desk too, only a single page left in his file to review. He could do it later, or not at all. He knew enough to make it through the meeting now.

"Hey, beautiful." He smiled at Hilde as she stepped past Cheryl's desk and into his arms.

"Morning, Gabe." Hilde smelled like tropical, coconutty perfume and fresh cotton that had been hanging on the clothesline outside. He took a quick breath of her before she pulled away.

"You look great," he said.

"Just going to work." She smiled her expertly glossed lips, her face perfectly made up. She too wore a dress with big flowers on it, and they must be in fashion right now. Lynn timer wore jean shorts and a blue tank top, no flowers in sight.

Gabe smiled at her as Hilde stepped back, and suddenly, the moment was injected with tension. He hadn't introduced his daughter to Hilde as his girlfriend, and he was about to take Lynn timer upstairs to babysit.

His mind warped on so many levels, and he wanted to take a step toward the stairs, but he couldn't do it.

"Do you guys want to come upstairs?"

Hilde's eyebrows lifted, and Gabe took her hand in his. He guided her toward the stairs, and she didn't protest. That alone told him what he already knew—that only he stood in the way of Hilde and Liesl getting to know one another.

He hadn't thought through this moment, and as he ascended the stairs, he told himself it wouldn't have mattered. He could've had an iron-clad plan, and it wouldn't go the way he imagined. Not even close.

"Liesl," he called as he opened the door to the living room. The little girl pushed herself up from the couch, and she looked like she'd fallen asleep again since he'd gone downstairs an hour ago.

Her face lit up at the sight of him, but Gabe supposed it could've been because of Hilde or Linnie. Her eyes switched from his to the women with him, and she smiled. "Hi."

"Hi," Linnie said brightly.

"Liesl, baby," Gabe said. "I have a meeting this morning, and Linnie's going to stay with you while I'm gone."

Linnie lifted her hand in a wave, and Liesl very nearly tumbled off the couch as she got down.

"I have a Minnie Mouse shirt," she said as she came toward them.

Linnie dropped into a crouch. "You sure do."

Gabe knelt down too, his heart pounding in his chest. He maybe should've talked to a professional about how to introduce his daughter to his girlfriend. He really had no idea what to say or how to do this.

"Liesl," he said. "Come here for a second."

She detoured toward him, and Gabe took her into his arms. "Daddy is...." He looked up at Hilde, but she said nothing. He took a breath and looked at his daughter again. He pleaded with the Lord for help.

"You know how Uncle Mav is married to Aunt Dani?"

"Yes." She started playing with his tie. "Are we going to play with Bethy and Boston and Lars?"

"Not today." Gabe smiled at her. "And who is Uncle Morris married to?"

Liesl looked up and into his eyes. Her dark brown eyes studied him with an intensity that said she was a little worried she'd get the answer wrong. "Aunt Leigh?" she guessed.

"Yes, right," he said, grinning at her. "So, Daddy doesn't have anyone like Aunt Leigh or Aunt Dani. But I could, if I found the right person." He stood and lifted Liesl into his arms. "Remember Hilde, baby?"

Hilde smiled at her, and Liesl nodded, her smile coming a moment later. "Yes. Hi."

"Hi, baby." Hilde reached out and tucked Liesl's hair behind her ear.

"Hilde is with me," Gabe said, not sure how to explain the word *girlfriend* or *dating*. "Linnie is her daughter." He swallowed, because he didn't want to get into the details of merging two families together.

"Okay," Liesl said. "How long will you be gone?" She squished Gabe's cheeks together, and he gently pushed her hands down.

"A couple of hours," he said. "I'll bring back some lunch, and we'll go to the park for a few minutes."

“Can Lynn timer take me to the park?”

“Yes.” Gabe glanced at Lynn timer. “It’s right behind the house here. She likes to sit on the swing on the balcony too. She can have anything she wants to eat except the things on the third shelf in the pantry. She only gets one of those per day, and it’s fine if she has one. But she just gets one.”

“I’ll let you know if she has one,” Lynn timer said.

“Okay.” Gabe set Liesl on her feet. “You be good for Lynn timer. Go get Piglet or Pooh and maybe she’ll have a tea party with you.”

Liesl’s face lit up. “Will you? A tea party?”

“Yes, let’s go.” Lynn timer extended her hand to Liesl. “Show me where the tea kettle is.” They went toward the stairs, leaving Gabe and Hilde alone. Once their footsteps disappeared, he squeezed her hand.

“How’d I do?”

Hilde turned her head toward him, her smile reaching all the way into her eyes. “You had no plan for that, did you?”

His stomach shrank, but he forced a smile to his face. “None.”

“You did great,” she said with a light laugh. She sobered quickly and touched her lips to his. Gabe drew a breath in through his nose, kneading her closer to him so he could kiss her the way he wanted to.

“Did I really?” he asked as he broke the kiss. He slid his lips along her jaw, enjoying how she clung to his shoulders as he kissed her there.

“Really,” she said. “She’s four, Gabe. I think you did a good job pointing out that some of her uncles have women that they’re with.” She drew his head up by gently taking his chin in her hand. “And I really liked how you said ‘Hilde is with me.’”

He grinned fully now. “You did, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“What else did I do well?”

“Please.” She pushed against his right shoulder. “I don’t need to feed your ego.” She laughed, and he twined his voice with hers.

“I just meant with the revelation that we’re dating to my tiny daughter.”

“I don’t know,” she said as she finished giggling. “I liked how you didn’t complicate it. I don’t think she needs definitions right now. I like how you said you could have someone like Leigh or Dani, if you found the right person.”

“And...” Gabe swallowed and ordered the words in his throat before he said them. “Am I the right person for you?”

“So far,” she said. With that, she stepped out of his arms. “I have to get to work.”

“And you didn’t want to go out with me,” he said as she walked toward the exit.

She let loose another laugh, and Gabe hurried to follow her. Downstairs, he said, “What about taking the girls to dinner with us tonight?”

Hilde turned around, and Gabe’s pulse skipped and then slithered through his veins. He felt like he’d sprinted a couple of blocks to ask her out, and she looked absolutely calm and nonplussed.

“Can your reservations accommodate two children?” she asked.

“Where do you think we’re going?” He chuckled. “It’s not a fancy place.”

“You said it was a—and I quote—‘nice place’.”

“I’ll call the restaurant. I’m sure it’ll be fine. Or we’ll go somewhere else.”

She reached for his tie and straightened it, then pressed her body weight into his. “You want to see how we fit together as a foursome. A family.”

“Is that a problem for you?” he asked.

“No,” she said, grinning. “I think it’s a little shocking for *you*, but it’s not a problem for me.”

“Great,” he said, trying to act like he hadn’t just been fundamentally changed by introducing Liesl to Hilde as “with him.” He’d literally never done that before, and surely she understood what a huge step that was for him.

“Have a great day at the store.” He kissed her quick and opened the door to his office. “Cheryl, are you ready?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, and he rolled his eyes as he entered the office.

“I told you, you don’t have to call me ‘sir’.”



Hilde swept her dark red lipstick over her lips as her daughter came into the bathroom. Lynn timer whistled, but she looked like a million bucks too. “You really like this guy, don’t you?”

“First,” Hilde said as she capped her lipstick. “He’s a man. Not a guy.”

“Okay.” Lynn timer rolled her eyes. “Second?”

“Second...yes.” Hilde met her daughter’s eyes in the mirror, and a moment passed between them. Then she smiled and turned toward Lynn timer. “I don’t know what tonight looks like, okay? I’ve not dated anyone as seriously as Gabe since your father and I got divorced, and I just don’t know what this looks like.”

Lynn timer grinned at her. “Mom, you don’t have to know what everything looks like.”

“How are you feeling, though? About me and Gabe?”

“I like Gabe,” she said. “He’s cool.”

“Cool?” Hilde didn’t mean to sound so horribly surprised, but she doubted very much that anyone had described the powerful Gabriel Young as “cool” in the past five years. Maybe longer.

“Yeah.” Lynn timer opened Hilde’s makeup drawer. “I was hoping you’d let me borrow some lipstick.”

“Nope.” Hilde pushed the drawer closed. “You’re fourteen, not twenty-four. You can wear gloss like you normally do.”

Lynn timer grinned, and Hilde realized she’d come in just to antagonize her about the lipstick. “Go on,” she said, giving her daughter a light push.

“They’ll be here any second.”

As if on cue, the doorbell rang, and Lynn timer took off running. “I got it!”

“Lynn timer,” Hilde warned, but she didn’t race her teenage daughter to get the door. Of course she wanted to be the one to open the door and see Gabe first. He’d probably showered, though he worked in an air-conditioned office. His dark hair would be swept to the side, his face freshly shaved, and those dark-as-midnight eyes seeking hers.

She slowed her step so she could make an entrance, and she paused at the corner to listen to him speak to Lynn timer. A river of pleasantness ran in his tone, and when she heard Lynn timer say, “She’s ready. I’ll go grab her,” she stepped around the corner.

“I’m right here,” she said as Lynn timer turned. Her daughter wore a flowery jumper and silver sandals, and while she’d started to fill out in the chest and hip, she was still mostly straight from ankle to chest.

Hilde had chosen a pair of navy-blue slacks and a white blouse with a lot of blue stars on it. July still sat a couple of weeks away, but it was her favorite month and holiday, so she owned a lot of star-covered clothing.

She smiled past Lynn timer to Gabe, who scanned her down to her white heels. “Wow, don’t you look star-rific.” He held Liesl’s hand, and the little girl wore a pink party dress, white socks with plenty of ruffles on them, and a shiny pair of black Mary Jane’s. Her dark hair had been braided, and Hilde found that as impressive as the pristinely violet, short-sleeved dress shirt Gabe wore, the top two buttons undone around his throat.

He’d paired the ultra-modern shirt with a pair of gray shorts, and he wore a pair of white athletic shoes that had pink and purple swirls along the sides.

“You look...you’re wearing purple.”

He looked down at his shirt. “I like purple.”

“You look nice in it,” Lynn timer said. “This dusky violet is everywhere, Mom.”

“Everywhere?” Hilde admittedly didn’t keep up with the fashion trends, but she’d not seen “dusky violet” everywhere.

“It’s very popular.” Lynn timer stepped up to her side. “Look at this video.” She held her phone out in front of Hilde, and she leaned back so she could see the screen. A male model wore a shirt very much like Gabe’s as he strutted down the runway, and Hilde could see Gabe doing that. The model was probably even the same age as Gabe.

Hilde’s insecurities started to roar, but she nodded. “I see.”

“Can I see?” Gabe asked.

Lynnie showed him her phone, and he grinned at it. “Oh, sure. This *is* that shirt.”

“It is not.” Lynnie’s eyes widened. “Mom, it’s the same shirt!”

“It does look similar.”

“I bought it online,” he said. “After my office manager said I should wear these shirts.” He gave Lynnie’s phone back to her. “Glad to know I’m on-trend.” He chuckled, and Lynnie laughed with him.

“You really are,” she said, giving Hilde a *so there* look.

He looked down at his daughter, and Hilde took the moment to roll her eyes at her daughter. Lynnie likely didn’t mean to make Hilde feel two inches tall, but she did nonetheless. She loved proving Hilde wrong, and Hilde normally didn’t mind. She wanted Lynnie to think for herself, stand up for herself, and learn what she wanted and what she liked.

She just wished she didn’t have to feel so insignificant on Lynnie’s quest to do those things.

She pushed the thoughts away. Mothers and fathers worldwide felt like this about their teenagers, and as far as they came, Lynnie was a very, very good fourteen-year-old.

“You want to show them your song?”

Liesl smiled and nodded, and she released her father’s hand and walked over to the piano which Hilde kept in her formal front living room.

“Can she play?” Gabe murmured. “We do lessons on Fridays, and she’s brand-new.”

“Of course she can play,” Hilde said.

“We’ll be sure to clap for her,” Lynnie whispered.

Gabe slipped his arm around Hilde, then lunged forward to help Liesl pull the bench out and get on it. She looked like a toy sitting there, but she looked up at her father and then put her hands on the keys.

He backed up, resuming his spot at Hilde’s side, his hand deliciously warm along her lower back. Liesl swung her feet, and Hilde wondered what she’d hear from the girl and the instrument.

Gabe taught Liesl her piano lessons, and yet Hilde had never heard him play. She made a mental note to ask him to play for her one day soon, and then she got completely distracted by the high, clear voice that started to sing *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*.

Liesl played the notes with her tiny fingers as she sang right on the pitch,

and she didn't stumble even one time. She didn't play fast, and Hilde marveled at her God-given talent.

When she finished, the last note hung in the air as absolute perfection. As stunned as she was, Hilde couldn't even react. Lynn timer likewise stood unmoving and silent while Liesl turned toward them.

She slid from the bench and dipped into the cutest little girl curtsy in the world. Gabe chuckled, and he started clapping first. That thawed Hilde and Lynn timer, and they both whooped and applauded for Liesl.

"That was *so good!*" Lynn timer scooped Liesl into her arms. "Who's teaching you to play and sing like that?"

"Daddy," she said, grinning at Lynn timer.

"Wow, Gabe," Lynn timer said, holding one fist out for him to bump.

A fist bump. She expected Gabe to curl his lip, as he was clearly a handshake-type of man. She couldn't even imagine him fist bumping a brother, let alone her daughter.

And yet, in living color right before her eyes, he grinned and fist bumped Lynn timer.

Hilde had never felt so old. So out of touch. She'd been able to contain her worries and fears about the age difference between her and Gabe, but as he pulled his hand back, they bloomed and grew like one of those children's toys that expanded to one hundred times its size when dropped in water.

She could barely breathe, and as Gabe looked at her, his smile slipped. "You okay?"

"Fine," she said, turning away. "Should we go? We have a reservation, don't we?"

"Yes, let's go."

Lynn timer put Liesl on her feet, and Hilde took the moment to drop to Liesl's height. "That was wonderful," she said, smiling at the girl with all she had. "Thank you for playing for us."

Liesl smiled, stepped closer, and Hilde drew the little girl into a hug. "Did your daddy do your hair?"

"Yes," she said. "Is it pretty?"

"So pretty." Hilde pulled back and gave her another grin while reaching up to the braid. She touched it lightly and then dropped her hand. "Come on. We'll be late for dinner if we don't get going."

Liesl skipped toward the door, and Hilde put her hand in Gabe's so she could stand. She once again felt ten times older than him, and she moved to

follow Liesl and Lynn timer out the front door. But Gabe blocked her.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” he said, his voice more of a demand than a request.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Hilde,” he said.

“This is our first dinner with the four of us,” she said. “I’m not going to ruin it with something we’ve already talked about.”

He cocked his head to the side, those dark eyes assessing and solving all her problems in only a few seconds. “My age.”

Hilde pressed her lips together and felt the stickiness of her lipstick. “You realize you’re wearing a designer shirt. That you could’ve been the male model in that video.”

He didn’t deny it, and Hilde really didn’t want to ruin their evening. “And my daughter said she likes you, that you’re ‘cool’.” She moved around him, and he turned to walk with her to the door.

“I’m glad she likes me,” Gabe said quietly. “Aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Hilde admitted. Out of their two daughters, how Lynn timer felt about the relationship was probably more important at this point. She paused in the doorjamb. “But Gabe, you’re going to have to be her stepfather, and you’re thirteen years older than her. Thirteen. Not thirty.”

He said nothing, and Hilde hadn’t thought of him as only twenty-seven years old until tonight.

“And,” Hilde said. “This might not work, and not because of that, but because I’m assuming you want more children?” Her eyebrows went up, and Gabe’s throat went down as he swallowed. That meant yes.

“I mean, sure,” he said.

“I’m thirty-nine,” she said. “That’s almost forty years old. I don’t have a lot of years left to have children.”

“I know,” he said, but Hilde doubted very much that he’d even thought about such a thing.

“So let’s just table all of this and go to dinner,” she said. “Okay? I want tonight to be fun for everyone too.”

He put his hand on the small of her back, and Hilde stepped out of her house. Lynn timer was just coming back up the sidewalk, but she stopped when she saw Hilde. “There you are. Are you guys coming?” She looked from Hilde to Gabe and back.

“We’re coming,” Gabe said, and Hilde was glad he could act as the voice

when she wanted to stay silent. She wanted a partner in her life, so she didn't have to shoulder everything alone. So she didn't have to be the one who knew exactly what to say. So she could have support when she needed it, and support someone else when they did.

She couldn't believe she'd brought up kids with Gabe. That hadn't been on her mind at all, but it sure seemed like everything was tied to her age, whether she liked it or not.

He played the perfect gentleman, but it wasn't just a part. Gabe Young *was* a gentleman, even though he was the youngest brother in the big, loud Young family. He'd told her he'd thrown plenty of elbows and even a punch or two when he was younger, just to get dinner on his plate.

Hilde couldn't even imagine having nine children, let alone all of them boys. He'd not said much about his relationship with his brothers, other than Morris, but he'd been about the same when the band had left. The only person he'd spoken about missing was his twin.

She let him hold her door, drive them downtown, get the girls out, and then come for her. She linked her arm through his, put a smile on her face, and prayed—yes, prayed—they wouldn't run into anyone she couldn't handle tonight.

As Gabe reached to open the door to The Branding Iron, it opened, and Pastor Abraham stepped out with his wife. "Oh, hello, Pastor," Hilde said, her smile turning absolutely genuine.

"Hilde," he said, quickly scanning everyone with her. "Gabe, Linnie. Even little Liesl." He smiled at all of them while his wife moved out of the way for the people exiting behind them. "It's good to see you guys."

The door closed, sealing in some of the noise. "It's pretty busy in there tonight," he said.

"I'll go check us in," Gabe said. "Good to see you, Pastor." He ducked inside, and Linnie took Liesl's hand, threw Hilde a look, and followed him.

She wasn't sure what they'd seen on her face or in her demeanor to let them know she wanted to talk to the pastor, but they'd all picked up on it. "Did you get that mattress set somewhere?" she asked.

"Yes." He smiled at her and then his wife, who linked her hand through his arm. "The mother was extremely grateful. She said to pass along her thanks."

"Of course," Hilde said. "If there's any other needs you hear about, will you let me know?"

“Sure,” he said. “We’ve got the Olson yard clean-up next weekend.” He nodded toward the door. “Maybe you could convince your boyfriend to come. We could use all the strong arms we can get.”

“I’ll find out if he’ll be in town,” she said. “Gabe lives in Jackson Hole.”

“I knew he didn’t live here,” Pastor Abraham said. “Did you know that, Patty?”

“I thought he had a place here now.” Patty looked at her husband. “Isn’t that what Cecily said?”

“He’s only here part-time,” Hilde said. “On the weekends. For his clients.” She wasn’t sure why she was making an excuse for him next weekend. For all she knew, the four of them could go help the recently widowed Olson woman get her yard into shape so she could list her house for sale. With a lot of hands, it wouldn’t take long. “I’ll talk to him,” she said. Then she nodded and entered the restaurant.

She caught Lynn timer looking over her shoulder, and she gestured Hilde forward urgently. “They’re taking us now,” she said as Hilde pressed through the crowd and joined her daughter.

She looked around at everyone else waiting. There had to be thirty people smashed in the small entryway. “They are?”

“Yes.” Lynn timer’s eyes shone as Gabe turned back to them.

“Ready?” he asked as if he got seated ahead of everyone else all the time. Perhaps he did.

“Yes.” Hilde nodded and indicated that Lynn timer and Liesl should go first. Gabe waited for her, and then he put his hand on her back as he moved with her.

“Everything okay with the pastor?”

“Yeah, sure,” Hilde said, losing his hand as the aisle narrowed between tables. “I just donated some furniture and wanted to ask him about it.”

“You donated some furniture,” Gabe said. They paused at the end of the table the hostess had brought them to. Liesl bounced and slid over on the bench seat really slowly, giving them a moment.

“Yeah.” Hilde smiled at him. “I’ve been trying to serve more. Really get outside of myself and see if there are needs that I can help meet.”

His eyebrows went up. “So you go to church often?”

“Every week,” she said. “Why are you surprised?” She ran her fingers up the front of his shirt when she should’ve sat down. She felt her daughter’s eyes on them, but she refused to look away from Gabe.

“You seemed surprised when I said I was praying a few weeks ago.”

Hilde swallowed, trying to find the right thing to say. “At the time, I was.”

“I take Liesl to church every week too,” he said. “In Jackson Hole.”

“I assumed.”

“Can you guys sit down?” Lynn timer hissed.

Hilde practically dropped next to her daughter, and Gabe elegantly folded himself into the booth opposite of her.

“Daddy, play with me.” Liesl shoved a blue crayon at her father, who picked it up. He made an O on the paper in front of the little girl.

“Do you like church, Lynn timer?” he asked, looking over to the teen.

“Yeah,” Lynn timer said, shooting a look at Hilde. “It’s...nice.”

Hilde pressed her lips together, but her lipstick wasn’t nearly as sticky anymore. “I’ve been...evolving,” she said. “Examining my own faith and my testimony, and trying to strengthen it. Okay?”

Gabe’s eyebrows went up, and when Hilde looked at Lynn timer and found the same surprise on her face, she realized how combative she’d sounded.

“Daddy,” Liesl said, her voice almost a whine. “It’s your turn.”

He looked down and drew another O, then returned his gaze to Hilde. He reached over and covered her hands with his. “Okay, honey,” he said. “That’s great.” He glanced over to Lynn timer. “Isn’t that great, Lynn timer?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Mom, it’s really great.” She grinned as she gave Hilde an arm hug and then she pulled out her phone. “Gabe, you have *got* to see this video on Yakety Yak.”

Hilde worked not to roll her eyes, and she swallowed against the sting in her chest as Lynn timer showed Gabe a video that made him laugh. She didn’t even try to show it to Hilde, and that made her feel very, very old.

Gabe finished his game of tic tac toe with Liesl, and then he ripped off a corner of her children’s menu. He colored and drew on it, folded it up, and slid it across the table to Hilde.

She lifted her eyebrows, and he only nodded, that sexy smile on his face. She picked up the paper and looked at it. He’d drawn a G and an H, with a heart between them, and warmth flooded Hilde from head to toe.

He’d said he didn’t care about the difference in their ages, and maybe he didn’t. Maybe she’d just have to get used to Lynn timer going to him for teenage things, and she reminded herself that was part of what she wanted—a partner to help her with her teenager.

So she re-folded the paper, smiled at Gabe, and tucked it away as the waiter appeared and wanted to know their drink orders. She wished they were alone, so they could discuss adult things, but she set them aside for now.

Tonight was family night.



“**Y**ou have to *sit down*,” he told Liesl for at least the sixth time. The waiter had just brought their dessert. Every time a plate, a cup, a new basket of bread—or these desserts—had arrived at the table, his daughter had stood up on the bench seat.

He was trying to be patient, but he feared that had run out when the main course had been served. Bringing her to a steakhouse had been a mistake. Lynn timer had been great for about the first three-quarters, but she was bored out of her mind now. It only took Gabe one look to know.

“Wow, look at this blondie,” Hilde said, a spoon already in her hand. She dug in, her smile real and genuine. She’d settled down after they’d ordered drinks, and she’d had one glass of wine and then switched to lemon water.

Gabe didn’t drink, unless Dr. Pepper counted. He’d had three cups of the stuff tonight, as he thought it was the perfect pairing with a medium-rare steak.

“It looks amazing,” he said as Liesl finally sat down.

“I want some,” she complained, and Gabe looked up as the waiter extended the vanilla ice cream cone he’d ordered for his daughter.

She stood up—again—and Gabe held his breath and then pressed it out slowly through his nose.

“Liesl, baby,” Lynn timer said. “Sit down to eat that. It’s going to get all over your pretty dress.”

Gabe took a spoonful of the blondie he and Hilde had ordered to share, and then shot Lynn timer a thankful look. She’d ordered a brownie sundae, and

she let Hilde taste it, and then Gabe. He was ready to go, dessert notwithstanding, and he asked for the check before Liesl had finished her ice cream cone.

She had her dessert all over her face, and Gabe dunked a corner of his napkin in her water glass and used it to clean her up. Partially. *Good enough*, he thought.

“Let’s go, Baby Bear,” Hilde said, and Liesl brightened. Gabe had seen her bloom to life under the care of women, and it was once again obvious to him.

“Don’t climb over the table,” he griped at her as she stood up. “I’ll get out.” He slid over, and Liesl thankfully followed him. Hilde took her hand, gave Gabe a knowing look, and headed for the exit.

Lynn timer waited with Gabe while he scribbled a tip onto the receipt, followed by his name. “You gave him a hundred bucks,” Lynn timer hissed as he tossed the pen to the table.

Gabe’s default tip was a hundred dollars, so he simply gave Lynn timer a look and said, “Let’s catch up to your mother.”

Twenty minutes later, he called, “We’re not staying for very long,” after Lynn timer and Liesl as they went giggling down the hall to the teenager’s bedroom. He sighed when neither of them acknowledged him, somehow getting a glimpse of his future.

“I can see you’ve reached the end of your rope,” Hilde said, handing him a bottle of water. The iciness of it seeped into his hand, and it took him a moment to focus on his girlfriend.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “That was a long dinner.”

“I had fun.” She smiled at him, and Gabe growled as he hooked his arm around her waist and hauled her against him.

“Of course you did.” He managed a smile as he leaned down and touched his lips to hers.

She sighed into his mouth as she kissed him back, but she didn’t stay pressed into him for long. “You’re good with my daughter.”

“You’re good with mine,” he whispered back. “Does it bother you that she shows me stuff on her phone?”

Hilde hesitated, but she said, “No. I’m working through that.” She gave him a soft smile and kissed him again. He broke the kiss, then held her close and swayed with her. “I’d like more kids, Hilde, but I’m fine if maybe that’s through adoption or something.”

“Mm.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page when it comes to church.”

“I’m really working on building—or rather, rebuilding—my faith.”

“If I can help, I’d love to.” Gabe pulled away slightly and looked down at her. “Anything I can do?”

“Just keep supporting me,” she said, tucking herself back into his arms.

“I can do that,” he murmured, and he held her close, his nerves calming and his patience extending with every moment Hilde breathed in and out with him.

“We’re coming back down the hall,” Lynn timer called, and Gabe opened his eyes. He hadn’t even realized he’d closed them, and as Hilde turned out of his arms to greet the girls, Gabe checked the time.

“It’s time for us to get going, Bug,” he told Liesl. “Come to Daddy.”

Liesl ran toward him, and Gabe swept her up into his arms. They laughed together, and Liesl would likely fall asleep on the way back to the townhome. With any luck, she’d sleep in tomorrow morning, and Gabe glanced over to Hilde.

“We’re hiking in the morning?”

“You still want to?”

“If you do.”

“I can,” she said. “Lynn timer’s working with a friend at the car wash.”

“I’ve got Blaze and Mav taking Liesl to get her nails done.”

Hilde’s eyebrows went up. “Blaze Young is taking your daughter to get her nails done?” She started to giggle. “Why does that make me laugh?”

Gabe chuckled too. “Because he pretends to be this tough guy, that’s why.”

“Like someone else I know.” Hilde bumped him with her hip. “Nine, okay? I’ll bring breakfast, and I’ll meet you at the trailhead.”

“See you then.” He didn’t bend over and kiss her in front of the girls but simply headed for the exit. His little girl hugged him tightly, and Gabe hugged her back, and sure enough she fell asleep on the way home.

Gabe changed into his pajamas and lay in bed, texting Hilde, the blissful silence around him not as lonely as it had been...because of her and her daughter and their presence in his life.

GABE MOVED THE PAPER ON HIS DESK, THE DARKNESS BEYOND THE WINDOWS of his home office telling it was still very early in the morning. He brought the paper back in front of him and adjusted the lamp. He reasoned that if he didn't turn on the overhead light, he wasn't really working.

The problem was, he hadn't been sleeping either. He'd fallen asleep quickly after his last text to Hilde, but he'd awakened a couple of hours later, the idea of splitting his law firm stuck on a loop in his head.

He had been handling clients here in Coral Canyon without living here. Brian, his partner, and Carrie both worked in Jackson. They could continue to run that office. Gabe now had Cheryl here at this office, even if she worked from home some of the time.

"This isn't really an office either," he muttered to himself. He'd already noted the concern at the top of the piece of paper in front of him. He'd drawn a line down the middle of it, and he'd put all the things that would need to be done in Jackson on one side, and the items that the office here would need on the other.

He could make the hour-long drive for court appearances and meetings. He couldn't believe he was even considering moving to Coral Canyon, but with video calls, his phone, his stellar employees and partner...he'd started to hope and dream that he could.

In the back of his mind, he knew the driving force behind these thoughts was Hilde. Linnie too, as she was fourteen and would be starting high school this fall. Hilde owned the largest furniture store outside of Jackson, and she wouldn't be moving anytime soon.

If Gabe wanted to be with her in a long-term way—and he'd been thinking that more and more as their relationship had progressed and deepened—he had to move to Coral Canyon. He couldn't see a way around it.

Waylon wouldn't be able to make the move, as he had other clients and a life in Jackson Hole. Gabe had reasoned that away by putting the names of all of his brothers who didn't currently have jobs. That included Mav, Jem, and Blaze. For good measure, he'd listed his parents, as if he wouldn't have enough help with Liesl.

She'd be starting kindergarten soon as well, and Gabe would only need someone to help half-time. He could hire another nanny here.

"Maybe," he muttered. There were a lot more wealthy people in Jackson Hole than there were in Coral Canyon, and he'd learned that just because

they were both Wyoming towns didn't mean they operated the same.

He really didn't have any right to be making plans like this at all. He sighed and slumped back in his chair, his eyes burning. His relationship with Hilde was five weeks old.

Five. Weeks.

Not five months, and Gabe had never considered himself the type to fall fast. In fact, he'd vowed not to do that this time, because last time had been such a colossal failure.

As he often did in times of stress, his twin entered Gabe's mind. Morris and Leigh had rekindled their romance and then dated for a full year before they'd gotten remarried. Morris had fallen for Leigh fast enough, but then he'd taken the time he needed to make sure things were right.

Gabe figured he could do that too. He left everything on his desk and headed back upstairs. Then up more stairs to the third floor. He stepped into Liesl's room and found her curled up in a ball. He watched her sleep for a moment, his father's heart filling with such love for the little girl.

"You'll always be my family, baby doll," he whispered to her as he leaned over and pressed a feather-light kiss to her forehead. Then he returned to his bedroom, where he climbed back in bed and prayed, "Help me fall asleep, Lord."

The things he'd written out and reasoned through no longer infected his mind, keeping him awake. He closed his eyes, and within seconds, his dreams filled with images of family.

Family gatherings on holidays, where the Youngs had to rent bigger facilities than someone's house. He attended, with Liesl of course, and then the gorgeous figure of Hilde emerged from the shadows.

With Linnie's auburn hair, some red was introduced into their gene pool, and Momma finally got her cute little redheaded granddaughter.

Quiet, private family meals with just him and Hilde and their kids played out in his dreams. Finally having a partner who loved and cherished him and Liesl brought such comfort to his heart. He hadn't realized how much he'd been missing by never having that perfect friend, that one person who might not always like him, but who always, *always* loved him.

In his dream, he knew it. Felt it. Wanted it—and had it with Hilde.

When he woke, he took a moment to stay in bed, holding onto the threads of the dreams until they vanished completely. He smiled softly to himself, and then got up to start making his dreams into a reality.



“Do you have your passport?” she asked Linnie, who looked up.

“I need my passport?”

“I don’t think you do,” Hilde said. “But your dad might want to take you into Canada. I don’t think they *require* you to have one, but you should take it anyway.”

Linnie moved away from her mostly-packed bag and opened her nightstand drawer. “I think it’s in here....” She pushed a pile of stuff out of the way, and Hilde turned away before she had to see the enormity of junk in her daughter’s drawer.

“Swimming suit?”

“Yes.”

“Sunscreen?”

“Yes.”

Hilde went through the checklist, reminding Linnie to be smart in the sun. Ethan wouldn’t remind her, and she had redheaded genes. She freckled and burned if she didn’t wear a hat and apply sunscreen, and she promised she would.

Linnie was a good girl, with a good head on her shoulders, but Hilde hated sending her off for weeks at a time, even if it was with her dad.

Linnie flipped the top of her suitcase. She leaned on it mightily to get it to zip closed as she said, “I’ll get it all in.”

“If you need me to get out the shrink-wrapper, I can.”

“Then I’ll have to take it with me.” Linnie stood and wiped her hair off

her face. "I'll be okay. Besides, you'll go through it tonight and take out all the stuff I overpacked." She grinned at Hilde, who didn't deny the accusation.

Hilde drew Lynn timer into a hug. "You're going to have a great time on the West Coast."

"I know," Lynn timer said, her arms around Hilde ultra-tight.

"If it's bad, call me," Hilde whispered. "We can work something out." She stepped back and smiled at her daughter, her whole soul lit by love. "But it can't be a stubborn teenage attitude thing, okay? He's your dad, and he does love you."

"I know," Lynn timer said again, this time with a little less attitude. She left her bedroom and the rest of the packing for later, and Hilde followed her. In the kitchen, she retrieved the credit card and cash she'd gotten for her daughter.

"Mom, I'm not going to need this."

"You never know," Hilde said. "Just tuck it away in your purse, okay? It'll make me feel better."

