

MATT

The Hartwell Brothers

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USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MATT

THE HARTWELL BROTHERS BOOK 2

M. S. PARKER

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THE HARTWELL BROTHERS

Thank you for reading *MATT*, the second book in my hot, new billionaire series: *The Hartwell Brothers*. Each book is about a different brother and can be read stand-alone, however, I highly recommend reading the books in this order:

[Book 1: KEITH \(Hartwell 1\)](#)

Book 2: MATT (This Book)

Book 3: JAMIE (Feb 2020)

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ONE

MATTHIAS

MARCH 1951...

THAT KISS.

I fell asleep remembering it and woke with the taste of her on my lips again. At least, the memory of it.

The annoying ring of the alarm clock on my nightstand had jerked me out of the sweetest dream. After knocking it onto the floor in an attempt to silence the damn thing, I lay there for a few moments, breathing in the quiet and trying to recapture the fading threads of the dream.

We'd been on the back deck, her face lifted to mine, looking so lovely and delicate.

Too often, when I looked at her, I saw the fading evidence of violence left on her skin by Lewis, the prick. It was only in my head. The faint bruises I'd seen on her skin that evening had long since faded, and since early January, the asshole had been out of the country traveling.

He hadn't hurt her again. Yet.

But even the memory was too much.

If he tries to hurt her again, I'll kill him, I told myself.

And I would. It was a miracle I hadn't torn him to pieces all ready.

The rage I'd felt that night...

Off in the depths of the apartment I'd rented, my phone rang. I jerked upright and stared for a second. It wasn't even seven in the morning. Who could be calling?

Throwing back the blankets, I rushed to answer and had the handset in my hand by the fourth ring. “Hello?”

After a long pause, there was a soft intake of air.

Somehow, I knew. “Alice.”

“I...I’m sorry, Matthias. I shouldn’t have called so early. I’ll talk to you later.”

“No!” It tore out of me without conscious thought. Calming myself, I cleared my throat. “It’s okay. I was already awake. Work, you know.”

“Oh.” A shaky sigh was followed by a pause so long, I thought she might have hung up. “I...well, perhaps I *should* call back later. I don’t want to make you late.”

“Sweetheart, I help run the place now that my grandfather has stepped down. The world won’t end even if I am a bit late, and I don’t have to be in until eight-thirty.”

“Oh.”

There was nothing else for several long moments, and I listened to the quiet sound of her breathing, giving her the time she clearly needed. Although miles separated us, I could picture her standing in the soft quiet of her little apartment near the campus, rolling the cord of the phone between her fingers. When she was nervous, she fidgeted, smoothing a napkin, adjusting a place mat, aligning the silverware, anything to keep her hands occupied.

She took another breath before asking softly, “Will I see you later?”

We’d made plans over the weekend to have coffee, but it wasn’t like her to call so early. And her voice shook.

“Alice, what’s wrong? What’s going on, sweetheart?” I asked quietly. I shouldn’t call her that. I knew it. She wasn’t mine, although she *felt* like she was.

“I...” Her voice hitched. “It’s nothing. We can talk later.”

The unease inside me grew. Lewis had finally returned from his business trip and Alice had told me that both her mother and his were now talking more and more about setting a date, but Alice had yet to commit to anything.

Lewis, so far, hadn’t pressured her. The last I’d heard, they didn’t see each other except for an occasional dinner at her parents’ home on Sundays, but I knew his type.

He’d hurt her once. He’d do it again, as soon as he got the mind to do so.

Checking the time, I made up my mind.

“I’m coming over, Alice. I’ll be at your place within the hour.”

“That’s not necessary, Matt,” she said in a rush. “You have to work, and I should shower and get ready for class.”

“You do that. By the time you’re done, I’ll be there. We’ll talk. And don’t worry about my work. If the boss can’t take a bit of personal time, who can?”

HOLDING Alice as she cried was torture.

And infuriating.

Each sob tore at my heart and made me want to commit acts of sheer, bloody violence. If Lewis were to appear before me just then...

I shoved the thought out of my head and focused on the woman in my arms, rubbing my cheek against her hair. “It will be all right,” I told her. “I promise you. It will be all right.”

Long, long moments passed before the sobs started to ease. She felt so frail in my arms, her back narrow, her shoulders hunched. Her face was tucked into the curve of my neck, breath warm and soft as she finally, *finally* breathed easier.

“I’ve made a mess of you,” she whispered, pressing slightly against me.

Instinctively, I resisted, not wanting to let her go. I *never* wanted to let go. “I like holding you, Alice.”

Her eyes swept up to mine, and I reached up, using my thumb to wipe away the tears.

She turned her face into my touch, lashes falling down. Leaning in, I pressed my lips to her forehead, aching for so much more. This was the closest we’d ever been, and it made the savage hunger within almost painful.

Seemingly unaware of my private torture, Alice leaned against me, shifting and moving until she could tuck her head against my neck. “I don’t know what to do, Matt. I’m so scared.”

“Don’t be.” I’d already made up my mind. “I’ll take care of you, Alice. If you’ll let me.”

I want to take care of you. Please let me.

A shaky sigh escaped her. I felt the caress of her breath over my skin. Fisting my hand in her skirt, I squeezed my eyes closed.

“This isn’t your problem, Matt. I...I just needed to tell somebody. I have

to think, have to figure something out. I can't stay here, though. If he knows...I don't think I'll be safe."

That rage punched into me again, but I smashed it down. There would be time for that later.

Cupping her chin in my hand, I said, "Look at me."

Her eyes, red-rimmed and still diamond bright, met mine.

"You are *not* a problem." I traced my thumb over her lower lip and saw the reaction, the flare of awareness. So innocent. So sweet. And so fragile now. "I *want* to help you. I *want* to take care of you. Let me."

"Why?" she whispered.

Because I love you. The words hovered on the edge of my lips. Should I tell her? Would it help? Would it scare her?

I had no idea.

Driven by instinct, I lowered my head and pressed my lips to hers, licking the full lower one before teasing the seam of her mouth, seeking entrance. She gasped, opening for me, and I stole inside. Her body, so soft against mine, made me ache, desperate for more as love and lust tangled inside.

Still, I took nothing more...just the kiss.

She made a low noise in her throat, and when she craned closer, her hip brushed against my rigid cock. Reflexively, I tightened my grip on the material of her skirt in an effort to hold her still, but there was simply too much of the soft cotton of her dress and petticoat beneath it for it to make much difference.

Stop, I told myself.

But she flicked her tongue against mine.

Then she wiggled around, turning in my lap to face me.

Aw, fuck...

My mind went red and hazy with lust as her small hands landed on my shoulders, fingers kneading my muscles through the fine cotton of my dress shirt. Gripping her waist, I pulled her closer, arranging her so our upper bodies pressed flush together...and her knees straddled my thighs. Petticoats and skirts billowed up, no longer such an impediment, and the soft, seductive heat of her thighs pressed to mine.

"Stop," I said, tearing my mouth away. Inside my chest, my heart pounded.

Alice looked at me with glazed eyes. Awareness came slowly, but when it did, her cheeks flushed a hot pink.

I was prepared.

She tried to jolt away, and I gripped her hips, holding her in place.

“Don’t,” I whispered, staring at her. “Don’t run away from me...from this.”

“I...I shouldn’t have done that. I...” Her voice broke, and she shook her head. “I don’t know what came over me. Matt, please...”

Pressing my finger to her lips, I somehow managed to smile. It was one of the hardest things I’d ever done, giving her an easy, carefree smile when all I wanted to do was strip her naked, worship her body, beg her to be mine as I told her how much I loved her.

“You have no idea how many times I’ve imagined holding you, touching you, just like this, Alice. Please don’t break my heart by regretting it.”

Her lips parted.

I couldn’t help it. I groaned. The feel of her lips moving on my skin when I was still hard and aching for her...

“Matt...?”

“I want you,” I said bluntly. “Surely that doesn’t come as a surprise.”

Mute, she shook her head.

Because I didn’t want her to be confused, I continued. “But it’s much more than *want*.” I stroked the outline of her lips, then curved my hand over the back of her neck. “I want to take care of you, Alice. In all ways. I want you to be mine. Let me do this. Let me help you now.”

IT DIDN’T TAKE LONG to make plans and preparations. A few days was all I needed.

Lewis was still out of town, and our parents were both convinced we were wrapped up in our busy lives.

Alice only had a half day of classes on Fridays, and her normal routine was to leave the apartment and head to the cabin in Cape Cod. Instead, she waited for me at her apartment. The threat of a winter storm had me concerned, but it went north, and when I picked her up, the sky was a pale, pearly gray, the sunlight thin and weak.

After packing her suitcases in the trunk of my car, I took her hands. “Are you ready?”

“Yes. I left the letter to Mom and Dad in my room. It will take them a few days to find it, but...they’ll find it.” She sucked in a deep breath. “Are you sure about this? You’re giving up so much.”

“No. I’m getting everything I’ve ever wanted,” I told her, brushing her hair back from her face. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.” She nodded nervously and darted a look back at the apartment building. “I...I’m worried about my parents. Especially Mama. My dad will be so angry. Mama will be so hurt.”

The desolation in her eyes broke my heart. Cupping her face in my hands, I waited until she met my gaze. “If you want to stay, I’ll make it happen. I won’t let him hurt you.”

“No.” A shadow fell across her eyes, and her jaw firmed. “I can’t stay here. Not now. Maybe...maybe later, we can come back. You’re certain your brother will take us in?”

Cracking a smile at her, I pulled her closer. “Positive.”

Then, because she was mine now, because I could, I pressed my lips to hers. “Let’s go, sweetheart.”

TWO

MATT

PRESENT DAY...

“YOU BROKE UP? WHEN?”

“Last Saturday.” Meeting Keith’s gaze, I grinned and wondered if it looked as bitter as it felt. Entirely likely. “I was planning on having a profanity-laced talk with you about how you should stop being such a dick to her the next time I saw you. Then she tells me she doesn’t feel for me how she thinks she should feel, and there’s somebody else she can’t stop thinking about, and it would be better...hell. Fuck it, right?”

Instead of answering, my younger brother tossed back the rest of the whiskey in his glass with a grimace and shot to his feet. Vaguely aware as he got himself another serving of whiskey, I took in the rigid set of his shoulders.

Keith was pissed. Why, I had no idea. Was it because his little matchmaking scheme hadn’t worked out?

Not my damn fault. I *liked* Veronica. No, it hadn’t been love, but maybe it could have been.

Except she felt something for somebody else.

Shit.

Brooding, I studied the rich, warm amber of my whiskey, swirling it around. How had everything gotten so fucked up?

“She came to see me Saturday.” Voice low and tight, Keith finally spoke, and those words had my muscles tensing.

I hadn't heard him right.

No fucking way.

Lifting my head just in time to see him toss back more booze, I took in the hard set to his jaw, the lines digging grooves into his cheeks, the shadows under his eyes.

No, I decided. Not pissed.

He poured more whiskey before turning to me. "For the record, before I tell you anything else, I really thought when I was introducing you that I was doing the right thing. You deserved...*deserve* better than that bitch, Nikolette. I don't know why I thought that pushing Veronica at you was the answer, though. I had to do something, but that wasn't the way to handle things. Not when I'd been crazy about her from the first night I met her."

Understanding dawned, and I put the glass down. I was tempted to throw the cut crystal highball at his head but resisted. If I kept looking at him, I wouldn't be able to, so I shifted my gaze to the windows, staring outside.

"She came to see me that Saturday," he continued, "after your date." Keith blew out a hard breath. "She told me that she wanted to know if I felt anything. Instead of answering her, I kissed her. Then I fucked her, and because I wasn't thinking straight, I threw her out."

I saw red. Unaware of anything but the pulsing rage, I crossed the floor.

"The next day—"

I didn't even *plan* to hit him, but I saw my fist fly out, saw Keith's head snap back. He dropped his glass and stumbled before catching himself.

"You son of a bitch."

"I know." A red splotch already darkened his jawline where I'd hit him. Eyes turbulent, he held mine.

I couldn't look at him. Turning away, I stalked over to the windows, staring outside. My hand throbbed, and I welcomed the pain.

I fucked her. Then I threw her out.

And then Veronica's voice, so soft and steady, even as color suffused her cheeks. "I'm careful about this sort of thing..." she'd told me. "When I say careful, I mean it as in...I haven't yet found the right guy."

Careful. Looking for the right guy.

And she'd dumped me, then gone to my brother who, in his own words, had *fucked* her before *throwing her out*.

Behind me, Keith demanded, "What, are you done all ready?"

I faced him, watched him lift his jaw as if he wanted another hit. His

voice was full of frustration and guilt.

Good. I hope the son of a bitch choked on the guilt.

“What’s the fucking point? We’ve both lost her now.” Turning away, I resumed staring out the window. Tension, heavier now than ever, snapped between us.

Keith spoke again, his voice gritty this time. “Matt...I care about her. A lot. I know I hurt you, and I’m sorry, but she matters to me, and I’m not going to let that slip away—”

She matters...?

Bitter amusement tore into me, and an ugly laugh escaped.

Turning to him, I looked him over and wondered if he even had a clue. He spent so much time looking at the world through the lens of his camera. Had he forgotten how to actually live without the fucking thing and just *see* people?

“Let me see if I remember right. You *did* say she came to see you, wanting to know how you felt,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. “And you...tell me if I’m wrong... but your words, *exactly*, were, ‘I kissed her, then I fucked her, and because I wasn’t thinking straight, I threw her out.’ Did I miss anything important?”

“No.” A muscle pulsed in his jaw, and that shadow in his eyes grew even darker.

“You spent a lot of time talking to her. She ever mention that she had issues from childhood? About her mom?”

“I know her birth mother ran out on them, that her grandparents adopted her and her brothers and sisters.”

“Her *six* brothers and sisters, right?” Narrowing my eyes, I pushed harder. “Ever met them? Seen pictures? It’s kind of obvious they don’t all share the same dad.”

“What are you getting at?”

“I don’t suppose you noticed she was a virgin when *you fucked her* before you *threw her out*, did you?” I asked, disgusted and getting madder by the second. At her. At him. At myself.

“I...fuck.” He was quiet for a long moment, then finally, he gave a terse nod. “I didn’t let myself think about it, but...yeah. I figured it out. After.”

“After. Dammit, Keith. I don’t suppose you stopped to wonder why she was still a virgin at twenty-five, did you?”

“I’ve been a little too busy kicking my own ass or choking on guilt. And

it's none of my fucking business."

"None of your business. Fuck, you're a moron sometimes, little brother. Yeah, I think it's safe to say we *both* lost her, although fuck me if I know why I lost her to somebody as oblivious as you. She was a *virgin* at *twenty-five* because of her mother, you asshole. Her mother had a revolving door on her bedroom, and Veronica didn't want to *be* like her. She wanted her first time to be with somebody who mattered. That guy, I suspect, was probably going to be *you*, seeing as how *you* are the guy she went to after dumping me—the one she couldn't stop thinking about. And you can bet your ass she'll think about you for a good long time, so congrats, man. You *fucked her* and *threw her out*. Way to make an impression."

Keith's face went slack, and I saw the moment the reality of what he'd done finally sank in. Cutting around him, I went to the small wet bar along the wall and studied the offerings before grabbing a bottle of scotch—Macallan 35. A night like this called for something special, after all.

"This probably won't have nowhere near the impact as when you kicked her out, but I feel it's the least I can do. Get the fuck out, Keith. I'm done talking to you."

I'D ENDED up taking the bottle with me, tossing it into a duffle bag along with a couple pairs of jeans and t-shirts. The walls of the condo were closing around me, and if I didn't get out of there, I'd start breaking things.

In the span of a couple of weeks, all the plans I'd made for myself, for the foundation, everything had spiraled out of control, and nothing I could do would put things back the way they were.

Maybe if Keith had just fucking minded his own business—

"Shit," I muttered, tossing my duffle into the back of my old Volvo Cross Country. It had been my first car, bought with money I'd earned. I lost my virginity in the back of that thing, and I didn't know if it was that or the fact that I'd bought the damn thing myself that kept me from selling it.

But I had no desire to part with the Volvo wagon. Not only did I not want to part with it, I put time and money into keeping it maintained and still drove it fairly often.

Sitting next to my other car, a sleek, silver Mercedes AMG GT Roadster

convertible, the Volvo looked like a dinosaur, but the Roadster needed gas, and I wasn't in any mood to stop any time soon. Besides, that car attracted attention just about everywhere I went, and I had no desire to attract any.

I didn't have a destination in mind—I just wanted to get out of my place, away from the city, away from Keith, from Veronica, from anybody and everybody I knew.

For a while.

Just until I could breathe.

Hitting the Massachusetts Turnpike, I drove for almost an hour before pulling off. I found a hotel in Worchester and booked a room for the night, carrying my bag and the scotch.

She matters to me. Keith's voice echoed in my head.

"Asshole," I muttered under my breath as I let myself in the room.

My phone vibrated, signaling a message. I almost ignored it, thinking it would be either him...or worse, my mom or grandmother. But a lifetime of being responsible kept nagging me, and I tugged the device from my pocket after locking the door with a sharp click.

It wasn't anybody from my family.

No, it was my assistant, updating me about tomorrow's agenda as she always did. Every night at nine-thirty.

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose, debating on how to respond, or even if I should. The thought of going into the office tomorrow was enough to make my head want to explode.

Things were too shitty right now.

Twice, I started to answer, but nothing came to mind. I didn't want to respond with *ok*, because each time I tried to picture myself going into the office in the morning, my brain balked because lying never set well with me.

"Fuck it," I said finally, putting the phone on silent and dropping it on the table where the ice bucket and two glasses sat. Not bothering with the ice, I took a glass and went to the bed.

With slow, methodical precision, I opened the bottle of Macallan 35. Keeping my mind blank as I poured two fingers, I kicked off my shoes, then settled with my back against the faux headboard.

"Here's to me and my fucked-up life," I said, lifting the glass to the empty room.

THREE

GABRIELLE

I WOKE TO HEAR THE EERIE, FAMILIAR SOUND OF COYOTES HOWLING IN THE distance.

Growing up on a ranch in South Dakota meant I'd learned that particular sound early. I'd learned to distinguish coyotes from wolves, and I could tell if either were close enough that I needed to worry about the animals. There was nothing worth worrying about tonight, I didn't think, but I'd have to send some of the guys to check things out in the morning.

Weariness punched at me. I rolled onto my side, fighting the urge to lift up the scarf I kept draped over the alarm clock.

I was twenty-eight years old, and up until four months ago, I hadn't ever really had much trouble sleeping. Oh, I was sure I had issues when I was a baby because, well, babies didn't care about a clock. Maybe there had been a few other times when sleep hadn't always come so easily, but nothing like this.

Four months ago, I'd put my father in the ground, burying him on the family cemetery here on the ranch, and the peaceful, easy life I'd known had been buried with me.

"Don't be so melodramatic, Gab," I muttered to myself.

Grief still choked me all too often, but it would pass. Or get easier. Or... something. It already had gotten a *little* easier—easier to breathe, at least. I didn't cry myself to sleep every night. No. Instead, I didn't sleep at all some nights.

It was getting a little easier to think about the man who'd been the center of my life for as long as I could remember and not immediately want to double over with grief.

Pick yourself up, Gabs. The echo of Tom Kennell's big, booming voice ghosted through my mind, and I took a deep, steadying breath. *You're my daughter, and there's not shit out there you can't handle once you put your mind to it.*

I'd heard that so many times during my life, accompanied by the heavy, reassuring weight of his hand on my shoulder. It had just been him and me against the world ever since I was a toddler.

Now, it was just me.

Yeah, I had friends who would help me through anything.

But it wasn't the same.

As I lay there in the dark, quiet house, I was acutely aware of just how *alone* I was. The coyotes howled again, the sound fainter this time. I shivered and pulled my blankets up more firmly and closed my eyes.

Morning would come all too soon, and I needed more sleep.

"BABY, DID YOU SLEEP AT ALL?"

The sound of Yuriko's voice, soft and chiding and firm all at once, made me want to crawl into my giant coffee cup. Or any other hole where I wouldn't have to have her worrying over me. Not that I didn't appreciate the concern and love her dearly, but I was too tired, and my mood was bordering on toxic after yet another night of poor, fitful sleep.

"I'm fine," I told her.

"You are such a liar," she said with a sigh. She pointed a long stirring spoon at the breakfast bar where I usually ate my meals. "Sit. I'll get your breakfast."

Yuriko had been the ranch's cook, as well as general lord and master of the house itself, for more than twenty years, and she was the closest thing I had to a mom. My own mother had been killed in a drunk driving accident when I was two, and my father hadn't remarried.

Yuriko was the one who told me about the birds and the bees, not that I'd needed a lot of explanation—when you grow up on a working ranch, you figure things like sex out pretty early on. She was the one to talk to me about my period, take me shopping for a dress the first time a boy asked me out... and the person to offer a shoulder after my first and only heartbreak.

There weren't too many people who could boss me around, but Yuriko was on the list, so with a sigh, I sat. My butt hadn't even completely settled on the stool before she was at my side with a pot of coffee, refilling the cup I'd already mostly emptied.

"You're drinking too much of this," she told me. "When you cut yourself, do you bleed coffee instead of blood?"

"Not yet." Giving her a hopeful smile, I said, "Do I smell fried beef hash by any chance?"

"Hmmm." Shaking her head, she returned to the oversized stove and picked up a spatula, pressing down.

Grease popped. Yummy, fattening grease...my belly grumbled. I'd ended up working through dinner, and the plate she'd left me had gone cold. I'd been too tired to mess with eating, much less reheating it, so I'd dumped it all down the disposal and washed the plate. Now, I was paying for it.

My belly rumbled again.

"You know, if you would eat your dinner, you wouldn't be so starved in the morning."

My cheeks heated.

She glanced at me over her shoulder. "No comment?"

"Nope." Sipping my coffee, I checked my watch and looked outside. "I'm going to have TD and Carl ride out to the western boundary with me. I heard coyotes last night."

"TD mentioned it." She pointed at the refrigerator with her spatula. "Lunches for three in there. Make sure you *eat* it. I'll tell TD to sit on you and make you if necessary."

"TD is too nice a guy to sit on me."

"If I bribe him right, he'll do it." She gave me a smug smile. "And he won't actually have to sit on you. He'll just flash that sweet, *aw shucks, ma'am* smile and keep asking until you do it just to shut him up. That bastard is such a charmer. If I was twenty years younger and into men, I'd fight you for him."

Laughing, I curled my hands around my coffee. "If that was the case, I'd let you have him because you'd treat him right, and he deserves a good woman."

"You're a good woman." Yuriko flipped the hash onto a plate, then added two eggs, both perfectly over easy. The toast popped up at almost the exact second she'd finished plating the eggs, and she added the golden-brown

slices before bringing the food to me.

“Yes, but we’re not in love. We’re friends, and that’s all we’re ever going to be.” Shrugging, I took my fork and cut into the crispy top layer of corned beef hash. “Trust me, the last thing I need in my life right now is some sort of romantic entanglement. I don’t have the time for it.”

“Oh, honey.” Yuriko settled across from me with a cup of tea. “When the right one comes along, it won’t matter if you have time or not. It’s going to happen.”

I didn’t bother arguing. There really wasn’t any point, and I didn’t want Yuriko to feel like she needed to worry anymore about me than she already did.

Both of the people responsible for being who I am—Yuriko and my father—had been torn apart by love. It was something I wanted to avoid at all costs.

“WHY DO YOU NEED US BOTH?” Carl gave me a narrow look after I finished telling them about heading out to check the western fence line.

Resisting the urge to ask him if he would have made this issue with my father, I just met his gaze and held his stare.

Carl’s hazel eyes went hard, and his weathered, ruddy skin turned an even darker shade of red. His lip quivered, and I braced myself for an ugly comment, but abruptly, his face smoothed.

The soft sound of a boot scuffing over packed dirt didn’t surprise me in the least, and I glanced over as Talbot Daggett, or TD as we’d taken to calling him, came to join us.

“Will says we’re going to go check out and see if the coyotes will be a problem?” he asked.

Nodding at TD, I said, “Yes. Yuriko said you’d heard them too?”

“Sure did. They weren’t close, but you know how it is.” He moved a leanly muscled shoulder in a shrug. “We don’t want to take a chance.”

“I’ll get my gear together,” Carl muttered, turning on his heel and storming back to the building where half the ranch hands lived.

On the opposite side of the sprawling, welcoming space stood the guesthouse. We had people come in from time to time, to visit, to inspect

cattle or the sheep. We also had a couple of friends in Montana who bred horses, and when we needed to buy a new one, they'd come here instead of having us make the trip out.

Their sprawling family operation was far bigger than ours—*mine* now, only mine. But Deke Franklin and his wife and their six kids lived on a ranch of nearly eighty thousand acres, sharing the property with Deke's brother, Sam, and his family.

Deke had known my father for decades and enjoyed the occasional trip to South Dakota. When Dad had decided to build the guesthouse nearly fifteen years ago, it had been because of his friendship with Deke, and others like him.

For three weeks after my father's death, Deke and his wife, Clara, had stayed with me, living in the guesthouse, taking breakfast with me, riding the fence line, a calm, comforting presence.

I missed them.

I missed my dad.

Blowing out a breath, I pushed the melancholy away and looked out over the yard. It had fallen into neglect after Deke and Clara had left, but between TD, Yuriko, and I, we'd gotten it back into shape over the past few weeks.

Now, the big swimming pool beckoned to me like an oasis. It was early, and the heat wasn't bad—yet—but I so wished I could spend a few hours by the pool instead of riding out there and dealing with Carl's surly attitude.

"He still giving you problems?" TD asked quietly.

"You really think he's going to stop?" I looked over at him with a sardonic smirk.

TD pulled his hat off and shoved a hand through his sandy hair. He needed a haircut, the overlong strands falling into vivid blue eyes. "Nah. That prick isn't going to stop, but you can't keep putting up with him, either, Gabrielle, especially since he seems to be getting worse."

A muscle ticked in his cheek, and I narrowed my eyes. "What's up?"

"He's been running his mouth with the rest of the ranch hands. Just about everybody but Fisher tells him to shove it up his miserable ass, but it's not a good way to start out. You're still trying to find your feet after losing your dad. You don't need some asshole undermining you with the rest of the guys here."

Sighing, I rubbed the back of my neck. He wasn't telling me anything I didn't all ready know, but at the same time, Carl was one of the most

experienced ranch hands I had. Next to Will Curtis, my overseer, there were only two others who had even close to the same experience as Carl, and lately, Will had been making noises about retiring. He'd come to me after Dad's death and promised he wouldn't be going anywhere until I was comfortable running things on my own, but I couldn't expect him to stay around forever.

"I know what you're thinking," TD said, his soft, easy drawl catching my attention.

"That I'd like to play hooky? Maybe both of us?" I gave him a wicked smile and nodded at the pool. "Kick everybody out, and the two of us could go skinny-dipping, get drunk and take the afternoon off?"

"You, darlin', could use an afternoon off, and you should probably take it." He gave me a lazy shrug. "If you want to do just that, feel free, but we should probably post a guard if you're going to skinny-dip. I think Yuriko could handle the job. She scares the bejeezus out of half the crew. I could nab Janvier or Dave to help Carl and me. But you won't do it. And that wasn't what you were thinking anyway."

"No." I gave the pool a wistful sigh. "But it would be fun. Okay, Mister Knows-It-All, what am I thinking?"

"That would be *Monsieur*," he said, affecting a French accent.

"That," I told him, "has got to be the worst French accent I've ever heard."

"You *inzult* me!" He somehow managed an affronted, snobbish look that was much, *much* better than the lame accent.

Laughing, I waved at him to continue. "Come on. Enlighten me. What am I thinking?"

"You feel loyal to the asshole." TD hitched up a shoulder. "And you're worried that if you fire him, people might get word and think you're being difficult after your dad's death. But trust me, nobody who knows that prick is going to wonder why he got canned. That chip on his shoulder has grown to the size of Mount Rushmore at this point."

Laughter gone, I wrapped my arms around my middle. I had nothing to say. There wasn't really anything *to* say. TD wasn't wrong.

"It's not going to get any better, honey," he told me. "You know that."

Yeah. I did.

FOUR

MATT

BRILLIANT LIGHT SHONE INTO MY EYES, A THIN SLIVER AT LEAST THREE inches wide. Rolling onto my stomach, I shoved my head under the pillows and started to drift back to sleep.

Two seconds later, I pushed onto my elbows and scowled at the window.

An unfamiliar window in an unfamiliar room.

“What the hell...”

Memory came rushing back in the next second, and I groaned, once more burying my face in the sheets. Any chance of getting back to sleep was gone, though.

I told myself I’d start trying to figure things out come morning, and I’d meant it.

Well, it was morning.

I was supposed to be at the office all ready.

I had no idea what time it was, but it was late enough for the sunlight to singe my retinas and wake me from a sound sleep, so it was definitely past time for me to be at my desk.

“Son of a bitch,” I grumbled.

I took the luxury of a few more minutes of peace, letting my mind stay completely blank, but eventually, a full bladder and the nasty taste in my mouth drove me from the bed and into the bathroom. After taking care of those necessities, I finished stripping out of the boxer briefs I’d fallen asleep in—I normally wore pajama bottoms but hadn’t packed any.

I was a man of routine and had expected the feel of smooth sheets against my legs to keep me awake for a while, but it hadn’t. I dropped into sleep and slept like the dead instead of lying there, brooding and worrying like I tended

to do most nights.

That, in itself, was a puzzle, but not one I wanted to think about right now.

Taking a long hot shower, I tried to focus on the day ahead. Normally, that was easy.

But it was impossible just then.

I didn't *want* to go into the office, but I had to. I had a job to do. The foundation needed somebody at the helm, and it was my responsibility now. And I couldn't just sit around this hotel indefinitely. My parents would worry, my grandparents, my brothers.

Scowling, I thought of Keith.

"Fuck him," I said as I scrubbed at my scalp with the hotel-provided shampoo, the scent filling the steamy air. "That prick didn't do much worrying leading up to this, did he?"

Bastard.

I was so fucking mad at him, I couldn't even think straight.

How in the hell was I going to work, function, do anything when my head was so messed up?

We were supposed to have a meeting in the next few days to go over pictures that had been taken at the picnic, something to use in a report for a board meeting. I was always roped into it, even though Keith had a better eye for that sort of thing. How could I talk to him without punching him in the teeth?

Still brooding over that, I exited the shower and dried off, all without looking in the mirror. I'd caught sight of my reflection when I brushed my teeth, and the disheveled hair, scruffy jawline, scowling mouth, I'd looked like a stranger.

I *felt* like a stranger right now, even to myself.

Leaving the bathroom, I passed by the table where I'd left my phone. The screen lit up. Determined to ignore it, I kept walking. I made it two steps before turning and grabbing the damn thing.

My dad.

Sighing, I took the call and sat on the edge of the bed, bare-ass naked.

"Hey, Dad," I said softly.

"Matt. Son, is everything okay?"

I blew out a heavy breath. "I don't even know how to answer that."

On the other end of the line, my father simply waited.

“Keith and I had a fight.”

This time, it was my father who sighed. “Yes, I know. After your assistant called here looking for you, I called around. I checked with Keith first, and he told me. He’s worried about you, son.”

“Great time for him to be worried,” I muttered, barely managing to not add a few select curses at the end.

“You want to tell me about it?”

“No,” I said hollowly. That was the last thing I wanted to do. But I knew I needed to give him something, considering what I was getting ready to do. “Veronica...you know she broke things off, right?”

“Yes. I’ve...spoken with your grandparents. I know Keith has feelings for her.” He hesitated before adding, “Your grandmother is of the mind he had feelings for her from the beginning.”

“Then he sure as hell shouldn’t have gone ahead with that idiotic idea to hook us up,” I said, biting the words off. My voice came out sharp and bitter, and I immediately sucked in a breath. “Shit. I’m sorry, Dad. My head’s in a bad place right now.”

“I imagine so. Listen, Matt, I’m not defending your brother. Keith made some mistakes, and that’s just all there is to it. But you know he loves you. He’s looked up to you since you two were kids. Whatever feelings he has for Veronica, they must be serious, or he never would have acted on them.”

She matters to me.

I silenced the memory of Keith’s voice, not ready to think about it. I didn’t know when I *would* be ready.

“It’s not just what he did by setting us up,” I said finally. “There’s more to it, but I’m not going to discuss his personal shit, Dad. But he goes meddling in my life, doing what he can to make sure I end things with Nikolette, then this mess with Veronica. I don’t need him throwing my life off-track, okay?”

“Matthias...” He sighed, drawing my name out in a way that left me feeling like I was thirteen years old. “Your mom and I have been worrying about you ever since you started spending time around Nikolette. *She* would have thrown your life off-track worse than your brother ever could, and I think you know that. She would have messed you up something awful, son.”

He waited for a response.

When I didn’t offer one, he continued, “You’ve got this picture in your head about how you can set up these guidelines about what to do and how

your life will go according to those guidelines. But life doesn't work that way. You've had a few wrenches thrown into your big life plan, and you're off-balance. You don't handle that well, never have. That, combined with this fight with your brother...well, it makes sense that all of this has your head in a bad place. The question is...what are you going to do?"

I said nothing for several long moments.

Finally, I said, "I think I need some time away."

I waited for the expected response. *You've got responsibilities here. Come back home, and we'll talk. Why don't we have dinner tonight...things will seem better.*

"That might be one of the smartest things you've said in quite some time, Matt."

I blinked. "What?"

"You heard me. Your mother and I will take care of things at the foundation, so you can take the time you need."

"Dad, I...look—"

"No. You need time. You take it. You've only got one life, son, and you've been too busy planning yours to bother trying to live it, much less figure out what it is that will make you happy. Take some time, figure that out. We'll take care of things here. *You take care of yourself for now.*"

The line went dead.

I lowered the phone and stared at it, my father's words still playing through my mind.

"Take care of myself," I muttered. Falling back on the unmade bed beneath me, I blew out a breath and focused on the ceiling overhead. Part of me, the stubborn part that had finally overcome a near-paralyzing shyness so I could take my place in the Hartwell Foundation, resisted the idea that I even *needed* to take time away.

But the realistic part of my brain kicked in. Or maybe it was the rational part—the part I'd been ignoring ever since Clinton Ives had approached me at the country club and informed me he knew about the foundation's 'little cash flow' problem.

Realistically, yeah, he'd offered a solution that *could* have worked, if I'd been able to look at things in a purely business-like, unemotional matter. That was what I'd tried to do, what I'd convinced myself I *was* doing. It was a decision made out of worry, that worry compounded by the weight of the responsibility hanging over my shoulder.

Now, for some reason, the worry, heavy as it was, no longer clouded the reason, and I realized something I should have figured out sooner. It never would have worked.

Looking back at the past couple of months, I'd been withdrawing further and further into myself, so wrapped up in the foundation, I'd lost sight of other things. There had been days when I'd stayed at the foundation until late in the night, only to crash on the couch and wake up when my assistant, Marquetta, arrived, bearing coffee. Not to mention the ever-present roll of antacids I kept on hand at any given moment. Several times, I'd had to ask Marquetta to run out and get more, until she'd taken to keeping some on hand.

"You should see a doctor about this, Matt," she told me more than once. "You're probably developing an ulcer with all your worrying. And I worry about your blood pressure too. All this stress can't be good for you.

I'd told her I was fine, healthy as could be, except for the heartburn. But she insisted it was more, and I'd promised to get it checked out, mostly to mollify her.

I hadn't followed through.

Just like I hadn't done anything about the sleepless nights, or the ones where I'd fallen asleep only after drinking half a bottle of whiskey to slow down the train of thoughts in my head.

"Shit. Take care of myself." Maybe Dad had been right. I'd spent so much of my adult life focused on the foundation and living for that alone, I had no idea how to focus on *me*.

FIVE

GABRIELLE

THE LIGHTS IN THE GUESTHOUSE WERE DIM WHEN I APPROACHED.

To my night vision, the faint golden glow coming within was more than adequate. The boards of the porch creaked under my shoes as I climbed, and the door swung open before I reached it, courtesy of said creaks.

Sound traveled easily on a night like this, and TD could have heard the back door to the house close if he'd been listening.

I saw his shadow, limned in light, and I smiled.

Then I drew close enough, and he moved, reaching out and snagging my wrist, hauling me inside so fast it pulled me off balance.

Crashing into TD's chest with a startled *oomph*, I looked up at him.

He smiled down at me. "Gotcha."

"Well, now. It looks like." Smiling back, I let him draw me into the house. "What are you going to do with me?"

"I was thinking...*this*." He spun us around, setting the room around me to spinning as he turned and used my body to shut the door. He crushed into me in the next instant, and I groaned as his mouth came down on mine.

All the pent-up energy of the past few days came exploding out, and I tightened my grip on him, shoving one hand into his hair, fisting it tight while I curved the other over his hip, hooking two fingers in his belt loop to haul him closer while the others brushed over the hard, muscled flesh of his side. Warm, smooth skin met my questing hand, but before I could enjoy it for more than a few seconds, he nudged my hands away.

"Naked, Gabrielle. Let's get you naked. I'm already half-way there. Can't have you sitting there all dressed and all."

"I'm not sitting," I murmured against his smiling mouth.

“Semantics.” He caught my lower lip between his teeth and tugged, slowly, sensually, before letting go.

A shiver raced down my spine, warmth chasing after it. That warmth spread as he slid his hands along my sides, down to my hips to catch the hem of the soft white cotton tank I’d pulled on over my jeans earlier.

Soon, he had me bare from the waist up, and I groaned in sensual pleasure as he painted a path of heated intent down my neck, the midline of my torso, on down to my navel.

There, he stopped, nuzzling my belly as he curled his hands over my hips, the heat of his palms scalding me through the material of the long, full skirt I’d pulled on earlier.

“I can’t decide if I want to strip this off and have you here up against the door or turn you around and bend you over that chair over there, pushing all this pretty pink cotton up over your hips so I can fuck you from behind... rough, hard and deep, until you scream and beg and moan,” he whispered, his mouth teasing my skin. “Which should I do, Gabrielle?”

“Fuck me,” I demanded, not even thinking twice. “Hard.”

My head was too loud, too full of noise, and I needed to forget for a little while.

As if pulled by strings, TD came to his feet in a loose, graceful uncoiling of muscle and sinew. In the dim light, his vivid gaze met mine, assessing.

A split second later, the room spun around me again, and the breath was knocked from my lungs. I couldn’t catch it, either, because he did just what he’d promised.

Bent over the arm of a high, wing-backed chair, fingers gripping and curling into the smooth material of the cushion, I sucked in oxygen, desperate. TD kicked my ankles apart, deliberately rough. He must have known the shape my head was in, but then, he would. He was the closest friend I had, the best friend I had, my first and only lover.

This was, at the core, simply sex, but it was a release I desperately needed, now more than ever, and when he brought the flat of his hand down on the curve of my butt, I bit my lip and groaned.

I might have even screamed...or howled...?

We both tensed.

“Well, fuck,” TD muttered, just as I started to swear in a long, low, ugly litany.

“Please tell me that’s not what I think it is,” I said as I straightened. My

back brushed against his chest, but even though we were both bare from the waist up, my mind was already on the problem at hand—*coyotes*.

“Depends,” he said, voice sounding surlier than I’d heard in a long, long time. “I’m pretty sure I heard a coyote.” He pronounced it *ki-yot*, heavy on the *i* and *o*. That drawl of his usually left me smiling, but not tonight.

I’d needed something other than running down a couple of damn coyotes.

His blue eyes slid toward me as he tossed me my shirt before going to grab his boots. “What about you, darlin’? Did you hear ‘em?”

“Yeah.” I sighed, tired all ready. “I’m going to run back to the house and change into jeans. Whoever gets out to the stable first saddles up?”

He nodded, face already set in grim lines. “Want me to wake any of the others?”

It wasn’t that late. Checking the clock, I considered a moment, then shook my head.

“No. If anybody is awake and moving on it, fine, but don’t drag anybody out of bed. They haven’t howled again, so they can’t be too close.”

IF THERE WAS a torture created more excruciating than a woman riding a horse while aroused, the swaying movements of her mount causing her panties to slip and slide all over her swollen, wet flesh, I didn’t want to know about it.

It wasn’t that I minded a little bit of punishment with my pleasure, but this was out of hand.

It had been weeks since TD and I had been able to scrap together more than a few minutes here and there—tonight would have been the first night in almost a month. That last time had been a stolen quickie in the bathroom in the main house a few days after my dad’s funeral, driven by my urge to forget.

We were lovers, yes, but it was an arrangement born out of friendship and a mutual understanding of the give and take between us. Although lately, I’d needed a lot more taking than giving.

“If you grit your teeth any harder, you’ll lose a molar or two,” TD said from next to me.

“You try riding a horse in my condition,” I muttered.

“I’m not in much better shape, darlin’.”

With a snort, I said, “I doubt that. You’re not the one with her panties sliding back and forth over her in time with your mount.” Maybe it was mean of me, but I wanted him suffering too, so I added, “It was *supposed* to be you slipping and sliding all over me, remember?”

TD let out a low, careful breath. “You’re an evil brat sometimes, Gabrielle.”

We rode an easy trot, our horses each chosen for their speed and endurance, as well as their calm natures.

My mount, Loki, a big, tall gelding my father had given me for my birthday three years earlier, whickered softly, his black mane lost to the night while his gray coat seemed to glimmer in the moonlight.

We hadn’t heard the howl again, but we had a good idea of the direction.

“I wonder why those damn coyotes had to go and be pests *right at that moment*,” I groused.

TD chuckled. “I bet that damn old mangy beasts would grovel and whine for forgiveness if they could see your face right now. You look like you want to tear out throats.”

I glared at him.

“Mine’s available if you’re curious.” He smiled, unabashed, and arched his strong throat, his deep, golden tan all but washed out by the silvery moonlight.

“You’re such an asshole,” I said, smiling despite my irritation. I might have even laughed.

But Loki went still, but it wasn’t a relaxed, easy stillness.

A second later, so did TD’s Appaloosa, a steadfast mare he called Gumdrop.

I’d seen both Loki and Gumdrop stand calm in situations that would make almost any horse shy away, so for them both to be acting like this was enough to have me drawing the rifle from the custom rig attached to my saddle.

TD did the same, using the night-scope mounted to it to scan the terrain.

“Hell,” he muttered. “You got a light on you?”

Silently, I pulled a military-grade flashlight from the bag and lifted it up. It lit up the night like a miniature sun, absolutely merciless as it illuminated the body of a fat, young ewe, her eyes wide and lifeless, dark as the blood spilling out of her torn body.

“Tracks,” TD said tonelessly. “To the right.”

I shifted the light’s beam to the hard-packed earth, too hard-packed to hold much of anything except the tracks that had gone through the dying sheep’s blood.

“Coyote.” Staring at them, I felt the skin on the back of my neck crawl in a way I couldn’t quite identify. “Only one, though. That’s...weird.”

“Yeah. You ain’t lying about that.”

SIX

MATT

SOUTH DAKOTA'S STATE LINE LAY ALMOST FOUR HOURS BEHIND ME. THE night before, I'd stayed in Winona, Minnesota, in an elegant old mansion that had been converted into a bed and breakfast. My assistant had found the place for me, planning my itinerary down to my stop in Seattle in four more days.

However, she hadn't planned on my after-lunch excursion. The GPS I kept in the old Volvo had glitched out on me—it kept trying to reboot itself. Sometimes, I hated technology. Turning it off then back on usually fixed the issue, but it took a few minutes to cycle through, and I got back on the road while it took its sweet time.

My phone's map app wasn't an option, either. It looked like cellphone towers were few and far between in this part of the country.

While the damn GPS kept booting and rebooting, I'd been blissfully unaware that I'd made a right turn instead of a left. Distracted by the rolling green hills and the sheer open expanse all around me, I didn't think much of the miles speeding by until I'd driven a good fifty.

I should have been able to reach my next destination—Rapid City, South Dakota—by around five with time to spare. Normally, I would have been on the road before eight, but the couple at the bed and breakfast in Minnesota had been talkers, and it had been...relaxing, really, just talking to them. No pressures. No expectations. Just conversation. I'd lost track of time and hadn't left until almost eight-thirty.

That, combined with my road-trip, would have me looking at arriving at the small, boutique hotel in Rapid City several hours later than planned.

Being late, even to check into a hotel, put my nerves on edge, and I had to

consciously tell myself to relax. I might have managed it too.

If it wasn't for the overturned tractor-trailer just up ahead on the interstate.

I MISSED SEEING the accident by less than a minute. Smoke was still billowing in the air when I pulled my car off the side of the road and jogged over to see if I could offer any help. Luckily, my phone had decided to work, and I was able to call 9-1-1 while the other drivers around called up to the cab, trying to talk to get the driver and get his status.

When there was no response, I put my phone on speaker, then dropped it into my pocket. "I can get up there if you two boost me."

We only had to wait roughly a quarter of an hour, but it felt like a lifetime as I sat perched on the side of the truck itself, talking to the driver to keep him calm. The two witnesses who'd seen the accident stood by, one of them watching the truck like he thought it might explode—that wasn't helping my nerves much. The other guy had his eye on the very, very dead bull that had contributed to the crash.

Beast versus man. I didn't think anybody won that round.

Paramedics arrived on the scene, and I jumped down to the ground after assuring the driver that help was there. He thanked me, face red, but less panicked now.

Since I hadn't seen the accident itself, the deputy who stopped me to take my statement only needed me for a few minutes. Once she was done, I gestured to the truck blocking the interstate. "I'm heading toward Rapid City, and I'm not familiar with the area. My GPS is acting up too. Can you suggest an alternate route? Preferably one that won't send me to the North Pole like the GPS might?"

If that damn thing ever started working again.

The deputy grinned. She looked to be in her forties, close to six feet, with curves to go along with the muscle, her skin gold from more than just sun. Her hair was worn in a long, thick braid, a few stray tendrils escaping to frame her face as she looked me over, her smile widening.

"Now, I never would have guessed you weren't from around here, Mr. Hartwell, with that *Bah-ston* accent and pricy clothes."

There was nothing mean about the way she said it, just humor, and I found myself smiling back.

“You on business?” she asked.

“Not exactly.”

She gave my pale gray dress shirt, the darker gray trousers, and black leather loafers another look. “Well, if you’re going to a funeral, I’d understand the fancy threads.”

“No funeral.” I said nothing else.

After a second, she just sighed. “You’re not much of a talker, Mr. Hartwell. Still, you don’t quite have the stuck-up suit thing going on, either, even if you do dress the part. Okay, now...pay attention...easy to get lost out here if you’re not from these parts.”

She gestured at the interstate divider. “You get back on, head east until you see the next exit. Turn left, which will take you north...”

Listening, I committed the details to memory, repeating them back word for word when she asked if I had it.

“Good recall.”

Tapping my temple, I said, “Nice trick of mine. Thank you, deputy.”

“No problem. And Mr. Hartwell?”

I glanced back.

“Loosen up a little, why don’t you? Get a pair of jeans or something. If you’re not working or going to a funeral, there’s no reason not to be a little more comfortable.”

Instead of answering, I just smiled.

“Oh, by the way. Get that car of yours looked at. Soon.” She gestured to the wagon. “It’s leaking something.”

I’D ALREADY CONTACTED a mechanic in Rapid City, agreed to pay an exorbitant amount for him to take a look at the Volvo Saturday morning. The good news? I’d decided to spend two nights there, so I wasn’t off schedule—yet.

The dark smoke that started coming out from under the hood of the car maybe thirty minutes after I turned onto the small, country road, however? It wasn’t just bad news—it was shit-tastic, fuck-me-over news, as my youngest

brother Shawn would have said.

It went from a couple of tendrils to plumes in a span of a few minutes, and I pulled over to the side of the road, frustration and something else, something I couldn't recognize building inside me. The red engine light flashed on *just* before I put the car in park.

The smoke kept coming, and worried about a fire, I turned the car off before climbing out.

That unrecognizable feeling continued to climb and swirl inside, drawing tighter and tighter as I stormed to the hood, freeing the catch and popping it up to glare at the smoking engine.

I got a face full of smoke for my trouble and turned away, coughing on the fumes.

Good news—I *had* stopped the car.

Bad news—I caught the hint of something burning. There weren't any flames, but there was no way in hell I could risk turning that engine on again.

Glancing around at the golden, rippling fields, I blew out a breath and turned back to the car. "At least it didn't catch on fire," I told myself. That wouldn't have just been bad for me and my already fucked-up plans—it could be catastrophic for many, many others.

The headache didn't go away, but some of the knots in my shoulders eased, and I blew out another breath. The smoke had mostly cleared, so I went back to the car and stared into the engine, although I had no idea what I was looking for.

Grandpa had made sure we all knew how to change a car's oil and a tire—you never knew when you might be out driving somewhere and have a flat. "You want to wait an hour or two for AAA or do it yourself and be on your way?"

It hadn't even been three months since the Volvo had gotten an oil change. I knew it wasn't that. The deputy had said something about the car leaking...what did cars leak?

I had no fucking clue.

Swearing, I went back to the driver's seat and sat, reaching behind me to pull the phone from the cupholder.

"Of course," I said. "Of course, there are no fucking bars."

I almost threw the device but resisted, curling my hand around it as I took a deep breath.

That tightening sensation in my chest, that smothering emotion, they both

got worse.

“Breathe,” I told myself. “Just breathe. Count to ten.”

“One.” Deep breath in, then out.

“Two.” Deep breath in, then out.

“Three.” Deep breath in, then out.

“Four—*fuck!*”

Exploding out of the car, I slammed the door, then kicked the side of the Volvo. Metal dented under my foot. The sight of it soothed something ragged inside me, so I did it again, then spun away to pace.

Something bit into my hand—my phone. I was squeezing it so hard, the plastic frame bit into my skin. Putting it in my pocket, hopefully out of danger, I shoved my hands through my hair and started to pace.

Something snagged in my hair—I wrenched and lowered my wrist, staring in disbelief at the pale, pearly button on the three-hundred-dollar shirt I’d picked up the day after I left Boston.

The button had a narrow crack, so fine it was almost unnoticeable. But it had trapped several strands of my hair just now, ripping them out.

“I get fucking lost,” I muttered, unbuttoning the sleeve. The button didn’t want to cooperate, and I ended up ripping it—and tearing a small hole in the fabric—but I didn’t care. “I end up trapped on the interstate because a stupid-ass bull decides to take a stroll on the road and gets his ass killed. My brother sets me up with a great woman, then steals her. I’m ruining the foundation. My life’s falling apart. The damn car broke down. I can’t call anybody. And I paid three hundred dollars for a shirt with shitty buttons!”

At some point, I’d started to walk.

I kept walking, swearing and pissed and so fucking angry—at the car, at the bull, at the foundation and myself, at my brother, at Veronica—the whole fucking world.

Heat pounded down on me, the sun intense.

Sweat trickled into my eyes, burning them.

I kept walking. I kept walking away from the car that suddenly seemed to represent *all* my problems.

I should have grabbed my water bottle. I was thirsty.

But I kept walking.

Sweat slicked my skin.

I was so hot, *too* hot. One good thing, the heat had finally burned away the anger, and all I felt was that heat...and exhaustion. I was so damn tired.

How long had I been walking?

I had no idea.

A truck drove by, slowing just a little. I stopped and looked up, but the driver sped up before I could do jackshit.

“Where the hell am I going?”

I honestly had no idea.

Turning, I looked back at the car.

Or I tried to. I couldn't see it.

“Aw, fuck,” I said, groaning. Swiping the sweat off my forehead with my sleeve, I headed toward the car.

It couldn't be far, right?

I had an idea of when I'd been forced to pull over because I'd glanced at the time on the dashboard clock just a couple minutes before the smoke. Pulling out my phone as I figured out the difference due to the time change, I glanced at the time.

Then I looked. Hard.

It was after five—mountain time.

“Aw, fuck.”

SEVEN

GABRIELLE

“YOU OUGHTA GO CHECK THE FENCE OUT ON THE WESTERN PARAMETER,” Carl said, eyeing me narrowly. “Out near where it runs up against the highway.”

“Why?” Frowning at him, I tugged my hat off so I could feel the faint breeze. It was almost six, and I’d been up and at it since dawn, just like always. I was tired, hot, and dirty as hell from the day’s work, and I wanted a tall glass of tea, a shower, and food.

Actually, I wouldn’t mind a nice long soak in the tub after I washed off all the dirt. Weighing the idea, I decided that I just might crack open a bottle of wine and take that and a sandwich into the bathroom with me so I could indulge in the bath.

“Something’s up with that fancy-ass fence you talked your daddy into putting up.” Carl turned his head and spat into the dirt, a mouthful of brownish residue—thanks to the chewing tobacco.

The sight of it made my stomach churn, and I resisted the urge to snap at him. He only did it because he knew I hated it, and I wasn’t going to indulge him right now.

“Something’s not working. The sensors are off or something,” he said. “That damn thing was a big, fancy waste of money. I told you and your daddy that, but nobody listened to me.”

That big, fancy waste of money was an electrical fence Dad and I had started putting up around the property two years ago. I’d spent months researching it and talking to various ranchers who used the same sort of fencing before Dad and I both decided to move forward. We were still in the process of upgrading it around the property line when he died, and the project

had fallen into limbo while I figured out what in the hell I was doing running the place on my own.

But we did have the fence in the areas we'd considered top priority—along the main road and the western perimeter where my land abutted the small country highway for several miles.

Thanks to advances in technology, we were also able to tell when certain parts of the fence line weren't functioning as they should, which was a heck of a lot more effective than doing physical perimeter line checks.

Yeah, the fences occasionally had problems, but the hint of a smirk in Carl's eyes put my back on edge. Mentally, I counted to ten before asking, "When did you notice the problem?"

"This morning." Scratching at his jaw, he cocked his head. "Nah, it might have been yesterday morning. I can't remember."

"You knew there was a problem with the fence, and you waited until the end of the day to say something?" The foreman, Will, stepped up at that point, glaring at Carl.

Will was similar enough in build and stature that he could have passed for my father's brother. They even had the same coloring. But while my father had still cut a handsome figure even into his fifties, Will had a face only a mother could love. His nose had been broken three times just in the fifteen years since I'd known him. His jaw was too pronounced, as was his forehead. Overall, he had a homely mug, right up until he smiled. That smile lit up his face, and his eyes were warm and friendly with those he considered his friends or family.

But when he was pissed? Those light green eyes turned to shards of ice. Currently, those shards were drilling into Carl with such intensity, I wouldn't have been surprised to see blood.

"It slipped my mind," Carl said with a shrug.

"Yeah, well, it's time for me to start tallying work hours tonight." Will planted his hands on his hips, temper shining in his eyes. "Maybe it will slip my mind that you're on the payroll. And if you don't get your act together, that just might happen."

Carl sneered, but a quick look at Will wiped his face blank. "You ain't gonna fire me."

"Since when have I been known to put up with incompetence? Since when has Gabrielle been one to put up with it? Because you know her father sure as hell didn't," Will snapped. "What in the hell has made you think any

of that changed?”

Carl glanced at me, and it was difficult to keep my face carefully blank. “You already know we had at least one coyote on the property recently, and we lost another three sheep last night. That’s not much, but we still haven’t found the damn thing. And now you tell us, *more than a day later*, there’s a break in the fence. Sounds like the definition of incompetence to me.”

Carl, his face a dull, angry shade of red, glared at me.

Up until my father’s death, I’d mostly handled the financial aspects at the ranch. Dad had taught me everything about running the ranch, and there had never been a question about me taking over after he was gone, although we’d only talked about it a couple of times.

Who wanted to think about that sort of thing?

While Dad and I had worked as partners for the most part, he’d hired Will for a specific purpose. Will had been the foreman for so long, and when it came to dealing with the ranch hands, Dad had left him to it, only stepping in on the rare occasion when somebody did have to be terminated.

I had no plans on changing how things were done, although Will’s upcoming plans to retire did need to be considered. Both he and I had talked about TD taking over as foreman, and TD was open to the idea.

Personally, I hated to think about a time when Will was gone, and not just because he knew how to shut Carl down almost as quickly as my dad. I didn’t really want to fire Carl, although it had nothing to do with any fond feelings. I just didn’t want to deal with the hassle.

But if this bullshit kept up, I’d do it, regardless of any fallout.

Several seconds stretched out and there was no response from Carl, so I shifted my attention to Will. There was no point in wasting time on Carl’s attitude, especially since I needed to deal with the fence.

“I might as well head out there.” Unable to stifle the sigh, I checked to make sure I had the small, fob-like device I’d need to do one of the routine troubleshooting tasks on the fence. It was tucked away securely in one of the small pouches on my saddle, and TD, as if he’d read my mind, appeared with a thermal bottle in hand.

He passed it over without comment, taking my empty one from me. I could go a little while longer without eating anything, but I really didn’t need to skip the water. “This old boy would probably like a run. He’s been trying to talk me into it all day.”

His ears pricking up at the word *run*, Loki arched his neck and whickered.

“Well, seems that mount of yours don’t mind working overtime,” Will said, smiling at the gelding. He came up and stroked a hand down the horse’s neck. “Even after a day this miserable hot, you want to go out there, don’t you?”

“Probably going to try to chase some rabbits or something, you bad boy, huh, Loki?”

The smile on Will’s face widened, but before I could bring the horse’s head around, Will caught the reins. “Hold up a minute. Carl can mount up and ride out with you.”

“No need. Loki needs the run, and I could probably use one. Carl won’t be able to keep up.” I smiled at Will, deliberately ignoring Carl, who had gone rigid at my comment. “Besides, it’s too late for any major repairs so there’s no point in both of us going, but if it’s just something simple, I can do it myself.”

“All right,” Will said as he shoved his hat back and scratched his scalp. He glanced at the Remington still tucked into its rig on my saddle. “That loaded?”

I just stared at him.

He laughed again. “I swear, girl. You’ve got your daddy’s glare down pat. Okay, go on. You check in with me, let me know what’s going on at the fence. If I don’t see you back here within a few hours, TD and I are going to come out looking for you.”

“Yes, mother,” I teased. Pulling the sat phone from its holster on my belt, I checked the battery. It was good to go. Out here, this was the only reliable form of communication other than landlines. “And before you can ask, I’ve got my phone.”

“Go on with you.” Will’s ruddy cheeks flushed a deeper shade of red as he waved me off. He slanted a look toward Carl before saying, “Carl, take a walk with me.”

As I guided my horse around, I sighed.

Will and Carl sure as hell were taking a lot of walks lately. The ranch hand had never been the easiest person to work with, but since Dad’s death, it had gotten worse. So much worse, he was becoming a pain in the ass, and I had a feeling it was only a matter of time before my foreman started pushing me to fire him.

Sooner or later, I’d have to deal with it.

Loki tossed his head and danced under me, letting me know what he

wanted.

“Good idea, boy. We’ll deal with it later.” Tapping my heels against his sides, I clicked to him. “Let’s go, boy. Show me how fast you are.”

Loki launched himself forward, running like he thought himself a contender for the Kentucky Derby. I whooped and bent lower over his body, laughing as he thundered over the ground.

He had a smooth gait, and for the short time I let him have his head, it was like we were flying, the wind tearing at my ponytail and knocking my hat back until the string around my neck was the only thing keeping it in place.

For a little while, I let all the worries and grief just fall away.

THE NICE THING about the perimeter fences was how easy it was to see if they were functional. We had them marked up in sections, and Loki and I had just about cleared the last section, the next one drawing into view when I saw the vehicle. Frowning, I pulled my mount to a stop and looked the car over, automatically drawing the Remington from the rig. The car’s hood was up. I didn’t see anybody. It wasn’t unheard of for people to have car trouble out on these long, lonely stretches, but my dad hadn’t raised me to be naïve.

Loki flicked his ears and tossed his head, clearly ready to get back to work.

“Impatient,” I told him, patting his neck. I didn’t see anybody, so I put the Remington back in the rig and dismounted.

After another look around, I led my horse to the access gate marking the end of one section and the next. The gate’s sturdy wooden posts were set a few feet out from the fence, each able to serve as a hitching post. After tying Loki off, I pulled the Remington once more. Almost as an afterthought, I grabbed the big, heavy thermos and hooked the strap crossways over my chest.

Still eying the car, I pulled the phone from my belt and called TD. It was times like these that made me glad I’d talked Dad into investing in sat phones. Yeah, radios were great, and we still kept them on hand, but a radio wouldn’t put in a call directly to the local sheriff in the blink of an eye the way a sat phone could.

Not that I expected I'd *have* to call the sheriff, but it never hurt anybody to prepare for the worst.

"Hey, darlin'," TD said, his voice low and easy. "You heading back all ready? What if I draw you a bath...and be waiting in it naked?"

A smile spread across my face despite my irritation. "That sounds pretty nice, but we'll have to hold off for a little while yet. There's a car out here." Glancing at the access gate as I crossed through, I gave him the details on my exact location. I took a look around, gaze lingering on the car before I started to walk. The faint hint of burnt oil lingered in the air. "Some kind of engine trouble, I think. Hood's up."

"You got the Remington, right?"