"Okay." Lynn timer did what Hilde asked, and then Lynn timer's phone chimed.

"Oh, Misses Bowman is here. I'll be back this afternoon."

"Call me if you need help with that baby."

Lynn timer looked delighted at the idea of spending the day with an infant, but she promised she'd call if she needed help before she rushed out the door.

Hilde stood in the center of her house, the silence absolutely deafening. It weighed about two tons as well, and she had no idea what to do with it. She felt like this every time she had to send Lynn timer off to do something with Ethan. He lived in Jackson Hole too, and he saw her once a month for a few nights. He took her for major holidays, and in the summer, and Hilde hated Lynn timer's absence every single time.

"And she's not even gone yet," she muttered to herself. She'd managed to convince Ethan to let Hilde have her for one more day, so she could take Lynn timer to the Young Family party tonight. She'd felt it important, and it had taken a bit of negotiation to get her ex-husband to agree to change his vacation plans.

But he'd done it.

This summer, she wasn't truly alone, as Gabe would be arriving that afternoon for the Fourth of July festivities that evening. He'd be here through the weekend too, and while Hilde would miss Lynn timer over the coming weeks, she wouldn't truly be alone.

She coached herself to pour her coffee and make the drive over to the store. They had limited holiday hours today, but they very rarely closed completely. Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day, and as Hilde pulled around the store to the back employee lot, the weight of the other three hundred sixty-three days of the year pressed down on her.

She needed to get some separation between herself and the store, and she'd been in this position before. When she got overwhelmed by the demands on her time and energy, she had to find a way to regain the balance in her life.

Usually, that was between family and work, but she now had a boyfriend to consider too. Even when Gabe was in Jackson, they talked all the time. He consumed her thoughts, and Hilde had assumed that would lessen as they continued to date, as they moved out of the honeymoon phase and into the hard work part of the relationship. But it hadn't lessened. If anything, she thought about him more. Counted down days and hours until she could see him again. Couldn't wait to text him the funny things that happened at work, or hear his voice when they spoke in the evenings.

She parked and went into the store through the huge warehouse in the back, the same way she always did. She put her thermos on her desk and promptly left her office again. She didn't want to be squirreled away behind a desk today.

Walking the store always brought her a new measure of life, and today was no different. She chatted with a few people, helped an elderly couple find a new matching set of recliners, and stopped by the bedroom section of the store just to lay on one of the beds in one of the staged rooms there.

She laughed when Mindie found her there with the words, "Taking a nap already?"

Hilde sat up, her head feeling light and fuzzy. "Was I snoring?"

"No, but I had to ping your phone after you didn't answer a store-wide page."

Then she had fallen asleep. "This is a comfortable bed," she said, patting the duvet. It was white and had puckers throughout, with matching pillow shams, making the bed look huge and inviting.

She slid off and smiled at Mindie. "What did you need?"

"I handled it, but it was a customer who wanted a return outside of our sixty-day window."

"What did you do?"

Mindie rolled her eyes. “Let’s just say you and Everly will have a project to do when she returns in the fall.”

“A project,” Hilde mused. That was what she needed. A project to get her hands dirty, recenter herself, and find the balance she needed. “What kind of project?”

“It was a credenza,” she said. “It was in good condition, and I only gave her thirty percent back.”

Hilde nodded, because while she normally had to sign off on all returns that came in outside of their policy window, she trusted Mindie. “It’s in the refurbished section?”

“I had Jeff put it back in your refinishing room.”

“Perfect.” Hilde and Mindie turned the corner, and the central hub of the store came into view. Their big customer service counter stood there, and Hilde had three people working there every Friday and Saturday, and on days like today.

When people didn’t have to work, they tended to come out and shop more, and Hilde needed employees to help them find their next great piece of furniture.

“Everything else is going okay?” Hilde asked.

“Like a well-oiled machine,” Mindie said with a hint of pride in her voice.

“Great,” Hilde said. “Then I’m going to go check out that credenza. I’m craving a good project.” She smiled at Mindie and headed toward the back righthand corner of the store. She had a secondhand shop back here, and many of the pieces in the discount room came from the community. Hilde had people attend estate sales to see what they could find, and she went in search of great used furniture for the secondhand shop too.

Anything she and Ev refurbished would go in there too, and the range of items in the shop at any given time could be astronomical. Today, she found a couple of people looking at the wall mirrors, and she’d buffed out one of the frames and painted it black herself.

She sent a quick text to Everly—*I really wish you were here to help me with a refinishing project*—and then she pushed through the “Employees Only” door and into the refinishing room.

The new item stood out, because Hilde had every piece of furniture in every corner of her store memorized. That, and Jeff still stood next to it, a clipboard in his hand as he walked slowly around it, taking inventory of it.

“Oh, they brought back the Winchester,” she said when she saw the credenza.

Jeff turned toward her. “It’s in good condition.” He made another check mark on his clipboard. “I’ve about got the intake form done.”

Hilde could simply clean it and put it in the secondhand shop, but she never did that. She didn’t want a used product to compete with a new item that still sat out on her showroom floor. She circled the piece too, trying to see it painted, perhaps with an upholstered top.

No, not an upholstered top. She’d cut out panels in the doors and put in windows. Maybe shutters. Maybe painted shutters.

Her imagination roamed, and Hilde couldn’t remember the last time she’d let her mind simply wander where it wanted. Maybe while she worked and weeded in her garden. As she clipped roses.

All other times, Hilde had work tasks to do, motherly concerns to attend to, texts to return to her mother, another employee to hire, more roses to trim and mulch, and then she’d added Gabe to the mix.

But while she looked at a piece of furniture and started to see new potential for it, her mind got to experience a level of freedom she rarely let it have. She could see different colors and how they might play against the reddish-brown wood—or maybe a different color of wood.

Or not, she thought. She hated covering up perfectly good wood, and this mahogany had been polished and finished beautifully already.

“Why did it get returned?” Hilde asked. Mindie hadn’t said, but she’d been right about it being in good condition.

“I think Mindie said the woman said her mother-in-law didn’t like it.”

Hilde scoffed as she trailed her fingertips across the top of the credenza. “That’s impossible. It’s a Winchester.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Jeff said. He finished his inspection, took the paper off the clipboard, and stuck it in the door of the credenza. “What are you going to do with it?”

“I don’t know yet,” Hilde said thoughtfully. “She’s really pretty, so she doesn’t need a major makeover.”

“That’ll be this piece,” another man said, and Hilde turned as Evan, another of her warehouse workers, entered the refinishing room with his arms wrapped around...something Hilde couldn’t quite identify.

He grunted as he set it down several paces away, and Hilde picked her way past the credenza and a mismatched dining room chair to see it. Evan

turned it around, and she saw the intricate carving on the front panel.

“It’s a writing desk,” she said with wonder in her voice. “Where did you get this?”

“Penny found it in your neck of the woods.” Evan stood back and smiled at the writing desk. “Rusk. She has more on the truck too.” He knocked on the writing desk, and Hilde almost lunged toward it to protect it from such a thing.

“More on the truck?” she asked as Evan started for the back exit.

“Can you lend me a hand, Jeff?” Evan asked.

“Sure thing,” he said, and the two of them left.

Hilde stared at the writing desk, then snapped a picture of it. *Look at this!* She sent the message and the photo to Everly, who still hadn’t responded to Hilde’s first text. She wasn’t sure which city Ev was in right now, but she knew her friend would respond when she could.

She finally left the writing desk to go see what else Penny had found in Rusk, and she gaped at a burnt orange loveseat as Jeff and Evan carried it past her. “That came from Rusk for sure,” she said.

“Yep,” Evan said, and Hilde hurried outside to the small moving truck where Penny stood with another clipboard in her hand.

“You found some great things,” Hilde said, causing her to look up.

“The garage sales in Rusk this morning were top-notch.” Penny grinned as Jonas appeared at the back of the truck. “There’s an amazing china cabinet in the back.”

“I want that orange couch,” Hilde said. “I don’t even know if I can recover that. It’s so vintage.”

“Right?” Penny looked delighted, and Hilde was so glad that she had people who loved antique and old furniture as much as she did. She enjoyed the new stuff too, but there was just something about handcrafted, solid wood furniture that made Hilde so, so happy.

She watched as a couple more items came off the truck, and then the china cabinet made an appearance. “Wow, Penny.” Hilde couldn’t look away from it. The cabinet stood about ten feet tall, and it looked like it had been specially crafted for a queen.

It had the high wings that curled back in, almost the way a royal’s crown would, and then the glass doors that had been hand-poured and boasted the waving glass of long ago. “It’s gorgeous,” Hilde said.

It was also quite dirty, hadn’t been cared for, and had several scratches

down the front of the lower doors.

She followed it back to the refinishing room, where someone who didn't belong there stood admiring the orange loveseat. "Gabe," she said, but he'd already looked her way.

"Ah, Mindie was right." He smiled at her and glided her way. He took her into his arms despite the fact that they weren't alone and pressed a kiss to her cheek. "You're getting a lot of secondhand stuff in?"

"One of my scouts went shopping the yard sales out in Rusk today," she said.

"And Dog Valley," Penny said as she entered the room. "Nine pieces, boss." She handed Hilde the clipboard. "All documented here."

"Thank you, Penny." Hilde glanced at the clipboard, but she didn't want to read anything right now.

"What do you do with these pieces?" Gabe asked.

"Refinish them," Hilde said. "This is our refinishing room. Then we move them into the secondhand shop and sell them."

"Yes, I walked through that," he said. "One young man out there seemed thrilled with the television cabinet he was looking at." He grinned, his hand sliding down her back to her waist. "I know I'm early, so I'm fine to just hang out until you're ready to leave."

"Where's Liesl?"

"Georgia has her at the bookstore," Gabe said. "It's Patriotic Princess Day this afternoon. She's going to take her home afterward, and I can get her anytime before we head over to the park for the festivities tonight."

Hilde nodded and surveyed all the new friends that had come into the store that day. "Are we really sitting by your family tonight?" she asked in a near-whisper.

"Yes," he murmured back. "Is that still okay?"

She nodded, though tonight felt like a turning point somehow. "My mother and I usually go with Linnie," she said. "I haven't spoken with her yet, but maybe she could come too?"

"Of course," Gabe said fluidly. "I suppose that means you're going to introduce me to her?"

Hilde smiled at the diplomatic way he'd said it. At how easy he made meeting her mother seem. "Yes," she said in slightly higher-pitched voice. "I suppose it does."

He chuckled. "Are we ready for that? My family and your mamma?"

She met his eye. "I'm ready if you are."

Gabe nodded, and while he didn't say he wasn't ready, there was an edge in his eye Hilde couldn't quite identify before he smoothed it away. Maybe just nerves. Maybe apprehension. Maybe the fact that Gabe didn't like crowds, or large family gatherings, and they'd be attending the town fireworks celebration with both.

"How's Morris?" she asked, and his expression turned wistful. Sad, almost.

"Good," Gabe said. "They're in Phoenix tonight, and he said it's hotter than the surface of the sun there."

Hilde laughed and said, "I bet it is."

"How's the packing going for Lynn timer?" Gabe asked, because she'd complained about how much she disliked it.

"Good," Hilde said in the same tone Gabe had used. "The house will be really quiet without her there."

"I'll bet," he said quietly, as if he understood. He leaned closer and took a deep breath. "Are you going back to your office, by chance?"

"Why?" Hilde looked at him and found that pure male desire swimming in his eyes. She smiled and shook her head. "Oh, I get it. You want to kiss me."

"It's a proper greeting I'm after," he whispered back, his smile dangerous and oh-so-delightful.

"Oh, yes," she said in all the mock seriousness she could muster. "Since you're such a proper gentleman."

"I am," he said, the words sounding very much like a protest.

She took his hand and led him out of the refinishing room. Her office sat on the other side of the store, and they made the walk there while he told her about the feast his momma was planning to bring to the park that evening.

"So I shouldn't send out for those six-foot licorice ropes," Hilde said.

"Tell me you don't eat those," Gabe said, his expression made of horror now. "Of course you do. You and Liesl are going to be best friends."

"I hope so," she said before she could censor herself.

"I do too," Gabe said, and Hilde paused only a few steps from her office.

"Do you, Gabe?"

"Yeah." He met her gaze, swept her into his arms, and kissed her right there for anyone and everyone to see. Hilde didn't even care, because there was something new in his touch, and something sparkling in the way he

spoke like they'd be together for a long, long time to come, and something energizing in having a man like him so enthralled with her.

Hilde held on the best she could and kissed him back, feeling something shift inside herself too. Something that spoke of hope for the future, of having a place to belong inside a core family unit again, of finally having the partner she'd dreamed of.

And he was a grumpy lawyer who hadn't given up on her when they hadn't been able to line up their first date as easily as he'd have liked.

Hilde finally felt like she was on the right track in her life, though she did pull away when someone catcalled. "Let's go in my office," she muttered, leading the way.

Gabe followed, laughing as he pushed the door closed behind him. "Is there anything I can do today while you're working?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, just thinking of it. "I promised Pastor Abraham I'd pull some items for him." She shuffled through a few of her handwritten notes to herself and found the one she needed. "You can go find these items in the store and tell the girls at checkout that they're charitable donations."

He took the paper and scanned the few items on it. When he looked at her again, Hilde already knew the question on the tip of his tongue. "Yeah," she said. "I'm doing really good in my quest to know the Lord better."

"You're a ten in service," he said.

"You think so?"

He held up the list. "Yes."

Hilde didn't need the praise, at least not from him. She sank into her chair. "I'm just trying to serve Him better. More. More and better."

Gabe sat down in front of her. "And you feel like you are?"

"Yes," she said simply. "And it's helped me get to know Him better too." Reading her scriptures had helped tremendously with that as well, and Hilde almost felt like a butterfly coming out of the cocoon where she'd been growing and changing.

"I'm glad." He smiled. "I should focus more on getting to know the Lord better too."

"I have a great daily gospel study guide," she said nonchalantly. "I could text you what I'm doing if you wanted to read the same thing."

"I'd love that," he said.

"Great."

He stood. "I'll go get your things," he said. "Then maybe I can order

lunch and we can pick up where we left off in the hallway.” He grinned himself out of the office before Hilde could snort or scoff that of course he wouldn’t be kissing her any more that day.

Because of course he would be.



Jem pulled into the driveway of his new house, and the afternoon sunlight glinted off the front windows. He hadn't had time to program his truck to open the garage door, so he had to put the vehicle in park and go up the front sidewalk.

He'd flown in from Vegas, which was an hour behind Wyoming, and he couldn't really blame his trudging feet on jet lag. He simply hadn't slept great last night.

"This is our new house?" Cole asked.

Jem looked down at his son. "Yep. Uncle Blaze and Uncle Mav moved all of our stuff over here while we were gone." He smiled at his boy and turned back to wait for Rosie. "Comin' kid?" he asked her.

She ran toward him, and he scooped her into his arms, the two of them laughing. "Daddy, I'm so glad you're back." She squeezed him in a full-body hug, and Jem pressed his eyes closed as his heart filled with love.

"And Uncle Blaze isn't gonna live here with us," Cole said.

Jem moved Rosie to his hip and looked at Cole. The boy wore worry all over his face, and he'd stopped too. Jem set Rosie down and dropped into a crouch. "Guys," he said as he hung his head. He had so many things to make up for. So much pain, and neglect, and fear.

He lifted his head as his older brother's words filled him. *You can do this, Jem. You've always had a good head on your shoulders.*

Blaze's confidence in him had come back to him time and again over the past few months, and Jem clung to it now too. He'd called Blaze every

evening while he'd been on tour with Luke and Corrine, because sometimes the bar's neon signs were so loud and so bright.

But he'd found an AA meeting in every city instead. He'd used Luke and Morris as sounding boards and check-in buddies so they'd know where he was at all times. He'd stayed sober, and that alone made him so dang proud of himself.

As he looked into his son's eyes, he felt the arms of God wrap around him and hold him tight.

"I know I pretty much failed last time we tried living on our own, but this time is going to be different." He looked up to the house. "This is a nice place. I bought it. It's our home. Mine, and yours, and yours." He smiled at Rosie and then Cole. "Uncle Blaze is just down the street, but he's not going to have to come get you ready for school, okay? I'm here, and I'm your daddy, and I'm going to take care of you."

He opened his arms, and both Cole and Rosie stepped into his chest. "I love you, Cole," he said. "I'm not as sick as I was last year."

"I know," Cole said, his own voice pulled tight with emotion.

Jem held them for several more seconds, and then he let go. They moved back, and he straightened. "Okay, so let's go explore and pick bedrooms." He'd looked at the house alone before he'd left on tour, and after getting a few questions answered, an inspection, and then having his real estate agent take him through virtually one more time, he'd put in an offer.

The owners of the house had already moved, and he'd paid with cash, so he could've moved in two weeks ago. He'd told Blaze at that point, and he could still hear the dumbfounded silence on the end of the line when Jem had told him he'd bought a house and would be moving out once he and his kids returned to Wyoming.

Now they were all here, and Jem pulled out his phone to find the code for the lock on the front door. "We can reprogram this," he told the kids as sweat started to run down his back.

It was the Fourth of July today, and his family would be at the park in a few hours for dinner, a concert, and then the fireworks. It normally didn't get terribly hot in Coral Canyon, even in July, but Jem felt one breath away from melting.

He finally found the code and tapped it in. The lock disengaged, and Jem pressed down on the door handle. The door swung in, and a blast of cooled air came out. He'd been here once before, and he'd been led through via

video, and his heartbeat calmed as he stepped into the foyer again.

This felt like home, and Jem reached for Cole's hand on his left and then Rosie on his right. "We'll normally come in through the garage," he said. "But when Grandma and Grandpa come, they can hang their coats and leave their boots here."

"It's big," Cole said.

The house sat in the same gated, lakeside community as Blaze's house, so yeah. It was big.

"There are enough bedrooms for all of us on this main floor," he said. "And we have our own basement." He proceeded to take the kids through the house. It wasn't as big as Blaze's, and his had every bell and whistle known to mankind. Jem's house existed a step or two down from that, giving it a more homey feel. It told him he belonged here, and that he could raise his kids here.

Rosie picked the bedroom next to his, as he'd suspected she would, and Cole took the one that branched right off the hallway. "Good thing Uncle Blaze can read minds," he joked as Cole ran toward his bed and jumped onto it.

"My own room, Dad," he said.

"Your own room." Jem leaned against the doorjamb and watched his son. "Now, come on. We have to get something to fill our fridge with, and then we're meeting everyone at the park." He turned and collected Rosie from her room too. "Should we take a blanket or chairs?"

"We don't have chairs," Cole said, looking at Jem with his big, round brown eyes.

"We can buy some, buddy," he said, tousling his son's hair. "At the grocery store."

"Daddy!" Rosie shrieked as she strained to open the sliding glass door that led out onto the deck and then the backyard. "There's a treehouse!"

"There is?" Cole bolted toward her, and Jem grinned as his kids shouted their joy at the backyard. Blaze's house sat on the lake, and his deck extended out over it. Jem's butted up against the forest, and he had grass, a play set, empty vegetable planters, and yes, a treehouse.

His kids ran across the emerald green grass toward it, and he prayed the ladder and floor were sound enough for a four-year-old and a seven-year-old. They were, and thankfully, his kids didn't fall or hurt themselves while he crossed the yard to join them.

The treehouse even took his weight, and he laid down on the floor and looked up into the branches. “My older brothers once built a house like this,” he said. Cole and Rosie crowded in on either side of him, and he lifted his arms so they snuggled into his side and he held them close. “I was one of the younger ones, and sometimes the older brothers said they were having a meeting I couldn’t attend.”

“What kind of meeting?” Cole asked.

“Only heaven knows,” Jem said with a smile. “Uncle Tex and Uncle Blaze thought they were so cool sometimes.” He sighed, listening to the whispering of the wind and the way his heartbeat slowed enough to truly experience nature.

He’d worked outside his whole life, and he’d never felt this close to the earth before. To simply being inside his own head and feeling comfortable there. To being Jem Young and no one else—that being Jem Young was good enough.

“Come on,” he said with a sigh. “If we just lay out here, we won’t have anything to eat for breakfast.”

“We can go get pancakes for breakfast,” Rosie offered helpfully.

Jem grinned at her as they all got to their feet. “That we can, kid. But I want to get a few things so we have food to eat here, in our new house.”

“And chairs,” Cole said. “Last year, the grass was wet in the park.”

“Good memory,” Jem said, and he led the way back to the truck. He let the kids sit in the big plastic front of the shopping cart shaped like a firetruck, and he put bananas, milk, cereal, coffee, fruit snacks, and more into the basket. Frozen pizza, frozen waffles, sliced lunch meat, cheese, and hot dogs. Potato chips, soda, bottled water, and fresh fruit and veggies.

He hadn’t done a ton of shopping in his life, and he knew he could do online pickup orders in the future. While trying to get one of those flimsy plastic bags open so he could put apples in it, he decided he’d definitely do that.

“Jem?”

He gave up on the bag and looked toward the feminine sound of his name. Sunny Samuelson stood there, a blue plastic basket over her forearm and a look of shock on her face.

“Oh, uh, hey, Sunny.”

She blinked, and her eyes returned to their normal posture from their wide-eyed stance. She looked at his kids and back to him. “Uh, hey, Sunny?”

she mimicked.

Before he could process the tone of incredulity, she flew at him. “You—left—I—thought—you—might—be—dead.” She swatted at him with both hands, and Jem blinked and backed up, trying to stave off the sudden attack.

She stopped and panting, stepped back. “Oh, uh, hey, Sunny,” she said again, this time angrily. She scoffed out her breath. “You didn’t text me to cancel our date, Jem.”

As if he’d forgotten. “I went on tour with my brother,” he said. “It was an emergency.”

“I’m so sure it was,” she said, this time with sarcasm dripping from every word. “A country music tour sounds like a pure *emergency*. Not something you can plan for, or I don’t know, communicate about to the woman you had a date with.” She took another step toward him, and Jem thought she might start flailing again, so he threw up both hands.

She looked at them and him, then glanced around the produce section of the grocery store. “I sat there like a complete fool for two hours. ‘I’m sure he’s on his way.’” She scoffed again. “Yeah, on his way to Nashville, the woman he *finally* asked out completely forgotten already.”

“I didn’t forget about you,” he said quietly.

“Oh, I know,” she said. “Just like you didn’t completely move on to some other girl the day after prom when we were teenagers.” She cocked her eyebrows, but Jem frowned.

“What?”

“Do they have the Granny Smith’s?”

Sunny turned toward the man who’d asked the question, and Jem looked at him too. He didn’t wear a cowboy hat, which seemed a little out of character for a man in Wyoming. He sported black shorts and a polo the color of the sky. He swept the display of apples in front of him, of which there were obviously plenty of green ones.

Jem pulled his cart back as his fingers tightened around the handle. This newcomer to the conversation slid his hand along Sunny’s waist, and she leaned into him as she looked up at him.

They were together.

They were dating.

Dating together—without him.

He fell back another step, and apparently the conversation was over, because Sunny turned toward the Granny Smith apples and ripped off a bag.

She had no trouble getting the razor-thin plastic sides to separate, and she held the bag while her boyfriend filled it with apples.

Jem pushed his cart away, deciding he could order apples online. He didn't need anything else either, and he simply had to get out of this grocery store right now. He kept glancing around as he loaded things onto the belt, and he burst out into the early evening heat and practically ran to his truck.

Rosie giggled and said, "Go faster, Daddy!" but he didn't. He already felt like he was sprinting. He threw the groceries in the back and got the heck out of there. He panted for half the drive home, and then he moved on auto-pilot, finding cupboards and drawers to put away his groceries.

"Aw, Dad," Cole complained. "We forgot chairs."

"I'll call Grandma and see if she has extras," he said.

"I'm hungry," Rosie said.

"We're eating at the park." Jem swept his phone off the counter and dialed his mother. He paced away from the kids, starting to feel overwhelmed. *You're fine*, he told himself. *You have groceries for the week, and the kids will be fed within the hour.*

"Jem, baby," his mother said.

"Hey." He exhaled and drew in another breath. "We're on the way to the park, but I forgot to get chairs. Do you have any extras?"

"So many," Momma said. "Daddy already has them loaded in the back, and anyone can have one."

"Perfect," he said. "We're loading up right now." He turned toward the kids and gestured to them to get moving toward the garage. To his relief, they did, and Jem followed them.

When they arrived at the park, it seemed like everyone had arrived ahead of him. Blaze sat beside Mav and Dani, and their kids all played together on a big quilt that had been spread on the ground in front of them.

With the band gone, Jem supposed he wasn't that late. Gabe hadn't arrived yet either, and while Jem hadn't been around for the past decade, he'd heard through the brothervine that Gabe came late to everything—if he came at all.

Blaze lifted the empty camp chair next to him, but Jem detoured over to his mother and father to say hello first.

"Oh, there's my baby." Momma shot to her feet surprisingly fast for a woman her age, and Jem sank into her embrace. There was nothing like a hug from his mother, and he'd been on the road for the past five weeks.

“Hey, Momma.” He smiled and held her tightly.

“How was the tour?” she asked.

“Good.” Jem stepped back. “Really good, actually.” He grinned at his father and hugged him too.

Daddy didn’t say much, but he squeezed tight, and he picked up Rosie and chuckled as he hugged her. “How’s my princess?” he asked. “How was Las Vegas?”

“It was so hot, Grandpa,” she said, and Jem nodded to Cole. He hugged his grandmother and started to tell her about the new house and how his bed was already in his bedroom.

“You need to tell Uncle Mav thanks for that,” Momma said. “He and Gabe moved all the big heavy stuff.”

Jem looked over to the two brothers who’d done so much for him. Appreciation swelled in his heart, and he went to sit beside them. “Thank you,” he said as he sat down. “The house looks incredible.”

“I liked it,” Blaze said coolly.

Jem looked fully at him. “You’re not mad I moved out, are you?”

Blaze’s dark eyes glittered in the dangerous way they had. “No,” he said.

“He is,” Mav said. “A little.”

“I am not,” Blaze said. “I know Jem needs to live on his own.”

“You just don’t like it,” Mav said with a smile.

“Where’s Faith?” Jem asked.

“She’s finishing up with her truck on the other side of the park,” Blaze said, his tone disgruntled now. “I’m going to go find her in a second. Just waitin’ on you.”

“Well, I’m here now.” Jem extended his long legs in front of him and appreciated that Beth, Boston, and Cash immediately made room for his kids on the blanket. Momma joined them and passed out fried chicken and biscuits to Cole and Rosie.

“Uncle Jem.”

He turned just in time to catch Joey, Otis’s daughter, as she reached him. He laughed and hugged her tightly. “Hey, little lady,” he said. “When did you get back?” She, Georgia, and OJ had been on tour with Otis and the band with Jem and the others until recently.

He twisted and found her still walking toward them, her six-month-old on her hip. Harry, Trace’s son, walked with her, carrying chairs and blankets in his arms.

“Let me go help your momma,” Jem said, and he got to his feet while Joey flopped on the blanket with the other kids. He jogged toward Harry and took a couple of the chairs. “Hey, guys.”

“Hey,” Harry said, and he sounded so much like Trace. He glanced over to Georgia, who smiled at him and then Jem. She only carried the baby and the diaper bag, and Jem gave her a quick hug and a kiss along her cheek before they all started back toward the group.

The chairs where Dani, Mav, and Blaze sat got rearranged, and Blaze said, “I’ll be back with Faith in a few minutes.” He tapped his son on the shoulder. “I’m goin’ to get Faith, okay? You mind your manners.”

“Yes, sir,” Cash said, and he went right back to the card game happening on the blanket. Georgia handed OJ to Dani and then settled into the chair next to her. “Whew,” she said. “I survived the princess party at the shop today.” She looked over to Dani, who cooed at OJ.

“Your first one since OJ was born,” Dani said. “Was it good?”

“Really amazing,” Georgia said. “It was really good to be back in the shop, especially doing the events.” She turned toward Momma as she handed her a plate of fried chicken and cole slaw. “Oh, thank you, Cecily.”

She took the plate but got to her feet to hug Momma. “My parents are coming too. There’s room, right?”

“Of course,” Momma said. “More than half of us aren’t even here.”

“And it’s a park,” Mav muttered.

“Mav,” Dani warned.

Jem grinned and turned away so he wouldn’t laugh. He looked straight at Gabe as he walked toward them, his hand secured in Hilde O’Dell’s. She walked beside Liesl, the little girl’s hand secured in hers.

On Gabe’s other side, Hilde’s teenage daughter walked with an older woman’s arm through hers. She had the same dark hair as Hilde, but with streak upon streak of gray. Obviously her mother.

Jem saw what a blended family looked like as it bloomed to life in front of him. Before he could stop himself, he pictured Sunny in his life, as the stepmother to his two children.

Ridiculous, he told himself. Sunny loathed him and had for years now. She still blamed him for what had happened in high school, and the worst part was that Jem couldn’t even remember what he’d done.

Not only that, but Sunny was dating someone else now. She’d probably met him while she waited in the restaurant for Jem to show up.

“Here we go,” Mav said, and he got to his feet to move the chairs again. Jem did the same, ready for the spotlight to be shined right on Gabe and Hilde.



Blaze needed to get across the park to pick up Faith, but he couldn't leave now that Gabe had just shown up with two daughters, his girlfriend, and his girlfriend's mother.

Not only that, but Liesl held Hilde's hand like she was the Queen of England herself, and Blaze couldn't look away as Lynn timer looked over to Gabe, said something to him, and the two of them started laughing together. Crinkly eyes and everything.

"Oh, boy," Blaze said under his breath.

"Right?" Mav muttered. "He brought her mother."

"Look at Liesl." Blaze nodded as if they weren't all staring already. The little girl looked up to Hilde, her expression open and hopeful, and Hilde nodded to Liesl as they arrived.

"Momma," Gabe said in his ultra-refined voice. He leaned in and hugged his mother. "You remember Hilde O'Dell." He swept his hand toward her, then kept it moving in a circle to encompass all of them. "Her mother, Elizabeth, and her daughter, Lynn timer."

They'd all gotten up to adjust their chairs again, and Blaze moved to set up chairs for those who'd just arrived while hellos and nice-to-meet-yous went around.

"Help me, would you, Harry?" he asked, and Trace's son jumped to his feet to do that.

"Looks like we need more chairs," he said.

"Daddy'll have some in his truck," Blaze said.

“I’ll go get them.” Harry went over to his grandfather and asked for the keys. Daddy dug them out of his pocket and gave them to Harry, and while the group had gotten bigger, Blaze didn’t stand so far away that he didn’t hear Hilde’s daughter say, “I’ll go with you, Harry.”

They looked to be close to the same age, and Harry smiled and said, “Sure.” He paused next to Gabe. “How many do we need, Uncle Gabe?”

“Looks like four, Harry,” he said. “Thanks, son.”

“Of course.” He and Lynn timer left, and Blaze noticed both Gabe and Hilde watching the pair as they walked away. Blaze didn’t know what that was about, and his phone buzzed at him.

Faith had texted, and Blaze stepped over to Hilde. “It’s great to see you again,” he said. “I have to go get Faith, but I’ll be right back.”

“Of course,” Hilde said.

Blaze tipped his hat at her mother. “Ma’am.” He made his exit and strode as fast as he dared over the uneven grass until he reached the sidewalk. The distance between him and Faith lessened much quicker then, and he found her pacing and talking on the phone as he approached her bright pink sprinkle truck.

She currently walked away from him, and Blaze grinned at the way her dark red ponytail swayed. As he approached, she turned, and he heard her say, “...he’ll be thrilled, trust me.” She met his eyes, and the smile on her face only got bigger. “Oh, he’s here. Talk to you later, Mom.”

She lowered the phone as Blaze took her into his arms. Oh, everything about this woman made him sing, and he grinned down at her. “How’s your momma?”

“Good.” She tucked her phone away and looped her arm around his neck. “I have good news.”

He swayed with her in the food truck lot, which had closed down now, as darkness was nearly here, and the concert would be starting any minute. “Let’s hear it.”

“My mother got a call yesterday from the doctor,” Faith said. “They moved her surgery to the third week of August, and she asked them when she could safely travel.”

Blaze refused to get his hopes up. Living for the past five or six weeks without a wedding date on the calendar had been pure torture for him, but he would never marry Faith without her parents there.

While Faith didn’t spend a lot of in-person time with her mom, because

of the distance between them, it had become abundantly obvious to Blaze that she loved her parents, and she really wanted them to be present at her wedding here in Coral Canyon.

Blaze would never deny her that. He'd wait as long as he had to, even if he died a little bit more each day.

"And Blaze, baby," Faith said, already laughing. "We can put September twenty-second back on the calendar!" She squealed and jumped into his arms.

Blaze caught her and swung her around. "Don't be teasin' me, Miss Faith," he said as he set her back on her feet.

She gazed up at him. "I would never."

"September twenty-second," he repeated. He grinned and grinned. "Seems like a good day to get married."

"Doesn't it?" Faith tipped her head back and laughed, and Blaze wanted to hear her do that every day for the rest of his life.

"I love you, Faith," he whispered.

She stopped laughing but her smile wouldn't seem to go away. "I love you too, Blaze."

Right on cue, the band back in the park started to play. Blaze didn't care one whit, for he was kissing the love of his life.