"Yeah. Gimme a minute...going to put my earbud in. I want my hands free." I usually kept a pair of earbuds in my pocket since I liked listening to music whenever I had a chance. After popping one of the buds in and tucking the stray under my bra strap so it wouldn't tangle and get in my way, I put the phone back at my belt. "You with me?"

"Always, darlin'. You see anybody, or is it just the car?"

I'd already moved past the car, walking at a quick clip, driven by an urge I couldn't quite explain. "So far, just the car. Listen, I'm going to take a look around. If you don't hear back from me every ten minutes or so, head out and look for me, okay?"

"Why don't you stay on the phone?" TD asked.

"Because I want to be able to hear what's going on, and it's hard to stay focused on what's around me when half my attention is on you. Talk to you in ten." I ended the call and hooked the earbuds around my neck, walking quicker and quicker until I was moving at a jog.

I sent two texts through to TD before something caught my attention. Judging by the pace I'd set, I'd probably covered well over a mile. Sweat had soaked my shirt through, and I stopped twice to take a deep drink of water. The thermos had kept it good and cold, and I had to remind myself not to chug it, as thirsty as I was.

I caught sight of the guy slumped under a tree a few minutes later and decided it was just as well I hadn't taken too many sips. This guy looked like he needed the water a lot more than I did.

There's a guy out here. Under that big bur oak, not moving. Going to check on him.

I didn't wait for a response, just kept moving closer, shifting the

Remington so I had it ready if I needed it. But I had a feeling I wouldn't.

"Hello?"

No movement.

"Mister?" I called again after closing a few more yards.

Still no response.

I sent TD another text

The guy's unconscious, not moving. Going closer.

I saw his response from my earlier text and shook my head with a sigh, resisting the urge to tell the big lug something sarcastic, like *no, I won't be careful...I'm going to be stupid because I do it so often.*

"Hey, man," I said, close enough now that I didn't need to raise my voice. I was also close enough to note several other things.

He was wearing what looked like a very nice dress shirt, now stained with dust and dried sweat rings, along with charcoal-colored trousers and leather loafers. The shirt had been unbuttoned and hung open over a white undershirt, which was also filthy. The sleeves had been rolled up, but none of that was enough to combat the intense heat of July in South Dakota.

But what worried me was the ominous red of his features. Although sweat had damn near soaked my shirt through at this point, I didn't see any sign of it on his forehead or anywhere else. "Damn it."

Crouching in front of him, I reached up and tapped his cheek.

His lashes fluttered, but that was all the response I got. His skin was every bit as hot as I thought it would be. The red of his skin could be from heat exhaustion, sunburn, or both. "Sir, can you hear me?"

This time, he lifted his lids a fraction and made a low noise, but that was it.

Still, it was better than nothing. After taking a few seconds to put the Remington behind me, a few feet out of reach, I rummaged through my pockets until I found the bandana I always kept on hand.

After getting it wet, I stroked it over his forehead. The second I touched it to his skin, a harsh noise escaped him and eyes of a deep, dark blue, flew open. Although he was looking right at me, I had a feeling he saw nothing.

"It's okay," I told him. "I think you've got heatstroke."

Glassy eyes tracked the sound of my voice for a few seconds, but then, his lashes drifted back down.

"Fuck," I muttered. I poured a little more water on the bandana, then settled it on the back of his neck.

Shifting closer, I tapped his cheek again. This time, when he opened his eyes, there was a touch more awareness. "I've got water," I told him. Lifting it to his lips, I tilted the canteen up.

At first, he didn't do anything, and water dribbled down his chin and neck. That was fine. He needed to cool off, fast. But then he shivered and opened his mouth and started to drink. He caught my wrist when I started to pull the insulated canteen away.

"You can't have any more yet," I told him. "You'll get sick."

I gave it five minutes. They stretched out, one agonizing second after another. Three times, I checked his pulse. It was strong and steady, but that didn't do anything to ease my nerves. Finally, I gave him more water, then poured some of the chilly liquid over his shoulders and neck.

He gasped and shivered.

"Sorry. Your body temperature has got to be sky-high. That's not healthy."

I shook the canteen, trying to judge the amount left. Probably less than half. It was a big one, able to hold forty-eight ounces easy, but I'd drunk a decent amount before I found this guy, and I'd used even more on the bandana.

I needed another drink or two myself, and I needed to give a little bit to Loki once I got back to him because I needed that big gelding to put his big body into movement fast once I got this sick son of a bitch on my horse's back.

Pulling the bandana off the man's neck, I wasn't surprised to find that it was already hot to touch. I dampened it once more and put it back in place.

"One more drink, buddy. Then I'm going to get my horse."

There was some semblance of understanding this time, and when I pulled the canteen away, he didn't try to fight me.

"I'll be back soon." I took a drink of water myself as I stood.

His lids lifted, and I found myself the focus of such deep, dark blue eyes, I hesitated.

"I'll be back," I said again.

Then I turned around and started to jog back to where I'd left Loki, careful to keep a steady pace, despite the nerves clamoring inside, despite the urge to *hurry, hurry, hurry*.

LOGIC TOLD me I wasn't gone all that long. It had taken me roughly twenty-five minutes to find him, and I'd been moving at a slower pace. I'd picked it up on the way back, and although I took a few minutes to let Loki drink some water from the collapsible container I kept stowed with my gear, he covered the ground in easily half the time.

Still, I worried every second I was gone, alternating between cussing the stupidity of city boys who had no idea how to conduct themselves out in the country, and worrying that he might have been in worse shape than I'd thought.

Should I have called for an ambulance?

Although, hell, as far out as I was from the nearest town, it would take almost an hour to get him anywhere that could help, and if it was just simple heatstroke, I could handle that at my place.

Before mounting Loki, I went by the man's car—had to be his—checking inside despite the stifling heat. I found a wallet, a bottle of water half-empty in the cupholder, and another full bottle in the seat. I took both bottles and the wallet, plus the car keys, taking care to lock the vehicle, although the likelihood of anybody messing with the car out here was slim to none.

Before mounting, I stowed the water and wallet and gave Loki a pat on the neck. "Come on, boy. I get to play knight in shining armor, and you're my gallant steed."

Despite my attempt at being light-hearted, a weird pain clutched at my heart for the rest of the trip. It didn't ease when I dismounted from Loki's back and moved back to the man's side.

His color wasn't quite so vicious a red now.

That was good, right?

"Hey, you still with me?" I asked, hunkering down next to him.

He made a noise under his breath and looked at me for a fraction of a second.

Okay. I'd take it.

Bringing Loki over, I had the horse go to his knees. "Don't give me that look," I warned the big gelding, narrowing my eyes as he tossed his head. "Overgrown peacock."

Loki snorted but did as ordered. Once he was on the ground, he heaved out a sigh and stared off into the distance, like I'd brought him to an all-time low, and he just couldn't believe it. Unable to control the smile tugging at my lips, I scratched his ears. "You're so spoiled."

He chuffed out a breath but otherwise ignored me.

“Oh, be that way,” I muttered as I went to crouch by the stranger’s side once more. Tapping his cheek, I found his skin still hot and dry. Not good. I needed to get him to the ranch so we could cool him off. “Hey, man. Come on. Need you to wake up a little.”

His lids lifted a fraction, then went right back down.

“Hey!”

The sharp edge of command had more of an effect, although the scowl that contorted his features made it clear he wasn’t overly enthused. I didn’t care. As long as he was somewhat coherent.

“Listen, man. I need to get you off the road, out of the heat and into someplace cool. Assuming you don’t want to die out here,” I said, electing to use a short, curt tone with an edge of command.

It worked.

His lashes lifted again, and although he wasn’t exactly in full control when I began the slow, onerous task of dragging him over to Loki, he did help—a bit. My heart was pounding hard and fast by the time I had him astride the horse, face first over Loki’s neck.

“Take it easy, boy,” I told the horse when I gave him the order to stand.

Ornery as the gelding was, Loki was also smart, and he had already realized he was now hauling somewhat fragile cargo. Fragile wasn’t a word I would likely ascribe to the man atop my horse under normal circumstances. I could tell by the length of his legs that he was a big guy, but none of that mattered shit right now.

Once I knew he wouldn’t tip right off the horse, I settled my right foot in the stirrup and mounted behind him. “This isn’t going to be fun,” I told my barely conscious companion. My phone rang, and I silenced it before sending TD a text, letting him know I was heading back—with cargo.

Somehow, the bandana had stayed in place around the stranger’s neck, and I pulled it off, dampening it once more and securing it before taking the reins. “Okay, boy...let’s go.”

EIGHT

MATT

I WAS FREEZING.

That was the first thing that came to mind.

Immediately on the heels of that awareness came another—a vicious pounding in my head, unlike anything I'd ever known before. It was like the worst hangover I'd ever known, condensed down to its purest form, then magnified.

I groaned, but even that small sound seemed to send ricochets of pain darting through my head.

Maybe I was dead.

The last thing I remembered was focusing on the widespread branches of a tree somewhere in the distance, heat mirages turning my vision somewhat wavy, and making it questionable just how far away that tree was.

I'd figured if I could get there, get out of the heat, I could rest and recuperate a bit.

But maybe I hadn't made it.

The few clear thoughts in my head, aside from reaching that fucking tree, had been centered on a few plain facts. I shouldn't have ignored what the deputy said about my car leaking. I shouldn't have walked so damn far from my car. And maybe I shouldn't have left Boston.

If I hadn't done any of those things—*all* of those things—I probably wouldn't be trapped in hell with the mother of all headaches.

Although, did you have headaches in hell?

It seemed kind of weird that only *one* part of me hurt.

With that thought in mind, I reached up to touch my head and found that my limbs were unbelievably heavy, each movement sluggish, like I had to

move through a vat of maple syrup.

Finally, though, I was able to touch my head.

My face felt hot—too hot.

It was that heat that offered the first clue behind the headache and my overall shitty state. The car breaking down. Me getting so pissed, I couldn't see straight, then walking.

After that, things got blurry. Very blurry.

My mouth was cottony, dryer than the Sahara, and I would have given up a kidney just for a drink of water. And speaking of kidneys, my bladder felt like it was going to bust. Sitting up took a hell of a lot more effort than it should have, but I finally managed it and looked around.

I had absolutely no idea where I was or how I'd ended up here.

The space around me was neat and well-kept, and the bed under me comfortable. The furniture was simple and utilitarian, made of wood and designed more for form than function. Yet everything managed to convey a welcoming vibe.

I took in all of that in the few seconds it took for my head to stop spinning. The next thing I took in was the pitcher of water on the nightstand. Next to it sat a glass of water. I grabbed it and drained it, so thirsty I could have emptied the entire pitcher.

Except my bladder was now demanding attention.

Pushing upright, I held still only long enough to make sure I wasn't going to pitch forward. Once I was certain my legs weren't going to fold, I angled toward the door closest to me and blew out a sigh of relief when it turned out to be the bathroom.

My head started spinning on me, so I braced a hand against the wall as I took what seemed to be the longest piss in the history of the world. After washing my hands, I went back to the bed and sat down. Pouring a second glass of water, I looked around and tried once more to puzzle through what in the hell was going on.

My stomach churned, and I suspected it was from how fast I'd bolted that water earlier. While I still had no idea what had happened, I'd seen the sunburn on my face, and I had no doubt the heat had played into my current circumstances. It had felt like I was going to spontaneously combust by the time I....

The tree.

I remembered seeing the tree and remembered thinking it would be

smarter to wait in the shade and cool off some before deciding what to do next.

But then?

Nothing.

From somewhere out in the other part of the house, a door swung open.

The sound of a light, easy stride came to my ears, and I looked up just as a woman appeared in the doorway. Her brows rose, and our gazes met.

Damn.

My mind went blank as I looked into her eyes, eyes a stormy, deep shade of a blue so rich and deep, they looked purple. Hair woven into a loose, heavy braid fell over her shoulder, and I could see strands of golden brown, blonde, caramel, and rich brown, all of them together in a tawny mass that made me want to unravel the braid and stroke my fingers through the strands. The end of the braid reached a full, heavy pair of breasts that filled out the front of a tank top that had gone worn and soft with use. The hem barely reached the waistband of her jeans, jeans that outlined hips and legs that perfectly fit that rack of hers.

“Well, since you’re feeling good enough to ogle me, I guess you’re going to live,” she said, her voice husky.

And amused.

My face heated, and this time, it wasn’t from the sunburn.

“Ah...” My voice wasn’t much more than a rasp. Clearing my throat, I grabbed the water and drank a little more. It didn’t help much. “Sorry.”

Her lips kicked up at the corner. “I’ll let it slide this time, considering I found you unconscious a couple hours ago.”

She gave me an appraising look, eyes narrowed in thought. “Well, your sunburn isn’t as bad as I thought it would be. You should put more of that ointment on, though.”

“Ointment?”

She nodded at the nightstand, and that was when I spotted a small, unlabeled black pot. “Homemade remedy. My foreman makes it. Fortunately, it doesn’t smell like shit the way some of his concoctions do. I’d use it every couple of hours if I were you. It might not stop you from peeling, but it helps a lot with the pain and redness. Taking cover under that tree was a smart idea.”

“Probably the only one I can lay claim to today,” I muttered, reaching for the pot. Screwing off the lid, I lifted it to my nose and sniffed. With a scowl, I

said, "It smells like flowers."

"You don't have to use it." She shrugged and leaned against the door frame. "Is that your car out on the highway?"

"That's a highway?" Dipping two fingers into the thick white goo, I scooped some out.

"You don't need much," she warned me. "And yes, city boy. That's a highway. A county highway. What's your name?"

"Matt." Smearing the ointment on my face, I decided I didn't care if I smelled like a field of flowers. That stuff worked. The relief was immediate.

"Got a last name, Matt?"

I flicked a look at her. "Yes. What about you? Have you got a last name? A first one?"

"Gabrielle Kennell." A smile flirted with her lips as she eyed me. "You've still got that goop on your face. You'll need a mirror. I'd rub it if I were you...or put it on your hands."

Getting to my feet took more energy than I liked, but at least I didn't wobble as I went to the bathroom to use the mirror. As I finished rubbing the stuff in, she asked, "What's your last name? Or should I just call you Boston?"

"It's Hartwell." I met her eyes in the mirror. "You said you found me?"

"Yes. What's wrong with the car? The hood was up."

Grimacing, I turned back to her. "Engine started smoking. Ah, thanks for your help." I still felt a little shaky, so I went back to the bed and sat down. After a few more sips of water, I asked, "What time is it?"

"Nearly nine." She crossed her arms, an act that made those pretty tits swell and thrust against her tank.

I had to make a conscious effort not to look down, but damn if my peripheral vision wasn't taking in the view.

"I brought you back here. One of my men helped me get you inside and into the bed. That was a little after six, so you slept about two hours. You woke up a few times on the way back here, and I had you drink some water. You started sweating again, so that's a good sign. You need to get some food in you, though, and more water. This heat, the sun, it'll take it out of you if you're not used to it."

"So I gathered," I said dryly. "I wasn't exactly planning on having car trouble or anything. My cell phone wasn't working either. One truck went by while I was looking at my car, but other than that, I didn't see any other cars

go by.”

She hitched up a shoulder. “We’re pretty isolated out here.”

“Is there a garage or anything around where I can get my car fixed?”

Her brows rose. “No place that’s open. You’re in South Dakota, Boston, not Massachusetts.”

Something about the way she was smiling rubbed me the wrong way. And yeah, it was kind of late, even for garages. Blowing out a breath, I tried again. “Okay. What about letting me use the phone so I can call for a taxi or something?”

“A taxi?” This time, she didn’t arch her brows or grin at me.

She laughed.

NINE

GABRIELLE

A SHUTTER FELL ACROSS HIS EYES, AND I WISHED I COULD TAKE THE LAUGH back.

Hell, it wasn't his fault he was out of his depth here. I'd caught sight of his license plate when I'd seen his car earlier, and the second he'd opened his mouth, I caught the accent. I knew it well. A friend of mine from high school had transferred out here from Boston to live with her dad, and the accent was pretty distinctive.

As amused as I was at the idea of him calling a taxi to ride into the tiny town closest to my ranch, I knew I'd be completely lost if I somehow ended up in the middle of Boston.

"Sorry." I couldn't quite wipe the smile from my face as I apologized. "I'm not laughing at you, really. It's just the nearest town has a population of fifteen hundred people, and it's a good forty minutes away. The closest thing they have to a taxi is deciding who will be the designated driver on weekends. You're in the middle of nowhere."

His brow furrowed, then he sighed and rubbed his temples. "That's just great."

"Look, it's all right," I told him, wondering if that serious expression ever left his face. "You can crash here in the guesthouse, okay? I use this place for guests or when I need to hire an extra couple of ranch hands, but nobody will be using it for a while. In the morning, one of my guys can ride out with us to where I saw your car and take a look." I scowled at the memory of the chore still left undone. "I've got to look at the fence out there anyway. That's why I was in that area to begin with, but I saw the car, then found you and never got around to taking care of it."

He looked puzzled but didn't say anything.

"Fisher, the guy who can look at your car, he can fix just about anything. His dad used to own a garage, and he spent half his teen years crawling around under cars," I offered, not certain why I was telling him so much. Hell, if he wanted to pay an arm, a leg, and half his internal organs to have a tow truck come out from Rapid City, who was I to argue? "Anyway, I'll have him ride out with us to take a look. If he can't fix it, at least he can give us an idea about what's wrong."

"Why?" His eyes, a rich shade of deep grayish-blue, met mine.

"Well, it seems the logical thing to do." I smiled at him, letting the dimple in my right cheek show.

"No, I mean..." He hesitated, looking flustered.

Something told me he didn't feel that way too often.

"Why are you helping me?"

Frowning, I studied him. "Because it's the nice thing to do?"

But that just made him look even more confused. Sighing, I tossed my braid back over my shoulder. "Look, I don't know how things are done where you're from, but around here, we don't just let people die on the roadside or leave them stranded if we can help out. At least, *I* don't. That wasn't how I was raised."

The strain on his face eased, as if something I'd said finally made sense to him. I wasn't sure what it was, but whatever it had been, I was glad for it. The way he'd been staring at me, like he couldn't figure me out, it was disconcerting, and I didn't care for the feeling.

"I can pay you," he said finally.

"That's not necessary." Waving it off, I pushed away from the door frame. "If there are parts needed for the car and all, we'll discuss it then. But you don't owe me anything for using the house tonight."

That line appeared between his brows again, but he didn't attempt to argue. I didn't take his silence for acquiescence, though. I wasn't sure he had an acquiescent bone in his body.

"I wasn't able to bring any of your stuff with me, except your cell phone." I gestured to where I'd left it, sitting on the dresser.

He rose, and I drew in a slow, careful breath as the long, lean form of him suddenly filled my vision. After TD had helped me get him into the house, he'd stripped him bare to the waist so he'd cool off faster, and now that my unexpected guest didn't look so pathetic—or unconscious—I realized he was

a seriously good-looking man under the burn tinting his face a vivid shade of red.

His hands had escaped the worst of the burn, probably because they had more exposure to the sun over the years.

Considering the expensive threads he'd been wearing, I wouldn't have expected to see such nice, lean muscles.

Shows what you know, doesn't it, Gabs?

Silencing my inner critic, I said, "The battery is dead. I can get you a charger. I actually meant to do it earlier but kept getting sidetracked. I've got WiFi out here. It's through my internet, which is via a satellite provider. Unless the weather is pure hell, the connection is decent, so once you charge the battery, if your phone can do wireless calling, you'll be all right. Otherwise, you can use my phone, as long as you aren't calling out of the country."

He nodded. "Thank you."

He glanced around and blew out a breath. "I guess I'll take you up on the invitation to stay here."

"So gracious," I teased him.

He shot me a look, and to my surprise, a rueful, somewhat abashed grin curved his lips upward. "Sorry. I...I don't deal well with having things thrown off schedule like this. You've been very kind. Thank you...Gabrielle, right?"

"Yes."

He suddenly seemed to realize he was standing there shirtless.

As beautifully built as he was, I wouldn't have expected the reaction that followed. His already reddened cheeks flushed even more, and he looked around, searching for his clothes, I realized.

"Your shirts are in the washer." I pointed to the neat pile TD had brought in. "One of my guys is about your height and build, and he brought a t-shirt and jeans for you." An inner devil made me add, "You'll either have to go commando or just keep wearing your own shorts, though."

And that blush of his deepened.

I was utterly charmed.

"Ah...thanks." He cleared his throat and nodded. "I appreciate it." He grabbed the shirt, and without seeming to rush, pulled it on over his head. His hair, a black so dark it ate up the light, fell in tousled strands over his brow, and he shoved a hand through it to push it out of his eyes. "Since the nearest

town is almost an hour away and I'm out of luck as far as my car goes, I'm probably going to come up empty here too, but I don't suppose there's any place that delivers pizza or anything? I'm starving."

He offered a wry smile as he asked, and it was so incredibly easy to smile back.

"As luck would have it, there *is* someplace around here to get pizza," I said lightly. Closing the distance between us, I leaned forward, encroaching on his space just a little so I could peer through the bedroom window. The lights of my house gleamed, and I gestured toward it. "It's right over...there."

"Really."

"Uh-huh. Standing Friday night special," I told him. Yuriko had been making pizza on Fridays for me and the guys for almost a decade, ever since she came back from a two-week vacation in New York City where she managed to con a recipe out of '*some sweet chick I went dancing with*'... Yuriko's words, not mine. "Beer's on the house, too, if you're interested."

I LEFT him behind to wash up and change, heading back to the house to ready the food.

There wasn't much to do.

Yuriko had left the pizza on the stone, covering it with a mesh dome. It was still mostly warm when I flicked on the light over the stove. Matt knocked on the back door as I checked the fridge. Peering around the door, I beckoned him in with a smile.

Spying the large salad bowl, I pulled it out and carried it over to the counter before gesturing to the fridge. "Help yourself to whatever you want to drink. I'll dish up the food. You want some salad too?"

"Yes, please. May I get your drink?"

The courteous words had me grinning to myself as I opened a cabinet and pulled down plates and bowls. "Yeah. There's a bottle of red wine in there. I want a glass of that. Have one with me if you want."

"It smells amazing. Did you make this?"

I laughed. "No. I've got my hands full keeping this place going. I've got a cook here who feeds the guys and me. She's been with us for years."

The pizza was large. Yuriko always made enough that I could have

leftovers for breakfast—cold pizza, the breakfast of champions. After the comment he'd made about starving, and figuring he needed to replace the carbs and whatever electrolytes he'd sweated away earlier, I served him up three large slices and popped them in the microwave while plating my own dinner. After switching them out, I grabbed the salad from the fridge. "Afraid we only have ranch or Italian dressing. Yuriko tends to keep everything simple. Her homemade ranch is to die for, though. You'll never want anything store-bought again."

"With that endorsement, I'll go with the ranch," he said.

Once I had everything ready, I carried his dishes over to the table by the large plate glass window that faced out over the swimming pool. He appeared at my side with the other plate and bowl, moving incredibly quiet.

"Oh. Those are mine," I said, putting down the dishes with the larger portions. "You said you were starving, so I took you at your word."

He nodded and put the other dishes down, but instead of sitting, he went back to pick up the wine he'd poured, then made another trip, carrying over two tall glasses of ice water.

He'd already downed half of his before he sat down across from me, giving me a sheepish smile. "I've never been this thirsty in my life."

"The heat," I told him. "You're lucky I found you when I did. If it had been much hotter, or if you'd been out there much longer..." I could tell by the expression on his face that I didn't need to finish the sentence.

"I don't want to think about it." With a grimace, he rubbed the back of his head. "I've got the mother of all headaches anyway."

"Hell." Rising, I went to the cabinet. "I should have thought about that. I can give you some ibuprofen. It should help some. I'm sorry...I should have offered earlier."

Returning to the table, I offered him the bottle. He took it but slid a look up at me. "You don't need to apologize. I'm already in your debt."

"No. You're not. You should probably stick to one glass of wine, though." Returning to my seat, I dug into my salad. "Where are you heading anyway?"

"Rapid City. Then on to Seattle, eventually."

"Eventually?" I popped a bite of salad into my mouth and gave him a curious look.

He had just taken a bite of pizza, and I noted, with more pleasure than I wanted to acknowledge, the satisfaction on his face as he got a load of

Yuriko's version of New York Style pizza.

"I think I want to steal your cook away from you," he said after taking two more bites and washing them down with water.

"Good luck. She's loyal." I winked at him. "So...Seattle?"

He shrugged and took a sip of wine, his gaze lingering on the dark red liquid. "Yes."

"Business?"

"No." He smiled, but there was no real humor in it. "I'm actually on vacation."

"Well, you sure as hell know how to party, Mr. Hartwell," I said, lifting my glass in his direction. "Passing out on the side of the road, getting heat exhaustion, sunburn...tell me, is this how you're starting your vacation...or ending it?"

He laughed, and the warm, velvety sound made things in my belly go tight.

Wow.

That was unexpected.

Eyes glinting with true humor now, he said, "Just starting out, Ms. Kennell. And I'll have you know that today is probably the longest I've gone without checking email, the stock reports, or...well." He frowned and leaned back, a surprised look on his face. "Anything, really."

"Hard to keep in touch with the world wide web, and anything else, when you're out of it," I told him.

"There is that." Gaze narrowing slightly, he asked, "Do you frequently rescue strangers stranded on the roadside?"

"You're my first." I took a bite of pizza, groaning at the cheesy mix of tomato, spice, herbs, and pepperoni. After swallowing and washing the food down with water, I settled back in the chair and reached for my wine, feeling oddly content. "How am I doing for my first time around?"

"I have no complaints at this point."

HE WAS TOO easy to talk to, I decided, watching from the doorway as he walked back to the guesthouse.

He also filled out those jeans quite nicely. That butt of his was something

else. I'd never thought I'd find anything attractive about the smooth, executive type—not that Matt Hartwell had declared himself as such, but I was pretty good at picking out blue-collar workers from white-collar.

Matt's collar was so white, it gleamed like the pure, driven snow.

He also blushed in a way that made me want to run my hands through his tousled dark hair.

And those slow, rare smiles drove me a little crazy, making me want to see what it would take to make him smile again. Or laugh.

That laugh...

"Oh, Gabrielle," I muttered once he reached the door of the cabin. "You need help."

He started to walk inside but paused and looked back at me.

I lifted a hand to wave.

When he waved back, my heart did a funny little bump in my chest.

Yeah. I definitely needed help.

TEN

MATT

I COULDN'T GET THE SCENT OF HER OUT OF MY HEAD.

Back in the cabin, I plugged my phone in with the charger she'd lent me, then prowled around the neatly organized space.

There were two bedrooms, one of them a loft that had two bunk beds, one shoved up against each wall. The bedroom downstairs where I'd been sleeping—*unconscious*—was bigger, the bed softer with a thick down comforter that had been folded and tucked away at the bottom.

Although I was dragging with exhaustion, sleep was out of the question. While looking around, I found a fresh set of sheets and pulled them out so I could change the bed. The sweat and dirt from my trek down the highway still clung to my skin, even though I'd spent a few minutes trying to wash up earlier, so I had no doubt the sheets were in need of changing.

I stripped the bed and put the clean sheets on, then left the dirty ones in the laundry basket. I'd wash them later. First, I needed to get my own clothes clean.

In the bathroom, I stripped out of the borrowed jeans and t-shirt, leaving them piled on the floor along with the rest of my clothes. Bracing for the harsh sting of the shower, I was relieved when it came out a soft, easy flow. Keeping the temperature just barely above lukewarm, I scrubbed my hair twice to get all the grit and sweat out. I'd almost taken my shirt off earlier while I'd been walking, but I hadn't, and I was glad now. The thin white cotton had been soaked with sweat, but it had kept my arms and shoulders from burning the way my face had.

It wasn't until I was done in the shower that I remembered I didn't have anything else to put on, all of my stuff left back in the car.

Grimacing, I eyed the borrowed clothes with about as much interest as my own dusty, sweaty ones. In the end, I just slung the towel around my hips and carried the dirty laundry with me to the washer I'd found earlier.

The dress shirt and undershirt were already in there, and after a few minutes, I figured out how to run the machine. One thing about living on my own for the past few years—I could fend for myself fairly well. At least, I could do so in Boston.

Tired, I retreated to the bedroom again and checked the phone.

There was enough of a charge that I could use it now, except I hadn't gotten the WiFi password from Gabrielle, and the dull headache sharpened as I squinted at the screen's harsh light.

Hell, what was I going to do? I'd already asked to use the phone earlier to try calling the inn in Rapid City, but the line had been endlessly busy each time I tried. I was a little thrown by the fact that I couldn't just leave a voice mail and finally contacted my assistant, although considering the time change, it was late enough on Friday that I knew she probably wouldn't get the message until morning.

There wasn't much else I could do other than wash the clothes so I'd have something to wear. That chore done, I prowled the house. The towel, slung in place at my hips, was the only thing covering me, which left me acutely aware of my overheated face and hands. I'd dealt with sunburn before.

Living in Boston, with the Atlantic Ocean practically at my front door, it was a given. The burn, really, was the least of my worries, and I'd gotten off easy, all things considered. But sunburns were a pain in the ass.

In the bedroom, I slathered more ointment on and wondered how long it would take the clothes to wash, then dry.

The headache started its obnoxious pulsating as I finished with the ointment, but it was too early for more medication.

Already thirsty again, I headed back into the kitchen. Dehydration was likely one of the causes behind the intense headache, so I poured some water from the pitcher in the fridge. After taking a drink, I pressed the glass to my pounding temple.

The relief was almost instantaneous. Putting the glass down, I went back to the bathroom and dug around until I found a hand towel. Getting the water as cold as I could, I dampened the cotton, squeezed the excess out, and carried the towel back out into the living room.

There, I dropped down on the battered recliner. Putting the towel on the

back of my neck, I eased the chair back and sighed as the pain began to ebb.

My lids felt heavy. I wanted the clothes to finish washing so they could dry, and I could have something to wear. But as the washer kicked into the rinse cycle, I gave in to the urge to rest my eyes.

Just for a little while. I wasn't going to sleep. The sunburn wasn't hurting so much now, thanks to the ointment, but the two million things on my mind weren't exactly conducive to sleep.

But I could rest my eyes, right?

ELEVEN

GABRIELLE

YURIKO EYED THE TWO LONE SLICES OF PIZZA IN A FRIDGE BEFORE SLIDING ME a look. “I heard you had company last night.”

I didn’t bother asking who had run their mouth. No doubt that every single hand who worked for me, including my foreman, had been eying my unexpected houseguest as I escorted him to the main house so he could get some food.

“Yes.” Giving her a bland smile, I said, “Some guy from out east. He passed out from heat exhaustion after his car died out on the highway.”