"YOU TWO READY?" BLAZE CLAPPED HIS HANDS TOGETHER AND RUBBED them. Both Harry and Cash looked up from the kitchen counter where they sat, empty cereal bowls in front of them.

"Ready," Cash said, sliding from his seat.

Harry smiled, but he definitely wasn't as enthused as Cash. He still said, "Yep," and reached to pick up their bowls. The teenager had been nothing but courteous and respectful since he'd returned to town with Georgia.

He hadn't wanted to leave for the entire summer, and he'd successfully negotiated with Trace to be able to come back for the month of July before returning for a couple of weeks of tour dates. Then he'd come back with Everly to get ready for school.

Blaze loved having Harry around, because he hadn't done dishes in the two weeks he'd been living there. He was a few years older than Cash, but

they got along great. Not only that, but Harry was calm and even where Cash was volatile and emotional.

He'd gotten much better in the past couple of years, and he saw a counselor regularly. Harry did too, and the two of them only ganged up on Blaze when it came to where to order dinner from.

This morning, they'd gotten up early to go horseback riding up at Whiskey Mountain Lodge, and Blaze couldn't wait. He could go riding out at Tex's place, but the lodge sat just up the canyon above his house, and there were no better trails than those through the mountains. Not only that, but the riding happened in a group, and Blaze had the help he needed with Cash, Harry, and Faith.

"Front door, open," his security system said.

"Let's get this party started," Faith called, and Blaze turned his attention to her. She wore a pair of jeans and a pretty floral jacket over a gray T-shirt with a doughnut on the front, as the sun hadn't quite shown its face in the shadows yet.

She smiled at him, kissed him, and went into the kitchen to collect the boys. "Are you guys ready?"

"Born ready," Harry said in a deadpan.

Faith tilted her head at him. "I thought you liked horseback riding."

"I do. I also like sleeping past dawn." He gave her a smile that told Blaze he didn't mind getting up early all that much.

"Well, I'll be sure to check with your daddy before we have Sarah over for dinner again." She raised her eyebrows, and Harry's face actually turned a shade lighter.

"That's fine," he said coolly. "I'm not sure she'd come anyway."

"What?" both Blaze and Faith asked. Harry tried to head for the garage exit, but Blaze stepped in front of him. "I thought you came back to Coral Canyon to see her."

"No," Harry said, his eyes as dark as Blaze's all of a sudden. "I came back so I could hang out with my friends."

"She's in your friend group," Faith said. "Isn't she?"

"She was," he said. "Is." He shook his head. "It's fine. We still see each other. It's just not as...something."

"She's seein' someone else," Blaze said, hearing all the things Harry wasn't saying.

"Not really," Harry said. "She said she wants the *option* to see someone

else.” He shrugged. “And she thought I wanted the same thing.”

“Why would she think that?” Blaze reached to open the door, then he gestured Harry through it. Cash followed, and Faith exchanged a meaningful look with Blaze as she went by.

Yes, they’d call Ev and Trace as soon as they could do so without upsetting Harry. He put his story on hold while they all piled into the truck. Blaze didn’t even have to prompt him again; Harry said, “She saw me with someone at the fireworks a couple of weeks ago.”

“You were with someone at the fireworks?” Faith asked. “You sat by us the whole time.”

Blaze looked at Harry in the rearview mirror, then pretended like he needed to use it to back out of the garage. He didn’t, because his truck had cameras everywhere, and he usually used the screen to his right.

Harry met his eye for a breath, but enough was said.

Lynn O’Dell.

Harry had been “hanging out” with Lynn O’Dell at the fireworks, and Sarah had obviously seen them and inferred something.

Faith let the subject drop, and she read to them about the Sunrise Rim trail as Blaze drove them all up to the lodge. A few other people were arriving, and they all followed the signs past the lodge and around to the barns in the back.

The horses milled along a fence, and Blaze went over to where a man stood with them, keeping people back. “Howdy, Eli,” he said.

“Blaze.” Eli Whittaker shook Blaze’s hand, his smile wide and happy. “You here with your family?”

“My son.” Blaze pulled Cash against his side. “My fiancée, Faith. And my nephew, Harry. So yeah.” He grinned at all of them. “My family.”

When he looked at himself in the mirror these days, he hardly recognized himself as the bull riding champion who’d unwillingly retired because he was hurt. He wore joy in his eyes, and he laughed quicker than ever.

He loved this small-town life, which gave him room to breathe and grow and change, and he was so glad he’d managed to find a place to belong inside the family he’d never thought he wanted.

Family was everything to Blaze, and he put one arm around Cash as Faith said, “I haven’t ridden a horse in a while. I’m going to be able to do this, aren’t I?” She exchanged a glance with Blaze, who gave her an encouraging smile.

“Oh, yeah,” Eli said. “This is an easy trail ride. Little kids can do it, and our horses don’t go much faster than what you see now.” He grinned at the horses—who were standing still—and they all laughed.

Blaze excused himself to go check them in, and his people followed him. His people. Blaze couldn’t believe he had people—and soon enough, he and Faith would be man and wife. For him, that day couldn’t come fast enough.



Tex Young knocked at the same time he stepped up and into the trailer. “It’s just me,” he said to whoever he’d find inside Morris’s trailer. The man looked up from his spot on the small couch behind the driver’s seat. He held his phone to his ear and said, “Leigh is going to kindergarten registration, yes. She can get you the information if you want.”

He beckoned Tex into the trailer, and Tex held the door open for Otis behind him. Luke and Trace had gone to get pizza and salad for dinner tonight, and the wives wouldn’t come to tonight’s meeting.

Tex had called it, in conjunction with Morris, and Country Quad needed to make some serious decisions. Namely, if they’d do another album with King Country. If they’d do another album at all.

“His trailer is bigger than mine,” Otis said.

“It is not,” Tex said for at least the tenth time in as many weeks. “It’s just newer, and he didn’t put in a dinette.” The sofa where Morris sat had a bed inside, and the kids slept on that. Well, just Eric, really, and since he was only five years old, the double bed was plenty big enough.

Rachelle, their four-month-old slept in a bassinet in the bedroom at the back of the trailer, and Tex had half a mind to do another album just to get a new trailer like this one. He wouldn’t, of course, but the idea tempted him.

He wasn’t sure if he wanted to sign on for another album at all. He’d built the shed behind the house so he could be in Coral Canyon and still make albums. He and the rest of the band members had done this album almost completely from that shed, though Otis had written a lot of it previously and

Morris traveled to Nashville and back regularly.

As the band manager, that was what he did. Lots of men and women traveled for work, and he wasn't gone so much that he couldn't be a good father to his kids and source of support for Leigh.

Tex was only forty-four years old, and he definitely felt like he had old bones some days, and then like he could keep making music and feeding horses and rocking babies for years and years to come.

Right now, he wasn't sure where he existed on the spectrum. He'd talked to Abby about it, and his wife had told him he'd know the right thing to do when it was time—and that she'd support him no matter what his decision was.

He sighed as he sank into a recliner opposite of Morris on the couch. He had a narrow cupboard in his kitchen that housed folding chairs, and he'd get those out, then pull the table out of the floor so they could meet and eat.

Otis started doing that while Morris said, "I can't tell you that, Gabe," in a quiet voice. "It's just...you'll know." He met Tex's eyes, plenty of worry and anxiety there. Tex tilted his head the way his German shepherd did, but Morris just shook his head. "Yeah, we'll talk tomorrow."

His call ended, and he knelt to get the table raised out of the floor while Otis set up the first chair.

"Gabe?" Tex asked.

"Yeah," Morris said. The twins were close; Tex knew that. "He's...got a lot of changes he's facing, and he wants someone to tell him what to do."

"Get Momma on his case," Otis grumbled, and Tex couldn't help smiling. Momma had been acting as a babysitter for Otis and Georgia's kids since Georgia had returned to Coral Canyon three or four weeks ago. She was back in her bookshop full-time, and her mom and Momma watched Joey and OJ so she could keep running her business while Otis was on tour.

That made Momma feel like she could text Otis parenting "tips," most of which he did not appreciate. Tex could at least chuckle about the texts, but Otis showed them to him with burning fire in his eyes.

"What kind of changes?" Tex asked as Morris stood, the hydraulics on the in-floor table helping it to rise effortlessly.

He unfolded it and flipped out all of the leaves to make it round. Tex would stay in his recliner for the meeting and the meal, and he'd known to show up early to get the best spot.

"The kind that a serious girlfriend cause," Morris said. "I'm not saying

anything else. You know how Gabe is.”

Tex did know. Private almost to a fault, Gabe would not appreciate Morris talking about his love life. He kept everything so buttoned up and close to his heart, and Tex supposed he couldn't blame his youngest brother. He had been through some extreme highs and some even lower lows in his twenty-seven years of life.

“What are we doing for your twenty-eighth birthday?” Tex asked next.

Morris retook his spot on the loveseat and let Otis continue setting up the chairs alone. They only needed two more, which he'd done, but he didn't like sitting on the loveseat. Claimed it was too soft and too low to enjoy himself while eating.

“I don't know,” Morris said. “If we want Gabe to attend, we better check with him. He probably has plans with Hilde.”

“So this is a Hilde issue,” Otis said as he set up a chair between Tex and Morris and then took it.

“They live in two different cities,” Morris said. “And school starts soon. He's trying to decide where to put Liesl.”

Tex said nothing, but making a school switch for Liesl meant Gabe would be making a primary residence change—and that *was* huge. Both items were, and Tex's nerves buzzed for Gabe. He wasn't sure why he took on all of the other brothers' problems and cares, but since he'd moved back to Coral Canyon, he had.

“Wow,” Otis said. “That is big.”

“Right.” Morris bent and reached into his bag, which sat on the floor near his feet. He pulled out a couple of folders and put them on the table. “Bryce got his last paycheck,” he said. “So he's in the clear there. I did communicate to the acquisitions producer that Bryce is not interested in a music contract at this time. We left it open and pleasant, because we all know how much life can change.”

“Thank you,” Tex murmured. Part of him mourned the death of the idea that Bryce would follow him into country music. It had been a great thing for Tex that he'd worked on for a long time before the dream had come true.

But he trusted his son, and if Bryce said he knew he shouldn't be playing the guitar for a living, then he shouldn't be. No matter what Tex thought. He'd refrained from asking him what he *was* going to do, and Bryce had gone back to Nashville and his job there.

He taught guitar lessons and worked at a sports bar, but if he wasn't

trying to make connections in the country music industry, couldn't he come home? He'd talked to Abby about offering the idea to Bryce, and they'd decided to let the young man have his space to make up his own mind. It wasn't like he didn't know where Coral Canyon was.

The trailer door opened again, and this time, Luke's and Trace's voices filled the space as they came up the steps. "...just saying, it would be nice," Luke said, and he didn't sound happy.

"Yeah, and having a private chef would be nice too," Trace said in a much more good-natured way. They both carried brown cardboard boxes—Luke, big ones, and Trace, small ones—and they put everything on the table and looked at the others.

"Who doesn't want a massage right now?" Luke demanded.

Tex automatically rotated his right shoulder. It ached sometimes, because he literally played for six hours each day right now. His fingers hurt from time to time, but they only tingled tonight.

"See?" Luke flipped open a box. "A massage therapist wouldn't be just for me."

Trace shook his head and sat down. "We got stuffed cheese bread and cinnamon sticks too."

"Good." Otis leaned forward and opened one of the smaller boxes. "Dessert first, I always say." He grinned, suddenly in a better mood now that Luke-the-Grouch was here.

Luke glared at the paperwork taking up real estate on the table. "Do we have to do this while we eat?"

Morris gave his attitude right back to him with, "Yes, because otherwise, we won't talk about it at all. I've been trying to get this finalized for a year, Luke. A year."

Tex was honestly surprised King Country had been so lenient. At the same time, he wasn't. They were in their tenth week on tour, with four more to go. Every city, every show, had been sold out for months, and this was an arena tour—the biggest venues possible so as many people as possible could attend.

King Country was making plenty of money on this tour, far above what it cost to produce it, the travel, and the publicity.

For a moment, Tex's mind flew back to the beginning of his career. He'd dreamed of a huge tour like this, surrounded by his brothers. He hadn't inserted a wife or kids, but now that he had them, he couldn't imagine going

on tour by himself.

He felt like he was starting over, and he needed to be sure he made all the right steps here so he didn't close doors unnecessarily.

Tex reached for a paper plate and took a couple of slices of barbecue chicken pizza, then a cinnamon stick before Otis could scarf them all. California had great pizza, and Tex had never been hungry in this state for very long.

"Let's hear it, Morris," he said.

Morris met his eye, and he opened a folder while Trace put a plate piled with pizza next to him. He finally sat, which prompted Luke to do the same, and the tension in the trailer went down a step or two.

"They want another album," he said, looking around at the band. "Two, actually, but I told them I could never get four signatures on the contract for two albums. So they reduced it to one."

Tex's surprise lifted his eyebrows, because he'd not heard this.

"They're willing to do the same thing we did for this album. We write the songs and submit them for approval. We can live and record and practice in Coral Canyon."

"And a tour?" Trace asked. He'd just gotten married, and Everly was a decade younger than him. Tex knew they wanted kids right away, and touring with a baby was no joke. He knew from personal experience, as did Otis and Morris.

"The tour isn't in the contract," Morris said. "I said I'd have a much higher chance of getting the four of you on-board if we could negotiate the tour separately." He pulled out a thick sheaf of papers. "It's a twenty-percent increase in the advance—each." He separated out individually stapled packets and started passing them out.

Trace and Otis would read theirs cover to cover, but Tex wouldn't. He might give it to Abby to see if she was interested in reading it, but otherwise, he passed it to his entertainment attorney and asked him if he should sign it or not.

Luke used the same man, and he actually slid his packet under his plate filled with pizza and kept eating.

"It's a great deal," Morris said. "They put a first-rights clause in the contract for the next album, and that includes solos. That's the biggest issue I think any of you would have. So, say, Luke couldn't break away from Country Quad and do a solo album without first going to King Country and

offering said solo album to them.”

“I’m not going to go solo,” Luke said, locking his eyes on Tex. “If anyone was going to do that, it would be Trace or Tex.”

“Not me,” Tex said.

“Nor I,” Trace said, and they grinned at one another.

Luke rolled his eyes at the familiar banter between them, and that made Tex smile. He’d invited Jem to come on tour with him for the first month, and to Tex’s great relief, Jem had done it. Why, Tex wasn’t sure, but he’d been a great companion for Luke, and it was good to see the two of them getting along so well.

“The songs are due ten months from the day we finalize the contract,” Morris said. “That’s when the second and final payment will be issued too.”

“Two payments?” Tex asked. “Not three?”

“Two,” Morris confirmed. “And while I was on the subject, I told them we hadn’t been paid for the first month of the tour, and they said we’d have those payments by the thirty-first.”

“That’s in two days,” Luke said, as if he needed the money to make his rent.

“Right,” Morris said. “We’ll be traveling to Portland, so I’ll handle it then.”

“Nine more shows,” Trace said,

“Nine more shows,” Tex, Otis, and Luke recited back to him, the way they always did when one of them named how many shows they had left on tour.

Morris let a moment of silence pass, and then he said, “I have to tell them yes or no on this contract by then too.” He cleared his throat. “So it’s time. No more putting it off. No more meetings. We either sign or we don’t.”

He might as well have said, *Country Quad either continues or it doesn’t*.

That had been the real question all this time, and Tex realized sitting there at the table that none of them wanted to answer it.

Not only that, but every single one of them glanced at him and then away. The pressure raining down on his shoulders could crush a man flat, but Tex had been carrying it for his entire life. The Young family name and legacy. The problems of all nine of them, plus their kids, and his parents.

He took his last bite of pizza and reached for a paper towel. He ripped one off and wiped his face. Then he picked up his packet like he’d read through it right now. “Two days doesn’t give me much time to send this to

Finch.”

“It’s identical to the last one you signed,” Morris said. “Except for the payment, which you’ll see about a third of the way down on that first page.”

Trace picked up the packet too, and he whistled. “This is twenty percent more?”

“It’s a lot of zeroes,” Luke said.

Tex’s heartbeat pounded and sprinted, zooming in and out between his ribs. Would Abby kill him for signing this contract? Committing them to another few years of brothers in and out of the farmhouse, making music in the barn, and being married to this job?

He could be committed to her too. Lots of men worked while they were married and had families.

He met Trace’s eyes, and he knew Trace would speak as soon as he did. He tossed down his packet. “Where’s the pen? I’ll sign it.”

“So will I,” Trace said.

“I’m in,” Luke said almost on top of him.

All eyes moved to Otis, who frowned as he studied the contract in front of him.

“It’s two years before we even have to think about touring again,” Trace said. “I’ll help write the songs this time, I swear.”

Otis looked up, his expression clearing. “I don’t mind writing the songs.”

“I know you don’t,” Trace said. “But I’m in a better place right now.”

“Country music is best written from a bad place,” Otis murmured. “What if we can’t write the songs at all?” He placed his packet on the table and looked at Morris, then around at the others. “Will they provide a songwriter for us? Present us with options?”

“That’s in Clause B,” Morris said. “And the short answer is yes. You can even request a songwriter, should you need one.”

Trace started to smile, but Tex simply lifted another piece of pizza to his lips. Otis would come to his own conclusions and being the lone holdout wouldn’t sit well with him. They ate in silence for a couple of minutes, and then Tex asked, “How’s Harry doing at Blaze’s, Trace?”

“Good,” Trace said. “If either of them are to be believed.” He rolled his eyes.

“Blaze tells the truth,” Tex said.

“If he says anything at all,” Trace grumbled.

Luke chuckled, and that was a sound Tex hadn’t heard in a while. “That’s

the truth.”

“Blaze says what’s important,” Tex said. “So if he hasn’t said anything, nothing needs to be said.”

“Something interesting,” Trace said. “He said I should ask Harry about Sarah, but that annoyed me, so I didn’t. Until this week.”

“And?” Otis asked.

“And he said they’re not dating anymore.” Trace grinned as he said, “I look like a fool, don’t I?”

“Your smile is a bit clownish,” Tex teased. “What happened with them?”

“I don’t know.” Trace’s smile diminished. “He wouldn’t say. He just kept saying, ‘Dad, stop bugging me about her. I’m fine. It’s fine.’ So I stopped.”

Tex nodded, but he couldn’t help saying, “I’d ask him every now and then until you know the whole story, especially if you think there’s more to it.”

“Or you think he’s not fine.” Otis met Tex’s eyes, and they both nodded.

“Right,” Trace said. “Yeah, good idea.” He looked troubled for a moment, and then that cleared. “He really did seem okay with it. Was upbeat and whatnot. Said he’s been helping Blaze a lot, and he’s even been over to Jem’s to babysit the kids so he could—get this—go on a date.” He hit the T hard on the last word, and another beat of silence filled the trailer.

Then the other four of them started asking questions about Jem—none of which Trace knew the answers to. They talked and laughed and finished dinner, and as they stood to put the table and chairs away and retreat back to their individual trailers and families, another moment arrived.

The moment of truth.

As Otis stepped outside and into the summer California darkness, he said, “I’ll sign it.”

Tex whooped first, and the others joined in, Morris the loudest of them all.

“Country Quad,” Tex said, starting the chant. He put his hand out, and Luke put his on top of it, easily joining his voice to the repeated words coming from Tex’s mouth.

“Coun-try Quad. Coun-try Quad,” they said.

Trace joined in, hand and mouth, and then Morris. Finally, Otis smiled and did the same, and after they’d chanted together a couple of times, Tex laughed and grabbed onto Luke and Morris and they created a group huddle-hug.

“This is going to be great,” Tex said, relief filling him. “Another album.”

“So that’s what this ruckus is all about.”

He spun toward the sound of his wife’s voice and found her standing several feet away, her arms folded. As he watched, Everly and Leigh joined her. “They’re doing another album,” she said to the other ladies.

Leigh’s face broke into a grin, as did Everly’s, and that left Tex to go embrace his wife and whisper, “It’s the right thing to do.”

“Then let’s do it,” she said back, and as he pulled away from her, he found a smile on her face too.



Gabe pulled up to the elementary school where he was meeting his brother's wife. Moms and small children seemed to move from the parking lot to the entrance in a steady stream, and Gabe didn't see a single father anywhere.

Darkness drew down his eyebrows, and he wasn't sure why. Maybe it was just the darkness that existed inside him, and he had to siphon it away before he headed inside the cheery public school.

His heart twisted inside his chest. Public school.

He heard Morris telling him not to be so snobby. That public school was a great option in Coral Canyon. No, it likely wasn't the same as the private school where Gabe had Liesl enrolled for the fall semester.

But he also wasn't so sure about having her start there. The thought had been needling him and needling him all summer long. Every time he saw Hilde, he saw himself living in Coral Canyon instead of Jackson Hole.

If Liesl started school in Jackson, they wouldn't be able to come to Coral Canyon until Friday afternoon, and that felt useless to Gabe.

He'd mentioned his plans to Waylon, who'd been more than enthusiastic about the change. "Besides," he'd said. "With Liesl in school full-time, you won't need me...right?"

Gabe hadn't thought about that at all, even with his pros and cons lists. Liesl's private school in Jackson Hole was an all-day program. Waylon wouldn't have a job come September whether Gabe moved to Coral Canyon or not.

With that permission, he'd very nearly committed to making the move. He hadn't mentioned it to Hilde yet at all, but he'd been talking to Morris every day for the past three weeks. He made so many decisions on a daily basis, but he couldn't seem to make this one.

Morris, however, wouldn't just tell him what to do. He had arranged for Gabe to meet Leigh at the registration event this afternoon, and here he sat.

His phone buzzed, and Leigh's name came up on the screen. *Just arriving. Sorry I'm a few minutes late. Rachelle wouldn't go down for a nap, and I didn't want to leave Denzel with her when she's so crabby.*

He picked up his device and texted her back. *I'm in the parking lot. No rush.*

"Winnie the Pooh, Winnie the Pooh," Liesl sang from the backseat. She didn't seem to notice or care where they were, and Gabe hadn't told Hilde either. She was currently prepping for a birthday party for Liesl at her house, and Gabe's chest felt tight just thinking about it.

Why, he wasn't sure. Probably because it was an incredibly intimate thing to do—prepare a surprise birthday party for her boyfriend's daughter. At least it felt intimate and special to him, and Gabe was already having a hard time putting the brakes on his relationship with Hilde.

Morris had told him he didn't need to apply the brakes, but Gabe didn't like the wild, out-of-control feeling of falling, so he very much *did* need to slow things down with Hilde.

How, he simply wasn't sure.

"Come on, baby," he said a moment later. Leigh wouldn't dawdle getting Eric out, and sure enough, by the time he and Liesl entered the school, Leigh had beaten them.

"There you are." She smiled at Gabe and swept him into a hug. He leaned down to embrace her, then smiled at Eric as he started chattering to Liesl about a butterfly they'd seen that morning in their front yard.

"Daddy, are we playing with Eric today?" Liesl looked at him hopefully.

"This is a school," he told her. "Like your preschool."

Liesl didn't seem to mind one bit that he hadn't really answered her question, and she held hands with Eric as he and Leigh inched forward in the line to pick up whatever they needed to pick up.

"Leigh Young," she told the woman sitting behind the table when she reached it. Gabe swallowed, because he hadn't realized he'd have to check in here. Couldn't he just pick up a registration packet and bring it back?

But all the moms were sitting at the tables around the foyer, chatting as they filled out blanks and boxes. He wasn't even sure he was going to enroll Liesl, and he suddenly felt like fifteen hundred spotlights had been turned on and aimed at him.

"I just have you down for one." She handed Leigh a packet, her eyes skittering over to Gabe. "Do you two have two kids?"

"I'm not Morris," Gabe blurted out as Leigh laughed lightly.

"This isn't Morris," she confirmed. "It's his twin brother, Gabe. He's got a little girl." She stroked Liesl's hair as she said it, but the little girl paid her no mind.

"Do you live here?" the woman asked.

Gabe reached for his collar, then forced his hand back to his side. "Yes," he said, glad Leigh hadn't jumped in and said anything.

The woman turned a check-in sheet toward him. "Just put your name, address, and phone number here. We just want to know how many packets we give out this year." She smiled as she said it, and as Gabe bent to fill out the information she wanted, he heard her whisper to Leigh, "Is he single?"

He jerked his head up, his eyes meeting this woman's. She drew in a breath, and he had no idea what storm showed on his face, but she said, "Oh, I can see he isn't." Her face flushed red, and she quickly looked behind him to the next person in line.

Gabe looked at the sheet of paper in front of him. He'd written his first name and nothing more, and he wondered if that would be enough to earn him a registration packet. Leigh gently took the pen from him and finished filling out the info. Afterward, she turned the paper back around, then she picked up another packet without saying anything to the woman.

She turned away, and Gabe went with her, feeling very much like a robot someone had put on autopilot. Leigh handed him the packet of papers, each of them a different color behind the top one, which was white.

After taking a seat and telling Eric and Liesl to stay by her, she proceeded to fill out the packet. Gabe rolled his into a tube, wondering what to do. Wondering why he'd come here if he wasn't going to enroll Liesl in school.

She has to go to school this fall, he told himself. She'd be five years old tomorrow, and since he'd planned a family birthday party, he, Lynn timer, and Hilde were celebrating Liesl's birthday tonight.

He could drop her spot at Lincoln Prep with a phone call.

His heartbeat boomed at him, and he pulled out the chair beside Leigh

and practically ripped a pen off the table. He started to fill out the information, hurrying so Leigh wouldn't have to wait for him. He finished close to the same time she did, and they stood up together.

"So are you moving here, Gabe?" she asked.

"I'll have to," he said.

"You don't sound happy about it." They joined the line to turn in their paperwork, where a trio of women were actually checking it off before letting people go.

"I am," Gabe said, though his throat narrowed. "It's just...a big step."

"Mm, yes," she said. "That it is."

What would Hilde think of his relocation? How could he even have everything ready in the next few weeks, seeing as how he hadn't even told anyone of his plans, his irrational dreams, his pros and cons list?

Not his partner in Jackson. Not his office manager. Not Hilde.

He swallowed again as he handed his paperwork to the woman who reached for it. She started checking it and putting actual check marks in the corner of each paper with a bright red marker.

"Oh, you didn't mark if you want the AM or PM session." She looked up at him. "Did you want to leave that open? If there's no preference, you could get either one."

He looked over to Leigh, and she'd marked PM for Eric. "Neither of us gets up very early," she said by way of explanation.

Getting up early wasn't a problem for Gabe. Having morning court times were far more regular than afternoon ones, as were meetings and consultations. He definitely wanted Liesl to be in the morning session, but it would be easier if he could ask Leigh or another of his family members to get Liesl to school and-or pick her up, should he need help.

And he was going to need help.

"Either," he said, his voice sounding like he'd just gargled with rusty nails.

The woman went check-check-check, smiled up at him, and said, "You're done. Thanks for coming in today." She was already reaching past him before he could get out of the way, and then it was done.

He broke the bad news to Liesl that they couldn't play with Eric, but because he couldn't provide a convincing reason for the girl, she wasn't happy by the time he got her in her car seat in the back of his truck.

She sniffled, her form of punishment, as he buckled his seatbelt. "Daddy,

I be so good for Auntie Leigh.” She hiccuped, and Gabe hated how miserable she sounded.

“It’s not that, honey,” he said to her. “We’re meeting Lynnne and Hilde.” He hadn’t wanted to say so in front of Leigh. Why, he wasn’t sure. Surely Morris had told Leigh all about Gabe’s conflicting feelings over registering Liesl for kindergarten here in Coral Canyon.

“Come on, now, princess,” he said to her, smiling in the rear view mirror. “Wipe your face. You won’t want Lynnne to feel like you were crying because you had to see her tonight.”

Liesl still wasn’t very happy, but she wiped her face, did one more big shuttering breath, and then quieted. She still sniffled every few minutes, but by the time he pulled up to Hilde’s house, the hiccuping had stopped.

“Oh, my goodness, Liesl,” he said when he saw what—or rather, who—waited on Hilde’s front porch. “Are you seein’ this, baby?”

“What, Daddy?”

He slid from the truck and got her unbuckled in record time. Then he held her on his hip while he faced the house and pointed.

“Winnie the Pooh!” She wiggled to get down, and Gabe bent to put her on the ground. She ran toward the front door, her dark pigtails flying behind her, the joy flying from her as wild and as free as anything Gabe had ever felt before.

She giggled and laughed, tried to take the steps with one foot on each one, and very nearly fell. He hurried after her and reached her as she made it to the porch by putting both feet on each step as quickly as she could.

“It’s Winnie the Pooh.” She gazed up at the big, bright yellow bear wearing the red T-shirt. He was a blow-up toy, and Gabe had absolutely no idea where Hilde had found him. What he knew was that he fell harder and faster than he already had been, especially when the front door opened before either of them rang the bell.

Lynnne stood there, and she held what looked like one of Pooh’s honeypots with a handle coming out the top. She grinned at Liesl, who hadn’t noticed her yet. Finally, she said, “Liesl,” and the little girl blinked away from the giant rendition of her favorite cartoon character.

Lynnne lifted the honeypot, and Liesl squealed again. She launched herself at Lynnne, who laughed and caught her. “Come on, sweetie,” she said. “We have a scavenger hunt for you. You’re going to need this.” She handed Liesl the honeypot as she entered, which was like a plastic Easter egg basket,

simply Winnie-the-Pooh themed.

Gabe wasn't sure what he'd get when he stepped inside Hilde's house, because he could never ever put together a birthday party like this. For tomorrow, he'd bought plates and napkins, cups and plastic utensils with the Hundred Acre Woods on it. His momma was baking the cake, and he'd ordered lunch from a place he and Hilde had eaten at and loved—Winnebagos.

But this enormous Winnie the Pooh? Maybe Hilde would let him borrow it.

With a lot of the band wives back in town for the start of school, he expected quite the crowd, and he'd asked Jem to host the party at his new house. His brother had agreed, and Gabe had even coordinated with Morris to stream the *Happy Birthday* song and candle blowing-out to everyone still on tour.

"Come in, Gabe," Hilde said. "The air conditioner is already going overtime to combat the heat from the kitchen." She stood down at the end of the hall, and Gabe quickly entered her house and closed the door, his daughter and Lynn timer nowhere in sight.

She smiled at him for every step it took him to get to her, and then he drew her solidly against his chest and kissed her like he meant to do so every day for the rest of his life. Her shock came through in the first couple of strokes, and then she melted into him and let him kiss her probably a little too passionately for having both of their daughters there somewhere. He got control of himself and pulled away, but he didn't release her from his embrace.

"What is with you?" she murmured.

"I'm going to move to Coral Canyon, so we can be together," he murmured.

Whatever he'd expected Hilde to say or do, it wasn't to step out of his arms, her eyes wide and stricken. Or for her to ask, "What? When?" like she didn't want him in her town.



“Just listen,” Gabe said, and Hilde hadn’t realized she hadn’t been listening. She’d definitely heard him say he was moving here so they could be together.

Moving here.

Leaving behind his ritzy, posh mansion behind the locked gate for a townhome.

Abandoning his father’s rights law firm to work out of a home office?

Had he said that?

Hilde’s mind had obviously fractured, but Gabe had been talking fast for five minutes. “I’m listening,” she said anyway, so much of herself wailing at her that she wasn’t worth such a sacrifice. “I just wish you’d have discussed this with me first.”

“We’re discussing it now.”

She looked outside, where Lynn timer cheerfully led Liesl around the yard to find “heffalump eggs” for her birthday party. Then she’d bring her inside, and Liesl would get to unwrap all of her presents, and Hilde would serve dinner and cake, and they’d all settle down to watch a family-friendly movie.

At least that was the picture-perfect fantasy inside her mind.

Nowhere had that included Gabe blurting out that he was moving here to be with her.

Her?

Had he lost his mind?

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while,” he said. “I’m losing my manny

in Jackson Hole anyway. Here, I have family practically begging to take Liesl, so even though kindergarten is only a half-day at the public school, it'll be fine."

Things he wasn't saying: *My fancy private school in Jackson Hole was an all-day program.*

Hilde blinked, her eyes traveling back to his face. He wore an expression of half irritation and half pleading. "I know a realtor who can probably list my house in Jackson anytime I want him to," he said. "I helped him with his divorce, and he's great."

"You're going to live in the townhome permanently?"

"Sure," he said.

Hilde shook her head. "Gabe, you think I'm going to believe that you're moving from your mansion in the mountains to a townhome, and everything is just fine?"

"It's just a house," he said.

"That is so not true." She lowered her voice when she realized it had pitched up a little. "One doesn't live behind a gate without meaning to—or without *wanting* to."

"I've got a secretary here," he said. "I just need to talk to Brian and Carrie, and—"

"You haven't even talked to your partner?" Now she knew he'd lost his mind. The moment he left here, and he wasn't being influenced by Lynn's amazing birthday party prep and the giant Winnie the Pooh welcoming him from the front stoop, he'd realize what he'd said—and he'd regret it.

"I've been putting the pieces in place," he said. "It's one conversation."

"You don't even like Coral Canyon," she said.

"What gave you that idea?"

"How about the several times you've said you feel suffocated by your family here?" She folded her arms. "Or how about the fact that you don't stay here for church? Or that you've said you don't have close relationships with very many of your brothers—really just Morris?"

"What does that have to do with moving to Coral Canyon?"

"You'll lose your buffer," she blurted out.

"All right," Lynn said brightly as she entered the house. "She found them all."

"Daddy!" Liesl skipped past Lynn, her honeypot overflowing with the gray and yellow-striped eggs. "Look how many heffa-fa-lumps I found!"

Gabe turned toward his daughter, his face dark in one moment and light in the next. “That’s so great, princess. Did you tell Linnie thank you for helping you find them?” He grinned down at her, and she spun back to Linnie.

“Thank you, Linnie.” She ran back over to Linnie and hugged her around the legs. “Can we crack ‘em open now?”

Linnie laughed and said, “Yep, but we have to do it at the table. We don’t want to let any of them escape.” They moved over to the dining room table, which Hilde had covered with a pink tablecloth. Gabe had told her Liesl loved all things pink and sparkly, and she’d seen it for herself in the girl’s clothes and shoes.

“Look who’s here,” Linnie said in mock surprise. She pointed to the end of the table, and Liesl shrieked.

Hilde winced, because she’d been expecting the little girl’s enthusiasm and joy, but Liesl didn’t usually make too much of a fuss.

“Piglet!” Liesl dashed over to the life-sized stuffed animal and squeezed it around the neck, her smile as bright as the sun. “Daddy! It’s Piglet!”

“It sure is,” Gabe said, and he shot Hilde a look that said he wanted to claim her mouth and kiss her again. As he looked away, she absently reached up and touched her lips, feeling the tenderness and urgency in his last kiss.

They put their conversation on hold all the way through the party. He didn’t protest at any of the candy she and Linnie had bought for Liesl, though she suspected he’d put it on that shelf that got rationed out one at a time.

He laughed with her daughter during dinner and stood right in front of Liesl with his phone up so his brothers on tour could see her blow out her candles. He stayed in the kitchen to help clean up while the girls went to pick a movie, and he took out the trash while Hilde loaded the dishwasher.

Her mind revolved and revolved like one of those hotel doors that never stopped. Of course she wanted to keep dating Gabe. She didn’t know what that looked like during the school year, as they’d started dating near the end of the last one.

She didn’t want to end things with him, but she didn’t want him to uproot everything he’d spent the last decade building and change it for her. The pressure of that.... No, Hilde couldn’t be responsible for that.

All at once, she realized what the problem was. He wasn’t going to lose his buffer.

She was going to lose hers.

He came back into the house, his face a complete mask. He didn't even glance at her as he said, "Lynnie, there's someone outside for you."

"Who is it?" Hilde asked at the same time Lynnie did.

"He said you didn't answer your phone," Gabe said as he continued through the kitchen. Lynnie sat up and looked over her shoulder at him. "You realize Harry is my nephew, right?"

Hilde seized onto the name. "Harry?"

Lynnie shot to her feet, her face instantly the color of watermelon flesh. Her freckles stood out when she blushed like this, and she ran her fingers through her hair. "Can I...I'll just talk to him for a second," she said in a rush.

She raced out of the room before Hilde could say another word, and then she zoomed back in. "I just need my phone."

She snatched it from the couch as Hilde said, "Lynnie."

"Two minutes, Mom! Please." She left without waiting for permission, and Hilde looked at Gabe in bewilderment.

"Shall we spy?" he asked.

Hilde spun on her heel and marched into the front formal living room and opened the blinds. Sure enough, a tall, dark-haired teenager stood at the end of the sidewalk, and he looked like he belonged to the Youngs.

"Have I met him?" she asked as Gabe pressed in close to her at the window.

"Yes," he murmured. "At that party where the band played. His father is the lead guitarist for Country Quad. He was sitting at the table with Mav when we first walked in. Remember?"

Hilde did, and she narrowed her eyes as Harry smiled and handed something to Lynnie. "He was at the fireworks too."

"Mm, yes." Gabe sounded like he was squinting to see things more clearly, but Hilde didn't dare look away from her daughter to see.

Lynnie took whatever Harry handed to her, but with her back to the house, Hilde couldn't see her face. "I thought Ev said he was dating someone else."

"Apparently not," Gabe said. "Oh, boy. She's coming back. That really was two minutes." He jumped away from her, and Hilde yanked the blinds closed in the next breath. Gabe practically ran down the hall to the back of the house, Hilde hot on his heels. She'd just rounded the corner when the

front door opened, and she did a wide arc and faced the mouth of the hallway as Lynn timer appeared in it.

“So?” she asked, unable to keep the curiosity out of her voice.

Lynn timer looked up from an oversized, white envelope in her hand, her face a normal color now, the freckles all back to their regular pigment. “He asked me to the Homecoming dance.” She looked like she’d been stunned with something strong, and Hilde had plenty of time to brace herself for the shrieking this time.

When it came, she actually exhaled and all the tension in her muscles bled out. “Can I go, Mom? Please, oh, please? I’ve liked him forever, but he’s a year ahead of me, and he’s been dating Sarah Endman forever.”

“Forever?” Hilde didn’t like the sound of that.

Lynn timer finally calmed enough to hear the tone in Hilde’s voice. “I mean, not forever. They started going out last summer at the dance. So maybe a year.”

When one was fourteen, a year was a very long time indeed.

“He’s a year older than you?” Hilde asked. Lynn timer was just starting at the high school this year, which put Harry in tenth grade. A sophomore. *It’s not a senior*, she told herself.

“He’ll be sixteen in February,” she said. “But I’ll be fifteen way before then.”

“Way before then?” Hilde cocked a hip. “You’re aware November is only three months before February, right?” She looked over to Gabe. “I’m sure he’s a good kid.”

“I’m sure,” Gabe said as if he didn’t know. The corners of his mouth twitched, and Hilde caught them before he flattened them back into his serious-lawyer face. “Does his daddy know about this?”

“I don’t know,” Lynn timer said. “He’s still on tour, isn’t he?”

“That he is,” Gabe said. “Let me call him.”

“No!” Lynn timer lunged forward like she might slap the phone out of Gabe’s hand. Hilde and Gabe both stared at her, and Hilde honestly didn’t know what to say or do.

Gabe looked at her, his eyebrows high. Then he focused on Lynn timer again when Hilde didn’t throw him a lifeline or even a bone. “You don’t want me to call his dad. Why not?”

“Harry says his daddy is....” She trailed off, and Hilde really didn’t like this.

“I don’t think you should go with him,” she said.

“What? Mom, no.” Lynn timer looked like she might burst into tears, and Hilde definitely didn’t want that.

“He’s related to Gabe,” Hilde said, gesturing between the two of them. “We’re dating, Lynn timer. It’s kind of strange, don’t you think?”

“No,” she said, actually sniffing. “It’s not weird at all. It’s not like he’s Harry’s dad. *That* would be weird.”

“I’m his uncle,” Gabe said as he moved to stand beside Hilde. She appreciated the support, the united front they presented to Lynn timer, and she slipped her hand into his. She hadn’t touched him since that blistering kiss when he’d arrived, and she suddenly craved being near him. “It’s almost the same thing.”

“It’s not even close.” Lynn timer glanced over to where Liesl sat on the couch, watching something blare on the TV. “Let’s talk about it later, okay? It’s Liesl’s birthday party.” She took the envelope with her over to the couch, where she cuddled in close to Liesl. “We chose Lady and the Tramp. Come on.”

“Yeah,” Gabe said under his breath. “Come on.”

Hilde grinned at him and quickly stretched up to kiss him while their daughters watched TV. “We can talk later too, right?”

“Over bingsu?” he asked.

She nodded, though she didn’t think she’d be able to get a single bite of the delicious treat down—at least until all of her words came up.

A COUPLE OF HOURS LATER, LYNN TIMER SAT TEXTING AT THE COUNTER WHILE Liesl slept on the couch. “We’ll be gone for an hour,” Hilde promised her daughter. “You’ll be okay?”

“Fine, Mom,” Lynn timer said without looking up.

“You’re not sending him any photos of yourself, are you?”

Lynn timer scoffed, but that did finally draw her attention from the device. “No, Mom. Gross.”

“Okay, but I get that phone in an hour, and I’m going to see everything you say. Remember that.” His father might be on tour, but Hilde wasn’t.

She turned toward Gabe, who extended his hand toward her. Hilde went

his way, took his hand, and let him take care of her by helping her into his truck and taking her for bingsu. The line wasn't long this late at night and only fifteen minutes before closing, though there were quite a few people milling about at the tables.

"I'd love a strawberry bingsu," she said when it was her turn to order. "With the condensed milk, and one of the s'mores toasts." She looked over to Gabe, who smiled softly at her.

He slid his arm around her and ordered an Oreo bingsu without the milk, no toast, and extra brownies. "Oh, and some coffee, please."

"Make that two coffees," she said. As he pulled his wallet out of his back pocket to pay, Hilde teased, "*Extra* brownies? You're such a rebel. We just had birthday cake."

"Two hours ago," he murmured as he passed over his card. When he saw her smile, his face split into a grin too. "You think I don't eat sweets."

"I think you'll run five extra miles in the morning to burn off this birthday dinner," she said.

"Yeah, because we have another one tomorrow night."

Hilde's stomach clenched at the idea of attending his family birthday party for his daughter. He noticed the change in her, though she wasn't sure what her face showed. "You're coming tomorrow night, aren't you? You and Lynn timer."

"With this crush-on-Harry development, I don't know. Surely he'll be there." She hated herself a little bit for using a fifteen-year-old boy as an excuse. And worse, her daughter's crush on the boy.

"Hilde," Gabe said, but he really meant so much more. He sheathed his card and turned away from the cashier. They found a table near the front windows, and Gabe slid onto the cushioned bench seat, leaving the chair for Hilde.

She took it and tried to think of something to say that would explain everything. She didn't have the words, because she didn't quite understand how she felt yet. Looking at Gabe's handsome face, his serious features and knowing how his face could transform into one of pure love and joy, she couldn't ruin things between them.

"I know you want an explanation," she said before he could say anything. "And I want to give you one. I do. I just don't—quite...know what it is yet." She sighed, because she'd almost made that sound like a question.

"You don't know what it is yet," he repeated. "You don't want me to

move here?”

“It’s not that,” she said with a sigh. “I do. And I don’t want to break up with you either. I just—need a minute to think through why I reacted the way I did.” She reached across the table and took his hands in hers. “I can tell you this—it has nothing to do with you.”

He frowned, his dark eyebrows drawing down into a sexy V. “I think it has something to do with me.”

She shook her head, glad when a girl in her early twenties arrived with their sweets and coffees. She felt cheap using the interruption as a reason to stop the conversation, but she did it anyway. As they stirred in sugars and milks to their Vietnamese coffee, Hilde prayed to know what to say to keep Gabe in her life now and long-term.

Please, Lord, she thought. Give me the right thing to say for both of us.

When she dared to look up at Gabe again, nothing came into her head. So she opened her mouth and said, “Tell me how Morris and Leigh got back together. They were married before, weren’t they?”

Gabe’s surprise wasn’t hard to find, but he relaxed, took a bite of his shaved milk, and said, “Yeah, they were, and did you know he didn’t know about Eric until a couple of years ago?”



Gabe entered the conference room at his Jackson Hole office, already reaching to unbutton his suit coat so he could sit down. “Brian, good morning,” he said.

His partner half-stood from where he sat, and he shook Gabe’s hand. “Morning, Gabe.” He too wore a dark suit and a complimentary tie, with his blond hair styled just-so. He screamed professional and lawyer to Gabe, and he’d liked Brian from the moment he’d met him.

“Coffee’s here,” Carrie said from behind him, and her heels clicked as she entered the conference room too. They muted once she reached the rug, and she set the tray of coffee on the table down at the end where the three of them sat to go over their firm business. She’d started to gain a few gray hairs, and Gabe smiled at her as she settled into a chair beside him. She wore pantsuits and skirts and blouses along with her heels, and Gabe had been impressed with her organizational skills and personable attitude from the beginning—just like Cheryl Ingalls. He just had a sixth sense about people.

Gabe reached for a mug, but he didn’t think he’d be able to swallow anything hot right now. Why people even drank coffee in the summer, he wasn’t sure. He mindlessly went about making himself a cup of coffee with plenty of sugar, because he’d done it so many times before.

However, all he could think about was that school started on Wednesday in Coral Canyon. Kindergarteners didn’t go for another week, as they spent the first week doing reading, writing, and math testing. What the teachers did with that, Gabe didn’t know. He knew how to fight for what he wanted as a

father, and he hoped to get either an email or a letter to his “home” address in Coral Canyon today about who Liesl’s teacher would be.

He already planned to schedule a meeting with the person who’d teach his daughter this year, so he could discuss Liesl’s needs in private before the school year began. He hadn’t called Lincoln yet, because he’d decided on Friday afternoon to register his daughter in Coral Canyon, and then the weekend had struck.

He’d been thinking about Hilde too, and he’d given her a pass for her reaction to his out-of-the-blue announcement that he was moving to Coral Canyon. He hadn’t liked it, and she’d given little explanation. The whole “it’s not you, it’s me” routine. He scoffed right out loud again.

“Gabe?” Carrie said. “Are you going to lead us out as normal?”

He looked up from the murky depths of his cup of coffee. “Yes,” he said, realizing he’d reacted physically and out loud to his inner thoughts. “First, Brian, I need to transfer a case to you.” He opened his briefcase bag and took out the only dark blue folder. “Rusty O’Dell. We’re still in discovery with him, and as far as I know, his wife has not filed for divorce.”

Brian took the folder and flipped it open. “Then how is he a client?”

“He’s my girlfriend’s brother,” Gabe said. “She asked me to take him on at the beginning of the summer, but Cheryl hasn’t been able to get any more information about the case.”

Brian and Carrie had both frozen, and Gabe suddenly needed to loosen his tie. He gazed back at his partner and then switched his gaze to his office manager. Big mistake. “You have a girlfriend?” Carrie asked. “Why is this the first time we’re hearing this?”

She lazily stirred her coffee, but her eyes never left his. “Since the beginning of the summer too, Brian.” She nodded to him. “Did you know?”

“Hadn’t heard,” Brian said.

“I don’t have to disclose my personal affairs,” Gabe said, glancing down. His throat closed, because he was literally about to use his personal life to drop a bomb into their professional ones. “Which leads me to…” He looked up. “My relationship with Hilde has gotten to the point where seeing her on the weekends isn’t enough.”

He cleared his throat, because he was so used to keeping his emotions out of his job. This felt like the opposite of that. “My entire family lives in Coral Canyon. I have a competent paralegal there now, along with office space.”

“You’re relocating,” Carrie said before Gabe could say it.

“Yes,” he said crisply. “I expect to flip what I’m doing in Coral Canyon with what I’m doing here. More court dates late Thursday and all day Friday. Essential meetings with clients on those same days. Then I’ll shift the bulk of my caseload to the clients in Coral Canyon.”

“Told you,” Brian said, completely surprising Gabe. He held out his hand while Carrie glared at him. “Fifty bucks.” Brian laughed and wagged his fingers. “Pay up.”

“I don’t have cash,” Carrie said. She shook her hair over her shoulders and looked at Gabe again. “I’ll FastCash you. So.” She drew in a breath. “Her name is Hilde, and it’s getting serious?”

“You bet on whether or not I would relocate the firm?”

“No,” Carrie said at the same time Brian said, “Yep. And I won.”

“No,” Carrie said again, glaring more fiercely at Brian. “We *discussed* whether or not you’d start spending more time in Coral Canyon. Of course we know about the paralegal you hired there. Cheryl is *the nicest* woman.”

“She is,” Gabe said feebly. “Very capable and competent.”

“I’ve spoken to her a great many times,” Carrie said. “I like her a lot. Gabe, you’re running two offices of Young Family Law. I’ve just been waiting for *you* to realize it, and Brian and I have *discussed* which one you’d make your primary home.”

“You owe me fifty bucks,” Brian said.

Gabe looked back and forth across the table as he volleyed his gaze between them. “And it’s okay if I choose to work primarily out of the Coral Canyon office?”

“Yes, of course,” Carrie said. “I think we’ll need to have an all-day meeting sometime soon to sort through current, past, and potential cases. Get those assigned out. Make sure we all have access to the right calendars, and I still don’t have the address of the office in Coral Canyon.”

“It’s on the bottom floor of my townhome,” Gabe said. “Right now.” He wouldn’t live in that townhome forever, and when he moved, he’d have to figure out better legal office space. “You can still do the office management for both locations, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Carrie said. “It’s essentially managing the two of you, and that’s not going to change.” She grinned and leaned back into her chair and sipped her coffee.

“Hey,” Gabe and Brian said together. Gabe then smiled and shook his head. He’d been working with Carrie since the very beginning of Young

Family Law, and he had no idea what he'd do if she ever decided to leave.

"So we have two lawyers," Gabe said. "Two offices. Clients in Jackson Hole and Coral Canyon and the surrounding areas. One office manager for the firm and its lawyers, and one paralegal for the same."

A beat of silence filled the conference room. "Sounds right to me," Brian said. "You know you're going to have the big hitters requesting you, right?"

"I can drive to Jackson anytime," Gabe said. "It's an hour."

"One-way," Carrie said. "And you hate that drive."

"It's not that bad," Gabe admitted.

"Yeah, because Hilde is on the other end of it," Brian teased.

Gabe felt his face and neck heating, but he didn't deny it. In fact, he raised his chin slightly and said, "She does make the drive worth it." He looked down at his list for today's meeting. "Okay, that was my biggest thing moving forward. I'm listing my house for sale this week too, and Liesl and I are basically moving to Coral Canyon this weekend."

"Wow, you don't pull punches," Carrie said.

"You thought I did?" Gabe cocked one eyebrow at her. They'd worked together for long enough for her to know he didn't. "I put off making a decision, if you must know—"

"I didn't say anything," Carrie said with a smile.

"I put off making the decision until the very last moment I could register Liesl for kindergarten in Coral Canyon," Gabe said. "My brother's wife hadn't done it for her boy either, as she's been on tour this summer, and I went with her. Decided standing right there in the elementary school that I wanted to be in the same town as Hilde."

He smiled just thinking about it. Telling her about his decision an hour later hadn't gone precisely as he'd planned, but Gabe couldn't wait to tell her this meeting had gone well. He probably should've put more pieces in place before blurting out his plans. He'd been thinking about making these moves for a while now, so actually executing them wasn't proving to be too terribly difficult.

So far.

He already owned a house in Coral Canyon. He could list his here and continue to come back and clean it out, move things, do whatever he needed to do until it sold. He already had his personnel in place. Liesl had been registered.

He needed the name of her teacher, to call a meeting for all four of them

at the firm, and to text the brothers' thread to let them know his big news. Two of those would be easy to do and the third.... Well, the third gave him heartburn that seared his throat like he'd swallowed something radioactive.

"Let's set up a meeting for Friday," he said, tapping on his phone to pull up his calendar. "If we're all available."

"We are in the morning," Carrie said, always one step ahead of him. "Shall I loop Cheryl in today?"

"Yes, please," Gabe said, eliminating that conversation from his to-do list. It wouldn't impact her too much, because her job and the location of it wouldn't change simply because he'd be moving to town. "Now, I need to go call my realtor, so if we're done...."

No one said they needed to continue, and Gabe collected his briefcase and left the conference room while Carrie and Brian started bickering over how the fifty dollars would transfer hands.

Instead of calling his realtor, he settled into his office with the door closed and texted Hilde. *Told my people at my firm. Can you believe they actually put down a bet on me moving to managing the Coral Canyon firm?*

He chuckled just thinking about Carrie and Brian talking about him and his firm's branch in Coral Canyon, though he wasn't that surprised by it. He was surprised about thinking he'd opened a second firm location, but he definitely had. He'd need to get signage for his office, as well as a commercial real estate agent looking for something a little more upscale and permanent.

When Hilde didn't respond right away, he did click to wake his computer so he could get the number for his residential realtor. Once he sold his house here, he could start looking for something bigger and more fit for a family closer to Hilde.

"There you go again," he muttered to himself as he found Andy's number. "Making plans with Hilde without actually including Hilde in the discussion." He wondered if that was what had bothered her.

Maybe he'd revealed too many of his feelings for her. After all, a move of any size was a pretty big deal for a relationship. Gabe had once told her he was nervous around her, but would deny saying so until he was ready for the world to know it.

He felt semi-ready for the world to know about his feelings for Hilde, and that they were strong and serious. "Not semi-ready," he told himself. "You're ready. You just announced it to your firm." And outside of Carrie, Brian, and

Cheryl, Gabe didn't see too many others socially.

"Gabriel," Andy said in a smooth voice. "Do not tell me you're unhappy with the house behind the gates in Hidden Valley."

He smiled to himself. "How could I be?" he asked. "There's just a teensy tiny problem with the house...."

"What could possibly be wrong with that house?" he demanded. "It was perfect for you three years ago, and it's still perfect for you now."

"True," he said. "But also untrue. You see, the location is just terrible for me these days." He grinned wider as his real estate agent sat there in silence. "You see, I need a place closer to Coral Canyon. Much closer to Coral Canyon. *In* Coral Canyon."

Andy swore, which made Gabe laugh. "I'm sorry," he said. "But you better not be teasing me, sir."

"Do I ever joke when it comes to how I spend my money?" he asked, still chuckling.

"No, but...I really get to list that Hidden Valley mansion?"

"Yes, please," he said. "And if you don't know Coral Canyon, I'd love a referral."

"Don't you dare cut me out of this adventure," he said, and he could just see his dark eyes narrowing and his free hand running through his short hair as he spoke. "I know Coral Canyon, Dog Valley, Rusk, and anything between here and there."

"Great," Gabe said breezily. "I think you know what I like."

"There's only one gated community in Coral Canyon."

"Two of my brothers live there," Gabe said. "I'm thinking non-gates for this new adventure."

Another pause, and then Andy said, "I don't even know who I'm talking to anymore. We better set up a meeting to go over what you want in a new house."

Gabe laughed again, because he felt very much like a new version of himself. Since this was a personal meeting and not something for work, he checked his own schedule and found a small chunk of time to meet with Andy tomorrow afternoon.

As he hung up with the realtor, he leaned back in his chair, and whispered, "Thank you, Lord. This is the right thing, isn't it?"

If he'd been smarter and more prepared, he could've had a new house by now. He and Liesl could be settled in their new neighborhood, gearing up for

her first year in school instead of living out of bags and making the trip back and forth between their houses every weekend.

He cleared his mind and focused on his question for God. A special kind of warmth that only came when he did the right thing started in his toes and rose slowly, filling him from bottom to top.

Yes, he was doing the right thing by moving back to his hometown of Coral Canyon. Whether this relationship with Hilde worked out or not, Gabe needed to be with his family, and that had not been part of his question.

But he knew it deep in his core soul, and he let his eyes drift closed as he considered all of the steps that had been laid for him to finally return to the town where he'd grown up. Once upon a time, he'd been the only Young living within a hundred miles of Coral Canyon.

Now, he was the only one who *didn't* live there. Well, besides Bryce, and Gabe's prayers switched to his nephew's well-being. His thoughts stayed warm, and while Gabe certainly didn't have all of the answers for how his own life would work out, let alone Bryce's, he definitely felt like the Lord had it all in His hands.

And Gabe couldn't ask for more than that.

“HEY, THERE HE IS.” JEM GRINNED AT GABE AS HE ENTERED THE LIVING room carrying a pan of Hilde's peanut butter bars. She followed, with Lynn timer right behind her. Liesl should already be here, and Gabe scanned the room to find her. He didn't see her, but he slid the treats onto the countertop where all the other cookies, pastries, and doughnuts sat, and faced the room.

“They're not here yet?”

“Not yet.” Blaze grinned at him and took him into a hug. “How's Hilde?” he whispered.

Gabe didn't want to have this conversation. Not here. Not ever. He simply grunted and stepped out his brother's embrace. “You're getting married in three weeks.”

“Eighteen days,” Blaze said proudly, his grin wide and oh-so-reckless. “But close enough.”

“Where's Liesl?” he asked, noting that Hilde had congregated with Everly and Leigh.

Abby had stayed on tour with Tex, and Gabe didn't see Georgia yet. He'd seen her at the bookshop last week when he'd gone to get Liesl another book at the recommendation of her teacher, a man who had taken to the little girl instantly. Gabe had met with him to express his concerns, and he spoke with Mr. Torrington every week about Liesl and how she did in class.

So far—and they were only three weeks into the school year—he'd only had glowing things to say about the little girl. He had given Gabe some good resources for reading material, but the books seemed to be way above her ability. Still, Gabe had gotten them, and he'd been reading them with Liesl until she could recognize the words herself.

Faith entered the house and called, "I need one more pair of arms that can carry doughnuts."

"I'm your man," Jem called, and he seemed overly chipper tonight. What that was about, Gabe didn't know, but he watched his brother head outside to help Faith with a wariness in his heart. Outside of his time in the professional rodeo, when Jem stepped willingly into the spotlight, there was something off—especially after his return to Coral Canyon.

"What's with him?" Gabe asked as he stood with Mav and Blaze.

Before either of them could answer, a cacophony of children's voices came roaring into the house. "Uncle Blaze, Uncle Gabe!" Cole yelled. "They're here! They're here!"

"Here we go," Mav said, and Gabe retreated to Hilde's side so he didn't have to welcome Country Quad back all alone.

He took her hand and exchanged a glance with her. "You okay?" she asked, and he somehow heard it above all the shouting kids and hushing adults.

"Yeah," he said, and for the first time when he thought of the band in recent years, the familiar bitterness wasn't on his tongue.

Tex came through the door first, carrying his baby girl, and he lifted his free hand all the way into the air and shouted, "Thirty-seven shows in fourteen weeks!"

Gabe laughed and started to clap along with everyone else, because that was an incredible feat. Otis entered next, and he had his wife and kids with him, so Georgia must've met him somewhere besides Jem's house.

Trace came inside, and Everly and Harry rushed toward him, engulfing him in a hug before he could say a single word. Not that he would've. Gabe paid close attention to Harry, who clung to his daddy as if he needed him to

stand. He'd not seen him in person for a few weeks now, and Gabe grinned over to Blaze and said, "Guess he likes Trace more than you."

"We'll see when his daddy starts makin' him do chores."

Still they clapped, because Luke ducked down to enter the house, as he had Corrine on his shoulders. She waved both hands high above her head once they were both inside, and Gabe found Liesl jumping up and down, waving hello to her cousin. She loved Corrine, because they were only about eighteen months apart.

Shockingly, through all the people and all the noise in the house, Luke's eyes found Gabe's and held. Something brotherly and kind flowed between them, and Gabe couldn't stop smiling or clapping.

His hands hurt, and still he carried on.

For Morris hadn't walked in yet, and Gabe knew that the success of this tour belonged squarely on his twin's shoulders. Morris had worked tirelessly for the eight months before the tour, and the hardest out of anyone in the past fourteen weeks.

He finally came through the door, holding his son, and Leigh started picking her way toward him, their baby in her arms. He grinned and accepted everyone's applause and praise with a simple bow of his head. Of course. How very Morris of him.

He too looked at Gabe, noticed Hilde at his side, and then Lynn at hers. Yeah, so a lot had changed around here since the tour had started, fourteen weeks ago.

Including his new home address.

He nodded to Jem, who reached to touch a button on a panel affixed to the wall. Jazzy piano music filled the house—a recording Gabe had done that morning and sent to Jem—and everyone paused for a moment.

Then all the brothers looked around at one another, devious, devilish grins appearing one by one.

"Oh, no," Momma yelled. "Not this song! Jem, you turn this off right now!"

While Momma was fierce, there was no stopping nine boys when they got together and ganged up on her. Therefore, Jem did not turn off the music.

Gabe got up on a chair, surprising even himself, and waited for the last line of the first stanza to finish. Then he yelled along with the piano accompaniment, "When you go home, there's always someone there to love you, love you, *love you!*"

By the time he got to the third “love you,” all of his brothers were yelling too. They shouted the rest of the song and then dissolved into laughter while the women looked like they’d been transported off-planet and the kids wore wide eyes of wonder.

Gabe got off the chair, laughing, and drew Hilde to his side. “It’s good to be here,” he said, and he truly, truly meant it.



The first time Blaze Young had gotten married, he'd bought a suit, walked down the aisle, and said I-do. There had been no excitement. Nothing to write home about. There'd been a venue, cake, and dancing with his pregnant bride.

This time, he pulled up to the curb in the pick-up lane at the Jackson Hole airport, grinning as his non-pregnant bride-to-be giggled and launched herself out of the passenger seat to greet her parents.

Blaze put the truck in park, said, "Come on, buddy," and got out too. Cash climbed down on his side, and together, they rounded the tailgate to meet Faith's momma and daddy. Thankfully, Mother Nature had held off on the snow so far. The leaves had turned glorious shades of gold, auburn, and ochre in the past week, and that alone made him smile.

He kept his arm around his son's shoulders as they watched Faith move from her momma to her daddy, all of them talking at the same time. Her parents would be in town for a few days before the wedding, and then they were staying to visit with Faith's sister, who also lived in Coral Canyon.

Faith finally turned toward him, linking one arm through her mom's and one through her dad's. "Mom," she said. "Daddy. This is Blaze Young, my fiancé." She grinned at him, those pretty emerald eyes shining with so much light. "And his son, Cash."

"It's great to meet you in person," Blaze said, moving forward. He'd played the part of Perfect Press Cowboy many times while he rode in the rodeo, and he was actually surprised to see how easily that persona slid into

place. “Faith talks about you all the time.” He hugged her mother and added, “How did the surgery go? For real?”

“Oh, just fine,” she said, her voice as gravelly in real life as it was on the phone. “My, you’re tall.”

He simply grinned as he pulled back and then faced her daddy. He shook his hand, ended up laughing, and then hugged him too. “It’s so great you guys are here. Feels like we’ve been waitin’ forever.”

Faith slipped her hand into his, and Blaze instantly felt more grounded. More like the version of himself he’d been working to become. Not the rodeo champion who answered reporters’ questions. But a strong, caring father, who loved a good woman in a small town. Who loved his family. Who even loved God.

“It has felt long,” her daddy said. “Faith didn’t tell you our names.”

“Oh, Elvis Presley,” Faith said. “Blaze, my daddy is Chris. This is my mom, Mary.”

“And where’s Justine?” he asked, actually looking behind them like he’d see Faith’s younger sister who lived in Arizona with her parents. Her older brother, Sam, lived in South Dakota, and he’d be driving in with his family tomorrow.

Faith and Trinity had been doing most of the wedding planning together, though they video-conferenced in their mother all the time. That was how Blaze had heard her voice and seen her face before, though they’d never officially met until today.

“Elvis Presley?” her daddy asked. “What’s that about?”

“It’s one of Faith’s bestselling doughnuts,” Blaze said, jumping in to answer for her. “She likes to swear in doughnut flavors.” He leaned over and pressed a kiss to her forehead. He looked over to his son. “So Cash is twelve,” he said. “He just started seventh grade, and he’s doing really well in the junior high setting this year.”

Blaze wasn’t exactly lying. Cash did like moving from class to class instead of sitting in the same room all the time. He got to be with different students and experience a variety of teachers. He said he had more freedom, and he’d practiced religiously to open his lock on his locker so he wouldn’t be embarrassed at school.

His voice had started to deepen and drop already, though he wouldn’t be thirteen for a few more months. He was a good, kind boy who still loved hanging out with his cousins and all of Blaze’s brothers. He had made a few

friends at school, and they'd been over to the house plenty of times over the summer.

"You didn't bring your dog?" Mary asked.

"Oh, no," Blaze said. "We thought you guys might want lunch." He looked at Faith. "Justine?"

"She decided to take the afternoon flight," Chris said. "Her stomach was bothering her."

"I think she's pregnant," Mary said as she stepped over to the truck.

"Mom," Faith chastised. "She probably wants to tell us herself." She exchanged a look with Blaze that said, *Told you. Five minutes in, and she's expressing opinions.*

Faith loved her parents. Blaze could feel it and see it. But she wasn't the one who'd moved with them when they'd left Wyoming for a warmer climate.

"So," he said, reaching to open Mary's door for her. Excitement built within him. He'd not felt excited in the days leading up to his first wedding. Come to think of it, there had been nothing exciting *at* the wedding either.

Relief. His first marriage had been built on and cultivated with relief. Then his momma wouldn't know what a bad person he was. No one would know he and Fiona had been sleeping together before they got married. They could pretend to be normal and happy, when they weren't normal or happy.

Yeah, that marriage had not lasted very long, and Blaze had given up appearances soon after that.

But this engagement and wedding was built out of mutual love and respect. It was founded with joy, and blessed by God above.

Blaze couldn't help feeling excited about becoming Faith's husband, and he couldn't wait for her to be his wife.

"So...what?" she asked as she climbed into the back seat after her mother.

"Lunch?" Blaze leaned into the cab of the truck and searched her face. "Here? In Coral Canyon?"

"I'm starved," her mother said, and that made the decision for them all.

"All right," he said cheerfully. "Lunch here. Let me get this luggage in the back." He closed Faith's door and gestured to someone wearing a bright yellow safety vest. "Can you load this for me? I had back surgery last year, and I can't do it."