She grimaced, sympathy darkening her eyes. “Yesterday was a nasty one. I had to take care of picking up groceries and supplies out in Rapid City, and I thought *I* was going to have heat stroke.”

“This guy is lucky he didn’t. Dressed in clothes like you would wear to an office and out walking with no water on him. Fancy leather shoes too.” I hitched up a shoulder in a shrug.

Her look had me smothering a smile.

“Be nice.” I pointed at her. “Sounds like he had a rough day on top of everything else. He knows what he did was stupid. And hey, I found him under that big burr oak, so at least he had the common sense to get out of the direct sun.”

“Well,” she sighed. “There is that. And I doubt he planned on having car trouble.”

“Car trouble?” Will came in at that moment and glanced between us. “That the guy you brought in last night?”

“Yes.” I waved him over to the counter and passed him a cup of coffee. I had already heard the voices echoing from the yard and knew the rest of the

guys were on their way in. “I’ll go over it all in a minute so I don’t have to keep repeating myself.”

Yuriko pulled another plate from the cabinet.

I smiled at her. “He loves your pizza. Said he might try to steal you from me.”

She harrumphed under her breath, but I knew she was pleased.

When TD came in, his gaze sought me out.

I nodded at him, aware he had probably worried about me even though he knew just how well I could take care of myself.

That *aw, shucks ma’am* attitude of his went all the way down to his core. Knowing he’d be like that with pretty much any woman he cared about, including Yuriko, made it hard to be annoyed.

Carl, on the other hand, was in his typical foul mood, and the snarling expression on his face put my back right up. He stomped into the kitchen, grumbling about the heat, how it looked like it might rain, how we could use the rain, but it would surely fuck things up, and on and on.

Rolling my eyes, I took the plate Yuriko had dished up for me while Carl fell in behind TD to get himself some food.

“Hell,” he grumbled, sounding annoyed even as he loaded his plate down. “Biscuits and gravy? We just had this a couple days ago.”

Yuriko went up to him and held out a hand. “Here. If you’re not in the mood for what I prepare, you can go without breakfast or make your own. I’ll give that to Will since he hasn’t gotten himself a plate yet.” Her voice was blade sharp.

Carl’s face reddened. He didn’t turn over the plate, though. “Now, Yuriko, I didn’t mean nothing by it.”

“Well, sit down, eat, and keep your trap shut,” she snapped. “I don’t get up at four in the morning to cook for you boys to listen to you insult everything.”

“Well, excuse the fuck out of me.” Judging by the look on his face and the snide tone he’d used, Carl had meant to pitch his voice too low for Yuriko to hear.

He failed. *Miserably.*

Eyes narrowed, Yuriko stepped forward, but before she could say anything, I put a hand on her shoulder.

Red-faced, Carl went to step around her, but Will placed his solid frame in front of the skinnier ranch hand. “I think we’re getting the day off on the

wrong foot. Why don't you give Yuriko a real apology?"

The apology was sullen, but Carl did set his miserable tail down and lapse into silence while the rest of us finished getting food and coffee, then gathered at the table.

A wave of longing swamped me as I took the seat that had once been my father's.

The plan had always been for me to take my father's place, to take over running the ranch. But I hadn't been ready. Not yet. And I'd always thought he'd be here to help if I needed him.

Damn, but did I need him now.

The weight of strain seemed to drop down on me, made heavier by the ugly look Carl shot me when I settled into my chair.

Ignore him, I told myself.

It wasn't always easy, but today, at least, I had plenty of things on my mind, things that would keep me busy. That jackass didn't need more space in my head unless he was going to start paying rent.

"So, what's the story with the guy you brought in yesterday?" Will asked.

"His car broke down." Taking a drink of my coffee, I let myself take a couple bites of food before continuing. "The hood was up when I got out there. I had to walk a little ways before I found him. He was under that big oak by the highway. He was in pretty bad shape but bounced back quick enough once he got out of the heat and had some fluids in him."

"Guess it's a good thing you had to head out there then," TD said. "Guy was lucky you had to check out the fence. Could have been a lot worse for him."

With a shrug, I took another bite. After washing it down, I looked over at Fisher. "Can you get your tools together? I'm going to take the truck out, figure out what's up with the fence. Wasn't able to yesterday. While I'm doing that, I'd like you to look at his car and see if it's anything you can fix or if we need to help him arrange for a tow into town, whether it's around here or in Rapid City."

"That will cost the man a pretty penny," Will said with a grimace.

"We're supposed to be moving the herd out to the southern part of the property," Carl said, frowning at me. "Going to be a lot harder for us to get that done if we're down both you and Fisher."

TD wrapped his long, graceful hands around his coffee, eyes on Carl as he spoke before I could. "We can handle it. It will take a little bit longer, sure,

but we'll get it done.”

“I'm not saying we can't do it,” Carl said in a far more congenial tone than he ever used with me. “I'm just saying it's going to be a lot harder to get it done. Hell, we might be looking at not finishing up until six or so.” He nodded at Fisher and said, “It's not like you get paid to work on cars for people we don't know out here, right?”

Fisher looked uncomfortable as he darted a glance my way before meeting Carl's gaze again.

Before Fisher had a chance to stammer out a response, I cut in. “Seeing as how I'm the one who signs the paychecks, I figure I'm the one who has the final word on the matter. My father wouldn't have left somebody out here stranded with a broken-down car. I'm not going to either. The matter is settled.”

Carl opened his mouth.

I gave him a cold look.

He snapped his jaw shut and bent back over his food, but I felt his fulminating glances throughout the rest of the meal.

I LEFT Will and TD behind to figure out how to redistribute the workload since Fisher was heading out with me once I'd roused Matt.

Carl had stomped out of the kitchen right as Dave and Javier, my last two full-time, permanent employees, arrived to get breakfast.

Will had informed them of the change in plans, but neither of them had any complaints.

It was just Carl. Only Carl. He was *always* the one to complain, and bitch, and cause trouble.

I had no idea why I let him get under my skin so much. I should probably just go ahead and take Will's advice and fire him. If I did it now, I might be able to get somebody hired and settled in before fall arrived and things got crazy.

It was possible.

But a part of me felt like it was giving up if I went that route.

Still brooding about it, I made my way across the yard toward the guesthouse with a covered dish in my hand. Distracted, I walked inside the

guesthouse without knocking.

Immediately, I froze.

Wow.

Tongue glued to the roof of my mouth, I tried to force air in through a chest suddenly gone tight.

Dazed, clutching the plate in hands that had gone sweaty, I stood there and stared at my very naked guest.

Matt was sprawled in the recliner, a muscled forearm slung over his eyes while his other hand rested low on his belly. He was all long, lean muscles, and my hands itched to touch.

My willpower seemed to evaporate, and I found myself looking him over with hungry, *hungry* eyes, from the muscled forearm that covered much of his face, down to his neck and the chiseled planes of his chest and torso, down to his abdomen and the hand that rested there...

Stop, I told myself.

But I couldn't. His hand flexed, and it was like he beckoned me, invited me to keep on looking.

So I did, and I found myself gazing at the heavy thickness of his erection, jutting upward, as if straining, *begging* to be touched.

Matt stretched slightly, his spine arching in a way that had already defined muscles flexing. Since I wasn't dead, I had a hard time *not* noticing the delineation of his six-pack, or the way his calves and thighs went taut.

Just what did he do in Boston to get a body like that? But even as I admired the musculature, my gaze drifted back down to his cock.

It pulsed, and I felt an answering ache between my thighs.

Although I had no siblings, I had grown up around guys. Yuriko had been the one to handle *the talk* and telling me about my period, but there had been a great deal I'd already known about the birds and bees, thanks to all the snooping I'd done around the ranch.

I'd been twelve when I asked my father what morning wood was, causing him to spray coffee over the kitchen table. Yuriko had overheard and nearly choked on her laughter.

Suffice it to say that I knew all about morning erections.

However, I didn't think I'd ever found myself this enthralled with the sight of a naked man's very luscious looking cock.

You are going to hell, I told myself silently. *Stop ogling him and get the hell out.*

The idea of being caught there gaping at him like a silly teenager mooning over the cute quarterback finally gave me the motivation to peel my feet from the floor.

A soft, sleepy sound escaped him as I eased back outside, still clutching the dish of food. After closing the door as silently as I could, I blew out a hard breath. “Wow.”

Seriously, wow. My cheeks heated, and I wasn’t sure if it was desire or embarrassment over the urge I had to go back in and continue appreciating the view. Voyeurism so wasn’t my thing. “Get it under control.”

After a few deep breaths, the heat in my cheeks cooled, and I thought *maybe* I could look at the sexy sleeper without gawking. Squaring my shoulders, I turned back to the door.

I gave it a brisk knock, then, because my inner devil got the better of me, I turned the knob and called out his name. Without waiting another second, I stepped inside.

TWELVE

MATT

FOR THE SECOND TIME, I WOKE UP FEELING DISORIENTED AND OUT OF PLACE.

Fortunately, my head cleared faster this time, maybe because of the gorgeous woman who stood only a few feet away, watching me with those indescribable eyes, the shade caught between purple and blue, and utterly beautiful against the soft gold of her skin.

Blinking, I sat up. “Hi.”

“Hi.” She lifted a brow and deliberately turned away, moving to put a plate on the small dining table.

An odd warmth settled in my chest as I watched her, the sensation unfamiliar. Intrigued by it—by her—I might have continued to sit there, watching, if I hadn’t become aware of an unmistakable fact.

Two facts, really.

I was naked—and I had a throbbing hard-on.

Gabrielle Kennell continued to give me her profile, and I thought I saw a soft flush to her cheeks.

Fuck. Embarrassment rose inside, and I looked down, thoughts scrabbling back to the past night. I’d sat down to wait for the clothes to finish washing. And...I’d fallen asleep.

Shit.

The towel I’d wrapped around my hips was bunched on one side. Now, springing up from the broken-down recliner as if it had turned to fire under my bare ass, I resettled the towel at my hip, grateful it was one of the oversized variety. Face red in a manner that had nothing to do with the sunburn, I cleared my throat.

Only pure, stubborn determination allowed me to meet her eyes as I said,

“I’m sorry. I was washing my clothes. I got the clothes you loaned me dirty as well, so...um, I threw them in there, too, and fell asleep without planning to. I...ah, well, I’d planned to stay awake until my clothes were dry, but...you know what they say about good intentions.”

How stupid I sound, I thought, disgusted.

“You had a rough day. I’m surprised you were able to stay awake long enough to even find the washing machine.” Gabrielle hitched a shoulder and glanced at me, eyes dipped to the towel now wrapped around my hips. “I should have mentioned that I keep some spare clothes here in the cabin. We get temporary help a couple times a year, usually when it’s time to shear the sheep or to help with calving. Clothes sometimes get left behind. I’m sure there’s something that’ll fit you.”

She spoke in such a blasé manner, I only felt more self-conscious.

Idiot.

If she was that unconcerned about walking in and finding me naked, why in the hell should I let it get to me?

“Some breakfast,” she said, tapping at something on the table. It wasn’t until that moment that I even took notice of the covered dish. “Sausage, biscuits, and gravy. It’s not quite as good as the pizza last night, but Yuriko doesn’t know how to make anything that isn’t delicious. I’ll go dig out the spare clothes for you.”

I would have stood there waiting, but she kept talking as she walked down the hall to the bedroom where I’d woken the evening before. So I followed along, still gripping the towel and trying to remember the last time any woman had left me feeling so off balance.

I’d been comfortable with Veronica. I braced myself for the stab of betrayal, of hurt, but although there was an edge of...something, it didn’t cut at me as it had in the hours when I’d first driven out of Massachusetts.

Nikolette Ives certainly hadn’t left me feeling this way. She’d been mercenary to the core and ready to use me in any way possible, and she’d made it very clear she’d happily engage in whatever sexual activities I chose. When I brushed her off, she’d made it even clearer that she had more than enough men at her beck and call if I didn’t find her *appealing*. Courtesy had kept me from telling her to do whatever the hell she wanted.

The few relationships I’d been involved in...well, even then, I hadn’t felt quite like this, not even with the first serious relationship I’d gotten involved in shortly after finishing college. It had been with an older woman, somebody

I'd met through the foundation. A divorcée who'd simply wanted a friends-with-benefits relationship, she'd figured out almost from the beginning that I'd had little experience with women, and she'd been more than happy to help change that.

There was no relationship with Gabrielle. I knew she had amazing eyes, gorgeous breasts I'd love to see filling my hands, and hair I'd like to have wrapped around my wrist. We'd had one real conversation, and I owed her a debt.

Yet, as she hunkered down by the bed where I'd slept and pulled out a long plastic storage container, I could feel the hard push of my cock against the towel. As I watched, I couldn't stop myself from picturing how she might look with that tawny hair with its shades of gold, toffee, and brown spilling around her shoulders as I settled between her thighs.

It was a daydream about as likely to come true as me suddenly realizing Nikolette had been the love of my life—not fucking likely.

Maybe I'd overcome the damn near paralyzing shyness that had haunted me for most of my childhood, but I still wasn't particularly comfortable with women. It was easier once I got to know somebody, but I definitely didn't have the confidence to approach somebody like Gabrielle with a one-night stand in mind. It would be an impulsive act, something that went against my very nature.

The last time I'd been impulsive—just weeks ago—had ended with the woman choosing my brother over me.

I felt completely tongue-tied now as she hauled the storage container onto the bed and popped it open.

“Here. You can dig through here, see if you find anything that will work for the day.” Gabrielle flicked a look at me, eyes lingering on my chest thoughtfully before shifting upward.

My cock responded with a vicious jerk, but I kept my expression neutral—somehow.

“After you're dressed, come on out and find me. I'll be nearby outside. Fisher, my guy who has some engine know-how, is gathering up his tools. Get dressed, eat fast, and be outside in about fifteen minutes. We're going to head out to see what he says about your car. While we're there, you can grab your stuff.”

“Can't he fix it?” I asked, frowning.

“We won't know until he takes a look. If he needs a part or two to fix the

car and it's not anything simple, he'll have to wait until Monday before he can do much. The local hardware place isn't likely to have much beyond the basics on hand." She shrugged. "Hurry up, okay? It won't be as hot today, but the sooner we get out there, the better. The later it gets, the nastier it gets."

It wasn't until she'd reached the front door that I remembered.

"Do you have a phone that works out here? I can't get any service. I know you said you had WiFi, but I need to place a few calls, and they can't really wait until we get back."

She tossed a phone onto the bed. "Get dressed and eat first. You can talk on the drive."

THIRTEEN

GABRIELLE

I HAD TO ADMIT, I WAS SURPRISED WHEN MATT MADE IT OUTSIDE IN LESS than the allotted fifteen minutes. My heart gave a hard lurch against my ribs at the sight of him in jeans and a worn white t-shirt, one that outlined those hard muscles with loving closeness.

In an attempt to distract myself, I nodded at his shoes. “If it wasn’t for the fancy loafers, you’d fit right in here, Boston.”

A faint smile curved his lips, but he didn’t respond as he looked around.

Fisher emerged from the storage shed—shed being a misnomer since the building was almost as big as the large barns built to stable the cows during calving time. He had his oversized toolbox in one fist, his powerful form roped with muscle that came from a lifetime of working the land. His eyes slid over Matt in a dismissive fashion as he came to a stop a few feet away from me.

“Carl told me he’s hoping I can get this done fast. He don’t like the look of the clouds, and the work with the cattle is going to take a while.”

Although he was courteous enough as he said it, I heard the thin thread of irritation in Fisher’s voice. There had been a time when Fisher had asked me out, and although he seemed to have taken my polite refusal with good humor, over the past year, there had been a change in his attitude.

It had gotten worse since Dad’s death, and I had no doubt as to why—he and Carl were tight, and Carl was likely egging him on, muttering to him about whatever it was that had made Carl so resentful.

“We’ve already addressed this, Fisher.” I gave him a bland smile. “If Carl has problems, he can see Will or me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He dipped his head and nodded at the truck. “You want

me to drive?”

I almost said no, but then decided against it. I wasn't going to put Matt in the back of the truck, but if I asked Fisher to take that spot, he'd resent it. And I didn't need his resentful ass brooding and making Matt uncomfortable either.

So, I'd be riding in the middle.

It wasn't a *completely* off-putting idea. Sure, it would put me in close contact with Fisher. But it would also have me close to Matt.

Very, very close.

I WAS STILL FEELING the hard, heavy length of his thigh pressed to mine nearly an hour later as Fisher stormed over to the car while I went to check out the fence.

Matt hadn't initiated any of the calls during the drive, saying he needed privacy for a few of them, if I didn't mind.

Figuring it was business related, I'd assured him it wasn't a problem, even as I wondered just what it was he did.

Finding the problem with the fence took under fifteen minutes, but it left me scowling. Several of the support posts that held the fencing material in place had been smashed in maybe a hundred yards up the road from where I'd seen Matt's car, but that wasn't the worst of it. The worst of it was finding that the grounding rod for that section had been knocked clear of its position.

Behind me, I heard the soft, steady sound of Matt's deep voice, and I let the smooth timbre of it roll over me while I eyed the fence.

What in the hell had happened? The rough idea, of course, was obvious—a vehicle had rammed into the fence line from the other side. I could see tire tracks—a big truck, no doubt about that.

But this scene just made no sense. There been a time or two when we'd had people run off the road and hit the fence before, and it hadn't looked like this. Those other times, the damage had been in a jagged diagonal line, the imprint of tires where the car had veered off the pavement obvious.

This time, it was like the vehicle had driven at the fence straight on, *deliberately* smashing the fence in.

Rubbing my neck, I considered calling the sheriff's department, then

decided against it. There really wasn't anything they'd be able to do other than file a report and tell me to keep my eyes out for anything unusual.

I made sure the current was turned off before gathering up the replacement posts I'd brought out in case minor repairs were needed. I was probably going to have to call TD out to help with the grounding rod, I could do a lot of the work on my own.

Matt was still in the general area where I'd discovered the damage to the fence. As I got to work, I found myself tuning in to his voice more and more, not really catching much of his conversation, but picking up enough here and there to make a few general assumptions.

Assumptions were something I typically tried to avoid, but I was strangely intrigued by Matt Hartwell. I had no idea why, either. The odd hint of embarrassment on his cheeks when he'd made his apology earlier had been so damned charming. Then I'd glimpsed the hunger he'd almost completely hidden, and I'd felt my knees weaken in a way I'd only experienced vicariously through books.

So, I let my mind wander and collect those odd bits of information.

Whatever he did, he was used to being in charge. It was clear in the authoritative tone he used. He *wasn't* used to having his agenda disrupted, even if it was through things outside his control. Twice, I heard him make courteously cool requests that all but had ice shimmering in the air around him.

But the overall impression I came to form of him was that he kept himself under rigid control, that part of that control came from keeping to schedules and staying on the straight and narrow.

A huge part of me wondered what it would be like should that control of his splinter. Another part of me wondered just why he felt the need to leash himself so completely.

By the time he finally finished with his calls, he seemed strung tight enough to snap. Straightening, I watched as he approached and couldn't help but think of the way my life had gone to hell over the past few months.

Even with all the weight of my grief, even dealing with Carl and to some extent, Fisher, none of that had left me feeling as strained as Matt Hartwell now looked.

Maybe, I thought, it wouldn't be entirely bad if he did snap...just a little.

"Thank you," Matt said, holding out the phone.

The line of his jaw was rigid, but he still spoke with that serious, somber

courtesy I suspected was as much a part of him as the color of his eyes.

“Hold onto it until we get back, if you don’t mind. My hands are full. You look pissed,” I said, telling myself to stop thinking about his eyes, pretty as they were. “What’s wrong?”

After tucking away the phone, he dipped his hands into his pockets. Gaze averted, he hitched up a shoulder. “Any number of things, but the most pressing, aside from the fact that your employee doesn’t appear to know what’s wrong with my car, is the fact that the hotel in Rapid City where I was going to stay canceled my reservation when I didn’t show up, then rented my room out. I have no place to stay, and I’m out the money for that room since I didn’t contact them in time, *and* even if I do find a room, I have no car.”

It was awful of me, but the put-out sound of his voice, coupled with the slightly bewildered expression on his face had me chuckling.

“Is this funny?” His gaze cut to my face, eyes narrowing.

There was serious command in that gaze, I realized. Not arrogance, exactly, but...authority, I decided. It was the gaze of a man who was used to being in control, and used to everybody around him *accepting* it.

“Funny?” I hitched up a shoulder and braced my hand on top of the support post I’d finished placing just as he approached. “Not funny, exactly. It’s just that you’ve got this look on your face...confused, sort of. It’s like you don’t know how to handle not having your plans go as scheduled.”

A fine line appeared between his brows as he studied me, but the frost faded from his eyes. “If you want the truth, Ms. Kennell, I’m *not* used to having my plans go off schedule.”

“Well, it’s no fun when it happens, but you adapt.”

“As I’m not used to having it happen, the *adapt* part is something I’ll have to learn.” A faint grin kicked up the side of his mouth.

Such a nice mouth...

Stop.

“You sound like you never have it happen.”

“I don’t.”

I’d turned to pick up the next support post, but at those two simple words, I looked back. “You don’t what?”

“I don’t have plans go off schedule.” Shoulders moving in a restless shrug I suspected was out of character for him, Matt said, “If I make plans, then those plans are carried through. That’s just how it goes.”

I tried to wrap my mind around the smooth confidence with which he

spoke and found I couldn't. "Huh."

"What's that mean?"

"Just that. Huh. I can't imagine my life going so smoothly that things didn't go off-kilter for me on a semi-regular basis." Without thinking, I grimaced and added, "Especially lately."

FOURTEEN

MATT

OFF-KILTER WAS NOT HOW I'D DESCRIBE THE PAST TWENTY-FOUR HOURS OF my life.

Hell, the past couple of *weeks*, but especially since Keith had walked into my penthouse and dropped the *I slept with Veronica* bomb on me. My life was orderly. Even with things falling apart at the foundation, my life stayed nice and orderly.

I couldn't understand people who didn't keep an organized life. It was baffling.

And yet it was pretty obvious that Gabrielle was the opposite of me. I couldn't say she was *unorganized* exactly. From what I had seen of the sprawling property around me, it seemed to be well-kept, and that sort of thing didn't happen by chance. But she clearly didn't expect everything in life to go according to plan.

Still, I had a feeling something in her life had gone awry lately, something she hadn't been able to shake off. Sadness had darkened those eyes to twilight at her final words.

The overwhelming urge to ask her what was wrong, to offer help rose, but I shoved it down. It wasn't like I even looked like anybody who *could* help a living soul.

As she turned back to whatever she was doing, I let myself study her, my curiosity about her growing. The majority of people I knew, outside the family and maybe a few close friends, typically treated me either with utmost respect or they fawned over me. When it came to women, more often than not, they fawned over me, and many made it clear they'd be more than happy to do that fawning in my bed, or on my desk, or even in the nearest bathroom

at whatever function I was attending.

While I wasn't inclined to take such offers, I'd grown used to it.

Veronica, with her contained, determined commitment to herself, and Nikolette with her conceited, deceitful love of self, had been two exceptions.

But Gabrielle was a world apart from anything I'd ever known. Granted, she likely knew nothing of the Hartwell family. However, I was coming to think that, even if she were to learn of who I really was, aside from my untimely breakdown and poor decision making of the past day, she wouldn't give a damn about my family.

She was a woman who'd form her own opinions on people.

My heart gave a hard, heavy beat in my chest, and something I recognized belatedly as anticipation stirred. How often did I meet women who had *no* preconceived notions about me?

I couldn't think of any.

As I stood there, she went over to the truck and hauled something out of the back. Sunlight shone down on her, highlighting the sleekly toned skin that looked achingly soft, touched with that kiss of gold, The jeans she wore outlined a first-class ass, and I curled my fingers into a fist, my palms itching to stroke down those sleek curves.

Shit, I needed to get laid.

She swung around, hefting her burden up onto her shoulder, a movement that once more highlighted elegant muscles and full curves. Once more, I felt like my tongue had gotten stuck to the roof of my mouth.

Fuck, I wanted to touch her.

Thrown by everything about this woman, I sought a distraction. My gaze landed on the fence where she'd just dumped her burden.

She headed back to the truck, and I watched as she started to pull another load of supplies from the bed.

That, at least, was something I could help with.

"I can carry some of this," I offered.

She shot me a look, one eyebrow rising.

I just stared at her.

"Okay." She gestured to the poles. "I need these out by the fence."

While I hauled them over there, she got to work, and I couldn't keep from admiring the flex and pull of her muscles, the way her braid fell over her shoulder. I had images of wrapping that thick cable around my wrist and holding her still as I kissed her mouth, tasting that easy smile.

I finished way too soon and ended up crouching by her. “What are you doing?”

An amused look came my way.

“I’m building a clubhouse,” she said, deadpan.

“Is it for girls only, or are boys invited?” The response came out without any conscious thought of my own.

A smile bloomed on her lips, one that had her eyes lighting. But it didn’t stop there. A laugh bubbled out of her, the husky sound of it reaching a place inside me that I hadn’t known existed. “It’s probably going to depend on the boy...although I tend to prefer men.”

Her gaze dipped to my mouth then, and that curl of heat I’d felt earlier turned into an inferno. Thrown off guard, I averted my gaze and cleared my throat.

“Anything I can do to help?”

“You ever repaired a fence before?”

The droll question startled a laugh out of me. Manual labor wasn’t something I had much experience with, save for the rare times the foundation—and therefore, my brothers and me—committed to doing some sort of charity function. Every couple of years, my youngest brother talked us into spending a few weeks building houses for Habitat for Humanity, but that was about as physical as I got when it came to work.

However, I was far from inactive, and I was in good shape.

“No, I can’t say I have. But I learn fast, and I have a feeling you’re a good teacher.”

“All right. Can’t say I’d mind a hand.” Still smiling, she gestured. “Something smashed into my fence. This section here is electric, so the materials we use aren’t as unwieldy as it is in other parts, but the repairs can be awkward on your own. If you want to hold this part...”

She indicated what she needed, and as I steadied the long, slender support piece, she got to work.

Time passed quicker than I would have imagined, the two of us content with the silence for the most part. From time to time, I’d ask a question, and she’d answer, doing so in a way that wasn’t condescending. If she was somebody who worked for me at the foundation, she would have climbed the ladder fast—she was efficient, smart, and able to explain and teach without coming off as overbearing or rude, which wasn’t always an easy quality to find.

“I guess the ranch has been in your family a while?” I asked as we finished hauling the tools and leftover supplies back to the truck.

“Yes.” That sadness I’d glimpsed earlier returned. But when she spoke, her voice was calm and level. “My great-great-great-grandfather bought the property in the 1800s. It wasn’t quite as big then. My great-grandparents were neighbors, fell in love, and got married. She didn’t have any siblings, so her dad’s properties passed to them.”

“It’s always been a cattle ranch?”

Turning to lean against the tailgate, she hitched up a shoulder, drawing my gaze to the smooth, sexy slope. I had to drag my gaze away, and when I looked back into her eyes, a smile flirted on her lips.

Awareness flashed, hot and bright.

“Yes,” she said softly, not looking away even as the air all but hummed with sexual tension.

Yes...yes, what?

Then she blinked, and the moment shattered. She shifted, crossing her legs at the ankles and folding her arms over her chest. “Used to be we kept only cattle and raised the crops we needed for their feed. Well, that and a garden for the family and ranch hands, but when I was a kid, Dad saw the writing on the wall. Even then, things were changing. Now, people aren’t buying as much beef, the prices are going up. He saw it early on and was able to diversify pretty easily. We’ve got a decent sized flock of sheep, which helps boost income. Lately, I’ve been—”

“You’re shit out of luck.”

The terse words came from the man who’d introduced himself as Fisher. His eyes full of hostility, he glared at me before dumping the toolbox into the bed of the truck. Face red and t-shirt damp with sweat at the neck and under his arms, he pulled his hat off and shoved a hand through reddish-brown curls that had drawn up in tighter ringlets due to the sweat.

Eyes cutting to Gabrielle, he said, “The engine block is busted. I can fix it, but I can’t do it fast or even get started on it without ordering the shit I need in to start the repairs.” He gave me another hostile look. “I’d be the cheaper option, since you’d have to pay for a tow, but I got a job to do that don’t involve fixing some stranger’s car, and the guys will get irritated if I spend a couple of days working on your car and leaving them to cover for me, not to mention I need to get paid.”

I was about to tell him affording a tow wasn’t a problem that concerned

me, but Gabrielle spoke up.

“If Mr. Hartwell decides to take you up on the gracious offer, Fisher, I’m sure I can figure something out,” she said, her voice coated with frost. “Why don’t you get the air conditioner started...and see if you can yank that stick out of your ass?”

The man’s face went an even hotter shade of red, and I saw muscles bulge in his arm as he clenched his right hand into a fist. Wary now, I shifted away from the truck, but he gave a curt nod and turned on his heel, striding away.

“He’s such a sweet, loveable bastard, isn’t he?” Gabrielle muttered, the elegant line of her jaw clenching.

“It must be me,” I said. “I bring out the best in people.”

Her eyes widened, then a quick, bright laugh escaped her. “Boston, that sense of humor of yours is rather deadly. Surprising, really, as straitlaced as you seem. Come on. Let’s get out of this heat, get some food, and we’ll figure out what to do about your car.”

FIFTEEN

GABRIELLE

JUST AS WE WENT TO CIRCLE THE TRUCK, FISHER SLAMMED THE DOOR OPEN and climbed out, glaring. “Are we going to sit here all fucking day?”

“Excuse me?” Stopping in my tracks, I stared him down, thumbs hooked in my front pockets. Usually, Fisher wasn’t such an outright ass.

A vein pulsed in his temple as he opened his mouth, then shut it. “Sorry, Gab. I’m just hot and tired, is all.”

But temper continued to simmer in his gaze, and when those angry eyes flicked to Matt, my own irritation spiked. Keeping a lid on the frustration, I shifted my attention to Matt. “Why don’t you grab whatever you need from your car?”

His eyes flicked between us, but he nodded and walked away.

Once there was enough distance to offer some privacy, I gave Fisher a hard look. “You need to remember who is the boss and who is the employee here, Fisher. You do *not* speak to a guest on *my* property like that. Am I clear?”

“He ain’t no fucking guest.” A dull flush dusted Fisher’s cheeks, and he wouldn’t meet my eyes. “He’s some city asshole who just showed up.”

“And *I offered him a place to stay and my help,*” I retorted, anger sharpening the words. “That makes him my *guest*. And if you have a problem with it, I suggest you bring it to *me*, not lash out at *him*.”

Fisher’s shoulders tightened, and he slowly lifted his head, meeting my eyes. “He keeps looking at you.”