Her father had already started climbing in the front seat, and Cash picked

up one of the smaller bags. Blaze opened his wallet and took out a hundred-dollar bill, and the airport attendant got right to work.

“Thanks,” he said when the job was done. He passed over the money, smiled at the man, and then put his arm around his son again. “Thanks to you too, Cash. You’re a good kid.”

“Thanks, Dad,” he said, smiling at him. “They seem nice.”

“Yeah,” he said. Faith’s parents were exactly as she’d described them to be. “They are nice.”

“Can we go to that one steakhouse where we ate when we drove here from Utah?”

“Journeyman’s?” Blaze asked as they went around to their side of the truck.

Cash merely shrugged and reached to open his own door. “I don’t know. I just remember the burger being really good.” He grinned and boosted himself up and into the seat amidst a round of laughter from Faith and her mom.

Laughter was better than crying in Blaze’s opinion, and he got behind the wheel. “Ready?” he asked, looking over to Chris and back to Faith.

She held up her phone. “We found a great steakhouse, baby. Journeyman’s.”

Blaze smiled to himself. “Is that what you were laughing about?”

“They have a funny menu,” Faith said.

“That’s the place,” Cash said.

“Then Journeyman’s it is,” Blaze said, shifting into gear and adding, “Map me there, dove, okay?”

“Yep,” Faith said from the back seat, and Blaze felt like his heart had grown the wings of a dove and flown right up to heaven.

Now, he just needed the next three days to pass so he could be the married man he wanted to be.

FAITH CROMWELL’S STOMACH HAD GROWN WINGS. THEY FLAPPED LIKE THOSE of a pelican, not the delicate flutters of a hummingbird. “I’m going to be sick,” she said.

“You shouldn’t have eaten so many doughnut holes for breakfast,” Trinity said, pulling Faith’s arms away from her midsection. “You’re

crushing the gems.”

They were *gems*. They couldn't be crushed by human arms, but Faith said nothing. She'd been entertaining her parents for a few days now, and she couldn't wait to get back to her regular routine. She'd taken them on a private tour of one of her food trucks, made them every flavor of doughnut she offered to the public, and eaten out more times than she could count.

Today's dinner was being catered by Everly's brother at Pork and Beans. Leigh had made the cake, and Faith had collaborated with Georgia, Dani, and Abby on the dress. Trinity had helped Faith book a venue—the Tree House Lodge and Events Center, where out-of-town guests had been enjoying their stay. They offered trail hikes, horseback riding, in-room dining, and wellness classes, and Faith's parents had been loving their stay at the lodge.

They had an enormous cabin they used for weddings, family reunions, holiday parties, and anything else someone needed a big space for, and even Blaze's mother had been oohing and ahing over Tree House since Faith had shown her the pictures.

Blaze had paid for it, because it wasn't a cheap location, and Faith hadn't minded one bit. She'd gotten better and better at accepting that the man had money, and she wanted the wedding of her dreams. Even more importantly, Blaze wanted her to have the wedding of her dreams, and that meant she didn't make any of the refreshments, she didn't have to cook or clean up afterward, and no one in her family had to do anything either.

She'd hired out everything she could and included her soon-to-be sisters-in-law as much as they'd wanted to be included.

“I'm falling out of this dress,” Faith said. “I shouldn't have eaten for the past three days.”

“You're fine.” Trinity said, cutting another piece of body tape. “I'm just going to seal you in right...here....” She pressed the tape along Faith's underarm and then adhered the fabric to it. “Done. Turn and look at me.”

Faith would do anything to stop looking at herself in the mirror. She faced her sister, feeling utterly exposed. Her hair had been curled, twisted, and pinned on top of her head so she looked like she wore a flaming, fiery crown. Delicate white flowers poked out of some of the loops, so she really did feel like a queen wearing a jeweled crown.

Her dress didn't have straps—thus, the body tape—but she didn't have quite the dancer's body Everly did. Thus, more body tape and the way her arms automatically went to cover her stomach again.

Trinity swatted them away. “I swear, Faith, if you do that one more time.” She let the threat hang there as she clipped off an errant thread from one of the jewels. They encrusted the top half of Faith’s dress, and they threw the light around in colored rainbows.

She wore clear shoes on her feet, despite her complaints that the heat from her toes would fog up the plastic. They did, but Trinity had insisted that no one would be looking at her feet. Even if they did, they wouldn’t notice.

Faith was sure they would.

She just wanted this to be over.

Hold on, she thought, unsure of where the words had come from. This wasn’t an event to be suffered through. This was her wedding day.

A day she’d dreamed about for a long time. A day she thought might never happen for her. A day she’d had to cancel and then reschedule once already.

She should be enjoying every moment of this day.

“Okay,” Trinity said, turning. “Ladies!” She gestured everyone over from the huge round table that had been set up in the corner. Abby stood first, and the rest of the wives and women followed.

Faith felt the glow of joy start in her gut and radiate outward as she hugged Trinity. “Thanks, Trin,” she said. “You’re the absolute best sister in the whole world.”

“Hey,” Justine said as she arrived. She took Trinity’s place in Faith’s arms. “I thought I was the best sister in the world.”

“You’re the best *younger* sister,” Faith said, grinning. Justine definitely had the tiniest of baby bumps, but she hadn’t said anything, so Faith didn’t either.

She hugged Abby and said, “Thank you for getting Country Quad to record that music.”

“Of course,” Abby said. The recording of their slowest, sappiest love songs currently played out in the event hall for the guests, who should all be here by now.

“Thank you for making the cake,” she said as she hugged Leigh. It stood six tiers tall, with the smallest one barely holding a figurine of a man and his wife.

“It was my pleasure.” Leigh moved to the side and Everly came forward.

She gripped Faith too and said, “You are the most beautiful woman in the world.”

“Thank you for being my friend,” Faith whispered. They’d be family too, but friendship mattered a great deal to Faith, and her eyes started to water as Everly stepped back.

Dani hung back so Faith could hug her mother, and no words were needed for that embrace. Faith didn’t always see eye-to-eye with her, but she loved her mom with everything she had, and she knew her mother loved her.

They separated, and Georgia reached up to pin ribbons in Faith’s hair. She was using a curtain of those as a veil instead of the traditional gauzy white fabric, and Georgia herself had seen the idea in a book. She grinned at Faith and hugged her saying, “He is the luckiest man alive.”

“Thanks, Georgia,” Faith said.

Maxine, her brother’s wife, held up a small circular piece of metal, the blueness of it making Faith squint. “Something blue,” she said. “My grandfather was a metalworker, and every woman in my family wears this right against their skin.”

She tucked it very neatly under Faith’s left arm, the coolness of it quickly evaporating with Faith’s body heat. “You’re beautiful,” her sister-in-law said, smiling, and Faith hugged her too. She didn’t get to see Sam and Maxine as much as she did Trinity and her family, but that didn’t mean she loved them any less.

Hilde moved into Faith’s arms. “Maybe this will be you one day soon,” Faith whispered. Hilde didn’t confirm or deny anything. She’d been dating Gabe for four or five months now, and the man had moved to Coral Canyon to be with her.

That was the rumor going around the Small Business Owner Association meetings anyway. Faith attended those with Everly, Hilde, Georgia, Leigh, and several other smart, savvy women around town.

Hilde moved back and finally Dani and Cecily came forward. They both had flowers for Faith, who took the bouquet from Dani, who used to own and operate a florist shop in Nashville. “Thank you, Dani,” she said. “These are gorgeous.”

She’d chosen white, bronze, and dusty rose for her wedding colors, and her bouquet looked like it had been lit on fire. Only the strongest of the pink flowers had survived the blaze, and they poked out between all the wildness of the bronze.

Cecily slipped a bracelet made of bronze beads and elastic around Faith’s wrist, so she could have part of her bouquet with her after she walked down

the aisle. “I never thought Blaze would find someone who could tame him,” she said. “That boy....” She shook her head, her smile fond and full of love.

His momma kissed Faith’s cheeks, one at a time. “He loves you so, and I know you love him.”

“I do,” Faith said, her emotions once again teeming so close to the surface.

“The I-do’s are for out there,” Trinity teased. “Come on, ladies. We better go get lined up. Mom, you need to send in Daddy.”

They started to leave the room, and Faith stood there with her bouquet, alone, as she turned back to the mirror. She held the flowers in front of her stomach, liking the way they looked there. Her dress shone in the natural light coming in through the windows, and Faith smiled to herself.

“You’re getting married in a few minutes.”

A light knock sounded on the door, and she turned toward it as her daddy walked in.

Except it wasn’t her daddy. It was Blaze.

“Blaze Young,” she said, lifting the flowers as if she could hide herself behind them. “What are you doing in here? Get out. It’s bad luck—”

He’d been walking toward her during her rant, and the touch of his hot hands along her bare arms silenced her. “I don’t believe in bad luck,” he whispered. He gazed at her with equal parts danger and love in his eyes. “I had to see you, and mm hm, you are just as gorgeous as you were this morning.”

“Wrong answer,” she managed to say. “My hair is done. My makeup is flawless. This dress is practically sewn to my skin.” Taped, but he didn’t need to know that. “I look way better than I did this morning when you showed up at the crack of dawn for a surprise wedding day breakfast.”

He chuckled and leaned down and kissed her. She didn’t let him linger for long, though she’d like to. “My lipstick is going to smear,” she whispered.

“Mm, I hope so,” he said, but he backed up, finally dropping his hands from her waist. He glittered from head to toe, the way he always had. He wore a black tuxedo, and wow, Faith couldn’t imagine a man looking better than Blaze currently did.

Dark from head to beard to jacket to pants to shoes. Everything shone, including his countenance. He exuded confidence and wealth, and for maybe the first time, Faith felt like she could be on his arm and be worthy of it.

“Did you bring Hollis?”

“He’s in a tux too,” Blaze said with a smile. “Cash is going to lead him down the aisle ahead of the wedding party.”

Faith was glad Blaze had included everyone in his family in the wedding, right down to Hollis, his Irish setter. Jem had offered to escort her mom, and Faith had been glad for that. Luke had said he’d bring a date, and he had. None of the other couples had asked to be switched around, the way they had at Everly’s wedding, though Faith knew there was something not quite right between Hilde and Gabe.

They still saw each other a lot. According to both of them, they were still together. Dating. He’d moved here, for crying out loud. But anyone with eyes could see there was some distance between them. Gabe was even more private than Blaze, and Faith had been too busy with her wedding to pry into Hilde’s love life.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“You’re my whole world, dove,” he whispered back, still backing up slowly. “I’ll see you out there.” Then he turned and left. Only ten seconds later, someone else knocked on the door.

This time, her father did enter the room. “Was that Blaze I just saw leaving?” He hooked his thumb over his shoulder, a look of complete scandal on his face.

Faith only laughed as she hurried toward her daddy to hug him. “Yeah, Daddy,” she said. “He just stopped by for two seconds.”

Her father studied her face, pure doubt etched in his. Then he finally said, “All right, but they’re all waitin’ on you two.”

“I’m sure they are,” Faith said cheerfully. “Let’s not keep them waiting any longer.” She strung her arm through her daddy’s and grinned at him. “I’m ready to get married.”



Luke knew every note as it wafted through the expensive speaker system above his head. This place was really nice, if a bit out of the way. But he didn't mind driving. That was why touring had never bothered him. Country Quad didn't fly; they drove trucks and trailers, so they always had somewhere comfortable and homey to stay.

Luke had followed Jem and Faith's mother down the aisle, with Morris and Leigh behind him, and Gabe and Hilde bringing up the rear. He still didn't talk much to Gabe, but they'd met twice since Luke had returned from the tour, and he'd been more than impressed with Gabe's investment plan. They'd been working on funding that, and it seemed Luke got an email every day. Sometimes more than one.

He'd sensed some tension between Hilde and Gabe, but he'd watched them circle the altar, all smiles and stiff arms, and then take their place in the audience on the other side of the aisle.

Blaze and Faith weren't having the wedding party stand at the altar with them, and Luke thought that was the smartest thing any of the brothers had done. He looked to the girl on his left—Corrine. She wore a frilly dress the color of pink lemonade, just like all of the other female cousins. He'd gotten really good with a curling iron this year, and her hair fell in dark ringlets to just below her shoulders.

He smiled at her and then looked to the woman on his right. Amelia Thorne. Not really a woman he'd want to go out with again, but she gave him a friendly smile, patted his knee like he was a ten-year-old enduring a boring

sermon on a Sunday, and focused on the altar again.

Blaze had just taken his position, but the instrumental Country Quad music playing from above hadn't changed yet. Luke heard and felt every drum beat through his whole body, each one placed precisely right.

He'd been playing drums since he was five years old, and his fingers, wrists, elbows, and shoulders ached just thinking about picking up another pair of sticks. He needed a massage, badly, and not just because he wanted to see Sterling again.

He did. He absolutely did. He hadn't booked a massage with her since the band had returned to town, though he should have. Instead, he'd gone back to her old spa and had someone rub him down there.

It hadn't been nearly as good, and guilt assaulted him from all sides as he thought about Sterling finding out that he'd used someone besides her. *She'll feel so betrayed*, he thought, actually taking his phone out to text her right now.

As he wondered if his muscles would rat him out for using someone else, the music switched to the country acoustic version of the wedding march, and everyone around him got to their feet.

He hastened to do the same, not even having to nudge Corrine. She jumped to her feet, and Luke only semi-flinched as Amelia linked her arm through his. He'd made it very clear that this was a friendly date to his brother's wedding, simply so he didn't have to attend alone. He wasn't sure why he cared.

Jem was here alone. Bryce had come without a date.

Luke couldn't believe he was counting Bryce, because while he was a Young through and through, he wasn't in the same generation as Luke, despite only a decade of difference in their ages.

He didn't want to be the last brother to get remarried, but he'd made mistakes like this before. As he watched Faith simply pour goodness and light out of her person, Luke really wanted to find the right woman for him. He switched his gaze from the bride to Blaze, who also seemed to fill the room with more light than it already had.

He wanted the woman that made him light up the way Blaze did. Not just anyone. Not just someone who would say yes to his proposal so he wasn't last.

You're going to be last, he thought, and that felt so true, his heartbeat vibrated clear up into his neck. He might not attend church every week, but

he believed in God. Always had. He'd prayed for years that the Lord would rid him of his anger, but when that hadn't worked, he sought out the help from the medical field.

He breathed in for a count of four, held it for four, blew it out silently through his nose for four, and held it for four more counts. Breathing this way had taught him to find control over his thoughts, calm his racing heart, and remember who he was.

Corrine's father—and she deserved a whole, calm, rational, kind father.

Momma's son—and she deserved a willing, respectful, thankful son.

His brothers' brother—and they deserved a friend, a confidant, a safe place to vent or talk or confess, and a brotherly brother.

He wanted to be all of those things to the people around him. Perhaps he simply hadn't learned or discovered the qualities he needed to be a husband.

Good—what did that even mean?

Loyal—Luke knew how to be loyal. True, hardworking, loving, compassionate, attentive. Yeah, he could probably use some work in some of those areas, though he sure did try with Corrine.

Being a husband was not the same as being a father. He drew in another breath as Faith reached Blaze, kissed her daddy, and then transferred her arm into her fiancé's. They shone like stars together, and Luke smiled despite his usually stony, spiky exterior.

"They're so cute together," Amelia whispered as she leaned into him.

He nodded, because the moment felt too special to speak during. The audience started to sit, and Luke helped Corrine into her seat so her dress didn't show anything it shouldn't. Then he settled down and focused on the pastor.

"I love marrying the men in this family," the pastor said, his smile absolutely huge. "I think there's still a few of you left, and it'll be a sad day in Coral Canyon when all the Young boys are hitched."

A few people twittered and the pastor glanced around the room, but thankfully, his eyes didn't land on Luke. He sat in the second row, because the family was so huge, and he'd opted to sit way over on the side to stay out of the limelight. He spent so much time in the spotlight when he stepped on stage that when he was off it, he didn't need anyone looking at him.

The pastor continued talking about love and marriage, the sanctity of each, and how each half of a couple could resolve to do better for their partner right here and right now. "Even if you're not married, you can

commit to being the best partner you can be. I'm sure your other half—a boyfriend or girlfriend—or future other half will appreciate it.”

A few more giggles and chuckles, and then he turned to Faith. “I understand you two have written your vows today.”

“Yes.” Faith turned from looking at Pastor Abraham to gazing lovingly at Blaze. Luke might've felt sick to his stomach in the past, but at today's wedding, he found a soft smile on his face instead. He'd been oblivious to true love—real love—until Mav had married Dani.

Outside of his own parents, he'd never seen anything like the two of them. They'd merged their two families, both with children, and had added another little boy. They were happy and whole and seemingly perfect.

Luke spent time at their house, so he knew there were dirty dishes and crying children. He also knew Mav and Dani worked together, loved one another, loved their children, and forgave each other and their children when they needed to.

Then Tex and Abby had gotten married, and Luke had marveled at the way Abby had loved not only Tex, but Bryce too. At their wedding, Luke had started to wonder if he could perhaps find someone to love him and Corrine too. She, of course, was easy to love. It was him that needed to calm down, sweeten up, and keep looking.

“Blaze,” Faith said, and Luke got out of his own head. He loved Faith and Blaze, individually and together, and he wanted to be present for their wedding.

“I love how tenacious you are.”

“My *tenacity*?” he quipped. “This is our wedding, and you're going to lead with my *tenacity*?”

“And your big mouth,” she shot right back. “Both led you over to my food truck one night, where you then bullied your way inside and turned off my fryers, even when I told you not to.”

“I did not *bully* my way onto that truck.” Blaze grinned as he looked out at the crowd, most of whom were laughing or smiling. “I saved it from an explosion. She's lucky to be alive right now.”

Faith simply shook her head, everything about her so soft and wonderful. “I love that you didn't give up on me,” she said next, and Blaze's shoulders went down. “I love that you don't let me be afraid of hard things. I love that you let me love you the way I know how, and most of all, I love that you love me the way you know how.”

He lifted her hands to his lips and kissed each one.

“I simply love you. I love being with you. You’re my one safe spot, and I have a few of those, but none better than you.” She didn’t look away from him for even a split-second. “I love that you spoil me, even when I act like I don’t. I love that you share your son with me.” She did look over to Cash then, separate her hand from Blaze’s, and draw the boy closer to them. They made a handsome family, and Luke’s chest turned tight.

His emotions attacked him at rare times like these, and then he could barely hear, barely see, and barely think.

“I love you, and I will do my best to be the wife you want and deserve every day from now on.” She nodded, and Blaze looked at his son.

Cash fumbled in his breast pocket for a moment and then produced a note card, which he handed to his father.

“You had to write them down?” Faith asked, clearly teasing him. “I had mine memorized, cowboy.”

Blaze focused on the card for a moment, then looked straight at Faith. “I told you once that you make me nervous, and this is our wedding day. I didn’t want to mess it up.” He glanced at the card again. “I went in a little different direction.” The very tips of his ears turned red.

“I’m sure you did,” Faith said with a kind smile. “That’s the Blaze Young way.”

The crowd chuckled too, but not in an unkind way. Luke happened to agree with Faith. Nothing Blaze did was normal or ordinary. Anyone who spent more than five minutes with him knew that.

Blaze tucked the card into his pocket. “Faith, I promise to listen to you when you need to be heard.” He cleared his throat. “I promise to consider your needs, each and every day, with every decision I make. I promise to be there for you, support you, and cheer you on in whatever you choose to do and be.”

Cash looked up at him, and they nodded to one another. “We promise to love you, honor you, and do our best to make you happy.”

Faith wiped her eyes, smiling through it all, and leaned over and kissed Blaze in the most chaste way possible. Which meant it was really hot too.

“Oh-ho,” the pastor said. “I guess we’re to the kissing part.” He checked with Blaze, who nodded, and he got his part done by declaring them husband and wife.

Then the real kissing started.

Luke cheered and clapped along with everyone else, and then he stayed out of the way until nearly the end of the family line. When he wrapped Blaze up in a hug, his brother held on tight, and in the Blaze Young way said, “I love you, brother.”

Luke knew he did. He was glad he did. And he actually felt lovable—all because Blaze told him he loved him.

BRYCE STOOD OUTSIDE WITH THE HORSES, ENOUGH OUT OF THE WAY THAT townspeople didn’t come approach him but close enough to still be present at the reception dinner.

Blaze and Faith had purchased the entire day at Tree House Lodge, and that included horseback riding. Bryce had been staying there for the past couple of nights, despite his father telling him he should stay at the farmhouse.

Yes, Bryce had a room there. Yes, he drove the ten minutes there every day to take care of his horses. Yes, they knew he would be cheating on them with another herd in Louisville very soon.

Only Dad and Abby didn’t know it yet.

The farmhouse didn’t feel like home, but as Bryce took another deep breath and gazed at the Teton Mountains on the horizon, Coral Canyon sure did.

He wasn’t sure what that meant. He didn’t know how to live here. He’d messed it up so badly last time. Seeing the Whittakers? He had no idea how to do that, despite nodding to them all as he’d entered the grand ballroom where Uncle Blaze and Faith had just been married.

Marriage.

Bryce wanted that, and...he didn’t. He thought of his last conversation with his mother, wherein she’d literally slur-yelled at him that he better not “ruin his life” by “getting married to some girl he knocked up.”

He’d asked her, though she was clearly drunk, if she and Dad had been pregnant before they’d gotten married. She’d denied it, but now Bryce wasn’t so sure. His birthday sat well within the timeframe for them to have been married for a few months before his mother would’ve gotten pregnant with him, but she could’ve had a miscarriage first. Lost a different baby.

He wasn't sure why he'd let his mother—someone he barely respected—taint him so much. He and Bailey had already decided not to marry, and not to keep their baby. He'd only called to tell her, so he could check off with Dad that he had.

“Howdy, son,” a man said, and Bryce's stomach lurched. He turned toward Graham Whittaker anyway, because he'd already tucked his tail and run once. He couldn't do it every time he saw Bailey's father.

“Mister Whittaker, hey.” Bryce stuck out his hand, and Graham took it, pulling Bryce into the kind of hug that said more than a handshake ever could. More than words could.

He cupped his other hand on the back of Bryce's head and said, “I miss seein' your face around town, son.”

Bryce was sure that wasn't true, but he said nothing. His emotions spiraled up into the atmosphere, and just like when he'd played on-stage and then ran off crying, Bryce felt this huge, all-encompassing feeling. It whispered to him, but he couldn't make out the words.

Graham cleared his throat and released Bryce, and the two of them parted. He watched as Graham swiped at his eyes, and Bryce took the moment to blink back his own tears. “How are you? Where are you these days? Bailey doesn't tell us much.”

In that moment, Bryce realized Graham and his wife, Laney, were probably hurting as much as he'd been. As much as Bailey.

He glanced around, because he didn't want his parents to overhear him tell Graham his future plans. “It's a secret until I tell my daddy,” Bryce said. “Which I'm planning to do tonight.” He tried to laugh but couldn't quite pull it off. “I'm moving to Louisville, sir. I've got a job at a boarding stable there, and I'm gonna learn how to run a rescue operation.”

Graham's eyebrows went up. “Wow, Bryce. That's real great.”

“What's real great?” Laney asked as she approached. She looked from Bryce to Graham and back. “Howdy, Bryce.” She leaned in and swept her lips along his cheek. “It's so good to see you.”

“Is it?” he asked before he could censor himself. He wasn't trying to be rude; he just never thought these two people would care to see him ever again.

Laney didn't miss a beat, didn't look at her husband, didn't even breathe before she said, “Of course. I mean, I did get to see your performances this summer online.” She smiled in a kind, thoughtful way. “You're very talented

with a guitar.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said.

“I suppose that’s why you’re in Nashville,” she said, clearly hinting for the same thing Graham had just come right out and asked. “Are you going to follow your daddy’s footsteps and make albums?”

“He’s got a job in Louisville,” Graham said, his smile ticking up the corners of his mouth. “I was just about to ask him if he talks to Bailey when you came up.”

They both looked at him with hunger in their eyes, and Bryce suddenly didn’t feel so bad for his communication with his parents, even though he knew his father would prefer Bryce call or text every single day.

“She...doesn’t talk to you guys?”

“Sometimes,” Laney hedged, but it was clear she meant *Hardly ever*.

“Did she tell you her good news from this summer?” he asked.

The two of them exchanged another glance. “No,” Graham finally said, following it with a grind through his throat. “Honestly, Bryce, we haven’t heard from her since Spring Break, and only then, because we went to Montana to make sure she was still alive.”

Laney started to weep, and Bryce’s heart went out to her. He couldn’t take this. He couldn’t be the reason they lost their daughter. His own tears flooded his eyes, and he reached for both of them at the same time. When they’d each encircled him in the safety and care of their arms, he found the courage to whisper, “I’m so sorry I did this to her. To you guys.”

“You didn’t, Bryce,” Laney said, her voice thick.

“I did, though,” he said.

“No,” Graham said quietly but with plenty of force. “Bailey is twenty-four years old, Bryce. She makes her own choices these days.”

“But I—”

“You have nothing more to apologize for,” Laney insisted, and she pulled away and took his face in both of her hands. She smiled through her tears. “Okay? We don’t blame you, and we never did.”

“I have worked so hard,” he said, hiccuping and completely embarrassing himself. He ducked his head, and Laney dropped her hands. He couldn’t apologize again, because his voice had disappeared somewhere in his throat.

“Hey,” Dad said brightly, and Bryce found the strength to look up and into his eyes. He wore pure concern there, and he glanced to Graham and Laney. “Is everyone okay?”

“Sorry, Tex.” Graham shook his head and turned around. He didn’t walk away, but he brought his hands to his face and scrubbed.

Laney lifted her chin, her tears obvious and her humility in full-force as she wore them proudly. “We were just talking to Bryce about Bailey. We haven’t heard from her for months, and we wondered if he had.”

Dad arrived at Bryce’s side and drew him into a side-hug. “Okay?”

“I’m okay, Dad,” he whispered back. They both looked at Laney. “I talk to her sometimes, Laney. A lot, it sounds like.” He dug in his pocket and pulled out his phone. “You can read all the texts.”

Laney took the phone, a look of awe on her face. She quickly pushed it back to him. “No, I don’t want to do that.”

“Maybe just the highlights,” Graham said as he turned to face them again. “When’s the last time you spoke with her?”

“Well, we usually text.” Bryce swallowed. “She calls every now and then, when she has something big to tell me. Like that fact that she got an exemplary mark on her first-year residency, and the clinic where she’s working might hire her on as a full doctor before she graduates.”

He cleared his throat, feeling like he was betraying her confidence. “She called and told me that near the end of June.” He looked at his daddy. “I was still on tour with the band.”

Laney’s tears flowed down her face. “She’s always been so smart.” She smiled, but she looked absolutely miserable.

Thankfully, Abby arrived, and she pulled Laney into a hug and whispered something to her. The two women clung to one another, and Abby shushed her the way she did Bryce’s half-sister who was two years old.

“Come on, Laney,” Abby said gently. “Let’s take a walk just for a minute.” She glanced at Dad and led Laney away.

Bryce didn’t know what to do or say next. He looked over to Graham. “I texted her on my flight here, telling her I was coming for my uncle’s wedding and asking her if she’d been home. She said she hadn’t.”

“Did she say anything else?”

Bryce shook his head and pressed his lips together. “She just said she thinks I’m brave for coming back here.” He whispered the words, wishing he didn’t know these things. Wishing Bailey hadn’t put him in this position. Wishing she’d be braver and better than she currently was.

“Okay,” Graham said. “Thanks, Bryce. We really appreciate it.” He clapped Bryce on the shoulder, which very nearly sent him to his knees, and

walked away after his wife.

Bryce stood there, numb when he'd been alive before. "Dad," he managed to say.

"This is not on you, son," he said. "I know what's goin' through your head, but no."

"Why won't she talk to them?"

Dad let out a long sigh. "Well, you only talk to us when we force you to, and maybe they're not as insistent as us."

Bryce shook his head as Dad chuckled, trying to make light of the situation. "I feel so much better, Dad. The meetings with my new therapist have been so helpful." He looked up at his father, a fresh round of tears threatening to streak his face. "Thank you for paying for those appointments for me." He'd switched counselors, so he wasn't getting a discount anymore, but his daddy had stepped right in without a single question. "It has been amazing."

"I'm glad to do it," Dad said, his voice husky.

"I'm doing so good," Bryce said. "I can come here without wanting to flee every second. I can see him, Dad, and I'm okay, because he's okay." He didn't have to spell out that the "he" here was OJ. His son.

"Georgia and Otis and Joey love him so much. Y'all love him so much." His voice broke, and Bryce pulled in a long, long breath trying to feel every rib as it expanded to make room for the air.

"I'm doing so good, I'm leaving Nashville," he said. Dad's eyebrows went sky-high, but he remained quiet. "I don't see the point in staying there now that I'm not going to do music," Bryce said. "So I'm moving to Louisville to start a job at this place called Rolling Hills Stables. They run boarding stables and a horse rescue ranch, Dad. It's so amazing, and I've been once for my third interview, and I can't even believe they hired me."

"Yeah, I can't either," Dad said dryly. "Did you tell them *I'm* the one taking care of your horses?"

"No." Bryce grinned at his daddy. "I told them Uncle Wade was."

Dad burst into laughter, and that made Bryce's heart so happy. He hugged his father, feeling the grip in his daddy's touch. "I love you, Dad," he whispered.

"Oh, my boy, I love you so much."

Bryce couldn't believe that Bailey didn't want this parental love in her life. She had always been a little stubborn and a lot self-assured, but Bryce

needed his dad. He absolutely needed him, and he'd been afraid to admit it until this moment.

"I know you wish I'd come home," he said as he stepped out of his dad's arms. "But I'm not ready yet."

They started walking back toward the buffet tables, the hanging lights in the trees, and the rest of the family. "I know you'll come home when the time is right for you," Dad said. "God's told me that, and I'm doing my best to trust Him." He gave Bryce a quick, tight smile that told Bryce his dad had personal work he was doing too.

Somehow, that made all the things Bryce needed to fix inside himself okay. No one was perfect, not even his father.

"So," Bryce said. "What's your schedule like next weekend, because I know someone who could use some help moving from Tennessee to Kentucky...."

Dad stopped walking, pure shock on his face. "Next weekend, Bryce? Tell me you're kidding."

Bryce only grinned wider, and then started laughing as his father shook his head, eyes cast downward like Bryce had just given him the worst news possible.

JEM DOZED, NOT TRULY FALLING ALL THE WAY ASLEEP. HE DIDN'T DARE WITH his darling little girl in his arms, burning through fever meds like she hadn't taken them at all. Rosie coughed, and Jem's eyes flew open. The girl moaned and shifted beside him in bed, and Jem reached over and put his hand on her chest.

She breathed in and out, in and out, but it was ragged on the exhale, and jagged on the inhale. He had no idea what to do. If he still lived with Blaze, he'd go knock on his brother's door and ask for help.

He'd tried calling Momma before bed, but her line had rung and rung. No answer. It had been eleven-fifteen, and Momma didn't stay up past nine. He'd searched on the Internet and wetted a washcloth with cold water, pressing it to Rosie's forehead as he prayed.

He'd given her the fever reducers. She'd fallen asleep.

His body protested as he kept one hand on his little girl and reached for

his phone with the other. Now that October had arrived, it got dark early in the evening and stayed dark until later in the morning, so he had no idea how to tell time other than his phone.

Two-ten. So it had been almost three hours since he'd given her the meds. Should she be this hot already? Could he give her more?

"What should I do?" he wondered aloud to the room. No one answered, because Jem was doing this father thing solo now. No wife. No brothers to help. A momma who was offline.

Something told him to check her temperature again, so Jem heaved himself out of bed and into the bathroom, where he'd put the medicine, thermometer, and washcloth. He picked up the thermometer, tiptoed back into the bedroom and slipped it under her arm. The seconds ticked by slowly as the temperature got higher and higher.

When it hit one hundred, Jem stopped breathing. One-oh-two. One-oh-three....

Rosie groaned again, and Jem didn't think. He simply knew he needed to do more than he'd done. He scooped Rosie into his arms, ignoring the way she moaned and cried, and headed into Cole's room.

"Cole," he said right out loud, his voice seeming like a shout because of the time of night. "Cole, buddy, I have to take Rosie to the hospital. She's too dang hot." Panic built inside him. "I don't know how to make her not-hot, okay, buddy? I'm going to call Uncle Blaze, and he'll come get you."

His son stirred and woke, and Jem repeated himself, minus the panicky parts. He honestly wasn't sure how he found shoes or his phone or his keys. The next thing he knew, Rosie lay in the back seat, almost not moving, and he had Blaze dialed on his phone as he backed out of the garage.

"What in the black devil—?" Blaze started to ask.

"Rosie is in trouble," Jem said. "I'm taking her to the hospital. I need you to go grab Cole and take him to your house. Can you do that?"

Blaze took one extra second to say, "Yes, I'm on my way now."

"And school in the morning," Jem said. "I don't know—" He cut off, because he couldn't think past this second. He didn't know what awaited him at the emergency room, nor did he know how long it would take.

It doesn't matter, he thought. This is why you moved home.

The words weren't his, but God's, and pure relief filled Jem. God was with him. With them. Surely He wouldn't let anything happen to Rosie now.

"I'm headed out the door," Blaze said. "He knows I'm coming?"

“I tried to tell him.” Jem took a deep breath. “He was asleep, and then I just ran out.”

“Call me when you know something,” Blaze said, and the call ended.

Jem wasn't even sure how to get to the hospital. He'd never made that trip before. He felt like angels had guided his truck, because he pulled up to the emergency room doors only a few minutes later. “Come on, baby girl,” he said to his daughter as he collected her from the back seat. He folded her over his shoulder and walked as quickly as he could.

The lights inside were far too bright for the hour, and Jem squinted at the woman sitting behind the check-in desk. “My daughter has a super-high fever,” he said. “I can't get it down, and I can't wake her up.”

The woman stood from the desk, alarm on her face. “She won't wake up?”

“No, ma'am.” At least Jem hadn't seen her wake fully in the past twenty minutes of manhandling her into and out of the truck. “Rosie, baby, wake up for Daddy.”

He switched to cradling her like a baby, and her head lolled against his chest. The woman wore a name tag that had letters after her name, and she whipped a stethoscope into position. She listened to Rosie's heart and lungs right there in the lobby, and then said, “Come with me.”

“Oh-okay,” Jem said, and he hurried after her. She went through a double-wide door into another sterile, white hallway with ultra-bright lights. Around a corner and then into a patient room, where she had Jem lay Rosie on the table.

Two male doctors or nurses came into the room, and they started asking Jem questions. When's the last time she was awake? What did he give her and when? How much? What was her temperature at home? What other remedies had he tried? When's the last time she ate?

They took her blood pressure and temperature, and then the woman left and returned with what looked like an x-ray vest but this one was blue. And stuffed with ice packs.

They laid it over Rosie, who immediately began to shiver. Jem's eyes filled with tears, and he scooted his chair closer to his baby girl and held her hand under the cold vest. “Daddy's right here,” he whispered. “I'm right here, baby. You've gotta wake up, okay? They just want you to wake up.”

They wanted more than that, Jem was sure, but no one said anything as they put in an IV and then started dripping something into her veins. What

felt like forever later, but was only a few minutes, the woman took the icy vest off Rosie and covered her with a warm blanket.

His daughter looked so pathetic lying on the table there, her tiny frame barely making a dent in the blanket's folds.

"Rosie," one of the men said. "Can you open your eyes?"

To Jem's pure relief, her eyelids fluttered. "Come on, kid," he said to her. "Wake up for Daddy."

She opened her eyes, and Jem looked up at the doctors to judge their reaction. They seemed more at-ease now, but they broke out their equipment and started taking Rosie's vitals all over again. When one of them said, "Temp is ninety-nine-point-eight," Jem started to think things might be okay.

Rosie whimpered and said, "Daddy," and he slid her into his arms.

"I'm right here, Rosie-girl." He pressed a kiss to her head and rocked her gently. She curled into him, and he looked up at the doctors. "Can she go back to sleep?"

"We prefer she didn't for a few minutes," one of them said, and Jem looked down at his flesh and blood.

"Baby, you have to stay awake, okay?"

"Okay," she said, looking right at him with such clarity and trust in her eyes. Jem knew then what it meant to be a father. A protector. A man who loved fiercely, who'd get up in the middle of the night and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to save his daughter. A father who sacrificed.

"Tell me about the stars," Jem said with a smile.

Rosie's face brightened, but she didn't move any other muscles. "They're in California, Daddy, and we can walk all over 'em."

"With famous people's names on them?" he asked, though he already knew.

She nodded slightly, her eyelids falling closed for an extra beat. "Like Alvin and the Chipmunks."

"Yeah," he said softly. "Stay awake, kid."

Rosie's eyes opened again, and she looked so tired. He looked up at the doctors. "She's tired."

"I bet," one of them said. "I'm going to order a strep test, and we'll see what she's got."

"Could it be strep?"

"It could be," he said. "We've had some RSV going through town, and a

lot of sinus infections this year. It's a little too early for the flu, but I had a case of pneumonia last week." He gave Jem a smile. "Someone will be in to do the strep test in a minute, and we'll see what's going on." He left, as did the other doctor, and Jem held Rosie close to his heart and hummed one of Country Quad's songs to her.

She closed her eyes, but she said, "I'm not asleep, Daddy, okay?"

"Okay, baby," he whispered.

It didn't take long for the door to open again, and Jem nearly jumped to his feet when Sunny—his gorgeous, half-blonde, blue-eyed Sunny—Samuelson walked in. Her hair had gotten longer since he'd last seen her, and she wore it in a braid as her step stuttered.

"Jem," she said.

"Sunny," he said back.

She smiled at little Rosie in his arms, and Jem sat his daughter all the way up in his lap. "You must be Miss Rosie," Sunny said in a sunshiney voice.

"Yes, ma'am," Rosie said.

"I have to stick this up your nose." Sunny held up an instrument shaped like a Q-tip, but skinnier and much longer. "It'll hurt and kind of tickle for two seconds, and then I'll be done."

She grinned like this would be great fun, and Rosie said, "Okay."

"Hold still, baby," Jem murmured in his daughter's ear. He couldn't look away from the sexy nurse as she approached, did the swab, and backed right up again.

"Usually takes about ten minutes," she said as she headed for the door.

"You still seein' that other guy?" Jem asked, the words just blurting out of his mouth before he could stop them.

Sunny paused and looked over her shoulder. She seemed to really assess him, and Jem felt utterly naked in front of her. He gazed back as the seconds passed, determined not to look away like a coward.

"We broke up," she said, and then she ducked out of the room.

Jem looked down at his daughter as Rosie looked up at him. "They broke up, kid. Did you hear that?"

"Yeah, Daddy," she said as she snuggled into his chest. "Can I go back to sleep now?"

"Yeah," he said, his mind not tired at all. "Go back to sleep, baby." And he'd figure out what, if anything, to do about Sunny and her newly single status.



Hilde painted her lips black, wondering once again why anyone thought Halloween was a fun holiday. She wore a variation of the same thing every single year, because customers did like it, and Hilde liked making customers happy.

The whole store had been sporting cobwebs and spiders, bales of hay out front with scarecrows stuck in them, and orange lights in the windows for the entire month. Hilde paid a window-painting company to come update her upper windows, and she'd made spooky table settings in her window displays for October too.

What she really needed to do was accelerate things with Gabe. They'd been in a stall since August, when he'd told her he was moving to town.

Move to Coral Canyon, he had. He and Liesl lived full-time in the townhome on the southeast side of town, and he ran his law practice from the bottom floor. Cheryl worked for his company as a whole, and the two of them went to Jackson Hole sporadically and not always together.

His house behind the gate in Jackson Hole had not sold yet, so thus, he had not purchased anything bigger or different here in town. He'd talked a lot about it. He'd even hinted that the two of them should look at houses together.

Hilde wasn't sure how to handle that. For as sure as she was in literally all other aspects of her life, she wasn't sure why she was suddenly dragging her feet in her relationship with Gabe. The beginning of the school year had been chaotic for both of them, and then Gabe's brother had gotten married.

Then the weather had changed, and it had snowed twice already, though the Halloween forecast called for a clear night and a full moon. Hilde would close the store early after doing an after-school trick-or-treating event parents could bring their children to. She and Linnie ran a cake walk type of game around the store, and they handed out candy to anyone who wanted it.

Gabe had said he'd bring Liesl by that afternoon, and then he'd asked Hilde to go trick-or-treating with the two of them, as well as Morris, Leigh, and their children. Hilde had said yes, of course.

She and Gabe did a lot together, and she saw him almost every single day. If he was late coming back from Jackson, she might not, and he'd gone to check on his house a couple of times and slept there instead of making the drive home.

Hilde pressed her lips together and capped the costume makeup. "There's no reason to be afraid of him," she told herself. She knew he'd bounced the ball to her, and she'd been holding it for a long time.

She thought she'd miss the buffer that the distance between Jackson and Coral Canyon offered her, but as she looked at her witchy makeup in the mirror, she had to admit she didn't. She liked having Gabe around more. She liked spending time with him and Liesl. She could even admit she liked Linnie sending him her "funny" social media videos. He actually laughed at them while Hilde tried to figure out what was humorous about them.

She went to work, and she complimented her employees on their costumes. She accepted their exclamations over her new pair of boots and the new wart she'd glued to her face. She was always a witch for Halloween, and the black, ripped-to-shreds dress never changed. But the hat, the boots, and the makeup varied from year to year.

The cake walk went well, and before she knew it, Hilde locked the store and she and Linnie drove over to a house nestled in a quiet neighborhood. Morris's place.

Gabe's truck already sat outside, and Linnie didn't sit and assess the house the way Hilde did. She simply slid out of the SUV and started up the walk. Hilde hastened to follow her when she looked back, and they stood on the front stoop while a bit of wind kicked up and tried to steal her witch's hat.

The door opened, and Morris stood there. Linnie stared at him, because Gabe had been dressed for Halloween as a lawyer—meaning his normal clothes—when he'd come by the store with Liesl only an hour ago. But Morris wore a blow-up bodysuit that made him a Sumo wrestler who

wouldn't even fit through the door.

"Wow," Hilde said, barely holding back a laugh. "Your head so doesn't go with this body." She indicated Lynn timer in her Little Red Riding Hood costume. "You remember my daughter, Morris. Lynn timer, honey, he's Gabe's twin."

Lynn timer snapped her mouth shut. "I forgot. Wow, you look exactly alike."

"That's what identical means," Morris said with a grin. "Come in." He peered into the sky above them. "We better hurry out."

"The sooner we go out, the sooner we can come back." Leigh appeared at the end of the hall, her baby on her hip. The little girl wore a onesie that made her a bright pink cow—probably something from a cartoon Hilde didn't know about—and Eric galloped toward them in his cowboy costume.

"Giddy up! Giddy up!" he yelled. Lynn timer grinned at him, and Hilde did too.

"Lynn timer," Liesl said as she came out of the living room ahead of them. She still wore her Kanga costume, complete with the stuffed baby joey in the front pouch, and she smiled up at them. "Come see this."

She took Lynn timer's hand in one of hers, Hilde's in the other, and pulled. "Just walk, Liesl," Lynn timer said with a giggle. "We're coming."

Liesl skipped off toward the kitchen in a sort of limping half-walk, and Hilde grinned at her gait. Her smile only got bigger when she found Gabe in the kitchen, his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows and his hands covered in flour.

So shocked was she that she stopped moving. "What is happening in here?" she asked.

"I'm making scone dough," he said as he looked up. "Momma always made scones on Halloween, and I decided we should carry on that tradition." He smiled at both of them. "Hey, my pretty girls."

"Hey, Gabe," Lynn timer said as she drew closer. She sat at the bar with Liesl, the two of them asking Gabe about the scones.

Hilde stood frozen several paces away, wondering why seeing him bake had undone her so completely.

"You okay?" Leigh asked as she squeezed by, and Hilde nodded.

"Can I?" She took the seven-month-old from Leigh, and Rachelle looked at Hilde with a sober expression. Hilde smiled and booped her nose, but Rachelle's mask didn't crack a bit.

Morris shuffled past her in his ridiculous costume, and Hilde realized

Leigh wasn't wearing a Halloween get-up. "You don't dress up?" she asked her.

"I hate Halloween," she said. "We're lucky the kids have costumes." She gave her husband a half-glare. "Morris loves the holiday, of course." Leigh sounded disgruntled about such a thing, and Hilde felt like she'd found a kindred spirit.

She sat on the couch beside Leigh and settled Rachele on her lap. "I don't really love Halloween either," she said. "I'm the same thing every year."

Leigh looked at Hilde like she'd just solved the world's energy crisis. "That's genius," she said. "Then I don't have to think about what to be."

"Nope." Hilde gave her a smile. "I'm always a witch. Same dress. Different accessories. I do like to shop, after all, and these boots can be worn with lots of other things."

"An excuse to buy new boots," Leigh said. "Hilde, you've just changed my whole life."

Hilde laughed. "By telling you to be the same thing every year for Halloween? Hardly."

Leigh grinned and got to her feet. "How long until you're done with that, Gabe?"

"I'm setting it to rise now," he said.

"Great." She called for Eric. "Come on," she said. "We have to put on coats or we can't go trick-or-treating."

Hilde held the baby until everyone was ready to go, and then she lingered near the back of the pack with Gabe. Liesl ran-walked-ran up ahead with Lynn and Eric, and Leigh and Morris made a wall between them and the kids.

"Listen," Hilde said. "I wanted to talk to you about...us."

Gabe looked over to her, curiosity in his expression. "All right."

Hilde nodded, like she needed his permission to have this conversation. "I owe you an apology, first off."

"Hilde, you really don't," he said, his voice tired.

Her resolve only hardened, and her irritation kicked in too. "I'd appreciate it if you'd let me say what I need to say."

Gabe blinked and then gestured with his now-flour-free hand for her to go on.

She took a deep breath, her mind recalling their first date. "Remember

when I said I expected a really, really amazing first kiss?”

“Oh, I remember,” he said with a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

“Well, it was more than a really, really amazing first kiss. It was absolute perfection, as has every kiss been since then.” She wasn’t sure where she was going with this. “You’re like, this god of a man, Gabe, and I was stunned when you said you were going to move here.”

“Because you don’t deserve me?” He scoffed. “That’s stupid, if that’s why.”

“It was kind of that,” she admitted. “I own a furniture store in small town Coral Canyon. You’re the youngest lawyer in the state of Wyoming.” She shook her head. “I’ve never compared us too much, but it sort of shocked me that you’d...uproot your whole life to move here, to be with me. So that took me some time to sort through.”

She looked up into the evening sky, the blanket of darkness turning even blacker as she did. The stars pinpricked it, and she thought about them burning billions of miles away. “I’ve been dreaming of a boyfriend like you for a long time,” she admitted. “And it scared me that maybe I’d found him and maybe I wasn’t good enough for him.”

His hand slipped into hers, and he said, “I thought you didn’t want me here.”

“I didn’t.”

He pulled in a sharp breath. “Hilde?”

She sighed. “That sounded too harsh. Of course I want you here. Absolutely I do. But at first...yeah, I was worried that we had this perfect relationship, because we only got to see each other a couple of times each week. So *of course* every kiss is going to be scorching hot and life-changing. *Of course* every stolen touch feels like the earth rocking off its axis. *Of course* the texting at night is special, because I can’t see you until the weekend.”

He remained silent for a couple of steps, then stopped as the kids ran up to a front door and rang the bell. “Our relationship isn’t perfect,” he said. “We work at it. Each of us.”

“Yes, I agree,” she said. She couldn’t look at him, though she felt his eyes on the side of her face. Instead, she focused on the pure joy of five-year-olds as they got cheap candy from strangers. She grinned and waved at Liesl and Eric as they ran back to Lynn timer and then toward the next house.

Morris and Leigh followed, and Gabe provided a good buffer for them by

not moving at all. Hilde turned to go, but she came face-to-face with him instead. “Every kiss is life-changing?”

She pushed against his chest, not willing to be teased right now. “Yes, okay? I think you’re an absolute ten when it comes to kissing.”

He licked his lips and dropped his gaze to her mouth, but he made no move to kiss her. Hilde wasn’t going to make out with him on the street, with moms and dads and kids running every which way. She couldn’t even believe she was doing this here, now.

She hadn’t really planned to. They’d planned to go trick-or-treating and then she had dinner being delivered to her house after this. Lynn timer had snagged an invite to a Halloween party that started at eight-thirty, and Hilde had thought she might—*might*—bring up this subject when she and Gabe were alone together tonight.

But seeing him standing in that kitchen, buttons unbuttoned and taking on a family tradition...she needed to talk to him, and now was the time she had.

“I was scared I was falling too fast for you,” she said, stepping into his arms. “I was scared that we wouldn’t be special without the buffer between us. I was terrified you’d make this move back to Coral Canyon and regret it—and then blame me for that.”

“I’m a big boy,” he said quietly. “I make my own choices.”

She smiled up at him. “I know.” Her grin faltered and fell away. “Gabe, I’m in love with you.”

He pulled in a sharp breath, but Hilde wasn’t done yet. “Don’t say anything,” she blurted out. “Okay? I just...you’ve been here for a few months now and not only did we stay together, we’re stronger than ever. The buffer isn’t what made us work. *We* make us work.

“I’ve been in love with you since Blaze’s wedding, and I just want to clear this confusion and tension from between us. I was scared, but I’m not anymore. I was worried, but I’m not anymore. I’d love to start looking at houses with you once yours in Jackson sells, with the intent that we’ll live there together and raise our girls and—”

She cut off when he touched his forehead to hers. “Please stop talking,” he whispered. “So I can say I love you too.”

Hilde gasped this time and tried to pull away from him. He let her go about six inches, and they looked at one another with street lamps, running feet, and yelling children all around them.

She smiled at him as he started chuckling. “Yeah, I said it out loud and

it's still true. I love you, Hilde."

Hilde tipped her head back and received his kiss—and yes, this one was just as life-changing as the first one and every one since. For she was now kissing the man who loved her, and he poured all of that into his touch.

"I live in this neighborhood," Morris growled, and Gabe pulled away. Hilde buried her face in his chest, glad she could grip his suit coat and bring it around her face to hide her embarrassment.

"Sorry, brother," Gabe said. "See, I just told Hilde I love her, and it felt like a good thing to seal with a kiss."

Hilde pulled Gabe's jacket away to see his twin's reaction, and Morris's stunned, blinking eyes made her laugh along with Gabe. "So I guess we're ready for the world to know?" she asked.

Gabe held her right against his side as they started the walk down the other side of the street and back to Morris's. "I've just been waiting for you to be ready, honey."

Hilde smiled to the stars. "Well, I better warn you about my expectations for our wedding," she said. "See, I expect a really, *really* amazing day, from beginning to end."

Gabe didn't miss a beat when he said, "I won't let you down, Hilde."

"And the proposal?" Hilde shook her head as if no one—not even him—would ever meet her expectations. "Let's just say you better think way outside the box and knock it completely out of the park."

"I can help with that," Morris said. "Right, Leigh? Our proposal was pretty amazing."

"You started it with, 'I got you something.'" She rolled her eyes, and Gabe burst out laughing.

"I fixed it," Morris said, looking from Leigh to Gabe. "I went back to the beginning and started over. It was super romantic in the end."

Leigh cuddled into his side. "It was great, baby. Perfect for us." She looked over to Gabe and Hilde. "That's all you need, Gabe. Something perfect for the two of you. That's what makes something amazing—it fits the people experiencing it."

They finished the trick-or-treating, and Gabe collected his scone dough to bring back to Hilde's. He left Liesl with his twin, and Hilde drove Lynn and Katie's house, where her mom waved to Hilde from the front porch.

At her house, she found Gabe in the kitchen, cutting scones, and she pulled up a barstool. "So."

He looked at her, his smile so genuine and so amazing. “So.”

She laughed and shook her head.

“Don’t worry, honey,” he said. “You don’t even have to tell me to do better than ‘I got you something.’ My proposal will be absolutely, one-hundred percent, out-of-this-world amazing.” He grinned and cut out another scone, and Hilde didn’t doubt him for a moment.

So she said, “I’m absolutely, one-hundred percent, out-of-this-world sure it will be.”



“All right, all right,” Gabe said, climbing over Hilde’s legs to get to the spot in the very center of the couch. He handed the bowl of cheesy popcorn to her and kept the one with butter and salt for himself.

Liesl immediately dipped into that one with, “I love popcorn.”

“Me too, Princess,” he said to her, throwing back his own handful of the stuff. He offered the bowl to Linnie, but she shook her head. She reached for the cheese kind instead and said, “This is my favorite.”

Hilde ate from both bowls as the movie started. “I can’t believe this is your favorite movie,” she said.

“Hey, it’s my birthday,” Gabe said. “I get to choose. That’s the rule.”

“You Youngs had far too many rules growing up,” she teased.

“There were *nine* of us,” he said. “If Momma didn’t make rules, there was war.” He looked over to her. “We got our favorite meal and our favorite movie on our birthday—and I only got to pick half the time because of Morris.”

“You’re telling me that sausage and olive pizza is your favorite meal?” Hilde asked.

“Shh,” Liesl said. “The movie is on, Daddy.”

“I wasn’t talking,” he said, though he totally was. He curled his arm around Liesl and tucked her into his side. “It was Hilde,” he whispered.

On his other side, she made a soft scoffing sound, and Gabe grinned at the movie. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. It wasn’t his favorite growing up, but

he did love it now.

After a few seconds, he leaned toward Hilde and said, “Yes, I love sausage and olive pizza, especially from Woodfired. It’s amazing.”

“Noted,” she whispered back, not taking her eyes from the television.

He kept his smile in place, hardly feeling like the grumpy lawyer trying to set up a coffee date he’d been six months ago. “I’m twenty-eight now.”

“I’m aware,” she hissed back. “You’re going to get me in trouble with your daughter again.” She did turn and look at him this time, and oh, she was gorgeous in the dark, with the light from the TV playing across her features.

“And for the record, you told me you’d be twenty-eight ‘soon’ back in May. You and Lynn timer need a vocabulary lesson.”

He burst out laughing, and Lynn timer sighed mightily and reached for the remote control. She paused the movie while Gabe and Hilde laughed together. “Are you done?” she asked. “Some of us are trying to enjoy this movie.”

Hilde zipped her lips, but Gabe’s curved up too much to do that.

“Watching you two flirt is kind of weird,” Lynn timer said.

“Weird?” Gabe asked. “Did I or did I not give you all the insider information on Harry?”

Lynn timer folded her arms, because she didn’t have a leg to stand on here. Gabe had given her all the dirt on Harry, right down to his favorite flavor of ice cream. “He never asked me out again.”

“Yeah, baby, I know,” Gabe said with plenty of compassion in his voice. “But you two had a great time at Homecoming, and Trace said Harry’s trying to date a lot of different girls right now. I guess he learned a lot from having a girlfriend—namely, that he doesn’t want a girlfriend.”

Lynn timer nodded, her mouth pressed into a thin line that mirrored the way Hilde positioned her mouth sometimes. She glanced over to her mother, who reached out and smoothed her hair back. “You have a date to the Christmas dance,” she said. “So maybe it’s okay to just go out with lots of different boys.”

“Yeah.” Lynn timer looked back at the screen. She’d accepted the invitation Isaac Witherby had extended to the Christmas formal, and she and Hilde had already started searching for a dress, though the dance wasn’t for another month. But she didn’t like Isaac the way she liked Harry—and Gabe didn’t blame her. Harry was a handsome kid, talented, and fun to be around.

He didn’t know how to bridge that gap, or even if he should, so he took

Hilde's hand in his, and said, "I'm sorry about the flirting, Lynn timer. I just love your mom so much."

She smiled softly at him, and even Lynn timer sighed as she sank back into the couch. Gabe leaned over and kissed Hilde, very aware of where he sat and who surrounded him. "Love you, honey," he said. "This is the best birthday I've had in ages."

"Love you too," she whispered, and he knew what it cost her to say those words. Hilde never said anything she didn't one-hundred percent mean, and he felt the weight of her declaration sink all the way down into his soul.

Then he took the remote control from Lynn timer gently and restarted the movie. "We'll be quiet now, I swear."

Just as fast as it had started to play, he stopped it again. "Oh, wait. One more thing." He looked at Hilde. "I talked to Andy about houses here now that I have an offer in on mine in Jackson, and he says he's found three here that he wants us to see. When can you go?"

Hilde's eyes filled with happiness and excitement, and she pulled her phone out from underneath her thigh. "Oh, Mindie texted from the store."

"Don't look at it," Gabe and Lynn timer said in tandem, and they smiled at one another.

"Your calendar, honey," Gabe said, reaching for her phone. "Should I check it?"

"No," she said, pulling her phone out of his reach. "I can go any evening this week and any time on Tuesday next week."

Gabe extracted his own phone and sent a text to Andy. "Great. Done."

"Where are the houses?" Lynn timer asked.

"I don't know," Gabe said. "Here in town. Now, can we watch this movie or what? I've been waiting all day." He grinned as Lynn timer rolled her eyes and Hilde scoffed again.

"Daddy, *you're* the one being so loud," Liesl said very matter-of-factly, and that caused everyone to go into another uproar of laughter.

GABE PEERED THROUGH THE WINDOW, THE HOUSE HE AND HILDE HAD COME to see obscured by the falling snow. "This is it," he said.

As he brought his truck to a stop, Hilde looked out her window too. "It's

really big, Gabe.”

“We have two girls,” he said. “Of wildly different ages. And even if we get married tomorrow and then get pregnant the next day, Liesl is still going to be six years older than any sibling.” He reached over and took Hilde’s hand in his. She didn’t look at him, because Hilde avoided eye contact when conversations got hard.

Gabe knew that about her now, and he could read her tells so well. He loved observing her and learning more and more about what made her tick. When she was ready to talk about something, boy could she speak her mind. She didn’t stutter or flinch at hard topics then. Sometimes she just needed to work up to them.

“Are you sure we can afford this?”

Gabe thought about the offer that had come in on his house in Jackson. He’d made over a million dollars on it, because he’d bought in a buyer’s market, and they’d moved into a seller’s since then.

He and Hilde weren’t married yet—they weren’t even engaged—so he hadn’t disclosed all of his finances to her. Maybe now was a good time for that. “Hilde-honey,” he said, putting her name with his preferred term of endearment. “Look at me for a sec.”

She did, but her eyes weren’t open all the way. Gabe decided to tell her anyway. “I’m making over a million dollars in equity on the house in Jackson. I’m going to sell the townhome too, and while I won’t get as much for it, I’ll have a little more than I paid for it.” He watched her eyes widen as what he’d said sunk in. “Not only that, but I could afford the house in Jackson just fine, because my firm represents some high-end clients, and we charge, uh, high-end prices.”

“I already know you’re rich.” And she didn’t seem impressed by it.

“You asked,” he said. “I’m telling you. I also do investment management for several clients, including a couple of my brothers. I make a percentage off their money, and it alone could uh, pay for...things.”

Hilde blinked and then started laughing. “You’re *telling*.” She scoffed again. “You’re hemming and hawing, Mister Young.”

“I make one percent off Luke and Blaze, and they both have over half a billion dollars invested,” he said, feeling grumpier than he had in a long time. “Is that what you want to hear?”

She sobered but said nothing.

Gabe sighed and ducked his head, a small smile playing with his lips,

because he knew what she was doing. “You’re trying to figure out how much one percent of one billion is,” he said. She raised her eyebrows, but Gabe wasn’t going to tell her he made ten million annually off Luke and Blaze alone. He worked for that money, and those two accounts alone cost him hours and hours of time and plenty of worry.

“It’s a lot. We can afford this. Now, come on. Andy just dashed through this snowstorm, and we have one more house to see after this one.”

He exited the vehicle and felt like running too. Instead, he rounded the truck and helped Hilde down. Then together, they hurried up the front walk to the two-story house that felt like it was out in the middle of the woods. It wasn’t; it just sat on thirteen acres of land, which meant the nearest neighbor wasn’t that near.

The house wasn’t in a gated community either, but it was a planned housing development on the northwest side of town that bordered the National Forest. Ten to twenty acre lots, beautiful homes, and HOA with snow removal in the winter and dust control for the roads in the summer. Any improvements on the property or any structures that were built or added onto had to meet approval of the board and put for vote in the community.

It sounded stuffy to Gabe, though he’d literally just left a community similar to this one.

Hilde reached the safety of the front porch first, and she paused before opening the door and going inside the house. “I like this, Gabe. It feels welcoming.”

The front porch was big, expanding left and right around the front door, which was the width of two doors. Tall, slender glass panels flanked the door, and Gabe liked that too. He could just see Liesl peeking through the custom-fitted blinds to see which of her uncles or cousins had come to visit.

Whoever owned the house now had set up a pair of chairs with puffy cushions, and since furniture was Hilde’s love language, they’d already started sucking her in. Gabe placed a kiss on her temple and said, “Let’s see more than the front porch, okay?”

He opened the door and called, “Andy?”

“Straight back,” his realtor called. “Take your time getting to me.”

Gabe stepped out of the way and let Hilde enter the house before he closed the door, sealing out the storm. “So we’ve just gotten home from work,” he prompted. The foyer held two-story ceilings above and tile at their feet below. To his right sat an office, and Gabe could admit he started

coveting it the moment he stepped into it and the lights brightened automatically.

“That’s a nice touch,” he murmured. The back wall had built-in bookcases from floor to ceiling, and a window took up the entire wall to his right. “I love this office.”

“That’s too bad,” Hilde said. “Because this one’s mine.”

Gabe whipped his attention to her as she strode past him and went further into the office. “Just imagine all of my fabric sample binders in this bookcase.” She turned to him with wonder in her eyes.

“You don’t even work from home,” he said.

“Do you or do you not have someone finding you commercial space downtown?” Hilde cocked her hip and put one hand on it. “Mister I-make-one-percent-on-a-billion-dollar-investment. That’s ten million dollars per year, Gabe.”

“You don’t have to sound upset about it,” he said. “I need this office for that investment planning.” He caught her around the waist and pulled her flush against him. “I have seven clients, and I have to earn that money, honey. It doesn’t just flow to me.”

She snorted and didn’t put her arms around him, but Gabe grinned down at her nonetheless. “You can have this office,” he said. “There’s one at the back of the house too, and maybe I’ll like that one more.”

“You will not,” she said with a sigh. “Plus, this is perfect for client meetings.”

Gabe had looked at the pictures of this place until he had them memorized. The office off the back of the dining room wasn’t as airy as this one, though it had a view of the forest. It wasn’t as big either, and he didn’t remember seeing built-ins like this.

Hilde went past him to exit the office, and Gabe took one last look at the grandeur of this place. It was definitely a whole flight of steps up from the house they’d just looked at, as Andy had said it would be.

They passed a powder room and plenty of beautiful wainscoting on their way toward the back of the house, which opened up to an enormous great room. The house was empty right now, and it looked massively huge.

“How will we fill this with furniture?” he asked, trying to imagine how much space a sectional would take up. Not nearly enough space, and he wondered if Hilde was right, if this house was too big.

“Gee, I wonder where we’ll find some amazing *furniture* pieces for this

place,” Hilde said.

Gabe frowned at her. “You’re salty today.”

She didn’t answer as she turned toward the gourmet kitchen and dining room that took up the back of the house behind the office. It exited to a utility room and then a four-car garage, which he found perfect for the family he was trying to build. Busy parents and kids, in and out of the wilderness, home from school and work, with a fifteen-year-old who’d be learning to drive in the coming weeks.

Gabe walked through all of it while Hilde opened the robin’s egg blue, pale blue cupboards and asked Andy about soft-close drawers and cabinets. When he re-entered the kitchen, Hilde met his eyes and then flew into his arms.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I don’t know why I’m so salty about this place. It’s fantastic.”

Gabe gazed down at her, his mind working overtime to sift through six months of conversations they’d had. “You’re scared.”

“You’re a billionaire and didn’t tell me.”

He grinned and shook his head. “Do you know how many millions a billion is? It’s one thousand million,” he said. “I’m nowhere near the level of Luke or Blaze.”

“I’m still reeling over the fact that the Country Quad boys are billionaires.”

“Only a couple of them,” he said. “Mav’s not. Morris isn’t. Tex and Otis have their money somewhere else, so I don’t know about them. But Luke and Trace are. This summer’s tour was very lucrative for them.”

“I suppose so,” she said. “I just feel...inadequate.”

Gabe laced his fingers through hers and took her toward the back windows. “Great yard,” he said almost under his breath. “I can see Liesl having her birthday parties here. Or hosting the whole family for a Sunday barbecue.”

“Mm.” Hilde’s hand in his tightened. “I’m not scared of us,” she said. “I love you. I just....”

Gabe cut a look at her out of the corner of his eye. “Surely you have plenty of money from the store.”

“Enough,” she said. “Yes.”

“So I have plenty of money from the firm,” he said.

“Which one?” she asked, her eyes telling him that he should’ve told her

about his financial planning business sooner.

“Don’t be mad at me,” he said. “I have said several times that I’m going over reports before we can meet for lunch or whatever.”

“You have.” She gave him a soft smile. “I really like this house.”

“So do I,” he said. “Let’s look at the rest of it. Maybe the bathrooms will be ridiculous like they were in the last place.” He gave her a soft smile and then faced Andy. “Lead on, Andrew. And talk to us about this place.”

“I think you’re really going to like the master suite,” he said as he led them across the cavernous family room. “It has a second washer and dryer, as well as a back exit to a private and covered jacuzzi.”

“I like the sound of that,” Hilde said.

Gabe did too, and he kept his hand in Hilde’s for as much of the tour as he could. When they got back in his truck, she didn’t even have to say anything for him to know what she was thinking.

“You want that house,” he said.

“Anyone would want that house,” she said, still looking at it as she tried to buckle her seatbelt.

“We have one more to see,” he said. “And maybe more. We don’t have to buy the second one we look at.”

“Okay,” she said, and Gabe pulled away from the curb, already following Andy to the next showing. He had a suspicion that they’d be buying that thirteen-acre-house, but Hilde had surprised him before.

Maybe she would again.



Georgia Young finished putting the finishing touches on her son's birthday cake, the spot between her shoulder blades aching. "There," she said, but no one responded.