“Yeah, well, in case you didn’t notice, I was looking back,” I said shortly. “And that’s none of your damn business. Now, if you want to keep working at this ranch, I suggest you yank that stick out of your ass. You can ride in the

bed on the way back. I don't want to put up with your attitude."

He opened his mouth as if to argue, then apparently realizing just how far he'd pushed me, he snapped his jaw shut with an audible click.

Matt was already halfway back to the truck when I climbed into the air-conditioned cab. The cool air blasting from the vents felt like heaven, and I took a few moments to close my eyes and soak it in before pulling away from the fence.

"Sorry about that," I told Matt, flicking a look in the rearview mirror. In the truck bed, Fisher sat directly behind my guest, turned sideways, and I could feel his eyes boring into me. I didn't bother letting him know I'd noticed. "Fisher usually isn't such an asshole."

"It's not your fault. To be fair, I doubt he expected to spend his Saturday morning crawling around under a car."

"Don't worry," I said, giving him a smile. "You didn't intrude on his day off or anything. I stagger those throughout the week. If he wasn't out here, he would have been doing something around the ranch."

And it wasn't the car that had Fisher being so pissy, but I didn't point that out. Wanting to change the subject, I said, "So, you know about my ranch. How about you tell me about what you do, Boston?"

"I'm going to have to start checking my driver's license to see if my name's changed if you keep that up." There was no bite to his words, just that quiet humor that kept catching me off guard. "I took over the family business when I turned twenty-eight. I'd been running it with my father until then, but my mother finally talked him into retiring. So, I took over."

"Really? Have—"

I was about to ask him more, when he said, "I get the feeling you and I have that in common. You took over from your father, didn't you?"

My throat went tight, and I had to blink away the sudden burn of tears.

"Yes, but not quite like you did. He..." I had to stop again, my throat having gone husky. "He was out with Will, the foreman. They were riding and checking on a few things with the cattle, and he had a heart attack. We tried to get him to the hospital in time, but..." Shaking my head, I went silent, throat too tight to continue.

His fingers brushed my arm. "I'm sorry."

Another few moments passed before I could offer my thanks.

The rest of the drive passed in silence, but there was something strangely comforting about Matt's silent, steady presence.

BACK AT THE HOUSE, Fisher ate in the small, dorm-style cabin he shared with Carl. I'd told him he could take a bit of a break before heading out to meet up with the others, but I wasn't surprised to see him riding out less than a half hour after we got back.

He'd come back with an even uglier temper, no doubt courtesy of Carl. On his own, Fisher wasn't so bad, but he was ridiculously easy to manipulate, and Carl seemed to know all the right buttons to push.

Telling myself I wasn't going to brood about it, I sat at the table with Matt, eating chicken sandwiches and salad, chatting about everything and nothing. He talked about living in Boston, and I showed him pictures on my phone that I took of sunrises out on my property. The appreciation in his eyes warmed something inside me, and I realized I was eating almost pathetically slow just to stretch the meal out.

But you could only make a chicken sandwich last so long.

Once we were done, I rose to clear the plates.

"I can get it," I told Matt when he started to help.

"I ate your food. It seems rude to expect you to clean up after me too." He shrugged and continued doing what he was doing.

"I guess we need to talk about the car," I said once we were finished. Pouring some lemonade for both of us, I led him out to the porch and sat.

"Is there a mechanic anywhere nearby?" he asked as he took the seat next to mine.

"Yes." I named the nearest town and added, "Despite what Fisher said, Mitch is pretty affordable. And he's got people who can help him. If Fisher did it, it would take longer because he's the only one who has that much experience when it comes to major car problems. All the guys know the basics, but Fisher's a regular grease monkey. He *can* do it, and if money is an issue, he will be cheaper than Mitch, but it will take longer too. And I understand this could be pretty expensive. If you need Fisher to help you out, I'll make it work somehow."

He was quiet for a long moment, sipping his lemonade as he looked out over the property. Finally, he spoke. "I don't want you to think I don't appreciate the offer, but I'd just as soon use the garage you mentioned... Mitch."

"Good call." Smiling at him, I tipped my glass. "Personally, if I had the

choice, I'd go with Mitch too. He's not going to treat you like he's doing you a favor, all the while treating you like shit." Blowing out a breath, I pondered the next problem. "We do have a flatbed. Tomorrow, I only have a skeleton crew on hand, so it will have to wait until Monday, but then we'll haul your car to the garage. In the meantime, you need a place to stay."

"You said the town was small...too small for a hotel?"

"Well, you're not going to find any five-star accommodations." Glancing at the somewhat dusty leather loafers, I said, "But there's a Holiday Inn, then a small motel just outside of town. Or..." slanting a look at him, I offered, "you can keep staying in the guesthouse. I won't be needing it for a while. And I've got a car you can use while you're here. My dad's."

For a moment, I considered asking if he just wanted to buy it. The car we'd left on the roadside had been in good condition, but it was clearly older. It was a Volvo, which I knew from experience wouldn't have been cheap when new. But while I wasn't any sort of car aficionado, just the body style alone made it obvious the vehicle was old.

But I wasn't ready to sever that connection to my dad.

"That's kind of you," Matt said.

He leaned forward, and I couldn't help noticing the way the worn t-shirt stretched over the breadth of his shoulders.

"I can pay you for the car and the use of the guesthouse." He flicked a look at me.

"No." Frowning, I shook my head. "I don't need the money."

A scowl tightened his face but faded away almost as fast as it formed. "How about this? You let me do...something around here. Granted, I don't know anything about helping out on a ranch, but like I said earlier, I learn fast."

A crack of thunder out in the distance kept me from responding right away, and I looked up, eyeing the growing bank of clouds off in the distance. The wind had picked up too.

"Storm's coming in." Rising, I hopped off the porch and started for the western edge of the sprawling yard. I tried to figure out just where the guys would be. I'd meant to touch base with them earlier, and it had slipped my mind. "Hope the guys were watching the weather better than I was. This is going to turn into a downpour, fast."

He'd fallen in step with me. "I guess if you live out here, it's easier to read the weather after a while."

“I grew up here,” I said simply. Remembering how I used to pester my father when he’d predict rain or snow, I smiled. *How do you know it will rain, Daddy...but it looks like snow!* “You could say I learned at my father’s knee.”

“You miss him,” Matt said softly.

“Like I’m missing a limb.” Narrowing my eyes, I shaded them with my hand. “I can see TD and Will. My father might have been good at predicting the weather, but Will? I think the air whispers to him.”

The rain started coming down faster, and we retreated back to the shelter of the porch to wait.

“WHAT’S the prognosis on the car, son?” Will asked as he dropped down into a chair on the porch. It was a couple of hours later, all the chores around the ranch done. One by one, the others had drifted up to the porch to join us, eyes on the heavy downpour. It wouldn’t let up anytime soon.

“Fisher told me the engine block’s cracked,” Matt said, nodding at the man in question. “Gabrielle’s offered to help me get it to a nearby garage come Monday so I can get it fixed.”

“What are you going to do until it’s fixed?” Carl asked. The question sounded polite enough, but there was an undercurrent to his words that I recognized too easily.

I gave him a warning look, but his eyes were on Matt.

“I’m staying here.” Matt’s reply was polite, his gaze level. “Gabrielle offered the use of the guesthouse and a car.”

“Well, ain’t that nice of her,” Carl said. This time, the edge in his voice was sharper.

Matt’s expression didn’t change.

“You know me.” With a sweet smile, I said, “Friend to all in need. Matt was kind enough to offer to pay, but I told him it wasn’t necessary. He insists on working for his keep.” Glancing in Will and TD’s direction, I canted my head to the side. “I’ll figure out what he can do that will be easy enough, but if he needs help with anything, I can count on you to help?”

“Sure thing.” TD gave Matt a friendly smile. “The car situation sucks. Sorry to hear about it.”

“Thanks.” Matt shifted in his seat. “Fortunately, I don’t really have anywhere in particular I have to be.”

“Fixing that car is going to take a while,” Carl said. “Ain’t you got a job or something?”

“Or something.” There was amusement in that quiet voice.

Carl frowned when Matt didn’t elaborate, and I had to bite back a chuckle.

SIXTEEN

MATT

THANKS TO TD, BY THE TIME EVENING ROLLED AROUND, I HAD WORKED OUT the details of getting the car to the garage. TD and Mitch, it turned out, were poker buddies, and he offered to call the man. I told him it wasn't necessary, but TD had already hit dial and gave me a sheepish grin when Mitch answered.

Mitch had offered to come out to the ranch on Sunday with his truck, haul the Volvo into his place so he could get to work first thing. He'd even offered to waive the payment, '*seeing as how you're friends with TD,*' but I'd told him that wasn't necessary.

Now, phone in hand, I stared at the picture of my parents, the avatar for my mom's cell phone, and debated just how to explain the weird turn of events. Thanks to the WiFi password, I could use the phone now, and I'd gotten a couple of texts and missed a call from my parents and my brother Jameson. I'd text Jamie later, but I needed to talk to my parents, let them know plans had changed.

Hey, Mom, Dad. The Volvo broke down, and I'm stuck in South Dakota, and this gorgeous woman offered to let me stay in her guesthouse while the car is fixed. I'm going to be working around her ranch since she won't let me pay her. It's weird, but hey, things are mostly fine. How are you?

I could almost picture the shock on my mother's face and chuckled to myself.

Frankly, I was surprised at how calm I felt about all this upheaval. I didn't *do* upheavals or chaos. But while I'd been working with Gabrielle out on the fence, an odd sort of peace had settled over me. There was something relaxing about seeing work unfold in front of me, watching and actually

seeing something being accomplished. And there was this place. It was... compelling, and not just because Gabrielle was so fucking sexy.

I could hear the steady downpour of rain outside and nothing else. Save for the trips I took to Cape Cod from time to time to stay in my grandparents' cabin, silence wasn't something I had much of in life. Boston was full of noise and chaos. I wouldn't have thought I'd like the quiet...but I did.

A message popped up from my father, and I shook my head, smiling as I read it.

Your mother hasn't heard from you in a couple of days. I keep telling her you're a grown man and able to take care of yourself, but do me a favor and call her before the rest of my hair turns gray.

Hitting the phone icon, I waited for the call to connect.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, I disconnected the call and pushed the phone into my pocket. Settling back on the recliner, I rubbed my face and stared at the blank screen of the television. Gabrielle had told me they had plenty of options when it came to the TV, including Netflix, thanks to the satellite. I could always find something to watch, but instead, I just sat there.

The inactivity was foreign, and I had a clawing urge to pull out my phone again, go through my emails...*work*.

A knock at the door came just as I went to unlock my phone. With a sigh, I put the device down.

No worrying about work, I reminded myself.

Opening the door, I found Gabrielle standing there, a tote hanging from one shoulder and a large box in her hands.

Without thinking, I took the box, my fingers brushing hers. "What's this?"

She slid past me and walked into the kitchen, putting the bag down on the counter. "Some clothes for you to wear," she said over her shoulder. "I know there are a few things here that will fit you, but unless you enjoy washing clothes every two days, you need more than what's in this place. These should work."

She hefted the tote next. "There is some food in here...just some basics, but Yuriko picked it up when she went into town earlier to get the mail from

the post office. You've got milk and eggs, bread, peanut butter, some apples and bananas."

As she talked, she emptied the tote out, moving easily around the kitchen, putting away the perishable items, and putting the others on the counter. Gesturing to the box, she indicated the table.

I put it down and flipped open the lid. Neat stacks of folded t-shirts and jeans lay inside. I pulled a pair of jeans out and checked the size. They'd work. I went to say something but stopped at the look on Gabrielle's face.

She'd picked up a couple of the shirts and stood frozen, staring into the box.

The stricken look on her face hit me straight in the center of my chest. Silent, I folded the jeans up and put them into the box. "These were your dad's."

"Yes," she murmured, her voice husky. She reached out and traced the faded logo of the t-shirt—it was a cartoon rabbit. "He loved *Bugs Bunny*. We always watched cartoons on Saturdays when I was growing up. It got to be tradition...I'd buy him something with Bugs on it for Christmas and his birthday every year without fail."

Carefully, I tugged the shirts from her and put them back in the box before replacing the lid. "I'll just pick some stuff up in town. I need shoes, anyway."

"I..."

Not thinking, I reached up and cupped her cheek. "It's okay, Gabrielle. You don't need that reminder in your face day in and day out. You're still grieving."

"Boston..." She closed her hand around my wrist, tipping her head back to look at me.

The soft glow of the light made her eyes look even more luminous. She stared at me solemnly.

"Yes?"

Her lashes dipped, then lifted as she cocked her head. "Yes, what?"

"You sounded like you were going to say something."

She was looking at my mouth. Damn it. I went to pull back, reminding myself of the sadness that had filled her eyes just moments ago. But when I tugged my wrist away, she tightened her grip and moved closer.

Instinctively, I caught her hip in my free hand, heat building inside as she continued to stare at my mouth.

“You should probably know that if you keep looking at me like that, I’m going to forget I’m a gentleman,” I said softly.

“Oh?” She did look away from my mouth, then tilted her head back to meet my gaze. “And what happens when you forget you’re a gentleman?”

Blood pulsed heavy in my veins, thick as syrup, while the heat rolled through me like lava. The invitation in her expression was unmistakable. Drawn by the compulsion I’d felt since the moment I’d seen her, I lifted a hand and fisted it in her hair.

She’d left the long, tousled strands loose, and I tugged. When her head fell farther back at the silent urging, the burning edge of lust inside kicked up even higher.

“I think I might do this,” I said, lowering my head.

She rose on her toes to meet me, and our mouths connected, a light, easy caress.

She gasped softly. It drew me in, that feminine sign of arousal. Tightening my hand on her hip, I lifted my head to meet her gaze for a fraction of a heartbeat.

The same need I felt was written on her face. With a groan, I tugged her closer and slammed my mouth down on hers.

She came alive in my arms, letting go of my wrist to clutch at my shoulders, her short, neat nails cutting into my skin while the full mounds of her breasts went flat against my chest.

Then she dragged her hands downward, shoving the hem of the t-shirt up so she could stroke her palms over my skin. She had callouses, and the rasp of the roughened flesh over my chest was an unfamiliar but fucking erotic tease.

Without thinking, I tugged her closer, my hand slipping to cup her ass so I could tilt her in toward me.

She moaned and rolled her hips.

“Fuck,” I rasped, tearing my mouth away.

“Come back here,” she demanded, reaching up to catch my neck and pull my mouth to hers once more. This time, she took control, biting my lower lip, then flicking her tongue over it before sliding inside to taste, toy, tempt.

Growling, I sucked on her.

She shuddered and pressed closer.

Mindless, I stroked my hand up from her butt to push under her tank, cupping one of her full, sweet breasts. She cried out as I pinched her nipple

through her lightly padded bra, and even through those layers, I could tell the flesh was already tight.

Images of picking her up and laying her on the table next to us so I could peel her clothes away and feast on her flooded me, raw and intense. I could all but feel the tightly furled bud of her nipple against my tongue.

Breaking the kiss, I lifted my head and sucked in a breath.

When she tried to tug me back, I tightened my fist in her hair. “If we keep this up, I’m going to do my best to have you naked in under sixty seconds. After that, I’ll be hard-pressed not to have my cock buried inside you about thirty seconds later.”

“Hmmm...” The sound was husky and rough and sexy as hell, and she looked at me with those twilight eyes, a sultry smile on lips already swollen. “I like the sound of that.”

But I didn’t ease the grip on her hair. “Are you sure?”

“Do I look *unsure*?” This time, even my grip on her hair didn’t keep her from pressing closer. Easing my hold for fear of hurting her, I sucked in air. She’d grabbed my hips and pulled me against her. Now, all I could think about was those hands on my hips—naked—and pulling me to her in the same way, urging me to bury my dick inside her. She rose on her toes and licked my lower lip. “In case that wasn’t clear enough, Boston...let’s get naked together. Right now.”

I grabbed the hem of her shirt and peeled it off her in the next breath.

But the sight had me pausing.

Gabrielle went tense as my gaze landed on the long, faded scar that ran between her breasts. Slowly, I raised my eyes to hers, then, as we watched each other, I hooked my thumbs in the straps of her bra and dragged them down. The bra closed in the front, and I freed the clasp, watching greedily as her breasts swung free.

The tension melted from her as I dipped my head to kiss her.

Her breasts, large and lush, pressed flat to my chest. Impatient, I grabbed her waist and lifted, settling her ass on the table.

“These tits,” I muttered, filling my hands with them.

The wariness gone from her gaze, she smiled. It was sin and sex, and everything delicious. “Boston, I never would have guessed you to be a dirty talker.”

“Normally, I’m not.” Circling the nipple of her left breast, I dipped my head and caught the right one in my mouth, sucking hard.

A startled cry escaped her.

The sound of her dazed, delight pleasure went straight to my balls, and I shoved her knees apart, moving between them so I could pull her to the edge of the table. Although I knew I had to be imagining it, I thought I could feel the heat of her cunt through the layers of clothing. The smell of her had grown richer, deeper, so lushly erotic, I wanted to bury my face in her neck and work my way down until I found the source of it.

“I want skin,” she demanded against my mouth, her hands working between us to run over my chest, nails scoring my flesh.

“I want pussy,” I said, mindless.

She sucked in a breath.

Lifting my head, I stared at her in the dim light, wondering if I’d crossed a line.

But the hot flush on her cheeks and the hungry glint to her eyes conveyed the direct opposite.

“Oh, honey...” A sinful smile curved her lips as she leaned back and braced her hands on the table. The position lifted her breasts, putting them on display. “If you’re going to talk dirty to me, you can have whatever the hell you like.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, darling Gabrielle,” I said, crowding up against her, yanking her even closer so that nothing separated us but denim and cotton. As my erection pressed into her belly, a husky moan slid from her, and she reached out, hooking her fingers in the loops of my jeans.

“I’m not. Tell me, Matt. If I let you have my pussy, what are you going to do?” She licked her lips, eyes mysterious and dark, unfathomable as the depths of the ocean.

“What do you want me to do?” I asked her, hitching her so I could fit my cock to the notch between her thighs. Then I began to grind against her, blind to everything but sheer want.

She shuddered, breath coming out in pants. “I want you to lick it. You’ve got a beautiful mouth, Boston. Put it between my thighs and lick my pussy for me.”

Her words went straight to my dick, making it pulse in demand. If I’d come right there, spilling in my jeans like a stupid kid, I wouldn’t have been surprised. Lashing down the urge to strip her naked and sink my dick inside, fucking her until she screamed my name, I pulled her off the table and

popped the button of her jeans.

Slowly peeling them away, I worked them halfway down her thighs before turning her and urging her to bend over the table. Guiding her hands to the sides, I said, "Hold on."

"Full of yourself, aren't you, Matt Hartwell?"

"Ask me again after you're done screaming my name." Leaning over, I kissed the graceful line of her spine.

She shivered.

The sight filled me with hot, savage satisfaction. There was nothing like having a strong, proud woman yield like this...and Gabrielle had to be the strongest, proudest woman I'd ever known. Taking my time, I painted a line of kisses down her back before kneeling behind her, palming her sweet ass and tugging, using my thumbs to part the intimate, delicate flesh of her cunt.

"Matt..."

"You've got a very pretty pussy, Gabrielle," I told her. Adjusting my hands so I could use two fingers of one hand to hold her open, I traced her entrance with the other. She bucked in response, a shaky moan escaping her. "Easy, darling. We've got plenty of time."

She swore and shoved back against me. Once more, I shifted my grip, this time, settling a hand on her hip to hold her in place. "None of that now."

"I want your mouth on me, Boston," she demanded.

"Oh, you'll get my mouth. You said I could have your pussy if I licked you, so be still and let me do it. I'm going to lick all this sweet honey up, maybe fuck you with my fingers while I'm at it. And once you're moaning and whimpering and begging for more...well, I'll probably just keep doing it until you're mindless. Until you've come two or three times and your pussy is so swollen from climaxing, I have to work my cock inside you."

She moaned, and from the corner of my eye, I saw the muscles in her arms flex. She'd be clutching at the table now. I knew it.

Satisfied, I leaned in and replaced the exploring finger with my mouth.

As the taste of her, female, salty, and wild, exploded on my tongue, Gabrielle shrieked.

My cock pulsed in urgent demand. Freeing the button of my jeans, I dragged it down, giving my penis some relief. It wasn't enough. The damn thing wanted to be inside her. Pressing my hand against it, I told myself to wait. *Soon...soon...*

Then, hungry for more, I feasted.

The denim still trapped around her thighs kept her from spreading for me, and although I wanted to finish stripping the sturdy material away, I resisted.

Gabrielle moaned and pushed back against me, as if trying to ride my mouth.

The unrestrained wildness of her drove me a little crazy after a few more seconds, and I shoved the denim farther down her legs, then spread her thighs wider before lifting her hips.

The muscles of her thighs tensed, trembling.

I could feel the orgasm building inside her.

Perfect...

Adjusting my angle, I pushed two fingers inside her.

She came with a harsh cry, her spine bowing as she clung to the table. Working her through it, I brought her to the edge again, ignoring the pulsing ache of my cock until, once more, her muscles trembled.

“Matt...*please...*” she gasped.

“I could taste you, drink you up for hours,” I said, dragging my tongue through her folds before seeking out her clit. It was swollen, so engorged with blood from her arousal, she bucked at the contact.

“You’ll kill me.” Gabrielle sounded dazed. “I can’t wait.”

Chuckling, I stripped her jeans away before rising. She had started to push upward onto her elbows, and the sight of her, flushed and limp from pleasure, filled me with a snarling, savage satisfaction. I was tempted to thrust into her, right there, fist her hair in my hand, wrap it around my wrist and ride her.

But I wanted to see those amazing eyes, fill my hands with her breasts. Spinning her around, I boosted her up onto the table. She reached for me, but I nudged her flat with my hand between her tits. Moving between her thighs, I spread them wider, then caught her left knee in my right hand, lifting and pushing it to the side to open her.

“No fair,” Gabrielle said, her lower lip poking out as I wrapped my hand around my cock. “I want to do that.”

“If you want to suck me off later or wrap those fingers around me and make me come, I won’t argue.” Bending over her, I caught her lower lip between my teeth and bit lightly. “Especially if you do it so I can come all over your pretty tits.”

“*Matt...*” There was nothing but pure, unrelenting heat in her voice.

“But right now, I want to feel your pussy wrapped around me. Open for

me,” I said as I straightened and tucked the head against her entrance. Without waiting, I thrust, hard and fast, filling her.

She was small, more finely built than any woman I’d ever been with, and the feel of her cunt closing around me, so tight and hot, was perfection. Gritting my teeth as her body’s natural resistance forced me to slow, then retreat before she’d taken half of me, I thrust again.

Gabrielle’s hands spread wide on the table, her eyes on my face, mouth parted as she gazed up at me, a stunned, startled expression on her face. The pleasure was stark, turning her even more beautiful.

Pulling her closer, until her lower body was completely under my control, I filled her again. With my free hand, I palmed her breast, squeezing her nipple and watching it blush under my touch.

“Matt!” She reached for me.

“No. Not yet.” I withdrew, then sank into her again. She eased more, taking almost all of me, and I shuddered as her muscles rippled and spasmed, milking my cock. Pushing her knee higher, I sank into her again, and this time, she took all of me.

She sucked in a breath, staring up at me with parted lips and flushed cheeks, and the hunger stole my breath. Bending over her, I slid my hand up and fisted her hair. Taking her mouth with demanding greed, I sucked and bit and tasted while she shuddered beneath me.

“See?” I murmured, tearing my mouth from hers to kiss a path to her ear. I withdrew, filled her again, the swollen resistance of her cunt forcing me to move slow. “You’re like a fist, swollen and wet for me.”

Slowly, I straightened over her, holding her gaze as I hooked my elbows under her knees, pushing them upward. I leaned forward then, lifted her ass from the table. A deep, hard thrust. She keened out my name, head falling back as she arched under the impact.

I did it again, filling her, over, and over, and over. She was so wet and sweet, the liquid heat of her pussy like a velvet fist.

“Matt...please...”

“Please what?” I asked, looking down where we joined. “Please fuck you? I am...look...”

My cock was wet and slick from her pussy, the flesh ruddy.

And bare—

Fuck.

Stilling, I lifted my head and looked at Gabrielle. “Baby.”

“*Move...*” She made it an order, trying to move, but unable. That didn’t keep her from clenching down with her internal muscles—and *damn*, but could she do that well.

Still...

Forcing my tight throat and dry mouth to form words, I said, “I’m not wearing a rubber.”

Her lashes flickered, the fog lifting slightly only to be drowned out by heat. Her muscles spasmed around me again, but this time, it was involuntary.

Swearing, I bore down on her with my hips. “Stop it before I lose it and fill you so full of cum it’s running down your legs this time tomorrow.”

She sucked in a breath. And fucking clenched around me *again*.

“*Gabrielle.*”

She blinked and shook her head, the slightly dazed expression in her eyes endearing even as the heat there made my blood boil even more.

“Rubber.” She swallowed and reached down, grabbing my wrist, squeezing tight. Her nails dug into my flesh as she blinked, and when she looked back at me, sense was in her eyes. “I’m on the pill. Is...is there anything else to worry about?”

“Not on my end. It’s still stupid.”

“Let’s be stupid, then. Fuck me, Boston.” She squeezed me again.

At the movement, my brain melted, and I lunged, driving into her hard and deep.

Gabrielle cried out.

My balls drew tight against me, a warning prickle racing down my spine. Clenching my jaw against the need to come, I hauled her off the table and spun around, pinning her to the wall until she hung impaled on my cock. Pressing close so I rode her clit with every thrust, I stared into her eyes.

“Kiss me,” Gabrielle demanded.

I couldn’t resist.

Tongues tangling as I drove into her, I surrendered to a soul-destroying need just as I felt her tighten and start to come around me.

SEVENTEEN

GABRIELLE

I FELT BRUISED FROM HIM IN THE BEST POSSIBLE WAY, AND SO WET AND swollen, just the feel of my panties rubbing over me was an exquisite form of torture. I all but floated on air as I walked back to the house, humming under my breath and luxuriating in the loose, limp feel of my muscles.

Sex had *never* felt like that before.

Yes, TD was a good lover. Granted, since he'd been my *only* lover until tonight, I didn't have the best frame of reference, but he made sure to bring me pleasure and was generous with his body as well as his affection.

But this...

Wow.

Still grinning as I wandered into the bathroom to start running water for a bath, I decided wow was the only word I could use. That long, lean body of Matt's held a lot of delicious, wicked secrets.

And that unexpected dominant streak, and the dirty talking...

Whoa.

When I came out, Yuriko was in there. As I paused in the doorway, she gave a lingering look.

"What's wrong?" I asked warily.

Yuriko shook her head, a bemused smile on her face. Despite the smile, her eyes were dark with concern. "You've never come back from the cabin after being with TD looking like this."

To my surprise, blood rushed to my cheeks. Attempting to hide it, I turned my back to strip off my shirt. "What do you mean?"

"Gabrielle." That single word held love, the weight of the history we shared, and even more of that concern. "You know I'm not a fool."

In the midst of stripping off my tank, I paused. With an unfamiliar tightness in my chest, I took off my bra and grabbed the robe draped over the foot of my bed.

“No, you’re certainly not a fool.” With the robe hanging open, I shucked my jeans and panties, wincing as muscles ached and pulled. Straightening, I tied the robe and turned back to Yuriko.

“Come sit with me,” she said.

Joining her on the bed, I clasped my hands together and tucked them between my knees. Would this woman who knew me so well ever *not* have the ability to make me feel young and uncertain?

She brushed my hair back from my face with a loving hand. “This hair... I’ve always loved your hair. It’s your mother’s, you know. Of course, I’ve only seen pictures, but you two look so much alike.”

My throat tightened. “I know.”

She stroked my hair for another moment before speaking. “Matt Hartwell seems like a very nice man, but he isn’t going to stay here.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Scowling, I looked away. “He has *city* written all over him.”

“Yes.” Wrapping her arm around my shoulders, Yuriko tugged me closer. “And your heart is here.”

Stripped bare and uncertain why, I rose and went to my bureau. “We had sex, Yuriko.” Wonderful, mind-blowing, bone-melting sex. But still, just sex. Irritated now and still just as uncertain, I grabbed my brush and began to drag it through my hair. “Simple, uncomplicated sex.”

“If that was the case, then you would have laughed this off.” Yuriko hadn’t moved from the bed, and I could feel her eyes on me as I continued to brush my hair determinedly.

The calm steadiness of her gaze only unnerved me more. Trying to distract myself, I put the brush down and began weaving my hair into a complicated braid. Instead of three sections, I split it into five, knowing the pattern would require more thought.

Yuriko said nothing, simply waiting me out.

The simple chore of dealing with my hair served to relax me somewhat, and after a couple of minutes, I was able to think. “You know I’m not the sort of person to fall for a guy because he has a pretty face. If that was the case, I would have shacked up with Fisher a long time ago.”

“Please.” She rolled expressive dark eyes. “Like that would ever happen.

No, you aren't going to fall for just a pretty face."

I heard the unspoken *but*. Meeting her gaze in the reflection of the bureau's mirror, I waited.

"He's more than just a pretty face, isn't he?" she said softly.

"I hardly know him, and that's how I want to keep it." But even I could hear the lie. Shoving the thought aside, I continued braiding my hair. "Stop worrying about me, Yuriko. Matt Hartwell won't be here any longer than it takes to get his car fixed. Then he's gone. I'm not out looking for a broken heart, and I don't see some soul deep connection happening with a guy passing through my life for just a couple of days."

"That's the thing with heartbreak, honey." Sadness in her eyes, she rose from the bed and came to me. Taking a hair tie from the dresser, she took over the task of dealing with my hair, adroitly finishing up the braid and tying it off. "We never see heartbreak coming, just like we never see it coming when we fall for somebody when they walk into our lives...whether for a few days or for the rest of our lives. But you know your heart, and you know I'm only speaking of this because I love you so much. You're the daughter I'll never have."

"I know. I love you too."

After she left, closing the door behind her, I retreated to the bathroom. But my previously light mood was gone. Slipping out of my robe, I sank into the tub and closed my eyes.

What had Yuriko seen that worried her so much? But even as I thought that, I felt silly. If my face reflected even half of how I had felt after spending several hours in Matt's arms, then I knew *exactly* why. Now that I was considering it, I was a bit worried myself.

Love. Heartbreak. Things I'd avoided like the plague for much of my life. I had no intention of changing that now—*especially* now.

"Just sex," I murmured. "It probably won't even happen again."

And it *shouldn't*. I should just keep things nice and friendly...and distant. It was the smart thing to do, really.