For one, Otis had gone to help Jem with his kids, and he'd taken OJ and Joey with him. Georgia had been home alone for the past hour, and she looked past the chocolate layer cake she'd just finished decorating with smashed cookie crumbs to simulate dirt and a bright yellow plastic truck which dug into it.

OJ loved trucks and mimicking the sounds they made, and Georgia loved the little boy with her whole heart. He was turning one year old today, and everyone in the Young family—close and extended—would be here within the half-hour. So would her parents and her brother and his family.

She gazed around at the house she, Otis, and Joey had decorated for Christmas, noting that the blue decor for the birthday party clashed with all the red and green.

A dog barked, startling her, and Georgia said, "Hush, Ruby. It's probably Daddy."

Sure enough, she heard the garage door finish opening, and several seconds later, Joey pushed into the house, her daddy only a step or two behind her. He carried the chubby one-year-old, and Georgia grinned at both of them.

"How's Jem?" she asked.

Otis smiled at her, but it looked guarded. "He's showering, but he

promised he'd be on time." He let the garage door slam closed behind him. "Blaze is going to bring him."

"Sounds good." Georgia nodded to her husband as the dogs swarmed. Her two cats had hidden themselves when the balloons had come out, and she'd put the dogs in the master when the party started.

"Come here, baby," she cooed to her son. The doorbell rang, and Ruby and Isla flew into a barking frenzy again. "I'm sure it's a serial killer," she yelled at them. "Go get 'im. Go on."

The dogs ran toward the front door, Joey hot on their heels. Otis exchanged a worried glance with Georgia before he followed the dogs and his daughter. Suddenly, Georgia's stomach felt like she'd swallowed a jar full of jumping beans.

Otis's deep voice carried to the back of the house from the front, and another male voice joined his.

"Georgia, cousin Bryce is here," Joey said as she raced back into the kitchen.

Georgia put the brightest smile on her face that she could. "Is he? Did you ask him if he wanted something to drink?"

Before Joey could return to the foyer to find out, both Otis and Bryce entered the back of the house. Most of the space had been crammed full of tables and chairs, as no amount of outdoor heaters could keep winter temperatures in Wyoming on Christmas Eve bearable.

Bryce's eyes skimmed right over OJ, as they usually did, and landed on Georgia. "Hey, Aunt Georgia," he said, his voice perfectly pleasant. Pure nervous energy radiated from him, however, and Georgia knew better than to believe that he felt as confident as he looked.

"Hello, baby." Her smile relaxed into something more genuine, and she looked down at OJ. "Look who it is, OJ. It's your cousin." She grinned at the baby, who flailed one of his arms.

They'd invited Bryce to the house early, been extremely clear about why they wanted him to come, and both she and Otis had been shocked when he'd agreed.

"Do you want to hold him?" she asked, because she had no script for this. Bryce didn't live in Coral Canyon right now, but he'd been around OJ a few times now since giving him to Otis and Georgia to raise.

He'd never once held the child.

"Oh, I don't—"

Georgia slid OJ into Bryce's arms, effectively silencing him. "I know you're good with babies. Come on. It'll be okay." She gave him another smile, this one wobbling on her face as her emotions piled into her throat and nose.

Bryce was the oldest of all the Young cousins, and it was safe to say he'd held a great many of his cousins when they were babies. This one just happened to also be his biological son.

He held OJ on his hip like he'd done it a thousand times in the past year, and he gazed at the child with pure love and wonder on his face. Georgia retreated to Otis's side, where she leaned into him as he put his arm around her.

"Look at them," she whispered.

OJ was theirs; she knew that. They'd finalized his adoption in court in September, once the tour had ended. She loved him like she'd carried him and given birth to him, and Otis did too.

But so did Bryce.

"Come over here and tell me about this horse farm in Louisville," Otis said, and that got Bryce to look their way. They all moved into the living room, and Bryce sat in the rocking chair with OJ. The little boy imitated a sack of flour, always molding to whoever carried or held him.

Bryce was no exception, and OJ sagged back into his chest, his chubby fingers wrapped around Bryce's pointer finger. "The horse farm is great, Uncle Otis," he said. "I really like it there. So much more than the sports bar."

"Are you sad you're not in Nashville anymore?" Georgia asked. She couldn't help comparing the differences and similarities in OJ and Bryce. They had the same dark hair—but all the Youngs had shades of brown hair and eyes.

Still, there was something about OJ that simply spoke of Bryce, and Georgia slipped her hand into Otis's and squeezed. She wasn't sure what she was trying to say, only that she knew Otis would understand.

He squeezed back while Bryce said, "Nah, I'm not supposed to be in Nashville right now." Ruby went right up to him and put her face on his vacant thigh, and he chuckled and rubbed the dog with his free hand.

"She'll try to climb onto your lap," Georgia warned as Ruby indeed tried to do that.

Bryce laughed as he pushed the dog down. "Go on, now," he said, and

Georgia definitely thought he'd developed a bit of a Southern twang. He looked down at OJ again, then leaned over and pressed his lips to the little boy's head.

Tears filled Georgia's eyes, and Otis said, "We got the adoption finalized, Bryce."

"My dad told me," he said quietly without looking up at them. He toed himself and OJ back and forth slowly, the rhythmic quality of the movement very calming and peaceful.

Otis glanced at Georgia, and she nodded. "I guess we want to know what you'd like us to do." He cleared his throat. "See, Georgia and I, we'd like to be open with him about things. Tell him that he's adopted. That he's yours and Bailey's biologically, but that well, that we're his parents. That he's *our* son."

Bryce looked up about halfway through Otis's explanation, his eyes wide. "I—I haven't thought about it."

"It's not a closed adoption," Georgia said. "We want you to be in his life as much as you want to be." Seeing as how this was literally the first time Bryce had held his own son, she didn't think it would be much. At least not right now.

OJ tried to put Bryce's finger in his mouth, and Georgia retrieved a set of plastic keys to spare Bryce. With OJ flapping those about noisily, they all smiled.

"You're his parents," Bryce said. "You should do what you think is right."

"Can I take a picture of the two of you?" Otis asked. "Then we can show him, since you know, you're not—since you don't live here right now."

Bryce swallowed, the first sign of nerves Georgia had truly seen. He smiled like he'd just won the lottery, and Georgia was glad to see the glimmer of joy in his eyes. He'd lost that for a while in the past couple of years, and she knew what that felt like.

Otis took several pictures; Georgia wiped her eyes; Bryce leaned over and kissed his boy again.

"Hey, hey, hey," someone called. Tex. "I see my son's truck outside, and—oh."

Georgia sniffled as she swung around to find Tex stalled in the doorway, his baby girl on his hip. "Bwyce," Melissa said in her cute little girl voice. She'd be two years old in a couple of months, and she squirmed to be put

down. “Daddy, Bwyce. Bwyce.”

“Yeah, go get him,” Tex said as he set her on her feet. She ran through the kitchen and into the living room, where Bryce picked her up with his free hand.

He held her on one leg and OJ on the other while she showed him the pony on her T-shirt, already talking his ear off about it.

Georgia grinned and grinned, because they were just so cute together. They all belonged to each other, and she didn’t chastise Otis when he took a few more pictures of Bryce with his half-sister and his son.

“He’s here early,” Tex said, total surprise in his voice.

“We invited him,” Otis said. “We wanted to talk to him about the adoption.”

“I told him about the court date,” Tex said, frowning as he came around the couches closer to where Georgia and Otis sat. He perched on the arm of the sofa, seemingly unable to tear his eyes from the kids across from him. They all came from him—all three of them—and Georgia could only guess at what Tex felt and thought about the scene in front of him.

“Yeah, I know,” Otis said. “We want to be open with OJ that he’s adopted.”

Tex swung his attention toward them now. “You do? I thought the whole point was that he looks like—” His eyes darted over to Bryce, who tipped his head back and laughed at something his sister had said or done. “Us. You guys. He looks like a Young.”

“He *is* a Young,” Otis said. “And we want him to know who his genes belong to, and which family he belongs to. Just because those two things are different, doesn’t mean he shouldn’t know the truth.”

Tex sighed and ran his hand along the side of his face. “I don’t know, Otis. I don’t get the point of telling him. He’d never know otherwise.”

“Well, it’s not up to you,” Otis said.

“What did Bryce say?”

Before Georgia could explain that of course OJ would know he didn’t come from her and Otis—there were no pregnancy pictures. No pictures of her lying in a hospital bed with her son on her chest. No hospital wristbands—another greeting got called from the front hallway.

She leaned over and kissed Otis quickly, whispered, “Don’t argue with him for too long,” and then got to her feet. After all, this was her son’s first birthday party, and she needed to be a good hostess for the hoard of family

about to descend upon the house.



Tex woke up to a shrill shriek. A few seconds later, Melissa came running into the bedroom. “Momma, Momma, Momma,” she said in a fake whisper that sounded like a shout. “Santa, Momma! Wake up, Daddy. Daddy!”

She climbed onto the end of the bed and crawled toward him and Abby, who groaned. He opened his eyes and smiled at his darling daughter as she reached him.

“Come, Daddy,” she said. “Santa come. Pwesents.”

“What number is on the clock, baby?” he asked, his voice sounding deeper than it normally did. That meant it was really early.

“It’s a six, Dad,” Bryce said as he came into the bedroom too. “I’ll take her and start the coffee. Come on, Mel.”

She launched herself into her brother’s arms, and the two of them left the master suite.

Abby murmured, “We have five minutes to get out there, or we’re going to be bombarded again.”

“So wake me up in four minutes,” Tex muttered back to her.

She whisper-laughed and rolled toward him. Tex took her into his arms and held her against his heartbeat. “Merry Christmas, Abs.”

“It’s her first real one,” she said.

Last Christmas, Melissa had been nine months old, and they’d gone next door to Wade and Cheryl’s to celebrate the holiday. OJ had just been born, and things had been so...fractured.

“Yeah.” Tex managed to match his mouth to Abby’s without opening his eyes, but he only kissed her for a couple of seconds. “Do you want another baby, my love?”

“Mm.” Abby nestled further into his embrace. “I wouldn’t say no to one.”

Tex had just signed a contract for another album, but he had a system in place that wouldn’t take him from home too often. Abby, Bryce, and Melissa had come with him on tour this year, and he figured they could again.

“All right.” He gently disentangled himself from his wife, rolled over, and sat up on the edge of the bed. “We don’t want any coups this morning, so let’s get this done with.”

“We can nap later,” she said.

She might actually do it too. Tex wouldn’t, because Bryce was home for only a few more days, and Tex didn’t want to miss a single minute of his son’s time in town by sleeping.

In fact, they had plans to go horseback riding that afternoon, and then they were going to look at a dog at the police canine training facility that Ames Hammond ran. Apparently, Ames had started training therapy dogs instead of law enforcement canines, and Bryce thought he was ready to take care of a dog.

He had a job now where he could take the canine with him, and Ames trained his dogs really well. Just the way Franny sat at attention on the exact spot where the living room floor met the kitchen tile spoke of that. She never went into the kitchen unless invited.

“Good girl,” he said to her as he ruffled her ears. “Oh, something smells good out here.”

Bryce smiled as he indicated the mugs on the countertop. He’d gotten out the flavored creams too, as well as the sugar bowl and several spoons.

“Don’t touch them, Mel,” he said as he sat down at the dining room table. “You have to wait until we’re all ready.”

“This for Fwanny,” she chirped anyway, and Tex grinned at her as she toddled over to the German shepherd and cooed at her that she’d gotten a gift from Santa Claus.

Tex went into the kitchen to pour himself a cup of coffee, his heart already so full after last night’s birthday party. Seeing his son holding OJ... Tex’s eyes misted as he stirred sugar into his mug.

He didn’t understand why Otis and Georgia wanted to tell OJ much of anything. The boy would literally never know he wasn’t their biological child

unless someone told him.

Otis had said Tex didn't have to understand, and he'd left it at that. Tex supposed he better figure out where Otis and Georgia were coming from before he made any judgments, and he finished fixing his coffee the way he liked it, then he did the same for Abby. He put his on the table too and took Abby's down the hall to see what was keeping her. "Abs?"

"I'm coming," she said from the direction of the bathroom, and Tex waited for her to come out. When she did, she smiled as she took the coffee from him. "Thank you. You're a lifesaver."

"You didn't have to get dressed," he said, taking in the oversized red Christmas sweater and jeggings.

"It's Christmas morning," she said. "Of course I did." She sipped her coffee and left the bedroom. Out in the living room, she gasped like she'd never seen a wrapped box before.

"Santa, Momma!" Melissa ran toward her, and Abby barely had time to set her coffee on the side table before her daughter reached her. "Look—presents."

"I see them, baby," she said.

Tex and Abby had stayed up late to fan them all out, and he could admit there were far too many. The wrapped boxes and bags and trinkets extended a good five feet beyond the lower branches of the pine tree he'd gone up into the mountains with his brothers to cut down, and at least Abby had done most of the wrapping.

"Let's see if our boys are ready," she said, and Tex's heart automatically pinched at the thought of the little boy who wasn't here with them who could've been.

OJ.

The pain only stayed for a moment this time. A mere whisper. A ghost of past heartache, leaving behind an echo that spoke the truth to Tex about where OJ was right now—and that it was exactly where he should be.

With his family.

He wanted to talk to Bryce some more about the topics Otis and Georgia had brought up, but the birthday party had gone pretty late, and then he'd been focused on getting the presents out so he could go to bed at a decent hour for this early-morning present unwrapping.

"Are Grandma and Grandpa coming?" Bryce asked.

"No," Tex said. "I think they're headed to Jem's this morning." His

parents had gone to Mav's last year for present opening on Christmas morning. "We're eating breakfast with Uncle Wade and Aunt Cheryl, and we'll have Christmas dinner over at Blaze's later tonight."

"Harry said he could come horseback riding if that's still okay," Bryce said. "And to look at the dogs."

"It is," Tex said.

"Come on, you two," Abby said. "There are gifts here for you."

Melissa toddled around, putting the presents in piles, precisely the way Abby told her to. Tex gestured for Bryce to get up first, and he did. He moved into the living room and sat in front of the increasing pile of gifts Abby had deemed his.

Tex watched his almost twenty-one-year-old son fold his tall body into a seated position on the floor, lean against the couch behind him, and grin at Abby and Melissa.

"Tex," Abby said at the same time Melissa and Bryce said, "Daddy."

"Come *on*," Melissa added with urgency on her face that reminded Tex so much of Abby. "Presents."

"Yeah, I know," he said chuckling as he moved to sit on the couch. "Wow, looks like we have a *very* good little girl who lives here."

Melissa grinned and grinned, and Abby let her open the first present for Christmas that year.



“Hey there, Lucky,” Bryce said to the golden retriever as he exited the house where Ames Hammond ran his administrative operation for his canine training facilities.

Dad was signing all the paperwork so Bryce could take Lucky home with him, and the joyous golden came trotting toward him. He chuckled as he crouched down to receive affection from the dog.

“You’re going to be leaving all your friends,” he said as he scrubbed the dog’s ears. “But you’ll have me, and we’ll meet lots of new people in Louisville.”

He’d already cleared bringing a dog to the horse farm where he worked. They didn’t raise horses, but trained them, boarded them, and cared for them. Several dogs roamed the grounds from what Bryce had seen in the past few months since he’d made the move to Louisville and started his job, and he wanted a canine of his own.

He could admit he wanted someone to be excited when he came home in the evening, and a dog always was. He lived with two other men in the provided housing, and he had his own bedroom and bathroom he was expected to take care of and keep clean.

“Yeah, that’s a good boy,” he said fondly to the golden retriever. Lucky had a lot of energy—more than a calm, steady therapy dog should have. He’d failed in his training with Ames early on, but the man had kept him and taught him several useful commands, as well as plenty about how to behave. He’d be an excellent pet and a good addition around the farm, and Bryce’s

excitement for the trip home grew.

“Just me and you for a while, bud.”

“So he’s still the one, is he?” Ames asked.

Bryce looked up as he continued rubbing Lucky’s face. “Yeah, I think so. I sure like him.”

“He sure likes you.” Ames smiled at both Lucky and Bryce, who stood. “Got your paperwork squared away.” He shook Bryce’s hand. “I understand a happy birthday is in order.”

Bryce smiled at Ames. “Thank you, sir.” He looked over his shoulder. “I guess my daddy isn’t comin’ out.” He wasn’t really asking.

“He got a phone call,” Ames said. “He said he’d wait in the truck.”

Bryce nodded and took the leash from Ames. “Thank you again. I’m gonna take real good care of him.”

“He’ll love Louisville,” Ames said. He knelt down in front of his dog too and took the hound’s face in his hands. “You be the best boy in the world for Bryce, okay? He’s taking you to big fields, with lots of horses and other dogs. You’ll fit right in.” He leaned over and kissed the dog right on the top of the head.

Surprise darted through Bryce, because Ames was a retired cop and a tough dog trainer. He obviously loved his animals though, and Bryce couldn’t fault him for that.

He affixed the leash to Lucky’s collar, and the dog walked right at his side as he went around the building to the tiny parking lot out front. Dad’s mouth moved from inside the truck, and Bryce hurried his step when the sun disappeared behind a cloud.

Winter in Wyoming was no joke, and while he’d enjoyed horseback riding on Christmas Day, he’d nearly been frozen by the time they’d returned.

He fed his horses morning and night in the chilly darkness too, and that was one thing he wouldn’t have to do once he returned to the South. Guilt battered him from all sides as he opened the back door of his father’s truck and told Lucky to “Get in, boy.”

The dog jumped in without another prompt, and Bryce threw the leash in after him. When he sat in the passenger seat, his dad said, “Bryce is back, Luke. Let’s talk later, okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” Luke muttered, and the call ended.

Bryce looked over to his dad. “I can wait outside.”

“It’s just Luke,” Dad said as he put the truck in reverse. “He has...a lot on his mind, and Mandi wants Corrine this upcoming summer.”

“Oh, wow,” Bryce said. “I didn’t think she was in the picture.”

“She’s not. Or she hasn’t been.” Dad sighed. “But she *is* Corrine’s mother, and Luke has no real reason why she can’t see her daughter.”

“Sure he does,” Bryce said.

“How do you figure?” Dad glanced over to him. “And don’t think that just because you rode next to Harry, and then spent the night at your uncle’s house, that you don’t have to talk to me about this adoption thing.”

“Dad.” Bryce rolled his head to stretch his neck. “There’s nothing to say there.”

“We’ll get to it. First, tell me why Luke shouldn’t let Mandi see Corrine.”

Bryce looked out his window, his own feelings for his mother crowding into his head. He didn’t have the best of relationships with her, but he didn’t know how to articulate things the right way.

To be perfectly honest, Bryce didn’t have very many good relationships with women at all, and he frowned. Not true, he thought. He loved Abby and had a great relationship with her. His aunts. His grandmother.

“Well, I just think—” He paused for a moment, trying to find the right way to say this so it wouldn’t hurt his father. “Sometimes no relationship with a parent is better than a fake one. Or one that hurts a kid. Or one that causes them fear or harm.”

“You think Corrine would be afraid of Mandi? Or be in danger?” The way Dad spoke, he disagreed with Bryce if he really thought either of those things.

Bryce said, “I think Corrine is seven years old and Uncle Luke has been takin’ care of her exclusively for over three years. She might not have many memories of her mother, and yeah, going hundreds of miles to *another country* might be scary for her.”

“Huh.” Dad said nothing else, and Bryce was fine to ride in silence. In the back, Lucky panted, but he’d laid down on the long bench seat, and Bryce grinned at him again.

“Dad, I really appreciate you takin’ care of my horses for me,” he said.

“I’m happy to do it.”

“Thank you for Lucky.”

Dad grinned and cuffed Bryce on the back of the head. “Happy twenty-first birthday, buddy.”

Bryce smiled too, and his was as real and as big as his father's. Maybe the first real, big smile he'd accomplished in the past couple of years. "I know there's a surprise party waiting for me at the farmhouse."

"I—that is not true," Dad said, but he was not a good liar.

Bryce laughed and said, "I heard Abby talking about it with Aunt Cheryl. It's so true."

"You're turning twenty-one," Dad said by way of explanation. "If you were still working at that sports bar, I'd finally be able to sleep at night, unworried about you getting arrested."

Bryce said nothing about the job at his age and his former job. Instead, he said, "I really like it in Louisville, Dad. A lot."

His father sighed and draped his hand over the wheel as he continued driving. "I know, son. I can see it in your face whenever you talk about it."

"I'm happier this year."

"You sure are." He looked at Bryce again. "You're still seeing the therapist?"

"Yes, sir," Bryce said. "I don't know—I mean, how do you know when you're ready to stop seeing your therapist?"

"I don't know, son," Dad said. "I think for a man like you, you'll just know."

"What does that mean?" he asked. "A man like me?"

"It means, son, that you have an excellent head on your shoulders. You know how to listen to God, and then you do what He says. So you'll know." Dad looked over to him again, pure vulnerability riding in his expression. "You're so good, you know. I don't worry about you doing the right thing at all."

"Except for the sports bar thing."

Dad shook his head, but his smile softened the action. "Yeah, except for that."

"And the getting-my-girlfriend-pregnant thing." Bryce couldn't believe he'd made it to the point where he could joke about this. He couldn't really, and he said, "I didn't mean that," in a near-whisper.

Dad cut a look over to him. "Bryce, you've repented of that. You've worked dang hard to fix it. To make right what went wrong. How can anyone be upset by it?"

Bryce didn't answer but just looked out his window at the rolling landscape. Snow draped over everything, and he shivered just thinking about

getting out of the truck.

“How are you feeling about what your aunt and uncle want to do?” Dad asked.

“Dad, he’s their son,” Bryce said with quiet conviction. “They want the adoption to be open, so it’s gonna be open. Neither Laney or I wanted it closed, and that means Uncle Otis and Aunt Georgia can tell OJ whatever they want. Whatever he asks about.” He looked at his daddy, wishing he wasn’t driving. “I’m really okay with it. Are you?”

“I’m working on it,” Dad muttered, and Bryce couldn’t ask for more than that. Heaven above knew Bryce had asked for and received the favor of more time to work through something more than he probably should’ve.

“Don’t give Uncle Otis a hard time about it,” Bryce said. “If there’s something he’s telling OJ, it’s because he and Georgia think it’s the right thing to do.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right.” Dad still sighed like he wished the adoption were closed and that OJ would never know he didn’t carry Otis and Georgia’s genes in his veins.

He turned the corner onto Mountain View Road, and their farm sat down it about a mile. “Good news is that I got the Hammond boy back as a guitar student,” Bryce said brightly. “I like doing the lessons too.”

“I’m glad, son.” And when he spoke with such fondness, Bryce didn’t doubt his father at all. “Now, you act good and surprised for your stepmother and your aunts. Ya’hear?”

Bryce laughed at the sudden sternness in his dad’s tone. “Yeah, okay,” he said. “The last thing I want is you getting in trouble for telling me about the party.”

“I didn’t tell you about the party,” he said.

“Didn’t you?”

“Bryce,” Dad warned as he turned into the driveway. At least half a dozen trucks had been parked in the one next door or in front of the farmhouse.

“Dad, look at this place.” He gestured to all the vehicles, the footsteps and paw prints in the snow. “It’s obvious everyone and their brother and their mother and their dogs are here. Does Abby really think it’s going to be a surprise?”

“Have you met Abby?”

They laughed together, and Bryce felt more like himself than he ever had. His true self. His authentic self. He felt older too, more mature, and while

he'd never minded having a late December birthday, for the first time, Bryce wanted to move into the New Year as a real adult—one who was healthy and whole, mentally and physically. One who was ready for the next challenge life might throw at him.

Because he was finally ready.

“All right, boy,” he said to Lucky. “Let’s go meet the crazy.” He got out of the truck and retrieved his dog from the back. They followed Dad up the side steps and into the kitchen, where not a peep could be heard.

“Abs,” Dad called. “We’re back.”

Bryce did hear someone shush another person then, and then he heard his baby sister say, “Bwyce back, Momma.”

A baby fussed as Bryce walked through the galley kitchen, and when he reached the end of it, he expected to see every aunt, uncle, and cousin crammed into the small living room at the front of the farmhouse.

He did, his daddy hurrying to fill the spot Abby had left for him in the group.

“Surprise!” they all shouted together, with the littler kids yelling it too late so that it sounded like “Surprise-prise-prise-prise!” as child-like voices joined in too late.

Tears rushed into Bryce’s eyes, and he swore someone opened a door to heaven and let just a little taste of pure love and belonging ease into the farmhouse that morning.

He’d always felt like he belonged in Dad’s family, but this was like God Himself confirming how very important he was here. He loved these people, and they all loved and accepted him too, even at his worst.

“Thank you,” he said. “Guys, this is Lucky. Lucky, this is....” He looked up and at all the smiling faces. Abby wiped her eyes too, and that only sent Bryce’s tears running down his face.

“This is everyone,” he finished right before his stepmother engulfed him in a hug that left little doubt in his mind that he could return home any old time he wanted. Abby had told him that many times in the past, but he’d never truly *felt* it until this moment.

“I love you,” she said into his ear as others came forward and voices filled the air. “Happy birthday, Bryce.”

“Thank you, Abs,” he said. “I love you too.”

He went around the room, hugging everyone and accepting their well-wishes. He noticed that Lucky never got too far from him, and he stuck

especially close when the pizzas finally got delivered.

He ended up sitting between his daddy and Harry to eat, and he grinned at his cousin, who smiled back. “Bryce,” he said.

“Yep.”

“Will you come back for my sixteenth birthday?”

It felt like someone had pressed pause on the party. Several people around Bryce stopped talking, and they all seemed to be looking at him. Not breathing.

He hated causing reactions like this, and then he wondered if the way life had moved into slow motion had only happened for him.

“Yeah, of course,” he said. “That’s a big milestone.” He picked up his phone from where it lay face-down on the table. “When is it?” He swiped to unlock his phone as he said, “I mean, I know your birthday is next month, but when is...the...party....”

His thoughts got slower and slower as he saw the message from Bailey. *Happy birthday, Bryce! I sure do miss you, and I hope you’re having a great day. Call me later, would you?*

He hadn’t spoken to her in a few months now—not since he’d spoken to her parents at Blaze’s wedding. Bailey never talked to them, and he’d called her and argued with her about why she should.

It hadn’t gone well, and they’d been silent with each other since.

“January twenty-fifth,” Harry said, and Bryce blinked away from Bailey’s texts.

“I’ll ask for it off, okay?” He put the event in his phone and shoved it in his back pocket. Had Laney and Graham told Bailey that Bryce was eating breakfast with them tomorrow on his way out of town? He hadn’t specifically asked them not to....

“Okay,” Abby said in a loud voice. “It’s time for the cake. Time for the cake! Everyone quiet down.”

Someone whisked away Bryce’s empty paper plate while someone else killed the lights. The candles on the cake had already been lit, and he basked in the firelight as Dad said, “One, two, three,” and then drew in a big breath.

“Happy Birthday to you,” everyone sang, and Bryce pushed away everything that scared him or made him nervous. After all, this was his birthday, and he was with his family, and nothing bad could touch him right now.



Hilde looked at the slips of paper in her hand. “All right, everyone,” she said to the room at the community center. “It’s time for our final item on today’s agenda.” She ran the Small Business Owners Association meeting today, the first one of this new year. “We need to vote on our new President, who will serve throughout the year.”

She read through the names again. “We’ve got Sterling Boyd, who owns Deep Purple.” She flashed a smile at the curly-haired blonde who couldn’t be older than thirty. “Nathan Houser, who owns Hot Dog Heaven.” She nodded to the portly man in the first row, doing her best to show no bias. “And Sally Benson, who owns A Cut Above.”

Hilde turned and picked up a fistful of pencils. “You get one vote. Put it in the box on your way out, and our governing board will—”

The door opened and a man came jogging inside. Jogging, which was why Hilde got interrupted.

Not just any man.

“Gabe?” she asked, but she knew instinctually that he wasn’t Gabe. Morris wore the designer suit, though. The shiny shoes. His hair swept just-so to the right and that classic frown between his eyebrows.

“I need you for a second, Hilde,” he said.

“Now?” She could barely look away from Gabe-Morris, because she suddenly couldn’t tell who it was. “We’re voting.”

“Two minutes,” he said.

They’d be done by then, but Hilde handed the ballots to the woman who

owned a pet grooming salon and the pencils to Nathan before following one of the twins.

Definitely Morris, she thought as she watched him stride toward the exit in front of her. Gabe usually walked with more swagger, and his legs always seemed to eat up more distance than Morris's.

He pushed open the door and held it for Hilde, who entered the hall at a full-speed walk. She immediately stalled when she saw her daughter standing there. "What are you doing here?" Lynn should be in school right now, as should Liesl, who came out of an open doorway a few feet behind Lynn, carrying a bouquet of pretty red poppies.

Where had she gotten those in the dead of winter?

"Girls," she said, and then the hallway literally got flooded by people as doors opened all along the hallway and they spilled into it.

Tex and Abby, who carried Melissa.

Mindie and her boyfriend, Kelton.

Leigh and Eric and Rachelle, plus Denzel and his dog, Scout.

Blaze and Cash, with their dog, Hollis.

Jem, Cole, and Rosie.

Cecily and Jerry, both of whom positively beamed at Hilde.

Her momma and brother, along with her three nieces. Why were they here in the middle of the day on a Tuesday? Didn't anyone have school today?

Hilde placed one hand over her heart as her unloading crew waved to her from down the hall, and then her cashier team came out of another doorway just closer to her than them.

Trace and Harry emerged, and Everly squeezed past Hilde and joined them.

Georgia and Faith went by her too, with Faith stepping into Blaze and kissing him, and Georgia taking her baby boy from Otis, who then pulled Joey to his side.

Everyone smiled and stared at her, and Hilde couldn't help smiling back. Her hopes spiraled and rocketed up to the skies, because Gabe had pulled off something pretty amazing just to get all these people here.

And during her meeting.

She was going to fillet him alive—right after she kissed him and accepted his diamond ring. And if this wasn't the proposal...Hilde had no idea how she'd react.

Bryce came out of a doorway, and Hilde's heartbeat bumped over itself. He stood with Mav, Dani, Beth, Boston, and Lars.

Rhea, her staging manager, grinned and grinned as she stood with three of Hilde's delivery truck drivers.

She noted the absence of her dear daddy, who'd passed away just before her divorce, and AnnaBelle, Rusty's wife.

But Cheryl and Wade had joined the throng in the hallway, along with their baby, and a few people Hilde had never met before. She assumed they worked at Gabe's Jackson Hole law office, and she had to mentally tell herself to breathe, because her body had gone on vacation.

He'd gathered everyone here before lunch on a cold, dark day in January, but Gabe himself was nowhere to be seen.

Then, from behind her, in the room she'd exited, a piano began to play. Gabe had never played for her before, but she knew the man could play. Lynn timerushed at her and took her hand. "Come on, Mom," she said, pulling Hilde back into the room where the voting should be happening.

It wasn't, but the chairs had been cleared completely, and a grand piano now sat in the middle of the room. Lynn timerushed dropped Hilde's hand about halfway to it, and she continued on, taking up a spot on the bench beside Gabe.

He looked at her while his fingers continued to play, and Lynn timerushed gave the slightest of nods. Liesl skipped ahead of the crowd too, and Tex himself pulled over a chair and helped Liesl up onto it so she stood and faced the crowd.

They gathered in and around Hilde, and she looked over to her mother, tears filling her eyes so full, they spilled over.

"Marry me," Gabe sang, and while he'd once claimed not to be a good singer, he'd been lying. "Today and everyday." He went through the chorus first, and Lynn timerushed played with him.

When he got to the part that went, "Say you will, hmm-mm," he stood, leaving Lynn timerushed to plunk out the melody herself.

He put his arm around Liesl and faced Hilde. "Say you will, hmm-mm," they sang together, and it was the sweetest—the absolute sweetest—thing in the whole world.

Gabe took a black box from Morris—who had been the one to come get her from this very room—and approached Hilde. He wore an identical suit, which meant he'd come from work, and dropped to both knees while Lynn timerushed

continued to play softly in the background.

“I’m in love with you, Hilde,” he said, his face full of shining hope. “I want you today and everyday. Forever. Always. A hundred years won’t be enough. Will you marry me?”

Hilde started nodding before he got the words all the way out. “Yes,” she said, wiping her face so she could see him clearly. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

A cheer rose up, and as all of their friends and family applauded, Gabe slid the diamond ring onto Hilde’s finger. She bent over to kiss him, one of their sloppier unions but absolutely wonderful all the same.

“I love you,” he said loudly to be heard above the applause and whooping.

“I love you too,” she said back.

Gabe got to his feet and drew her into a hug, where Hilde whispered in his ear, “I expect to be married before I’m forty, Gabe. Doable or not doable?”

He tensed for only a moment before he asked, “Have I ever let you down, Hilde?”

Read on for a sneak peek at **JEM**, featuring Jem Young, the next brother in the Young Family who’s looking for love - and literally falls at the foot of the woman who could be “the one...”

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SNEAK PEEK! JEM CHAPTER ONE:



Jem Young inched forward until the tailgate of his truck wasn't hanging out in the road. He put the vehicle in park and looked in the rearview mirror. "All right, Cole," he said to his son. "We're here."