IT SEEMED SO SIMPLE, the idea of keeping a friendly distance. But an hour after I'd gotten started working in the barn with him the next day, I

knew I'd been lying.

Simple. It was anything *but* simple.

I'd started him on the easy chore of cleaning out stalls—hard work, sweaty, and backbreaking, but the simplest thing for somebody who'd never worked a ranch.

Fisher was off for the day, along with Janvier and Dave. We kept a skeleton crew on hand Sundays, rotating the off days among the crew with just enough hands around to cover the necessities while, during the week, I staggered the off days for most of the guys.

Today, it was TD, Carl, and me—and my new, very untried hand—currently mucking out a stall without complaint.

Carl and TD were busy combing out and bathing the horses. Despite the fact that it was a time-consuming task, Carl kept showing up at the stall where Matt was working in silence. I was in the larger, open area of the barn a few yards away, repairing my saddle.

It left me with a front-row seat to watch several things, including Carl's attempts to needle Matt...and the sexy-as-fuck way Matt just...*moved*.

"This must be a real eye-opening experience for you, city boy, spending your Sunday mornings shoveling horseshit instead of sleeping in and eating brunch or what the fuck." Carl's lip curled up in a smirk as he eyed Matt. "You must miss your Bloody Marys and mimosas and shit.

Matt, to his credit, didn't rise to the bait.

"I don't tend to do brunch much, but yeah, it's different," Matt said easily. He straightened, one gloved hand wrapped around the pitchfork, his dusty, sweaty face unperturbed. He looked utterly relaxed, more at ease than I'd seen him. Well, other than last night when he was lambent and heavy-eyed after orgasm.

Fans in the barn circulated the air, kept it from being too heavy, but the heat of a South Dakota summer could be brutal. Yet Matt wasn't disturbed by the sweat trickling down his brow or the heavy stink of manure and horseflesh.

"Bet you ain't used to working like this, sweating until you stink," Carl said, persistent.

A faint smile kicked up the right corner of Matt's mouth. "I spend most of my time behind a desk, but I've sweated a few times in my life." He offered a lazy shrug, still smiling that odd little smile. "Tell you what, Carl. You let me know if you're ever up in Boston. I'll take you rowing out on the harbor."

Carl's eyebrows dropped down over his eyes, and the scrunched-up expression on his face gave him a constipated look.

Smothering my laugh, I directed my attention to Matt. "Rowing?"

That would explain the musculature of his chest.

"Yes." His smile was oddly self-conscious, and he shrugged, turning back to his work. "I was captain of the team in college. I don't do it as much now, but I still go out several times a month when the weather isn't too cold for it."

Carl spat a mouthful of tobacco juice on the ground. "You even know what cold is, city boy?"

"You live through a couple of nor'easters and ask again," Matt said, face expressionless now. He flicked a look at the pool of slimy brown spit staining the earthen barn floor. "Are you going to clean that up?"

Carl frowned. "Clean up what?"

"That disgusting brown crap you spit on the ground and expect everybody to walk through." Matt narrowed his eyes. "It's one thing dodging horse and cow shit around here. Nobody expects animals to do anything else. But I doubt anybody is paid to clean up after you."

Face twisted in an ugly sneer, Carl shoved off the gate's supporting beam and glared at Matt. "You ain't been around here long enough to tell me shit."

Matt didn't back down. "You want me to believe nobody's ever suggested you stop doing that?"

Carl snapped his jaw shut with an audible click, mouth in a vicious snarl as he turned away.

Once we were alone, Matt met my eyes. "I apologize if I overstepped."

"You're fine," I said softly. Glancing in Carl's direction, I shook my head. "He's probably butthurt because he expected you to be begging for mercy by now. He's likely convinced all you do is sit at a desk, push papers around, and maybe go for a manicure to get exercise. You've worked without complaint, then pointed out how gross that habit of his is. He doesn't like it when anybody makes him question himself, or when somebody makes him look like an idiot. You did both."

"First, I don't think it takes much effort to do the latter part." He grimaced and swiped his forearm over his forehead. "Second, I get the feeling that man doesn't like much of anything."

"Well." I blew out a breath. "You're not wrong."

I could have told him more—so much more. It was unnerving just how much more I wanted to tell him.

I made myself think of the talk with Yuriko the night before, made myself remember that Carl was just a few stalls down.

Matt was leaving.

And Carl was a headache I'd have to deal with for...well, however long I decided to put up with him.

IT WAS ALMOST NINE, the sun painting the western horizon in a magnificent canvas of pink, orange, and gold. As I slid from the house, I took a moment to appreciate the view.

Nobody was around, although even if there had been, I doubted it would give me any pause as I made my way back over to the guesthouse. The memory of the conversation with Yuriko hummed in the back of my mind, but I didn't want to think about it.

I didn't want to think about *anything* in that moment that didn't involve getting naked with Matt again.

The sensory memory of his skin sliding over mine, his cock filling me, it had haunted me all day.

I *craved* more.

For the first time in my life, I understood what people meant when they talked about being addicted to somebody—and that was scary.

The door to the guesthouse swung open, and Matt stepped out, eyes skimming the area.

My heart thumped hard when they landed on me, because it seemed that dark blue was lit from within. And he *smiled*. That smile of his was dangerous, so slow and serious, carving deep grooves into his cheeks.

Mounting the steps, I came to a stop just a couple of inches away, close enough to smell his freshly showered skin, to see damp strands of his hair curl at his temples.

“Hi.”

His smile widened a fraction. “Hello. Did you need something?”

“You.”

His lashes swept low, smile fading to be replaced by that edgy hunger. Without speaking, he stepped back into the guesthouse and held the door open.

Moving past him, I grabbed the hem of the short sundress I'd pulled on after my own shower. Stripping it away, I bared myself to him. I hadn't bothered with panties or a bra, because I'd had every intention of getting naked fast. Now, naked for his pleasure, I tossed the dress over the back of the nearest chair.

Before I could turn to Matt, he came up behind me and slid his arms around me.

His hands palmed my breasts, and I shivered, his callouses rasping over sensitive flesh in the best way. "I fucking love your tits, Gabrielle," he whispered, lips pressed to my neck.

"I love the way your hands feel on them."

"Good. Because I plan to spend some time playing with them."

He stopped, though, and I moaned. "I thought you were going to play."

"I am." Sexy, smug male amusement in those simple words, he swept me up in his arms,

The swiftness of the movement elicited a gasp from me, and I wrapped my arms around his neck. "That was unexpected."

Already walking toward the bedroom, he said, "I'm all about being expedient."

He put me on the edge of the bed and once more palmed my breasts. "Unzip me."

It came out a rough order, the raspiness of his voice stroking over my senses like whiskey-soaked velvet. Watching him as I undid the button, then slowly dragging down the zipper, I asked, "Plan on going through with what you said last night?"

"Do you have any objections?"

Slowly, I shook my head. It was a new, erotic thrill, the sensual way he looked at me, as if he wanted nothing more than to draw this out until we were both a little crazy—and I was completely on board with whatever he wanted to try.

As he continued to palm and stroke my breasts, toy with my nipples, I freed him from the confines of denim and cotton, then leaned forward and licked the swollen head of his cock.

"More," he demanded.

Although I was tempted to tease, I didn't, taking him in my mouth to suck.

Matt tangled his fingers in my hair. I felt a tug on the ends and realized he

was wrapping the heavy strands around his fist. Once he was done, he had complete control of my head and held me in place when I would have moved on him again.

“I want to fuck your mouth,” he said. “And when I’m close, I want to come all over you.”

Unable to speak as he began to thrust into me, I moaned and sank my nails into his thigh. Already wet, a pulsation set up between my legs, my clitoris standing up and begging for attention.

He pinched my nipple, thrust, craned my head farther back, thrust, squeezed my breast, *thrust*. A harsh noise escaped him. “Take me, Gabrielle. Open wider...*fuck*, like that. You’re so damn hot...”

I felt like the sexiest damn woman on the planet, listening to his guttural tone, feeling the rigidity of his muscles as he began to thrust harder, faster, but still with a contained control I wanted to break.

Grabbing his jeans and underwear, I worked them lower, then reached between his thighs, closing my fingers around his balls.

“*Fuck!*” He drove so deep into my mouth this time, I almost gagged. Fighting to control it, I held him in place when he would have pulled back. “Gabrielle?”

Holding his hips, I tugged, pushed, imitating movement.

He acquiesced, feeding me his cock once more, but slower. This time, when he hit the back of my throat, I held him in place and moved forward, despite the grip he had on my hair. The trembling of his muscles urged me on, and when he hit the back of my throat and held there, I swallowed.

“Yes...” It was almost a growl. Then he was gone, withdrawing so fast, it left my head spinning.

“Matt?”

But he wasn’t listening.

I went to say his name again, but froze, staring as he closed his free hand around his cock and began to pump. Hard, fast, the strokes brutal in comparison to how I’d been touching him. His other hand was still tangled in my hair, holding me in place, and when I managed to tear my gaze away from the sheer eroticism of what he was doing, it was to see his eyes locked on the tableau between us, flicking from the curves of my breasts and the valley between to the fat head of his penis disappearing into his fist, only to reappear with the flushed tip a mere few inches from me.

He climaxed, cum erupting from him to splash onto me, hot against my

skin.

Shivering, unbelievably aroused, I looked at his cock, then slowly back up at him.

“On your feet,” he said. “Bend over the bed.”

I did so, my knees so shaky, I had to lock them to keep from trembling once I was in position. He stroked his fingers along the seam of my ass, and I jolted when he paused, not at my pussy, but at the tighter, darker entrance. “Have you ever been fucked here, Gabrielle?”

“No,” I whispered.

He slid a hand around and stroked his fingers through the slickness of his semen still warming my skin.

Then he touched me again, harder, more firmly.

The alien caress was so strange...erotically so.

“I could teach you,” he said. “If you want.”

“Maybe...”

He didn't stop those tormenting touches, teasing me with pressure that alternated from firm to light. The head of his cock pressed to my entrance, and I moaned, pushing back.

He retreated at the same time...but on the next pass over me, he *did* invade me, thumb penetrating the tight, untried ring of muscle between my cheeks. Sensation licked through me, and I didn't know if I liked it or not. Before I could decide, he nudged me with his cock again, and this time, he pushed into me, hard and fast.

Hands splayed over my hips, that one thumb just barely lodged in my ass while he fucked me, it didn't take any time at all before I was moaning his name. Struggling to keep my legs from dissolving, I fisted my hands in the sheets. Fire flooded my veins, my skin stretched too tight around my frame as an orgasm built and built and built.

Matt shifted and hiked my hips up higher.

My elbows gave way, and I collapsed face-first to the mattress while my knees trembled and shook. Held up by the invading pillar of his cock and the strength of his hands, I felt helpless and deliciously, *terrifyingly* vulnerable, so lost in him that when he abruptly stopped, I almost sobbed in denial.

“Shhh...” He stroked a soothing hand down my hip before urging me to climb more fully onto the bed. He came down with me, rearranging my body so I lay on my left side. Grabbing my right knee, he pushed it up. At the same time, he straddled my lower leg, effectively trapping me under his greater

weight.

This time, when he slammed into me, I felt so full of him, I thought I could taste him in my throat.

“You’re so fucking wet,” he muttered, slipping his hand down once more to stroke me between the cheeks of my ass.

No. That wasn’t entirely right. He toyed with that fragile bit of skin between my pussy and butt, the flesh there wet and swollen. He worked that slickness backward, spreading it over the puckered entrance of my anus.

When he pushed inside me there this time, he went deeper, while slipping the fingers of that hand under me, *lifting* me.

Then he began to move, his cock so thick and heavy in this position, I almost couldn’t stand it.

Squeezing my eyes closed against the intensity of it, I fisted my hands in the sheets.

“Look at me.”

The evocative sound of his deep voice had me opening my eyes to find him watching me hungrily. As if he’d been waiting for just that simple connection, he settled into a hard, driving rhythm, taking me, *possessing* me. It was base and primal and left me feeling owned.

“Matt...”

The orgasm hit hard and so sudden, I had no time to brace for it.

But I didn’t think it was even *possible* to brace in such a matter. Not for sex with him...and not for the impact he was starting to have on me either.

I CAME AWAKE in his arms sometime later.

Disoriented at first, I started to sit up, only to relax as the scent of his skin filled my head, and just like that, I knew where I was.

Matt had his hand on my belly and was tracing small circles around my navel. He’d paused when I moved, but now, as I curled back into him, he resumed.

“Did I wake you?” he asked softly.

“No. I needed to wake up anyway. I have to go back to the house, clean up. Get some more sleep.”

“Wake up so you can go to bed,” he said, sounding amused.

“Pretty much.” Rolling onto my side, I looked at him in the dim light filtering through the gap in the curtains. He was so damn pretty. I wanted to eat him up in greedy bites.

His thumb traced over the scar on my torso, and I stilled, but he kept going, smoothing up over it, then back down. “How did you get this?”

An old ache rose, tightening my chest, and I closed my eyes as I made myself breathe past it.

“There was a wreck. I was young, just over two. I was in the backseat, strapped into my car seat. Mom and I had been in town, visiting a friend of hers. We were on our way back here, and a drunk driver hit us head-on.” Squeezing my eyes shut, I scooted forward and gave in to the urge to cuddle against him. Matt cupped the back of my neck and kissed my temple. “My mom was killed on impact. I...well, I almost died. I don’t remember any of it. Whether it was because I was so young or the trauma, I don’t know. The impact had broken a couple of my ribs and bruised the area around my heart too. One of the ribs punctured the sac around the heart. One of the witnesses to the accident was a pediatric cardiologist from Rapid City on his way home from vacation with his wife. If he hadn’t been there...I probably wouldn’t have made it.”

“Shit, Gabrielle.” He kissed my temple and nuzzled me, stroked my hair. “I’m so sorry.”

Nodding, I slid an arm around his waist and held on tighter. I needed to go. Really.

But not just yet.

It felt so good to just be held.

EIGHTEEN

MATT

WAKING TO THE SOFT, QUIET MORNING ON THE RANCH WASN'T AS MUCH OF A shock as it had been the past few mornings. Still, it was surreal, how serene and peaceful the morning was, the quiet like a balm on the jagged edges of my psyche. Although the worries were there, the chaos of my real-life felt muffled by the unending, vast tranquility of the world I'd somehow fallen into.

The tension I always carried had melted away under the hot summer sun and pure, intense drain of the labor I'd been doing around the ranch.

Rubbing at one eye socket, still sleepy, I used my free hand to tug at the curtains, revealing a still-dark sky. That simple movement made muscles wince in protest, but at least they'd stopped screaming at me.

One thing that hadn't been bothering me, weirdly enough, was my head. Too often, I woke drained and tired, a headache pulsing away at my temples before I even had a chance to get through coffee and a shower.

After the headache from what must have been heat exhaustion had finally passed, there hadn't been another recurrence, and that was nothing short of amazing. I couldn't remember the last time I'd gone more than a day or two without one of those bastards taunting me.

Laughing softly, I considered my situation once more. Six months—hell, *one* month ago, if somebody had told me the cure for my headaches was located on a ranch in South Dakota, I would have suggested they seek psychiatric help.

Stretching out, I took stock of my muscles, relieved to find that heavy ache from the past few days had ebbed. Since waking Sunday morning, I'd done more heavy, physical labor than I ever had in my life. Thanks to rowing

and a regular routine of running five miles three times a week, I was in good physical condition, and the rowing meant my hands were all ready calloused, but that first day helping out here on the ranch had left me hurting in places I hadn't known existed.

Not that anything had kept me from enjoying time with Gabrielle when she showed up at my door each night. I'd have to be dead not to enjoy those opportunities each time the chance came up.

Like Pavlov's dog, I'd already been trained to react to her cues—a knock on the door after dinner, a slumberous look across the yard while we were working.

She could probably just glance at me, and I'd be ready.

Right now, just knowing she was on the other side of the door when the knock came each night was enough to make me hard.

But it wasn't just the evenings spent with her.

She was different from women I dated before, even Veronica, who had been a breath of fresh air. As different as Veronica and I were on many levels, we'd had a number of things in common, things I could relate to.

Gabrielle was unique. She'd likely have little interest in the sort of conversation I usually was forced to indulge in socially. But being with her was...easy. It satisfied me in a way I couldn't describe.

Most of the time, I felt like I was wearing a mask, one that made me into Matthias Hartwell, the CEO of the Hartwell Foundation. That man couldn't be seen as an introvert. He was expected to attend various functions and events, to socialize with others in his social sphere. It was one thing to admit in an interview that he much preferred a quiet evening at home, reading and sipping a nice scotch. It was another thing entirely to indulge in such, especially on a regular basis.

The Hartwell brothers were the face of the Hartwell Foundation, and right now, that foundation needed to stay in the public eye so we could draw attention from big-name donors. That meant *Matthias Hartwell* had to spend his life in the public eye.

It wasn't a life I enjoyed. The mask I wore chafed and rubbed, but normally, I coped well enough. Lately, though, I felt like it was strangling me.

Out here, nobody knew who *Matthias Hartwell* was...nor would they care. It was freeing, knowing that.

A horse's low whicker from somewhere outside caught my attention.

Grabbing my phone, I checked the time. Stiff muscles stretched and pulled as I dragged my tired ass from the bed.

With grim determination, I hit the floor and began a set of push-ups, followed by sit-ups before stretching out as best I could. Every other part of my body would soon get a better workout than I'd find in any gym.

Muscles decidedly looser, I showered and headed to the house for breakfast.

Yuriko opened the door before I could knock, a smile on her round, friendly face. With a sigh of mock aggravation, she asked, "Were you getting ready to knock, Matt? What did I tell you about that?"

"I must have forgotten. I'll try harder." Giving her a solemn smile, I held the door and waited for her to retreat back inside before following.

"No. You won't." Still smiling, she gave a quick shake of her head and headed back to the stove while I shut the door. "I bet you gave your mother fits growing up."

"No, ma'am. I was as good as gold."

She lifted an eyebrow and glanced at me over her shoulder. "Harrumph."

"Scout's honor." For some reason, it was fun to chat and tease Yuriko. "I wouldn't lie about something involving my mom. She'd never let me hear the end of it."

"I have a feeling you have that woman wrapped around your little finger."

"I'm wrapped around hers," I said somberly. "The way you cook, you might end up having me wrapped around yours too."

"You're a terrible flirt, Matt Hartwell." Yuriko shook her head but continued to smile as she passed my plate, now loaded with potatoes fried with onions and peppers and a fat breakfast burrito.

"Oh, man. I've died and gone to heaven," I told her, accepting the plate as the door behind us slammed open.

"Smells good," Carl said as he came in, his heavy-footed stride now familiar.

Yuriko sniffed and turned back to the stove, not responding. Considering how he danced between dismissively rude and arrogant in his treatment of her, I couldn't blame her.

Carl had a chip on his shoulder you'd have to be blind to miss. It rivaled the size of Mount Everest.

"What's a man got to do to get fed around here?" Carl asked, a thread of humor in the question, although it came off as horribly forced.

“It’s easy,” Yuriko said in a deceptively sweet voice. “You open a cabinet, get a plate, serve yourself.”

As I dug into my food, I tuned out Carl’s sour response. Yuriko looked content to do the same, coming over to sit next to me, carrying two cups of coffee. I smiled my thanks when she put one in front of me.

A cabinet door slammed behind me. Yuriko rolled her eyes and shook her head. I grinned at her while Carl continued to grumble to himself.

The man never seemed to be happy with anything.

Several more minutes passed without anybody else joining us, but there was no awkward silence. Yuriko asked me about Boston while Carl sulked and brooded as he ate.

Where was Gabrielle? She’d stayed at the guesthouse later than normal last night, just lying in my arms while I played with her hair. We hadn’t talked much, just lay there enjoying the quiet and each other.

It had been one of the most satisfying nights I could recall in my life.

I slid a look toward the door. Although I thought I’d been subtle about it, Yuriko noticed.

“You can stare at that door all you want, but it won’t make her come through it.”

Blood heated my cheeks.

“She, Will, TD, and Fisher road out earlier to move the stock.” Eyes glinting with humor, she said, “There’s a storm moving in, and Will thinks it could be a rough one, so he wants the cattle in the lower pasture. They’ll herd the sheep in when they return. I guess you rushed in here for nothing.”

“I came in here to spend some time with you,” I told her.

“Liar.” She chuckled and shook her head. “I told you, you’re a terrible flirt. I like you, anyway.”

An hour and a half later, my shirt sticking to my back, I heard Yuriko calling my name. Leaving the shade of the barn, I caught sight of her on the wide porch of the main house, phone in hand.

“It’s the garage.” She wiggled the phone with one hand, pushing her hair back with the other while the wind whipped around us. “It’s about your car.”

“Thanks.” Looking down at my dusty, dirty hands, I shouted, “Ask him to hold up just a minute so I can wash off a bit.”

Hands and face scrubbed clean of the muck, I jogged over to take the phone from Yuriko. Her eyes lingered on the western horizon, a faint line furrowing her brow. “You all right?”

“Yes.” Her smile was distracted, but she reached out with friendly affection to pat my shoulder.

As she turned to go back inside, I lifted the phone. “Matt Hartwell.”

“Hello there, Mr. Matt Hartwell. It’s Mitch at Cotton Garage over in Cotton. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine, Mitch. And you?” Swiping my forearm over my forehead, I leaned back against the support post, studying the sky. The clouds weren’t really any darker than they’d been earlier, but the wind was blowing hot and heavy.

“Not too bad. Looks like we’ll be getting some rain. We could use it. Gabrielle got everything under control out there?”

“I’m probably not the best person to ask. Yuriko mentioned she went out earlier with Will and TD to move the cows to a different pasture because of the storm.”

“Not a bad idea. The worst of it is supposed to be over within the next couple of hours, but I think we’re looking at a wet afternoon. Anyway, about your car. It’s done. Lucked out and was able to get what I needed from Rapid City instead of special ordering everything.” He rattled off a figure that sounded almost insanely low.

Rubbing my eyes, I kept quiet for a few seconds. I hadn’t expected it to be done so fast. Now, I had to look at leaving all ready. Leaving *Gabrielle*.

“I know that’s a steep price. Usually, I require payment before I can let the car go when it’s somebody I don’t know, but seeing as how you’re helping Gabrielle out and TD vouched for you, I can let you pay for half, and we can work out a payment plan if you need to.”

“That’s not necessary, Mitch.” I wasn’t ready to leave. It hit hard, that realization, but it was plain and simple fact. I just wasn’t ready. “I can take care of it now if you can take a credit card?”

“Yes, sir. My dad, he always hated plastic, but we gotta move with the times, don’t we?” Mitch laughed, and the sound came from him easily, like he did it often.

Still off balance by how much I didn’t want to leave, I made only a vague sound.

“So what’s that number...and do you think you’ll make it out today or should we plan for tomorrow with the storm coming?”

“You know what, I’ll have to work out a ride, and I want to make sure I don’t leave Gabrielle on the hook with anything since she’s helped me out so

much,” I said, acting on that unsettling desire to spend more time with the woman who had gotten under my skin. “Can I pay you to store the car for the time being and get with you once I work everything out?”

“Well, I don’t see why not.” Mitch was quiet a moment, then offered a dollar amount per day for storing the car.

“That’s more than fair. You ready for my credit card info?”

“Yes, sir.”

Reciting my personal card’s information from memory, I waited until he read it back to confirm, then thanked him and ended the call.

Lowering the phone to my side, I looked out over the yard, then in the direction where I thought Gabrielle would be with TD, Will, and Fisher.

No. I definitely wasn’t ready to go.

I needed more time with her.

THE FAT, heavy clouds had started to darken two hours after the call from Mitch. The wind was now constant, but it was no longer so hot, a cool edge to it that made me eye the sky warily.

The door opened behind me.

I wasn’t surprised to see Yuriko when she moved to stand next to me, arms folded across her chest, and that worry line between her eyes again.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Of course.” Then she sighed and rubbed her temple. “I never used to worry about her so much. But after her father...” She hesitated. “Has she mentioned him?”

“I know he passed. Was it recent?”

“Very much so. It’s not that he was always there watching her. Gabrielle is one of the most independent, strong women I’ve ever known. But she’s taken on so much since he died, and she barely had time to mourn him.”

Resting a hand on her shoulder, I said, “She’s got TD and Will. They seem like good guys.”

“They are. Janvier and Dave, they’re great too.”

There were two names that were obvious in their absence, but I didn’t comment on it.

“She’s got support when she needs it,” I said. “Including you.”

“You’re a good man, Matt.” She patted my shoulder. “There they are. I don’t know why I worry so much. Will can read the weather the way I can read the book.”

On the horizon, I caught sight of the large flock of fat, fluffy sheep first, then Gabrielle. The odd light filtering through the banks of clouds slanted down on her, limning her silhouette as she sat straight and tall on her horse. TD and Fisher appeared next, with Will bringing up the rear of the group.

TD broke off to the side to help herd in some of the sheep that had started to drift off to the side.

“Why don’t you finish up with whatever you were doing?” Yuriko said, nudging me. “They’ll probably need help in a few minutes, getting the sheep taken care of.”

“Of course.” I jumped off the fence and jogged over to grab another bale of hay, moving as fast as I could. I’d just finished spreading the second bale, muscles straining in protest at the pace when I heard the commotion alerting me to the arrival of Gabrielle—and the sheep.

TD had already dismounted and gave me a few quick pointers, and soon, Gabrielle, TD, Will, and I were dealing with the silly-faced, fluffy creatures that all seemed to want to huddle in one area.

At one point, I heard Will calling out for Carl and Fisher, but neither showed.

He shot a fulminating glare in the direction of the barn but said nothing else as fat drops of rain started to come down.

“All right, Gabrielle and I can handle it from here. TD, Matt, can you two deal with the horses?”

TD gave me a look, and I nodded. I’d ridden fairly often, even if I didn’t own a horse of my own. Unsaddling horses and leading them to their stalls was one thing I felt confident about doing without any help.

I took the reins for Loki, Gabrielle’s big, mischievous mount, who started poking his nose into my chest as soon as I was close enough. “Later, boy,” I said, stroking his neck as I accepted the reins from Gabrielle.

TD was already ahead of me, leading his own ride and Will’s red roan, incongruously named Blue. Gabrielle had laughingly told me that Blue’s full name was *Blue Streak*—as in the damn thing had made Will cuss a blue streak while he had been trying to saddle break the gelding.

The rain started coming down in earnest before we reached the barn where the horses were kept.

“Son of a bitch,” TD swore, tugging on the reins he held while staring out into the murky light. “Where the hell is Carl and Fisher?”

I had no idea, but since the question had been rhetorical, I didn’t bother to answer. Once we were inside the barn and the horses all in their respective stalls, I met TD’s gaze. “Go help them. I can handle the horses.”

“You sure?” He frowned, but I didn’t think it was because of me. “Blue can be a mean bastard.”

“I’ll save him for last if you want. You or Will might be done by then, but they need help, and I’d just slow them down.”

“All right.” He flashed me a smile. “You’re a decent sort, Hartwell.”

As he shot off through the big, open doors of the barn, I let myself into Loki’s stall. Ears perked, he looked at me, and I couldn’t help but laugh. “You already have me pegged, don’t you, boy?” Passing him one of the pieces of carrot I’d pocketed while talking to TD, I waited for him to take it gently from my fingers. “No more now. Let’s get all of you comfortable first.”

Just as I went to pull Loki’s saddle off, voices drifted to me. I paused, about ready to look out into the main part of the barn, but stopped as the words became clear.

“... high and mighty bitch...”

The annoyed comment caught my attention, mostly because there was so much aggression in the words.

Carl.

While rain pounded down on the roof and the others were rushing around outside, he and Fisher sauntered through the barn, heading toward the tack room.

“If I was the one running this place, we wouldn’t even have those dumb sheep,” Carl continued.

Fisher snorted. “I fucking hate being out there when a storm rolls in. We almost didn’t make it.”

Leaning back against the wall of the stall, I stroked a hand down Loki’s neck while he crowded up closer to me, nuzzling my chest again.

“She sure as hell shouldn’t be running this ranch. You and I both know that.” Carl’s voice was louder as he passed by.

“That’s a fact.”

“We’re the only two who knows it. Will’s too damn old and stubborn, and you already know what TD’s problem is. As for the rest of the assholes

here...they ain't worth shit," Carl said, his voice full of an ugly anger. "And things will just get worse if we don't do something."

"I don't think there is much we can do," Fisher said. "It's her ranch. Her daddy left it to her. I mean, it ain't like he didn't know you wanted it. You offered a couple of times to buy it so he could retire and all, but he always laughed it off. And she keeps ignoring you too. You tried to talk to her again since last time?"

Frowning, I rubbed Loki's neck while turning everything over in my head.

Carl wanted to buy the ranch? Hell, he couldn't get his lazy ass moving without somebody all but kicking him into action, and he thought he could put the required work into this place?

"Shit, what do you think? 'Course I have, but she wouldn't know a good offer if it hit her on the ass." Carl sounded even more disgusted...and angry.

Stupid too.

Who in the hell were they to question Gabrielle's ability to run this place?

"And I'll tell you what," Carl said, voice rising. "Yuriko's attitude is getting on my very last nerve. I swear, she kisses Gabrielle's ass like it was made of candy. The same way she did with the old man. But she treats the rest of us like shit. You should have heard how she talked to me this morning."

"Aw, Yuriko ain't so bad. Yeah, she kisses Gabrielle's ass, but she practically raised her. Of course, she's going to play favorites there."

"She shouldn't, not like she does!" Carl snapped. "She's a fucking employee, and that's it. No reason to treat others like shit, like she's better than us. And her cooking's getting worse too. I could barely stomach that mess this morning. There's nothing about this place that doesn't drive me crazy these days."

There was a pause in the silence, followed by a nasty, wet sound, which I suspected was Carl spitting that disgusting tobacco juice on the ground. As tempted as I was to make my presence known so I could shove his face in the mess, I stayed quiet.

"You and me, Fisher," Carl said in a confident voice. "We ain't going to keep putting up with this shit. You hear me? She don't deserve to be running this place, and it's high time she figured that out."

Fisher's response was cut off by a sharp voice.

"Carl, Fisher!" Will barked. "You two get your miserable tails out here

and help us deal with these sheep. Unless you've decided you no longer *work* here?"

They offered only mumbles, and I stayed where I was, still stroking Loki's neck.

The menace I'd heard in Carl's voice was unnerving.

High time she figured it out...

Why did that sound like he had more than just wishful thinking going on?

The call from the garage circled through my mind, and I swore.

"Fuck."

Loki whickered, and I stroked his neck once more before ducking around him to deal with the saddle. He waited patiently, then nudged me hard in the chest when I turned back to face him.

"Is he up to something, you think?"

But the gelding just stared at me, not offering any answer.

"Some help you are."

He huffed out a sigh, then rubbed his head against my chest.

I couldn't help but smile. Still, the knot inside didn't lessen. That knot, it had a name.

Fear.

As reluctant as I'd been to think about never seeing Gabrielle again, now I was outright resistant to the idea of leaving. What if Carl and Fisher were planning something?

A prickling sensation danced over my neck just as I reached for the brush.

Carl, wet to the bone, came plodding back into the barn, and he looked up, saw me. Lines furrowed his brow, and I knew he was wondering if I'd heard them.

Deliberately, I looked away, feigning disinterest.

But I could feel him watching me as I went back to caring for Loki.

Watching...and wondering.

NINETEEN

GABRIELLE

AS YURIKO FINISHED PACKING UP WHAT LITTLE WAS LEFT OVER FROM DINNER, I rinsed off the dishes and started loading them into the dishwasher. Will was the only one left inside eating—and he was on his second helping.

“You outdid yourself,” the older man said, grinning. “I don’t think I’ve had barbecue that good since...hell. I can’t remember.”

“I can.” Yuriko chuckled. “It was the last time I made it, and you said the same thing then, you old goat. You just love barbecue.”

“That is a fact.” His eyes slid toward mine, a smile creasing his face. “I need to get up, but I think I ate too much. Can I just sleep here for the night?”

“No.” Winking at him, I grabbed a small container of leftover barbecue from the fridge and took it to him. “Maybe if you get off your rump, you can make it to your truck and beat the next downpour.”

It had been raining heavily most of the day, although after the first violent storm, there hadn’t been any repeats. As foreman, Will had the use of a small house about two miles away, accessible only by a decent four-wheel-drive vehicle or horseback. The little place had been the original house on the property before my great-grandfather built this one for his wife on their twenty-fifth anniversary. The place sat empty for a while, but after some time had passed, it had been updated and renovated to become part of the pay package for the current foreman.

Will gave me a look of mock exasperation as he accepted the leftovers. “It’s not like I take up much space. I can pass out on the couch.”

“And your snoring would keep the whole house awake, and possibly everybody sleeping in the cabins.” Yuriko laughed, the friendship between them a long, easy, comfortable thing. “Now, scram.”

“No respect from womenfolk anymore,” he said somberly, but his eyes laughed. He had risen to his feet as he spoke, and after giving me a quick hug, slipped out the door.

“Womenfolk,” Yuriko said with a huff, but her eyes were laughing.

“Don’t be so loud. He’ll hear you, and he doesn’t need encouragement.” Shaking my head, I finished with the dishes while she moved to clean up the stove and counters.

Several minutes had passed in silence before she said, “Matt had a call today. It was the garage.”

My belly clenched. The reaction caught me off guard almost as much as my sudden inability to breathe.

So soon...

Those words reverberated through my mind even as I tried to shake off the surprise. Why *was* I surprised? It didn’t make sense. He was only here because his car had broken down. Even if it *did* feel like he...well, kinda belonged.

He didn’t. He belonged back in Boston, and this was temporary.

If his car *was* fixed, then it was time for him to leave.

“I guess the repairs are done.” Wow. Listen to me, sounding all calm and unaffected.

“He didn’t say.” With a shrug, she rinsed out the sponge before setting it down to dry. “He works very hard. Doesn’t seem to be much of a complainer, either.”

“No,” I said. Yay for me, still sounding all cool and adult-like. *I can’t believe he’s already leaving.*

“I think I’ll go on up to my room,” Yuriko said, pausing by me to give me a kiss. “Get some reading done.”

“Okay. Enjoy your book.” I smiled at her, but my mind was elsewhere.

I’d showered earlier and put on my favorite bra and panty set, silk in a deep rich shade that hovered between deepest Indigo and darkest purple. A delicate bow of silver decorated the deep plunging V of the bra, the decoration echoed at each hip of the panties. The lingerie was pretty and feminine, a secret indulgence of mine. Over it, I wore a skinny-strapped sundress in the same shade as the bow, and I’d left my hair to dry, putting some gel in it so the curls wouldn’t turn into a frizzy mess.

I’d planned to go over to Matt’s house once it got closer to dark, but now I was all but desperate to see him. Leaving the kitchen in a rush, I hurried up

to my bedroom, grabbing my rarely used purse, tossing a wide-toothed comb inside as well as a couple of things from my nightstand. After a quick look in the mirror, I jogged back downstairs, lingering only long enough to slip on a pair of sandals.

When I slid from the house, I wasn't surprised to see Matt outside, sitting in the rocking chair on the guesthouse's small porch.

He'd been watchful, eyes intent on me throughout dinner, and he'd been unusually quiet, even for him. I'd wondered if he was feeling all right, but now that I knew about the mechanic's call, I had a good idea of why he'd been so silent.

As I started across the yard, meeting his level gaze, he rose from the rocker. My heart bumped even faster against my ribs as he stepped forward and rested his hand on the support post, eyes sliding down to caress the lines of my body.

Inside my bra, my nipples drew tight and hard, and my breathing grew ragged.

He didn't move as I mounted the steps, so when I came to a stop, I was so close, those throbbing, aching nipples brushed against his chest. Dragging in a harsh breath, I tipped my head back to meet his gaze. Giving in to the need to touch him, I reached up and brushed his hair back from his forehead. He caught my hand and pressed a kiss to my palm, and the feel of his lips on my skin sent shivery thrills of sensation through me.

The stark hunger in his eyes had my belly tightening. Flushing, I realized I was already wet and ready for him.

"Let's go inside."

He stepped to the side. My arm brushed his chest as I moved past him, and I sensed as he fell into step behind me. Skin prickling along my nape, I felt his eyes slide over me again, lingering on the sway of my hips before dipping lower. Like he left a tangible wave of heat, I *felt* everywhere he looked and had to bite back a moan as I pushed the door open and moved inside.

There was a faint *snick* when he locked the door behind him, but I didn't turn to look at him. Instead, I put the purse down and grabbed the hem of my dress.

Before I could pull it off, he caught me around the waist and pulled me back against him, burying his face in my hair. My heart stuttered at the simple affection of the touch.

Oh. Oh, no.

This was bad.

I was already hurting inside, knowing he was going to leave soon. I didn't need him to do things that made me want to give even more of myself to him.

Fear pushed me to pull away, but I managed to keep the movement easy, even managed to put a sassy smile on my lips as I leaned against the table and faced him.

"I've got something in my purse," I said softly.

Left brow crooking up, he offered a faint smile. "Really."

"Uh-huh." I'd never been self-conscious during sex but found that was the case now. Struggling to find level ground, I curled my hands into fists. "Maybe if you take your shirt off, I'll tell you."

"Is it worth my while?" The smile on his face took on a teasing slant, and my heart gave another hard thump, even as the ground under my feet crumbled a little more.

This was very, *very* bad. If he was going to be playful...

"Yes." Biting my lip, I curled my hands around the table and added, "I'm hoping you can make it worth my while too. But...shirt first."

Interest darkened his eyes, and he reached for the hem of his shirt. Red painted a flush along his cheekbones, but he didn't look away as he stripped the shirt off and tossed it over the back of the chair.

Knees going weak, I tried to will myself not to collapse when he closed in on me and caged me between his chest and the table with his arms. "So, what's in your purse, pretty, pretty Gabrielle?"

I tried to tell him and realized my throat had gone all dry and tight.

"Why don't you look?" I whispered.

"Why don't you make it worth my while?" He let his gaze roam over me, his dark blue eyes lingering on the neckline of my dress before coming back up. "Take your dress off."

This, at least, was comfortable territory. I'd been the seductress before, although other than Matt, TD was the only lover I'd ever had. Reaching down, I gathered the material in my hands slowly, bunching it up bit by bit, revealing one bare inch at a time.

Matt clenched his jaw, the muscles in his neck and shoulders rigid as he lowered his gaze to watch me. Once the dress fell in a whisper to the ground, he reached for me, but I pressed a hand to his chest. "Don't forget, Matt."

"Fuck." He snaked out an arm and snagged my purse, hauling it toward

him without looking away from me. “What am I looking...”

The words faded into nothing as he pulled the first item out, hand clenched around the bottle of lubricant. “Is this for anything in particular?”

“You know it is. There’s one other...oh. You found it.”

The vibrator looked odd in his hand, bright pink with the thick but somewhat short penis-shaped dong jutting upward from the rounded base that sat next to the ridged, bumpy ‘tongue’ designed to pulse against my clitoris. That toy was responsible for some seriously intense orgasms.

Matt stroked his thumb along its side as he studied it, and for some damn reason, my nipples went tight.

“Just what do I get to do with these, Gabrielle?” he asked, voice rougher than I’d ever heard.

At least he could *speak*. I seemed to have lost the ability, standing there, watching him caress the vibrator with the hand I wanted on *me*. After clearing my throat twice, I managed to respond. “You said you could teach me to...” I had to stop, wet my lips.

Matt’s eyes tracked the movement of my tongue.

“Teach you...?” he prompted.

“About anal sex.” If I squeezed the table any harder, I’d end up with splinters.

Matt closed the distance between us and plunged a hand into my hair, my breasts going flat against his chest as he slammed his mouth down on mine. I whimpered in reaction, but the sound was lost to that voracious, demanding kiss.

His hands raced over me, stroking, caressing...*branding*.

I didn’t remember even leaving the main area of the cabin, but we’d done it, because in between one series of kisses and the next, he had me on my back, his chest crushing me into the mattress as he kissed a searing path down my neck.

His hands cupped my breasts, molding them possessively. I moaned when he stopped the kiss, shoving my hands into his hair to bring him back to me. But he didn’t move far. He hovered above me, mouth skimming the edge of the bra as his eyes moved to meet mine. “Pretty,”

“Thanks.” My cheeks heated, but it had nothing to do with embarrassment and everything to do with stark, maddening need, and the empty ache inside. “I wore it for you. The panties too.”

Deep grooves bracketed his mouth as he smiled. “Thank you.”

“Now, take them off.”

“You’re so bossy, Ms. Kennell.” He lowered his head once more and began to kiss me, hot and open-mouthed, the caresses to my flesh so raw and intense, they stole my breath. Inside the silk of the bra he was *not* taking off, my nipples were tight, pulsing in rhythm with my clitoris, which echoed my racing heart.

Restless, I shifted and lifted my hips to rub against him.

The heavy ridge of his cock fit into the notch of my legs, and for a few seconds, I had relief. Then he caught my hip and pinned me in place. “Be still. I’m not done with you yet.”

The gravelly timbre of his voice made me quake. A hot, wet rush of heat gathered between my thighs. He’d moved to straddle my legs, and since I couldn’t rub up against him to ease that ache, I clenched my thighs together. The pressure on my clitoris from just that was near torture, and I didn’t even recognize the noise that left my lips.

Matt still wasn’t in any rush, drawing the straps of my bra off and tugging the cups down slightly so he could feather kisses along the top curves of my breasts. Fisting a hand in his hair, I tried to guide him.

He wasn’t in the mood for it, taking his sweet time, and when he actually reached my right nipple, I was so frantic to have his mouth on me, I thought I’d die. His mouth closed over my flesh, and sensation arrowed straight down to my core, exploding through me.

I came.

Just like that.

Just from the feel of him drawing my nipple into his mouth, the pressure from my thighs squeezing together against the ache there and the already overwhelming burn of lust.

Matt didn’t stop to let me catch my breath, working my right nipple until it was almost as tight and sensitive as my clitoris, while he rolled the left one between thumb and forefinger. Writhing under him, mindless, I gripped his waist and tried to ground myself. It was useless. Already, another orgasm was building. I reached between my thighs.

“Oh, no...you’re trying to rush things,” Matt said, catching my wrist and dragging it up over my head.

“I’m dying,” I told him.

“No...you’re not.” He moved lower and caught me by the hips, lifting me up to meet his mouth.

As he licked me through the panties, my breath trapped in my throat, a scream building...and building...and building. Then he caught the gusset of the silky, slinky garment and tugged it aside. As his tongue flicked over the swollen, sensitive flesh of my clitoris, I thrust up, eyes closed...and shattered. Again.

Moaning and shaking from the climax, I was only vaguely aware of his hands on my hips, of him turning me onto my belly, then urging me to my knees. I was still shuddering, rocking from the climax when he drove into me, filling me in one hard, brutal thrust.

“Up, baby,” he said, fisting a hand in my hair and pulling me until I was upright, impaled on the thick pillar of his penis as he rocked up into me. His free hand, big and hard, palmed my breast through the silk of my bra, molding and shaping, his touch possessive, a brand I was in no mood to deny.

He rolled his hips again, again, then went still. Lips pressed to my ear, he whispered, “Ride me.”

“Matt...”

He caught me by the thighs and lifted slowly. “Ride me, Gabrielle. Show me how much you want me.”

I could do nothing else. Breath catching in my lungs, I lifted up, then slowly, so, so slowly, sank back down. His fingers tightened on my thighs, then stroked, steadying me as I found my rhythm. Soon, though, he stopped touching, and I was left on my own.

That was fine because the orgasm was already building inside and I moved harder, faster, grinding down on him, until—

“Oh!” I froze, shock reverberating through me as he slid a hand between us and touched me between the cheeks of my ass. Lubricant slicked his fingers, easing his way. He did nothing invasive, but the bold stroke was...startling.

His mouth found my neck, tearing a moan from me. Soon, I was back to the same hungry, eager rhythm, rolling back against him, taking him deeply as he stretched me open in ways I’d never experienced, pushing the tip of his finger inside me—just the tip—before retreating. It was such a teasing, taunting caress that I found myself pushing back on him every time he stroked me there, hungering for that intimacy without understanding why.

He added a second one and pain pinched, but a stroke against my clitoris distracted me. Shuddering, I sagged back against him, unwittingly driving myself farther down on him.

The pain speared into a hot, intense sort of pleasure, and I cried out at the fullness. He lightened the touch on my clit, and I rocked forward, following his fingers. He rewarded me with another firm, knowing caress, and soon, I was moving on him again while fire built inside me.

“That’s it,” he muttered, lips to my ear. “Ride my fingers, Gabrielle...feel it? Push down now.”

I tried, mindless, reaching back and curling my arm around his neck, nails biting into his skin. “More, Matt...please...” The heavy ridge of his penis pulsed inside me, and I clenched down around him, shaking with the intensity of the sensations.

“*Fuck*,” he rasped, mouth still against my ear. He moved then, surging forward until I spilled onto my elbows, and he had one hand braced on my spine, and he filled me with a hard, deep thrust, his cock hard and hot.

“Matt!”

He withdrew, and I sobbed in frustration, but the empty ache inside was soon eased as a pulsating, vibrating fullness filled me. I keened and arched up—or tried to. He pressed the flat of his palm to my back, holding me in place as he pushed the vibrator inside me, settling it snug in my pussy, the extension designed to tease my clitoris centered so perfectly, it was like it had been guided into place with laser precision, while the dong extended, pulsed and rubbed against my G-spot deep inside my cunt.

He fisted his hand into my hair again and pulled me upright.

“Do you like how it feels?” he whispered against my ear.

“Yes...” Whimpering, I rolled back against him, his cock cuddling against the seam of my ass in a shockingly intimate fashion.

He thrust forward, letting me feel him more fully, one hand catching my right cheek and opening me, exposing me. The sensations were...intense. Erotic. Explicit. Dirty and raw, in the most primal way.

“You know what I want now. Are you certain you’re ready for it?” He gripped me then, opening me fully, exposing my anus as he spread me open and bared me, the head of his cock bumping against my entrance. “Are you ready to let me take you like this? To open you for my cock and let me fuck your ass?”

Unable to speak, I just whimpered and rolled forward against the vibrator’s caress.

He wasn’t satisfied with that. Reaching around me, he tugged the device away slightly, then pinched my clit. “Talk to me, Gabrielle...do you want me

to open your ass with my cock? Fuck you like nobody has? Yes or no. Tell me now, or this ends.”

“Do it,” I demanded, mindless, and focused on one thing—*completion*.

He bit my neck, a savage growl escaping him.

Seconds later, I was back on my elbows and knees, bent forward with my ass lifted and exposed.

“This will be uncomfortable, Gabrielle. At first, at least.” He smoothed a hand down my spine, then cupped my ass, pushing at me until he had me open and bare.

I shivered at the stark, intimate vulnerability of it. It was too much, too...*raw*, too real. But I didn't pull away. Shaking, I held still as he slicked the lubricant around my entrance, then began to work it inside me with his fingers. The pinch of pain, I accepted and bore with my eyes clenched tightly closed.

But he wasn't happy with that.

He wanted...*everything*.

The intimate touch turned...*taunting*. Teasing. The rotating of his fingertip as I rocked forward to meet the pulse of the vibrator, followed by the glide of his cock between the cheeks of my ass, then the way he pressed the vibrator more firmly against my clit, angling it so the dong's G-spot extension pulsated just so. As if he'd choreographed everything to my body's response, soon I was moving back, to ride his fingers, to rub against his cock, to seek more friction from the vibrator.

I didn't know when he replaced his fingers with the head of his penis.

I didn't even remember being aware of the shift, just some dim realization that it was now both hands gripping my hips as I rocked shallowly back and forth as the swollen head teased the entrance of my ass and it was *so, so good*.

Then he tugged, opening me, and slid in deeper—just a bit—and everything changed.

I gasped and went rigid, unable to move, unable to breathe.

The vibrator pulsed maddeningly inside me, and I moaned, poised so close to orgasm, the head of his penis stretching me so intimately. He withdrew slightly, and breath squeezed out of me. But then he was pushing forward again, and even with the pain, I wanted it—wanted more, wanted *him*. Using that same taunting, teasing rhythm from earlier, he soon had me pushing back on him.

“More,” he muttered gutturally. “Push down on me, baby.”

Mindless, I did as ordered, and he sank deeper. A pained cry escaped me, and I stiffened, but he was already withdrawing again. It was the same pattern, again, teasing withdrawals, followed by slow, teasing glides until I yielded. After the third cycle, when he told me to push down on him, something in me unclenched, and I shuddered as he sank inside more fully, more completely.

“That’s it...awww, yes...just like...that,” he said, and the words were a sexy growl that tripped up my spine and added to the overall eroticism that had taken me under. His hands tightened on my hips, and he lifted me higher for his possession. “Take all of me now, Gabrielle...perfect, so perfect...”

Whimpering, I felt him sink completely inside me, his pelvis pressed snug to my butt. The vibrations of the toy in my pussy were more intense now, the maddening pulse against my clit almost painful. And the orgasm built inside me.

He pulled out and slowly sank back in, again, again, again...the movements teasing, tauntingly slow—or at least it felt like that.

I pushed back onto him. “More, Matt...please...I want more.”

“Like this?” He surged harder, and a cry tore from me, but it still wasn’t enough.

“*More!*”

He paused, then adjusting his hands on my hips, held me in place. Breath catching in my lungs as I felt his eyes roaming over me, from my head down to where our bodies joined, the imprint of his eyes leaving a burning trail in their wake. Then he thrust, and it was deep and complete, filling me with his cock. He withdrew while the sound of my cry was still rippling around us, and then he came into me again, and again, and again.

My bones dissolved, and I collapsed onto the bed, face pressed to the sheets. Matt followed me down, catching my left knee and pushing it up to keep me open. Clenching my hands in the sheets, I quivered.

Pressure built inside.

His cock pulsed, chest hot and slick with sweat gliding over my back as he rode me. “Gabrielle...”

He bit my shoulder, and I broke, the orgasm shattering me into a thousand pieces.

AFTER WE SHARED A SHOWER, one that resulted in him pinning me to the wall and thrusting into me after we'd both washed, we collapsed onto the bed. It was still light outside, but my eyes were heavy, the need to sleep overwhelming. I fought it off, not because I didn't want to sleep here with Matt—I wasn't opposed to the idea at all—but because I didn't want to not lie there and enjoy him.

“Yuriko said the mechanic called earlier.” Cheek pressed to his chest, I lazily tugged on his chest hair, loving the way it felt under my fingers. “Am I about to lose my new ranch hand?”

I kept my tone easy, but my stomach was clenched into knots.

“No. Not yet,” he murmured, rubbing his lips over my brow. “It's going to be a little more time. He needs one more part. I'm here for a while longer if you want me.”

I wasn't prepared for the burst of happiness that flooded me, but I didn't fight it.

Pushing up onto my elbow, I kissed him, soft and slow. “Oh...I want you.”

He was grinning when I slid on top of him.

TWENTY

MATT

HEAD ACHING FROM LACK OF SLEEP, I STOOD UNDER THE HOT PULSE OF THE shower, hoping it would clear the fog in my brain.

So far, it wasn't working.

I ended up giving up on the shower idea in hopes of caffeine. As I pulled my shirt on, my phone started to ring. The sight of Keith's name put my teeth on edge, and I debated on whether to even bother answering. But the sense of responsibility that had plagued me most of my life got the better of me.

"Hello, Keith," I said, hearing the frost in my voice and not giving a damn about it.

"Matt." His voice was cautious.

For a second, my chest felt tight. The guy on the other end of the phone was my best friend. Nobody knew me like he did. I'd thought I knew him the same way.

I cut the train of thought off, deliberately reminding myself of what he'd done, of Veronica and how she'd left my arms to go straight to him, how he'd come to me days later and told me.

I care about her. The look in his eyes came back to me, and I clenched my fist. Fuck.

"What do you want?" I demanded brusquely.

"I...hell, Matt. I want to talk to you. I miss you. I'm worried about you."

"There's no reason to worry, Keith. I'm fine. I've talked to Mom and Dad several times. I'm sure they've told you. Is that all?"

On the other end of the phone, my younger brother blew out a breath. "No, Matt. It's not. Fuck, I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have let things go the way they did. If I hadn't ignored how I felt about Veronica, this wouldn't

have happened. And I should have trusted you to figure out the Nikolette situation on your own. I...I'm sorry."

"I don't want to hear it, Keith." Not bothering to say goodbye, I hung up the phone and tossed it on the bed. Looking away from my reflection, I squeezed my eyes shut.

I care about her.

"Fuck."

THE HOURS SPENT with Gabrielle the past night had left me feeling loose and limp as I drifted off to sleep, her head pillowed on my chest.

She'd been gone when I woke up, and I kept telling myself not to linger over it, but it wasn't as easy as I'd like.

Now, muscles tight as if the night before hadn't happened, my head still pounding and my mood absolutely shit after the call with Keith, I took my frustration out on my assigned work. It was hot and sweaty labor, mucking out the stalls, again, and I smelled like the inside of one of those stalls in no time. The work was hard enough, intense enough that I could focus on it and let my brain tune out. Maybe I could work the bad mood out, but I wasn't planning on it.

Several hours passed before my sore muscles demanded I take a break. I washed up at the big utility sink before grabbing my water bottle and slipping out to lean against the barn.

Nearby voices alerted me to the presence of some of the others. I recognized TD's voice right away, despite the sharp edge of anger that was unfamiliar to me.

"Would you just shut your mouth, Carl?" he snapped. "None of this shit is any of your business, now is it?"

"Hell, I'm just saying...it's not like the two of you haven't been scratching the itch with each other for years now." Carl sounded like the asshole I'd come to know him as, smug and condescending.

Even though I didn't know who he was talking about, I wanted to hit him on principle.

"If you say one more thing about Gabrielle and me, I'm going to knock you on your lazy ass, Carl," TD said. "And that's a promise. I've had it with

you and your mouth, your problem with her, your attitude. I've just had it."

Blood rushed to my face. I felt hot—too hot. Stepping around the corner of the barn, I blinked into the bright sunlight before focusing on the two men. Fisher was leaning against his truck, smirking at the other two, while Carl stood in front of TD, hands out in an appeasing manner.

"Okay, okay...look, it's gotta be rough, having her ignore you while that city boy is here. We all know she's fucking him—"

TD swung out with cool, practiced deliberation. As Carl toppled backward and hit the hard-packed earth, the younger, taller man said, "I warned you, Carl. I don't make empty threats."

He turned toward the house then...and saw me.

Mouth twisting in a frown, he nodded. "Matt."

I turned away.

I was getting the fuck out of here.

Now.

IT TOOK five minutes to scrub away the sweat and dirt and wash my hair good enough that the scent of the barn didn't seem to linger. It was about six minutes more than I wanted to spend there at the guesthouse, but I didn't plan on stopping once I hit the highway, and I wasn't going to drive all day smelling like a barn.

Packing up took the same amount of time, and I didn't waste another second checking to make sure I had everything. If I left something behind, it wouldn't matter. Nothing here was important. Absolutely nothing,

Gabrielle was involved with TD.

Fuck, I felt like it was Keith telling me about him and Veronica all over again, a sucker-punch I hadn't seen coming.

But it was worse, for some reason. I didn't know why.

I only knew I had to get the hell away from this place before I went insane. Slinging my bag over my shoulder, I left the guesthouse, striding to the big house. Gabrielle would be out somewhere, either off by herself or doing something with Will. Once I told Yuriko I was out of here and grabbed the keys from the counter where Gabrielle had pointed them out the other day, I was gone, and I wouldn't have to see her again.

Hopefully, I could put her out of my mind as quickly as I planned on putting miles between us.

Without bothering to knock, I opened the door and stepped inside.

Yuriko was by the table.

“Yuriko—” I stopped, everything else I was about to stay trapped in my throat as I realized she wasn’t alone.

TD sat at the table, a bag of ice on his hand, and Gabrielle sat across from him. The hard set to her jaw softened when she saw me, a smile warming her eyes. That smile faded as she saw me take the keys.

“I’m out of here. My car’s ready,” I said shortly. “I’ll leave your keys with Mitch at the garage. I’m sure TD can give you a ride into town to get them.”

She was already out of the seat and walking toward me.

I turned to go.

“Matt, wait,” she said, catching my arm.

Shrugging her off, I pushed through the door. “No. The longer I wait, the later it will be before I can get on the road.”

“But...what about the part?” she asked, following me out. “You said he needed another part. Did it come in already?”

There was a look in her eyes that hit me square in the chest, but I wouldn’t let myself dwell on it. Feeling mean and wanting to lash out, wanting to see if she could hurt the way I did, I held her gaze. “There was no part. I lied. For some fucked up reason, I wasn’t ready to go, to leave you. I can’t figure out why, though. Not now. All I want to do is get away from here, and you.”

She sucked in a breath. “Matt...”

Shaking my head, I turned and walked away.

TWENTY-ONE

GABRIELLE

STUNNED, I STARED AT MATT'S RETREATING BACK WHILE MY CHEST ACHED and confusion spun through me.

“What in the hell just happened?”

The floorboards creaked. Dazed, I looked over at TD.

He stroked a gentle hand down my back. “I think he heard Carl when that asshole was running his mouth.”

It hit me like a punch to the gut, but I shook my head.

“We...hell, we're just friends, TD. Besides, that's all that's going on between Matt and me too.”

TD cocked a brow, and a faint smile creased his handsome face. “No, sugar. It's not the same thing, and you know it. Hell, anybody with eyes can see it.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.” Folding my arms over my chest, I stared at the car pulling out of the garage. *Stop him*, a small voice in my head whispered. But I stood there, frozen, my feelings a chaotic, turbulent mess that made no sense. The tires squealed as Matt whipped the vehicle around and hit the gas, taking off like the hounds of hell chased him.

“Don't you?” TD wrapped his arm around my shoulders, and it was the embrace of a friend. “All you and I ever had was friendship, Gabrielle. And some excellent sex, but still...we're friends and that's all we'll ever be. You never once looked at me the way you look at Matt.”

He was right. I didn't want to acknowledge it, but I'd never been one to run from the truth, even when I didn't like it.

“What does it matter?” I asked, bitterness rising inside. “He doesn't belong here and never could. You know that. And look at what just

happened. He took off, never even asked me a single question.”

“He probably feels sucker-punched, honey. Carl was making things out to be...not what they are. You know how he is. Go after him, Gab. If you don’t, you’ll regret it.”

I started to deny it, but stopped, because he was right. I’d already been hurting from the coming loss of Matt even while he’d been here. This abrupt leaving, coupled with his anger, tore a hole in me, and if I just left it...

No. I couldn’t do that. Looking up at TD, I asked, “Can you handle things without tearing Carl apart?”

“Sure thing.” The smile that lit his face was friendly and casual, but his eyes were hard. “If he gives me any grief, I’ll just put him on the ground again. He probably knows it too.”

“Thanks.” I kissed his cheek and ran inside to get my keys. My mind was racing, but none of the thoughts connected just yet.

Hurt, anger, they vied for dominance, but the hurt was too confusing. Yeah, TD wasn’t wrong. Matt had already gotten under my skin, had come to mean more to me than he should, far more. But the anger was easier to focus on.

And focus was exactly what I did—I focused *hard*, so hard that by the time I arrived in town just over thirty minutes later, I was gripping the steering wheel so tightly my hands ached, and my jaw was sore from grinding my teeth together to hold back the curses building inside.

I planned on saving them all for Matt.

Slamming the car into park in the garage’s lot, I climbed out. Eyes on the back of the man I could see through the window, I sucked in a deep breath and stood there, waiting to see if my mind calmed any. But...no. It didn’t.

A bell jangled over the door when I shoved through, and Mitch looked up, a smile breaking out over his face. It faded quickly, eyes skipping between me and Matt, who still stood with his back to me.

“Ah, I think I hear my phone ringing,” Mitch said, a blatant lie as his cell phone was sitting in plain view, silently, on the counter. He tossed me the keys to my dad’s car and turned, moving out of the office like his ass was on fire.

Matt turned, his eyes cool as they connected with mine.

“What?” he asked, tone icy.

Instead of answering right away, I closed the distance between us, moving so close, I could feel the heat of him. My body, already so attuned to

his, clamored in response and I fisted my hands, nails biting into my palms against the urge to reach for him.

Stupid body, stupid need.

Stupid me.

“Just who in the hell do you think you are?” I asked, my voice every bit as cold as his. “Taking off in my father’s car like that, talking to me like that, *acting* like that?”

“If you’re bothered about my use of the car, I’ll be happy to pay you for it.” His lashes swept down, then back up as a faintly mocking smile settled on his face. “Will a hundred dollars suffice?”

“Shove your money up your ass. What right do you have to judge me? Were you a virgin the first time we had sex?”

His cheeks flushed, but he didn’t look away. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Apparently, you found out that TD and I have slept together.” Narrowing my eyes at him, I added, “So, clearly, I wasn’t a virgin. Were you?”

“There’s a difference between being a virgin and hopping from one bed to another, sweetheart,” he said, words sharp enough to cut, while his eyes were hard enough to bruise. “Were you fucking him in the same bed where you fucked me?”