His son looked up from his handheld game machine, his eyes a bit glazed, and tossed it onto the seat beside him.

"Careful," Jem chastised, though it wouldn't do any good. His son had gotten the game machine from his uncle Blaze for Christmas and three months of Jem telling him to be careful with it hadn't yielded much more than Cole tossing the handheld anywhere it happened to land.

"Bye, Dad," he said, and Jem waved over his shoulder.

"Be good. Turn in your math!" he yelled as the door slammed closed. The chances of that overdue math sheet—that had been done for over a week now—getting turned in existed down near zero, and Jem sighed as he put the truck in drive.

"All right, kid," he said. "You're next."

Rosie cheered, and Jem found his smile again. He'd enrolled her in preschool at the beginning of January, as she'd turned five years old and would be attending kindergarten in the fall. That felt impossibly far away, but for Jem, days and months bled together faster than he could comprehend.

Even now, February had almost ended, and before he knew it, the Wyoming winter would start to thaw back into another spring. He couldn't wait to see what wonders the house he'd bought last summer would have for them as the earth thawed. They'd discovered some errant pumpkin seeds that had somehow survived, and he'd carved two puny jack-o-lanterns with his

kids last year.

His momma had said there might be bulbs in the ground, and Rosie talked about them almost every day, though she didn't even know they existed. If they didn't have any this spring, Jem wanted to buy some and plant them while she was at school so they'd be surprised next year.

He pulled up to her preschool, took a parking space, and got out of the truck to help her down. Her backpack was as big as her, practically dragging on the ground behind her as she held his hand and skipped toward the entrance. In Vegas, he'd have to be buzzed in, but here in Coral Canyon, he just opened the door and said, "Hullo, Flo."

"Morning, Jem and Miss Rosie," she said with a smile as they went past. Jem took her down the hall and around the corner, where he crouched down in front of her.

He tugged her tee down so it covered the top of her jeans and looked into her eyes. "You be nice to Lincoln today."

"He's not nice to me," Rosie said, as sober as ever.

"Besides," Jem said, telling her that didn't matter. "Get Miss Murphy then."

"He's sneaky." Rosie looked past Jem, and he hated that. He should be glad she had a mind of her own and would follow it, but he also really wanted his five-year-old to behave at preschool.

"Maybe he won't be here today," Jem said. Rosie had only been coming to school for a couple of months, but she sure seemed to love it. All of it, except Lincoln, who she claimed wasn't very nice to her or anyone else. So she'd stood up to him last week, and boy had Jem heard about it. From Rosie. From her teacher. From the director at the preschool. From another mom of another little girl.

The reports were mixed, of course. And he knew he couldn't allow Rosie to kick another child, even if he deserved it. Did anyone ever really deserve to be kicked in the shins? Rosie insisted Lincoln did, and changing her five-year-old mind wasn't going to happen this morning.

So Jem gave her a kiss on the forehead and said, "I'll see you in a couple of hours, kid." As he walked out, he saluted Flo, the sixty-something woman who manned the front desk. She laughed at him and said, "Have a good day, Jem," and he planned to do that.

He could admit he'd been enjoying a few hours alone every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday while both of his kids attended school. Sometimes

he went to the gym with his brothers. Sometimes he bought groceries without having to say no fifteen hundred times to the many and varied requests of his children. Sometimes he simply drove up the canyon, found a cleared trailhead, and hiked to the nearest bench.

Then, he'd sit there and watch his breath steam in front of him in the cold air. He'd reflect on his life, on how he'd been doing as a father, on what he needed to do to be better. A better son, a better brother, a better dad, a better friend.

Jem needed the quiet time to slow down, calm down, and kneel down. That had become his mantra in the past several months since he'd gone on tour with Country Quad, his brothers' band.

Slow down, calm down, kneel down.

Today, he decided the best thing he could do for himself to improve himself and his mood was to get breakfast. Food always helped him when he was worried or he wanted to drink, and he pulled up to a little hole-in-the-wall place with eight tables called Pancake Power. They actually served flapjacks out of a window like a food truck, and a line of people braved the chilly Thursday morning there.

Jem inched around the side of the shack to a tiny parking lot, decided against taking his huge truck in there, and parked down the block. Just the walk to the window made him shiver, and he nodded to a couple of men standing there as he went by.

Inside, the heat roared, and Jem untucked his hands from his pockets. A pretty woman named Jean looked at him. If he was a decade older and into divorced brunettes who owned pancake houses, she'd be perfect for him. As it was, she grinned at him, giggled, and took him into a hug.

"You haven't been around these parts for a while," she said.

"No, ma'm." Jem reseated his cowboy hat from where it had been knocked a little loose. "Just me today, of course."

"What's that brother of yours up to?" She picked up a single set of silverware but didn't grab a menu to go with it. Jem didn't need it, not for how many times he'd been here.

"Which one?" he asked. "I have eight brothers, Jean."

"Oh, you know," she drawled, and Jem followed her to a tiny table-for-two against the wall. This was not a place for big parties, as a sign on the door even proclaimed. If someone wanted to bring a party bigger than four for breakfast, they could order at the window or for carry-out. Pancake Power

even delivered, just like a pizza joint.

“Well, Blaze has been married for about six months now,” Jem said with a groan as he sat down on the side of the table that gave him the best view of the restaurant and the street beyond it. “So I expect he and Faith will announce that they’re gonna have a baby any day now.” He grinned up at Jean as she set down his coffee mug and silverware.

“Really? Within six months?”

“Well, Blaze is no spring chicken,” Jem said with a smile. “So yeah. I know he and Faith wanted a family fairly quickly after getting married.” Trace and Everly did too, and they still hadn’t announced anything on the brothers’ text, nor at any of the family dinners that seemed to happen every weekend these days.

Heck, Abby or Dani or Leigh could all have babies at any time now too. Jem swallowed back the thought that everyone had boarded the Young Family Train except for him, told Jean of course he wanted the real maple syrup and not to skimp on him, and watched her walk over to the coffee pots.

“Luke’s not married,” he muttered to himself. Outside of the rodeo, Jem had not needed to be first. He simply didn’t want to be last. The problem was, Luke wouldn’t want to be last either, and Jem pulled out his phone to touch base with his brother.

We need dates, he texted. Let’s make a pact. By the Sunday luncheon, we’ll have each asked someone to dinner. Deal?

Luke started typing, and Jem could only hope and pray he’d caught him at a good time. His brother could be as grouchy as a caged wolverine sometimes, and unless Jem stood in the same room with him, he wasn’t sure what mood of Luke’s he might encounter.

I don’t want to, Luke said. But I will.

Who you gonna ask? Jem asked, because he needed an idea for himself. He knew women around town, but none the type he’d want to date with an eye toward a future. He couldn’t allow himself to mix the two worlds he’d brought with him to Coral Canyon.

He was a straight-laced family man now, who didn’t touch alcohol, didn’t go home with women, and didn’t have to keep secrets from his kids, his Momma, or his brothers. Any of them. He shoveled snow and read books with his kids while they played in the tub. He took them to church and showed up to family dinners. He held babies whose mommas needed a break and rode horses with Blaze and Tex when neither of them wanted to talk

about the things bothering them.

And he made dating pacts with the only single brother he had left.

I don't know, Luke said. There's a teacher at the school who's seemed interested. Maybe her? I could ask Sterling...

Jem's thumbs flew over the screen. *Sterling's a good thought, Luke. You should ask her. Would she go out with you?* He'd been seeing his massage therapist for a couple of years now. Maybe three. He'd told Jem and the other band members he'd tried to get Sterling to come on tour with Country Quad last summer, but she'd just opened her private massage spa and couldn't leave it.

He hadn't heard anything more about the woman, though Luke got regular massages.

I don't know, Luke said again. Who are you gonna ask?

"What'll ya have?"

Jem looked up at the woman now standing beside his table. Jean had come and poured his coffee at some point, and Jem hated how focused he became sometimes. Cream and sugar sat on the table already, and he could've been fully caffeinated before coming face-to-face with his waitress.

She held a pen in her hand, poised above the ordering pad. Pancake Power wasn't all that technological, though everything in this shack was clean and orderly.

"I haven't seen you before," he said.

"Been here about three weeks," she said with a smile. "Jean says you like the real maple syrup, and I think she's gone into the forest to tap a tree just for you." She laughed, and Jem turned his phone over and placed it face-down on the table.

"She only brings that stuff out for the special customers."

"That's what she said." The woman lowered her pen. "You seem like a regular, because you have no menu, but I've been here three weeks and haven't seen you once." She raised her eyebrows, clearly calling him on his "regular" status.

"I'll have to come by more often," he said, sliding right into his rodeo cowboy flirtation zone. "If I know your name." He glanced to her chest, where a name tag normally sat. "You're breaking the dress code by not wearing a name tag."

She grinned even wider. "I'm Kelsie."

"Jem," he said.

“Oh, I know who you are,” she said. “My boyfriend is a big fan of the rodeo. Gushes about you Young boys all the time.” A brightness came into her face, but the light inside Jem had gone dark with the words “my boyfriend.”

“In fact,” Kelsie said. “Can I get a picture with you? Brandon is going to *flip out*.”

“Sure,” Jem said, and he grinned like he wasn’t about to humiliate himself by asking Kelsie to dinner while she snapped the selfie.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Kelsie,” Jean barked, and she was now wearing snow boots. “We don’t take pictures with the customers.”

“It’s fine, Jean,” Jem muttered. “I want the buckwheat tall stack,” he added. “Three orders of bacon, one regular, one of them candied and one peppered.” He reached for a sugar packet. “And keep the coffee coming.”

He wasn’t even going to go home before he had to pick up Rosie from preschool. He’d stay here and drink himself into a frenzy, then go grab her, get lunch, and figure out how to sleep tonight when the time came.

“You got it,” Kelsie said, and she walked away. She paused in front of Jean, who gave her a very quiet dressing down. Kelsie had the good sense to drop her head and nod, as if she actually cared about Jean’s wrath. Maybe she did.

Jem finished doctoring up his coffee, and he drank half of it before reaching for his phone again. Luke had texted a couple more times, saying he might ask this woman at the grocery store who worked at the customer service counter, or maybe that single mom who kept sitting by him at church, or even one of the room moms who worked at the elementary school in his daughter’s class.

What do you think? he’d asked Jem, and Jem wasn’t sure who any of the women were besides Sterling. So he told Luke that and then said, *Honestly, man, go with your gut. Who do you want to go out with?*

You never said who you’d ask, Luke reminded him. *What is your gut saying?*

Sunny. The woman’s name came instantly to Jem’s head, but he didn’t type the five letters of her name. He couldn’t. Number one, she was upset with him, and all of his apology texts to her had gone unanswered—even after he’d had a middle-of-the-night run-in with her while in the ER with Rosie.

Luke's next text made Jem forget about filling his body with caffeine. *If you tell anyone this, I will murder you while you sleep*, he said. *But Sterling. I've had a crush on her for a while now.*

"A crush?" Jem lit up like a Christmas tree that had just been plugged in. "Wow, Luke." He typed as fast as the wind. *That's amazing, Luke. So ask her. What's holding you back?*

Luke had never held back in much, that was for sure. He'd dated a lot in high school and right into his time in the band. He'd gotten married young and had Corrine fast, then divorced just as quickly. He'd aged and matured a lot in the three or four years he'd been back in Coral Canyon, acting as his daughter's only caregiver.

Jem felt like he had too, but he was on the inside of his life and couldn't see the progress as drastically as he could from the outside of Luke's. He reached for his coffee and took a sip as Luke's next message popped up on his screen.

Besides the fact that she's seen me naked dozens of times?

Jem spewed coffee out of his mouth, the laughter following closely behind it. A couple of people sitting nearby looked at him, and he quickly reached for a napkin to wipe his face. He mopped up the table partially and left the napkin sitting there in a small puddle of cooling coffee and grabbed his phone again.

Totally naked?

Close enough.

Jem could just hear the completely arid tone of Luke's voice in that text, and that only made him chuckle again. *Well, at least you have options*, he said. *I was about to ask out the new waitress at Pancake Power, then she dropped the word "boyfriend."* So. *I've got no one.*

He wasn't as observant as Luke. No one topped Blaze and how much that man saw, except maybe Gabe. The only reason Gabe might beat Blaze was because of his photographic memory. So he saw things *and* could remember them.

Jem felt like he lived with his head down. Inside his own bubble, just worried about what he had on his plate—because it was too much already.

He was getting better at seeing the bigger picture, but it didn't come naturally to him, and he had to work on it. There were always too many things to work on, and Jem had to pick and choose the things he thought required the most immediate attention.

That had boiled down to his kids, his home, and his faith. But he could see his circle expanding to include a woman, and he really wanted to try again with Sunny.

What about Sunny? Luke asked. Of course he'd go there. Jem had toured with Luke for a month last summer, and they'd become good friends. Luke hadn't breathed a word about his secret feelings for Sterling, but Jem had confessed about how he'd forgotten to reschedule his date with Sunny.

She's mad at me still, Jem said. It felt like such a high-school thing to say, and he wasn't in high school anymore. It sure seemed like Sunny had issues from back then, though, and Jem simply wasn't sure they could ever find themselves on common ground.

Someone at the preschool? Luke suggested next, and Jem appreciated that he didn't harp on the Sunny-thing. Everyone knew Jem had gone out with Denice Houston last fall, and that he'd quickly retreated back to his house along the woods, declared himself unready to date, and hadn't been out with anyone since.

But now....

Maybe, Jem told Luke as his pancakes and bacon arrived. He ate; he drank more coffee; the texting with Luke tapered. He watched the people in the line outside the windows, and he wondered if God would simply introduce a new woman into his life. Maybe someone he ran into as he went to get into his truck as he left here. Maybe a woman in the grocery store when he and Rosie went shopping tomorrow. Maybe someone at Cole's basketball game on Saturday morning.

Sufficiently calm and slow, Jem paid his check and got to his feet. The morning rush had ended a while ago, and only one other table held any people. Three women, out for a mid-morning breakfast, probably after getting their kids off to school and putting in a couple of miles of power-walking, if their Spandex pants paired with oversized sweatshirts told him anything.

He nodded to them and headed for the exit. "Jem," Jean called just as he'd reached for the door handle. He turned back to her, and she bustled toward him with a plastic sack in her hands. It held to-go boxes, but he'd consumed all of his pancakes. "Some bacon for the road."

"Jean." He shook his head, his heart filling with love for the kindness of people in small towns, in even smaller pancake houses. "Thank you." He took the bag of bacon from her, then leaned in and kissed her cheek. "You're good people."

“Don’t take so long to come back next time,” she said with a matronly smile.

He promised he wouldn’t, and he leaned into the door, his hand grappling for the knob. Then, suddenly, the door wasn’t there, and Jem spilled onto the sidewalk.

The bag of bacon went flying up as he fell down. Jean yelled. Cold air assaulted him. Pain cracked through his hand, wrist, and all the way up his arm as he landed on the hard concrete.

Then everything went still. Someone said, “Dad, you made him fall down. You can’t just open the door like that. Didn’t you even look?”

Jem couldn’t even look at the woman whose voice he recognized. All he could do was look up into the sky—the bright blue winter sky that brought so much chill with it. He blinked slowly, the pain in the left side of his body absolutely astronomical.

He’d felt like this before—when he’d been hit by a two-ton bull after falling off of it.

Then an angel appeared in his line of sight. Sunny-Beautiful-Samuelson. “Jem?” she asked. “Jem, baby, look at me.” Her hand swished through his hair, and he told his eyes to look at her, but they took their sweet time doing it.

“Sunny,” he slurred.

“Call an ambulance,” she barked, probably at Jean. “He’s got a concussion for sure, and this wrist is broken.”

Broken, broken, broken. The word reverberated in his head as he closed his eyes and couldn’t open them again, despite Sunny insisting that he do so.

SNEAK PEEK! JEM CHAPTER TWO:



Sunny Samuelson glared at her father from her position on the sidewalk. The concrete bit into her kneecaps, but she couldn't move away from Jem. He'd passed out. Somehow, he was even more handsome asleep than awake, which made no sense since he had the most dreamy pair of chocolate latte eyes on the planet.

"I'm sorry," her dad said.

"You can't just say sorry and make it better," she said. "The man broke his wrist." And who knew what else. Sunny looked back to Jem, whose head had started to lilt a little. She shored it up with her hand to keep it steady and his neck straight.

Jean Dowman returned with a big, heavy jacket—the best she could do for a blanket at the pancake house. How Sunny wished her daddy hadn't been whining for pancakes for three days now. How she wished she hadn't given in to his requests to come here. Any other place in town that served pancakes, at any other time, would've been better.

She helped position the jacket over Jem, because he didn't wear one at all and the temperatures had to be in the single digits today. Of course. The cowboy didn't need a jacket, he'd once joked with her. *I'm hot-blooded*, he'd said, that devilish look in those eyes that said he wanted to warm her up too.

He had, once upon a time. Sunny hadn't kissed him in oh, over fifteen years now. *Seventeen*, her mind whispered. Half her life she'd gone without kissing this man, and it seemed entirely too long now that she thought about it.

Jean crouched down on Jem's other side, tears wetting her face. "I

shouldn't have distracted him with the bacon." She lovingly brushed Jem's long hair off his forehead. "Oh, someone needs to call his momma. I'm gonna go call his momma."

Sunny didn't bother to stop Jean as she jumped up and hurried back inside the pancake house. She didn't need to ask how Jean would get Cecily Young's number. In a small town like this, these people knew everyone and how to get in touch with them.

You're one of "these people" now, she told herself. She'd given up her job in Kansas City. She'd moved back home to help her daddy. She'd come to terms with it...mostly. On good days. Sometimes, she wondered what she'd been thinking and why she hadn't moved her parents to KC to live with her.

Jem groaned, and Sunny said, "Shh, Jem, I need you not to move." She pressed one hand to his shoulder, hoping to calm him and keep him still at the same time. Most people didn't come out of unconsciousness and bolt to a sitting position, but as a nurse, Sunny had seen a little bit of everything.

"Jem, it's Sunny, okay? You fell down and hit your head. Your left wrist is most likely broken. If you're waking up, don't try to move, okay?" She spoke in a calm, rational voice, the one she used on patients at the hospital. They weren't at the hospital—yet—but Sunny knew this side of herself very, very well.

She was an excellent nurse, and she'd been hired here in Coral Canyon during a hiring freeze. That was how good she was. Her emotions never came into play with patients, at least not where they or anyone else could see. Sure, she'd spent some time crying for a lost patient at home in the past. But at work? She was iron-faced and stiff-willed.

She also wasn't at work right now, and her emotions seemed to have boarded a fast-moving roller coaster. Up and down they went, tossing her from side to side.

For this was Jem Young, the focus of her teenage crush and the man she'd been dying to go out with for the better part of a year now. *A year*. She'd be lying if he hadn't played into her decision to leave Kansas City too, but no one had asked her that, so she didn't have to lie.

Jem moved his head again, another groan coming from his mouth. It grew in volume and pitch, and Sunny did not like the sound of it at all. She needed to wake him. And where was the blasted ambulance? The hospital had to be maybe seven minutes from here.

“Jem, honey,” she said as he quieted, wondering where the term of endearment had come from. “It’s Sunny. You fell right outside the pancake house and hit your head. Your left wrist is probably broken.” His eyes opened, but Sunny knew he wasn’t focused on her. “Don’t try to move, okay?”

She stoked his hair back now too. “It’s Sunny. You fell, baby. Don’t move, okay? The ambulance is on the way.”

Jem tilted his chin down slightly and looked at her then. “Sunny?”

“Your left wrist is probably broken.” She pressed on his right side. “Don’t move it. Just stay right there where you are. Right here with me.” She gave him an encouraging smile, her own eyes filling with tears. Ridiculous. She’d seen so much worse in her decade as a nurse. Why was she crying over Jem Young?

Because it was Jem Young.

“Jean’s called your momma,” Sunny said, finally hearing the siren on the ambulance. “Are you here alone?” She knew he was, or one of his brothers would’ve been here by now.

“Alone,” he echoed. “My daughter...preschool.”

“I’ll call Blaze,” she said, because she knew the two of them were really close. “Okay? I’ll ride with you to the hospital and stay until someone from your family comes.”

Something played with the corners of his mouth. Could’ve been a smile, or it could’ve been a grimace of pain. “Thanks, Sunny,” he slurred again.

“Jem,” she said in a commanding voice. “Look at me, Jem. Don’t close your eyes.”

He did what she wanted, and she started telling him about the bluebirds in her daddy’s front yard. “He puts seeds out for them all winter long. Can you believe it? And they know it, and they’re right there, waiting every morning.” Her daddy had a path worn down in the snow and everything. “I think he does it so Dolly can go chase them off at least once a day.” She laughed, glad when Jem smiled too.

The siren grew to deafening, and Sunny had to stop telling him stories about the funny things her daddy did to make his dog happy. Opening a glass door without even looking to see if someone stood on the other side of it wasn’t so funny.

“Sunny,” one of the paramedics said as he opened the passenger door.

“Garrett,” she said. “He fell backward out of the restaurant. I’m pretty

sure the left wrist is broken. Not sure about anything with the legs, but he definitely caught himself with that hand. And I'm ninety-nine percent sure he hit his head too."

Garrett relayed the information to Stew as he came around the back of the ambulance. They opened up the big doors back there and yanked out a stretcher.

"Jem," Sunny said. "I should call Blaze, right?"

"Luke," he said. "I was texting him earlier. Call him."

"Okay," she said.

"My phone's...." He trailed off, a terrible look of childlike confusion entering his eyes. "I don't know where it is."

"I'll find it," she said as Garrett pulled back the heavy coat. Jem shivered, and while Sunny made room for the two men to check his vitals and put a neck brace on him, she slipped her fingers into his and didn't let go until they lifted him onto the stretcher and covered him with a warmed blanket.

"I'm riding with him," she said.

Garrett didn't seem to care about this, and he pushed Jem into the back of the ambulance and climbed in first, then turned back to her and offered her a hand.

"Sunny!" Jean came running outside. "Here's his phone. And the bacon."

"Jean, I—" Sunny couldn't protest as Jean shoved everything into her hands.

"I'll get your daddy fed and home," she added.

Sunny really couldn't protest then, so she simply smiled the best she could and said, "Thanks, Jean."

"I called his momma. She's rallying the troops."

Sunny nodded and moved to the slim bench where she'd sit on the way to the hospital. Garrett closed the doors and locked them, then knocked on the window to let Stew know they were ready. She nearly got thrown off the seat though she'd been expecting the movement, and she reacted emotionally when Jem groaned.

"Sunny?" he asked.

"I'm right here," she said, glancing over to Garrett. She wasn't sure why she cared what he thought. Maybe because she'd dated one of his friends last year. Then another doctor on the fourth floor, and then one of the security guards at the hospital.

She'd struck out with all three of them, and Sunny had decided to stop

dating people who worked where she did. The problem was, if she wasn't at work, she was at her daddy's, and there weren't a lot of single men dropping by the older neighborhood cul-de-sac on the east side of town. Jem, in fact, lived in the complete opposite direction, about as far from Sunny's father as one could get in Coral Canyon.

She lived closer to the center of town, in a basement apartment she rented from the couple upstairs. She'd wanted to be closer to hospital, and she couldn't stand the thought of actually living with her parents. Neither of them would thrive in that situation.

She put her hand in Jem's, and his fingers closed around hers. "Does he have a concussion?" she asked.

"His pupils dilated just fine," Garrett said in his calm, slow, steady way. He was a great paramedic. Cute, too, but unavailable. Married. "But the doc will check him out." He gave her a smile that she returned.

"Is the wrist broken?"

"Oh, yeah." Garrett looked at it where he'd stabilized it in a thick brace. "I've put him on a low dose of morphine for that. It's gonna need surgery, I'll bet ten to one."

Sunny nodded, thinking she'd probably be the first point of contact for his family. "Anything else I should tell his momma?"

"Luke," Jem said. "I told you to call Luke. He needs to get Rosie."

"I know," she told him, though she'd not texted Luke yet. Surely Cecily had a way to contact all of her sons in one go-round, but Sunny slipped her hand away from Jem's to text his brother.

She tried very hard not to look at the conversation already on the screen, but that proved to be impossible when she saw her name sitting there.

What about Sunny?

She's mad at me still.

Someone at the preschool?

She swiped up quickly to see what this conversation was about, and she pulled in a sharp breath when she saw Jem and Luke had been discussing who they could ask out on a date. They'd made a dating pact.

She looked over to Jem, who rode with his eyes closed, his chest rising in a slow, steady way.

Luke had suggested her.

She wanted to tell Jem she wasn't still mad at him. Of course, she hadn't answered any of his apology texts either, but that was because she'd been

dating Hank when they'd come in, and he'd been jealous of any male attention Sunny received. Even from elderly patients, and she'd ended things with him because of his jealousy.

She cleared her throat and sent a quick text to Luke. *It's Sunny Samuelson. I'm with Jem in the back of an ambulance on the way to the hospital. I'm sure your momma has told you he felt outside Pancake Power. He's awake and doing okay. He's got a broken wrist and they'll check him for a concussion at the hospital. He wanted me to text you about getting Rosie from preschool.*

She sent the message and looked over to Jem. "I texted Luke."

"Thank you, darlin'," he said, but he couldn't lift his head to look at her.

She edged forward until their eyes met. She wasn't sure if she should bring up the texting conversation she'd read or not. She didn't normally shy away from awkward or hard conversations, but instead of saying anything about Jem initiating some sort of dating pact between himself and Luke, she said, "Jean called your mother."

"Great," he deadpanned. "Is the hospital equipped to deal with fifteen levels of crazy?" He sighed like he really regretted being part of his family. "Wait, I only have eight brothers. Plus their wives. And my parents...my momma is really like six levels herself, especially if she gets fired up." He grinned at Sunny and then Garrett. "I think y'all better be ready for World War Crazy."

Garrett laughed and Sunny smiled. Jem did too, but his quiet chuckle turned into a cough that immediately concerned her and Garrett both. "Okay, man," he said. "Calm breath in. Yeah, there you go...no more laughing."

"My arm really hurts," Jem said as the coughing subsided and his breathing evened.

"I've got drugs going in you," Garrett said. "But I didn't want to knock you out. We need you awake so the doctors can check for other things."

"Mm hm." Jem's eyes fell closed. "I'm not asleep, I swear. I just can't look at Sunny anymore, because she's too pretty."

Sunny's mouth opened but nothing came out. Garrett looked at her with his eyebrows raised, his eyes dancing with unvocalized laughter. She shook her head and said, "You're the one who put him on morphine."

She glanced at Jem's phone as it chimed, and all Luke had said was, *I'll see you at the hospital, and you can tell him I'll get Rosie.*

"Jem? You awake?"

“I said I was,” he said crossly. That could be from the morphine too, and Sunny wondered what dose he’d been given.

“Luke says he’ll get Rosie.”

“Great,” he said. “There’s mac and cheese at home.”

“Jem, buddy,” Garrett said loudly. “Open up your eyes and tell me who Rosie is.”

Jem’s eyes took at least two seconds to open. He so wasn’t as awake as he thought. “Rosie is my daughter.”

“Oh, wow.” Garrett looked at Sunny again. “A daughter. Any other kids?”

“Yeah, I got a son too,” he said. “Cole just turned eight. Rosie is five. She’s always hungry, and Cole won’t turn in his math.”

Garrett chuckled, keeping it low-key and quiet. “I gotta say, I’m always a little hungry too,” he said.

Sunny nearly got thrown again as the ambulance came to a stop. Stew unlocked the doors and opened them, and she climbed down so they could get Jem out. She stood next to him as they put up the sides on the stretcher and locked them. “Do you want your phone? Me to go in with you?”

“You really are beautiful, Sunny,” he said.

“Focus, Jem,” she said, though what woman didn’t want to be called beautiful? “I’m going to keep your phone. I’ll go out in the waiting area and see if your family is here and tell them what I know. Who gets to come back?”

“You can come back anytime, sweetheart.” He smiled at her in that sexy, suggestive way he had.

Garrett stepped in. “Which family member, Jem? You got a favorite brother?”

“Blaze,” he said when Sunny was expecting him to say Luke again. “Blaze can come back. Luke too, but don’t let ‘im bring my kids. They don’t need to see me like this. I’ll sober up, and then they can come back.”

Sunny exchanged a look with Garrett again, and then they wheeled him into the ER. Sunny knew family couldn’t go through the ambulance bay doors anyway, and she made her way around the corner in the freezing wind and into the main waiting area.

Only one member of the Young family had arrived, and it was the one who made the most sense based on where he lived. Blaze Young lived up the canyon where Jem did, only a few minutes from the hospital, and he lasered

his black-as-night eyes on Sunny and strode straight toward her. “Where is he? He’s really all right?”

The man had a bark as loud as thunder, but Sunny had dealt with people like him before. “Yes, sir,” she said. “They just took him in through the outside bay. His wrist is broken, as I told Luke, so we put him on morphine for that. I gotta say, he doesn’t seem to be handling it well.”

“Jem is sensitive to drugs,” Blaze said. “They make him all loopy.”

“Yeah, I saw that.” Sunny didn’t smile, because she wasn’t sure what Jem meant by “sober up.” She took Jem’s phone out of her pocket. “I was using this to text Luke. It’s Jem’s.”

Blaze took the phone and looked at it like it might tell him how his brother was really faring. “When can I go back?”

“Only one person can,” she said. “And lucky you, he named you as the authorized family member. I can get you back there, but they might not let you see him. We should check with Linda.” She indicated the woman seated at the check-in desk, but Blaze looked at her like he’d just as soon eat slugs.

“Fine,” he said, marching over to Linda without waiting for Sunny to accompany him. The door opened and in walked Cecily and Jerry Young. Behind them came Morris and Gabe, twins but oh-so-opposite. One in jeans and a leather jacket, the other in a designer suit. They both wore looks that suggested they’d remove doors from their hinges to get to their brother, and Sunny faded further from them.

Luke arrived next, followed by Mav and Dani Young, then Otis, Trace, and finally, the oldest of them all—Tex. That made sense, because he lived pretty far out on their family ranch, so he definitely had the furthest to come.

None of them seemed to notice her, and Sunny wasn’t sure when Blaze had been allowed to go back. She didn’t see him standing with them anymore, and she wasn’t sure why she hadn’t left yet. Maybe because going back to hang out with Daddy sounded like torture today. Or maybe she wanted an update on Jem’s health for her own mental sanity. Or maybe because Jem had called her beautiful.

Finally, Luke looked her way as he started to leave the emergency waiting area, and he detoured over to her. “Sunny, right?”

“Yes,” she said. “How is he?”

“Blaze said they did an x-ray on the wrist. Broken pretty badly. They’re prepping him for surgery now.”

“Concussion?”

“They did an MRI. Showed nothing.”

“That’s good,” she said.

“Yeah.” Luke appraised her, then gestured to his large, loud family of all men. “You can go sit with them if you want.”

Sunny swallowed hard and shook her head. “Nah. I need to get back to my daddy anyway. I just wanted to know how he was.” She tried to smile at Luke, glad when she managed to pull it off.

Luke then surprised her by drawing her into a big cowboy hug. “Thank you for taking good care of him today,” he said in her ear. “I know you’re still mad at him, so thank you.”

“I’m not mad at him,” she whispered, clinging to Luke for longer than socially acceptable. She somehow couldn’t seem to let go of him. She finally caged her emotions and stepped back. “Will you have him text me when he can? Or will you let me know how he’s doing?”

Luke nodded just once. “I’ll make sure you know, one way or the other.”

“I don’t work until tomorrow,” she said. “They won’t keep him that long, so I’d appreciate it.”

“Of course.” He nodded toward the exit. “You leavin’, then? I’ll walk out with you. I’ve got to go get Rosie for him.”

“Uh, I need a ride back over to Pancake Power,” she said. “I left my car there earlier.”

“I can do that,” he said, giving her half a smile. “Let’s go.” They didn’t speak much in the truck, which left Sunny several minutes to fantasize about what it would be like to be able to walk over to that group of brothers who’d rallied in mere minutes behind Jem and be one of them.

They’d open their arms to her and accept her, love her, simply because she was with Jem. As Luke pulled into the tiny parking lot beside the pancake shop, Sunny realized how badly she wanted another chance with Jem. Should she say something to Luke about it?

What could it hurt? she wondered. When the Lord didn’t silence her thoughts, but they only grew louder, she looked over to him.

“I’m not mad at him anymore,” she said quietly. “I’d go out with him if he asked.” She looked over to Luke, whose face turned a little whiter.

“You read his texts.”

“Not on purpose,” she hurried to assure him. “But Luke, I don’t want him asking someone at the preschool. If he’s ready to date again, I want it to be with me.”

There. She'd said it. Now she just had to hope the message didn't get lost on the way to Jem.

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ABOUT LIZ



Liz Isaacson is a USA Today bestselling author and a Top 10 Kindle All-Star Author. She is the author of multiple #1 bestselling Christian cowboy romance novels across several categories and retailers. Her inspirational romances are usually set in Texas and Wyoming, or anywhere else horses and cowboys exist. She lives in Utah, where she writes full-time, babies two grown dogs, and eats a lot of Ferrero Rocher while writing.

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GABRIEL

Book Six in the Coral Canyon Cowboys Romance series

by Liz Isaacson

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