“You *asshole*.” The threads of my control snapped, and I shoved him—hard. “Who in the hell do you think you are, asking me shit like that? Until a few days ago, I didn’t know you existed, and you didn’t know shit about me, either.” I poked him so hard it hurt my finger. “And for the record, *clearly*, you still don’t. Yes, I’ve had sex with TD in the guesthouse because I sure as hell wasn’t going to sleep with him in the cabin he shares with other ranch hands, but since we’re just friends, I didn’t feel right having him in my bedroom, either.”

He opened his mouth, but I cut him off.

“So sorry to have sullied you with my loose, easy ways, Matt Hartwell. If that was a mistake I could rectify, I surely would. Since it’s not, I’ll cut my losses and get out of your way. Clearly, you’re eager to get back on the road and continue running from whatever in the hell is eating at you.”

I’d made a stab in the dark with that last one, and judging by his flinch, I knew I’d been on target.

I didn’t feel any satisfaction, though.

No, I felt bruised and raw, hollow inside in a way I’d never felt before.

And I was terrified I might cry. Turning on my heel, I stormed out.
The very last thing I would do was let him see that he'd affected me that much.

TWENTY-TWO

MATT

THE FEEL OF HER HANDS STILL BURNED THROUGH MY SHIRT TEN MINUTES later as I turned onto the road that would lead me out of town.

She'd gone the opposite way, back to the ranch. Try as I might, I couldn't stop hearing the husky way her voice had hitched as she threw that parting comment at me. It had cut deep, but even worse was the way I felt as I saw what looked like the glint of tears in her eyes.

Miles sped by as I drove, hitting the expressway and putting the car on cruise control as I tried to block out the memory.

But it wasn't happening. Nearly forty minutes had passed when I saw a sign for a rest area and pulled in, not even sure why exactly.

The stab of hurt, the brutal kick to the gut I'd felt when I realized TD and Gabrielle had a thing had faded in the minutes since I'd left the garage, and I felt a decade older.

We're just friends.

Were you a virgin?

The fury in her eyes when I'd responded, and the flash of pain.

Fuck.

She was right. I was an asshole.

Yeah, the knee-jerk response and the pain hadn't exactly been in my control, but I should have slowed down, handled things way better.

Maybe if I hadn't still been bruised over what had happened with Veronica and Keith, I might have handled it differently.

Gabrielle is more important than Veronica ever was.

That slammed into me, and I swore, because it was the truth.

Veronica hadn't ever gotten to me like Gabrielle did. Hell, if it wasn't for

how caustic Nikolette had been, and how easy it had been to be around Veronica after dealing with Nikolette's viciousness, maybe I would have realized things weren't quite right earlier.

With the clarity of hindsight, the signs that Keith had been attracted to her were painfully obvious, even if he had been hiding from it.

And, yeah, I needed to talk to him about that mess too. It wasn't like he and Veronica had been sleeping around behind my back. She'd ended things before even going to him.

But all of that would have to wait.

Head pounding and stomach in a knot, I let myself admit something else I'd been hiding from—I was falling for Gabrielle.

She meant something to me.

She was so *not* the right woman, and I knew it. I had the foundation to run, and my family. Everything I knew was in Boston. And Gabrielle's heart, *her* everything, was here.

But I couldn't deny the pull I felt toward her, either.

"You went and fucked things up good, Matt," I muttered. Dragging my hands down my face, I pulled up the map app on my phone. It worked, and I took that as a good omen.

Now, I just had to find a decent place where I could turn around.

I couldn't leave, not like this.

IT WAS mid-afternoon by the time I pulled into the small half circle behind the big house.

Yuriko pushed the door open, concern on her face. It morphed to irritation at the sight of me, and my gut twisted. Face hot, I climbed from the car and faced her.

"Yuriko."

She scowled at me but didn't speak, looking toward the car expectantly.

Several seconds passed before she slowly shifted her attention to me. "Gabrielle isn't with you, is she?"

Something within froze me at those words, but I managed a level voice as I said, "No. I left her in town a couple hours ago."

Dark eyes flashing, Yuriko pressed her lips together and looked back over

her shoulder.

That was when I noticed Will and TD on the porch behind her. Tension building inside, I slid my hands into my pockets and looked back at Yuriko. “I need to talk to her.”

“Well, isn’t that just too bad?” She gave me a sharp-edged smile. “She hasn’t come back yet. I called Mitch, and he said she headed back home over two hours ago.”

A sharp twist knotted my gut, and I looked from her to Will to TD. None of them looked at ease, and the knotting sensation in my gut intensified. Over two hours ago. Just after we’d spoken at the garage. “Did he say if she was heading anywhere else?”

“No.” Yuriko offered a cold smile. “But he did say that you were there at the garage when she showed up, and the two of you had words.”

Blood, once more, heated my cheeks, and the urge to apologize rose inside me. But the person who needed to hear that apology wasn’t the woman in front of me. “We did. I came back to talk to her about that.”

Yuriko opened her mouth.

To my surprise, it was TD who stepped forward and touched her shoulder, speaking to her softly. I didn’t hear anything he said, but when Yuriko looked back at me, her features were calmer, more somber.

“I think we need to head out and look for her,” the other man said, turning to face me.

Will strode up to join us, a hard set to his features. “It could be that she just wanted some time alone, TD.”

“It could be,” TD allowed. “And if that’s the case, I’ll apologize personally and take full responsibility, but something feels off about this. She isn’t answering her phone, and if she was going to be away from the ranch during the day, she’d let one of us know. She wouldn’t disappear when there’s a storm coming and work to be done.”

“You all need to go look for her,” Yuriko said from her position on the porch. Brow furrowed, she stared off into the northwest. “Now. Before that storm gets here.”

After a quick discussion, TD and Will decided to go out on horseback while Will turned over the keys to his four-wheel-drive truck. “In case that storm hits, I don’t want to have to come dig any of you out of a hole,” he’d said.

Holding the keys in my hand, I met Will’s gaze. “I came in the same way

she should have, and I didn't see her. Is there another road she might have taken?"

Will's mouth turned down in a frown as he exchanged looks with TD.

TD was the one who spoke up. "If she was upset, she might have taken the old backroads that led onto the property. Takes longer to get here, roads aren't all paved. But it's a pretty drive, and Gabrielle takes that route sometimes when she has to clear her head."

When I asked how to get there, he pulled up a map on his phone and showed me the roads in surprising detail. I commented on it.

"I go out and take pictures sometimes, or just hike around the creek," he said with a shrug. "I know the area."

Then, directing my attention to the map, he tapped his finger on a bifurcation in the road that looked familiar. "This is where she'd turn off if she'd decided to take the backroads."

He helped me locate the right road on the minuscule screen, and while I committed it to memory, he brought out a piece of paper and a pen, roughing out a quick map.

Five minutes later, armed with a radio that would let me talk to the others at the ranch, and water, I was back out on the long, winding road that led away from the ranch.

"Where are you, Gabrielle?" I murmured.

TWENTY-THREE

GABRIELLE

“Owww...”

Harsh, silvery-gray light shone into my eyes, burning my retinas with the intensity of a thousand fiery suns. Lifting a hand to shield my face, I looked around, only to wince at the first movement. *My head*. Hell, *my everything*.

Confusion vied for control with a deep, instinctive fear, but finally, I had both under control and started to take stock.

One good look at my dad’s car—what remained of it—and memory rushed back at me. I’d wrecked. My dad’s car was totaled.

The last of the fog clearing, I forced myself not to panic. Doing a quick mental inventory, I decided that other than being sore as hell, I’d been lucky—very lucky. The seatbelt was locked tight across my chest, and I didn’t seem to have hit anything, but the car was at an odd angle.

“The buck,” I muttered.

A big pronghorn antelope, one of the biggest I’d ever seen had been crossing the road, hidden from vision by a curve, and I hadn’t seen him until I’d nearly crashed into him. I’d been trying to slow down for the curve, though, hadn’t I?

Needing to move, I pushed on the latch for the seatbelt.

It didn’t move.

I pushed again.

“*Fuck!*”

The rush of blood caused by a spurt of panic made the pounding in my head worsen. Forcing myself to breathe, I counted to ten, then twenty. By the time I was at eighteen, the spiraling sensation inside my head had started to retreat, making thought easier.

“Okay,” I told myself. “Okay.”

The solution came almost immediately, and I lifted my gaze skyward as I murmured, “Thank you, Dad.”

Opening the center console, I was able to get the tool Dad had insisted we all carry in our cars with us. It was called a car safety hammer and could be used to smash a window or cut through a seatbelt. A friend of his had died several years ago after being caught in a surprise thunderstorm.

He’d been in a wreck on a backroad like this one, but down in a valley. Waking up when the rain started, he’d realized he was trapped and had been able to call for help on the radio in his truck, but help hadn’t gotten there in time. Held captive by the seatbelt, he’d drowned when the nearby creek overflowed the banks and swept the truck away.

Sore muscles in my back protested as I cut through the seatbelt. The cutting tool made short work of it, and soon, I was free to figure out the hard part—getting out of the car. The driver’s side was smashed into the ground, so I wasn’t getting out that way.

I couldn’t remember exactly what happened after I’d seen the buck. There were fleeting thoughts of panic, the knowledge that something was seriously wrong, and that I needed to stop the car before I came upon the next curve. That one wasn’t even a quarter mile away but was far sharper and on the opposite side, dropping off into a steep embankment that then gave way to a creek.

Even thinking about it made the memories come more clearly.

I’d jerked the wheel hard to the right, away from that upcoming curve.

Then everything had been noise and chaos before giving way to darkness.

Eying the window of the passenger seat, I took a deep breath. It wasn’t comfortable, but nothing was broken. I was going to be sore as hell for a while, but that was all.

The fun part would be getting out, if that door was damaged in any way.

I lucked out—finally. The whole day had been pure shit, but when I pushed down on the button for the window, it unrolled smoothly. After securing the hammer, I hauled myself up and out. It took more energy and caused more pain than I wanted to admit, but I was able to get out.

I’d lingered just long enough to look for my phone, but it had been nowhere in sight. I couldn’t even remember if I’d brought it when I left the house—I’d been so angry, so hurt.

Thinking of Matt made a sharp ache rise inside me, so I pushed him out

of my head and focused on the problem at hand.

And there *was* a problem.

The sticky, sweltering heat had my shirt plastered to my skin, but the wind was blowing, hot and dry while the sky roiled overhead in an ominous greenish-gray sheen.

Tornado light.

That was what Dad had always called it when the sky looked like that.

It didn't necessarily mean we were going to see twisters, but we were sure as hell in for a storm, and I was stranded.

At least now I could see where I was. By road, I was a good ten miles from home, but over the pasture, it was only about three miles. It would be better to go cross country because the road ran alongside that creek for a good two miles, and when the rain came down hard, that creek could rise fast, washing out parts of it.

Every muscle in my body protested when I took the first step toward the fence, but everything seemed to be in working order. My left ankle protested every step, though, pain shooting through my leg. One of the small outbuildings on the property was only about a half-mile away.

There wasn't much in it—it wasn't meant for anything more than an emergency shelter, there in case anybody on the ranch got caught unaware by a storm that came up quickly. However, it had a narrow bed, plenty of blankets, a small portable heater and camp stove, as well as some basic food supplies and a first aid kit.

Unless this storm *did* spawn tornadic activity, I could wait out the rain there. Sooner or later, Will and TD would come looking for me, and they'd check both ways on and off the property. Once they saw the car, they'd check the shelter.

I'd be uncomfortable for a few hours, and probably wet, but it wasn't anything I couldn't survive.

Decision made, I started forward just as thunder rumbled overhead.

It was much, *much* closer than I liked.

Grimacing, I forced my sore body to keep moving.

Heavy drops of rain began to pour down, cold against my overheated skin.

Just as I reached the fence line, light splashed over the tall grasses.

"Oh, thank God," I muttered, turning back to look at the road.

Sagging against the fence, I closed my eyes and lifted my face to the sky.

I didn't care who it was, TD, Will, Yuriko—hell, it could even be Fisher, and I just might kiss him.

Not Carl, though. The asshole.

“Gabrielle.”

My heart stuttered to a stop.

TWENTY-FOUR

MATT

THE RAIN STARTED COMING DOWN IN SLOW, FAT DROPS, BUT IF THE WIND WAS any indicator, it would get bad pretty fast.

When I saw the glint of red, my heart stuttered. A taillight. I couldn't see much more than that and realized immediately what had happened. Grabbing the radio, I called back to the house. "I see the car. I think she might have wrecked."

"Where are you?" Yuriko demanded.

I had to bite back the urge to say, *I've got no fucking idea.*

"I'm not—" The rain picked up almost at the exact same moment I caught sight of a slight form pushing through the tall grasses, perpendicular to the road. "Wait a minute. I see her. She's moving toward the fence line. I'll be in touch."

Yuriko didn't bother wasting time demanding more information. "Get out of the rain if you can. It looks like the worst of the storm will pass south of us, but we might get some hail, and the downpour is going to be heavy."

"Understood." Pulling the borrowed four-wheel-drive onto the narrow, sorry excuse of a shoulder, I put the truck in park, grabbed the backpack Will had insisted I take, and jammed the radio in the mesh pocket on the side before climbing out. A crack of thunder shattered the sky, followed by a slashing bolt of lightning just as I called Gabrielle's name.

She'd paused, leaning against a fence but didn't stir at the sound of her name. I tried again just as the rain picked up.

This time, her head turned my way.

Pushing forward, I shouted her name again.

I knew she heard—and recognized me. Her shoulders stiffened, and she

averted her gaze. Slowly, she pushed from the fence and swung around, moving forward—away from me.

Her steps were stiff and awkwardly slow, obviously favoring her left leg.

Realizing she was hurt made the hot, bitter stab of guilt inside me twist, tearing something open that exposed something vicious and nasty within. Shoving it down so I could focus on her, I jogged forward, glad that I'd at least kept to the boots and jeans I'd been wearing for the past week. By the time I caught up to her, she'd reached the fence, and I sucked in a breath, recalling what I'd learned about the electrical power that ran through much of the property line.

It wasn't until I'd gone to grab her—too late—as she lifted a latch that I realized we weren't at a regular partition of the fence line, but one of the gates. As she shoved upward, I joined her, taking the bulk of the weight.

She pointedly ignored me, shoving on the gate until it swung inward.

Once she had enough room to pass through, she stopped, and I hurried to get through before she decided to close it on me, although I wouldn't have been able to blame her.

She pushed onward, her steps achingly slow and stiff, as the rain came down harder.

I reached out to touch her shoulder. "Will loaned me the truck. I can—"

"Don't touch me," she said coldly, knocking my hand off and pushing forward, limp and all.

Although I had no expectation of anything else from her, I tried again. "Let me get you to the truck. The storm—"

"It's already bearing down on us," she snapped. "There's a shelter less than five minutes from here. I'm going there. You do whatever in the hell you want."

The caustic acid in her voice would have made me flinch if I hadn't been so worried about her. Hearing there was safety so close, however, changed everything. She shot me another dark look as I edged closer but immediately shifted her gaze away.

The second she did, I swept her up in my arms.

She went rigid.

"Where's the shelter?" I asked, striding onward in the direction she'd been moving.

Gabrielle stared straight ahead, her features stony.

"Okay. I guess I'll just keep walking."

“Asshole,” she muttered under her breath. But when we crested a rise, the rain slamming into us, she pointed to my left.

Off in the distance, I caught sight of a vague, indistinct shape.

Breathing out a sigh of relief, I headed in that direction, moving as quickly as I dared in the faint, dying light. Although it wasn’t late, the heavy storm clouds gathered overhead had cut off the sun, and it was nearly as dark as dusk around us now.

A blast of wind slammed into me, and I staggered before finding my balance again. Ahead, maybe a dozen yards away, the dim shadow of the shelter hulked in the growing darkness.

Finally, we reached it, and I lowered Gabrielle to her feet so I could open the door. She shrugged my help off and hobbled inside, leaving me to follow. I had to fight the wind to close the door behind me, and when I turned, it was to see Gabrielle pulling a box out from under a narrow bed that had been built into the wall of the shelter.

Seconds later, light filled the cabin, and I lifted a hand to shield my eyes.

She put a small, emergency-style camping lantern on the floor and flicked a look at me.

“If you’re expecting five-star accommodations, you’re out of luck. This shelter is set up for emergency use only.”

Even though she sat on the cot, she somehow managed to look down her nose at me as she spoke, dismissing me the second the final word left her lips.

Going to crouch in front of her, I took the lantern and lifted it so I could study her face. “I saw the car. Were you hurt in the wreck?”

“What do you care?” she asked sharply. “And why the hell are you *here*? You should be settled in someplace now and comfy in Rapid City. You sure as hell tore out of here like your ass was on fire earlier.”

Guilt a gnawing, growing ache inside, I had to fight the urge to look away.

“I fucked up, Gabrielle,” I said bluntly. “I never should have lashed out at you like I did.”

Her expression didn’t soften.

And I couldn’t fucking blame her.

Bowing my head, I focused on the supplies she’d revealed when she pulled the box out. A familiar white cross, emblazoned on a field of red, caught my eyes. A first aid kit. Well, that was something I could help with. Grabbing the kit, I opened it. Maybe it was more asshole behavior of me, but

when she reached for the kit, I nudged her back, shifting the kit backward and claiming she was in the light.

She was...but it wasn't anything I couldn't work around.

"Bring the lantern closer, would you?"

For a moment, there was no response. But finally, the light swung closer, and I got a good look at her ankle. It was swollen and discolored, a few ugly scrapes marring the soft silk of her skin. "Did you trip, or did this happen in the wreck?"

"It must have happened during the wreck," she said, voice still stiff.

Giving a short nod, I turned away and rooted through the first aid kit, grateful now for my youngest brother's insistence that we all join him when he decided to spend some time with Habitat for Humanity and other charitable groups. There had been more than a few chances to take basic and advanced first aid courses, and both Shawn and I had taken them every chance we'd gotten.

"You've got some pretty moderate bruising."

"I didn't even *notice*, Dr. Hartwell," she said in a mockingly sweet voice.

When I glanced up at her, she gave a flutter of her lashes. Her eyes shot darts that would have drawn blood if I hadn't already been bleeding. Deciding not to respond, I picked up the scissors from the kit and held them out.

"Probably a good idea to cut the denim away so I can get a decent look at your leg." There were visible tears in the material and splotches of blood, but unless I had no other choice, I wasn't going to push anything else on her.

"Do you even have a clue as to what you're doing?" she asked.

"Yes." I looked up and held her gaze, waiting.

"Fine." She huffed out a sigh and looked away.

It was obvious by the way she held herself that even the slightest movement caused pain, but after I'd cut the blue jeans away, I could see there wasn't any sort of serious damage...unless...

"Have you had a tetanus shot recently?"

"Two years ago." Her voice was still stilted but not quite as caustic as it had been.

"Good. I need to clean the scrapes out."

She curled her hands around the edge of the narrow bed, her knuckles cutting against her skin. "Get it done."

Ten minutes later, her scrapes and cuts bandaged and her swollen ankle

wrapped, I stroked my hand up her calf slowly, reluctant to break contact. Outside, the rain raged on, and thunder crashed like an angry monster, intent on tearing down the world.

I smoothed the tape on the bandages down a second time.

“I think it’s fine,” she said in a raspy voice.

“Yes.” But I still didn’t let go.

“I’m pretty sure that wrap isn’t going anywhere, Hartwell.”

“Sorry.” My voice came out a bare rasp, and my face was hot when I looked up to meet her gaze.

She stared at me, her eyes dark and bruised.

“I’m sorry, Gabrielle.”

She started to look away.

Driven by instinct, I caught her face in my hands, rolling to my knees, so we were eye to eye.

“I’m sorry,” I said again. “I was an asshole. There’s no excuse, and I can’t change how I acted, but I’d turn the earth backward if possible, just to spin the clock back a few hours.”

Eyes glittering, she stared me down for a long moment before averting her gaze.

“Gabrielle...”

“You *hurt* me,” she said, each word coming out in a harsh, staccato burst.

It felt like she was stabbing me in the heart with each syllable. And I deserved each sharp, brutal pain.

“I know. I know you’re angry. I don’t expect you to forgive me.” I didn’t. I couldn’t.

“Then why are you *here*?” Her eyes shone at me in the dim light filtering through the narrow windows, the shadows playing over her face.

“I...”

The words, words I’d never spoken, froze in my throat. Sagging back on my heels, I looked at her and fumbled for the right response. Her eyes were still so cool. I’d never felt so hesitant as I reached out to touch her calf, closing my hand around the sleek muscle.

“I realized how bad I’ve messed up. I...look, I was wrong and way off target. There’s no excuse for it. You weren’t wrong, though. My head wasn’t in a good place when I came here. I’ve been off kilter for a while, and I let it affect things when I shouldn’t have. I let it affect...this. Us. I’m sorry.”

Her lids flickered, then her gaze fell away.

“Gabrielle.” My throat went tight, my voice sounding like gravel and crushed rock. “I need to tell you something. You’re going to think I’m crazy, but if I don’t, I’ll regret it. I think I’m falling in love with you.”

TWENTY-FIVE

GABRIELLE

I THINK I'M FALLING IN LOVE WITH YOU.

I wanted to push him away and take off running into the pouring rain. Stupid idea? Sure. But it would be a lot less terrifying than what I'd just heard from Matt's beautiful lips.

Falling in love with me?

No. Oh, *hell* no.

I didn't want his love.

The mad flutter of my heart seemed to show that to be a lie, but even that racing heart felt the cold clench of fear.

My dad had loved my mother with everything in him, had never been able to love another after her. Hell, even up until the day he died, I'd hear the quiet, one-sided conversations he still had with her. Not in the *I'm crazy and she answers back* sort of way. But in a way that made it clear she was still in his heart, that he missed her and loved her with everything inside him.

My hands started to shake, and I wrapped my fingers around the edge of the narrow bed.

A soft, nearly imperceptible sigh escaped Matt before he spoke again. "You're cold. Is there a blanket or anything here?"

Angling my chin to the weather and rodent proof trunk along the far wall, I gave him the code for the lock—my mother's date of birth. As he did that, I grabbed the radio.

"Yuriko."

"Gabrielle!" Her voice was staticky but understandable.

Outside, thunder boomed, so loud my ears rang.

"We're at one of the shelters." Giving her the area and ignoring Matt as

best I could, I asked, "What's the weather report?"

"Thunderstorms," she said succinctly. "But nothing severe as long as you're not near anywhere prone to flooding."

"I'm not," I told her. "I'm safe...Matt's with me."

He sat next to me, wrapping a thick woolen blanket around my shoulders. The need to lean into him was overwhelming. Deliberately, I made myself think of how he'd acted earlier. But even though I was still angry, the urge to lean into him was still overwhelming, and my heart was still doing the rumba against my rib cage.

"I want to knock his block off," Yuriko said, dragging my attention to the radio. "But at least he proved himself useful. Are you okay?"

"Mostly. I wrecked Dad's car." I couldn't control the soft break in my voice. Matt stroked a hand down my back, the touch light, almost hesitant, but the comfort of that touch went through me all the way to my bones. "I don't know what happened, but other than some scrapes and a sore ankle, I'm okay. We'll talk more when I get back."

"Gabrielle, it's Will. Sorry about your dad's car...listen to me. Don't try to come back tonight. The rain isn't letting up any time soon, and you know how rough that terrain can be in the rain," my foreman said, his voice brusque.

"I won't. We're safe here."

"All right, girl. Be safe."

Lowering the radio, I gripped the edges of the blanket and levered myself upright. After hobbling to the window, I looked out over the rolling hills of my property. Rain beat down as the dark of night crept closer, aided by the heavy clouds. In a matter of minutes, it would be as dark as a tomb, save for the flashes of lightning and the lantern, which we needed to avoid using as much as possible.

I think I'm falling in love with you.

"Gabrielle?"

Turning my head, I glanced back over my shoulder. I didn't look at him, though. Maybe it was cowardly, but I didn't know how to handle this.

When moments passed without him saying anything else, I finally asked, "What is it, Matt?"

"Never mind," he said. His words were almost as stiff as they'd been when we'd met just days earlier.

Going back to my study of the storm-swept terrain, I huddled deeper into

the blanket.

I think I'm falling in love with you.

I'd avoided relationships all my life. Even in high school, when other girls were looking for boyfriends and dates to the prom, I'd been content to hang with my girlfriends on the rare occasions I had free time.

Falling in love, giving my heart to somebody who might leave me the way my mother had left my father, shattering me forever, it was something I'd never wanted to risk, something I'd promised myself I never *would* risk.

Don't talk like that, baby...

This time, the voice that ghosted through my mind wasn't Matt, and the words weren't ones spoken from just moments ago. No, this memory was older. A lot older.

I'd been fourteen years old—fourteen and angry and missing my mother. Dad had taken me out riding one day, probably at his wit's end with my attitude and backtalk. It had been the one time in my life when I'd given him grief, but he'd handle it with grace, just like every other rough point in our lives together.

We'd ridden, and he'd talked about everything and nothing all at the same time.

Sometime along the way, he'd started telling me about my mom, things he hadn't told me before.

"You're so much like her, baby. Not just the way you look, but that fire inside you, your heart, even that smart mouth of yours."

Although he'd been smiling, I'd heard the poignant loss in his voice.

"You still miss her."

"Every day, Gabrielle. But she's still with me. I see her in your smile, in the sunset. I hear her laugh in the wind. She's always with me."

The girl I'd been had thought he'd just been blowing smoke. Even just a few months ago, I hadn't fully understood it. But since I lost my dad, I'd come to understand it well. I could see my dad everywhere I looked around the ranch. But it wasn't enough.

"I don't ever want to fall in love, Daddy. I don't think I could stand losing somebody like you lost Mama."

"Oh, baby." He'd taken my hand, squeezing it gently. "Don't say that. Yes, I miss your mother, but I'll take missing her every day for the rest of my life over never having had the chance to know her at all. Love is worth the risk, Gabrielle. Remember that. Don't lock yourself away out of fear."

With a knot in my throat, I closed my eyes and rested my brow against the rough wooden wall.

Love is worth the risk.

Dad had always believed that, had told me more than once that I needed to go out and live my life, see something more than what lay beyond the ranch.

He'd always understood that my heart lay here, but at the same time, he hadn't wanted me to lock myself up in a cage, either. I'd always been happier on my own, though. Just me, my father, Will and Yuriko...and the ranch. That was all I needed, all I'd wanted.

Now my dad was gone, and my life seemed far emptier.

Like he was there to whisper in my ear, I heard the echo of Dad's voice. *Don't lock yourself away out of fear.*

Turning to face Matt, I thought about never seeing him again, of him leaving here and going...wherever it was he'd been headed. Would he meet somebody while he traveled? Or would he go back to Boston and meet the woman of his dreams back there? It couldn't be me—

"I'm all wrong for you," I blurted out. "And you're wrong for me. Our lives...hell, we're so totally different. The idea of this ever working out..." The knot in my throat swelled and thickened until breathing around it was almost impossible. "You know it's impossible."

A muscle quirked in his jaw as he averted his gaze. Now, he was the one to stare outside, and his gaze was unblinking, unflinching.

"Sure. Impossible," he said, voice monotone.

"Impossible. Even if you hadn't acted like a total douchebag, this wouldn't work. I should be smart, you know. Just go to sleep, and once we get back to the ranch, tell you goodbye so we can both go our separate ways. It's the smart thing to do." Wrapping my arms around my midsection, I whispered, "But it's not what I want."

He stilled.

Heart racing, I lifted my gaze to his as he turned to face me.

Unable to speak, I held myself still, watching as he came back to me, moving slowly, each step careful, as if he feared breaking some spell. "Gabrielle?"

"Kiss me," I murmured.

He went to his knees in front of me, cradling my face in his hands. "Why? Is this one more for the road?"

“No.” Pushing my hands into his hair, I tugged him closer. “I came after you in town because a wise person told me that if I didn’t, I’d regret it. If you hadn’t been such an ass...”

He cocked a brow at me.

“We can talk about that later.” Already aching for him, I gave one more small tug, eliminating the distance between us. “Kiss me, Matt.”

I didn’t have to ask again.

His mouth came down on mine, greedy and demanding, but it was nothing compared to the demanding hunger building within. Hands careful, he stripped me naked, but when he started to come down on me, I pressed my hands to his chest, holding him back. “Not yet.”

“Why?” He hovered just a breath away, his mouth close to mine and the heat of him warming me all the way through.

“Because I want you naked so I can touch you.”

Slowly, he eased back, and I was blessed with the sight of the slow, beautiful smile curving his lips. “I think that sounds doable, ma’am.”

As he sat back on his heels, I pushed onto my elbows. The lightning coming in through the narrow windows fell to highlight the hollows and planes of his physique, the flex of a bicep, the leanly sculpted plane of his torso as it tapered down to his belly and hips.

Hands curling into fists, I struggled to draw in a breath against the vicious wave of heat that slammed into me. It took far too much effort to drag in air, and my chest got tighter with every passing second. By the time he’d kicked off his boots and reached for the belt, I thought I might hyperventilate.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I somehow managed to drag in a breath of air just as I heard the clink of his belt buckle, then the rasp of leather against denim. Hot hands brushed against my thighs, and I opened my eyes to find Matt bending down over me. Hot, smooth skin met my hands as I gripped his arms, the hard bulges of his biceps tensing as I sank nails into skin.

“Gabrielle,” he murmured against my neck, the fingers of one hand tangling in my hair. The hairs of his thigh rasped over my skin as he pushed between my knees, his palms coming down to spread them wider.

Soon, the heaviness of his cock nudged me, and I gasped as he came into me, thick, hard, and full. Grabbing at his shoulders, I sank my nails in. “Matt.”

“Say my name again,” he whispered, lowering his mouth to mine.

“Matt...please. Move, Matt. I need to feel you.”

He twined one hand with mine, linking our fingers together. He broke the kiss and pulled up to look at me. Then, slowly, he began to move. Moaning, I rocked up to meet him. He gripped my hip with his free hand and hitched me up higher, angling me until every single stroke rubbed against me in the most delightful way.

Pleasure shattered through me, my veins burning hot with it while, inside me, it swelled and stretched so big I didn't know if my skin could contain it.

“Matt, please!”

He nipped my lower lip, catching it between his teeth before he gave it a slow, gentle tug.

And still, he moved, each stroke deep and slow and achingly delicious, filling me with a delirious sort of pleasure.

The climax was already building, shoving me closer and closer to the edge as he kissed me, releasing my hip to skim his hand up my stomach to cup my breast, mold, and shape it before tugging at the nipple. Each tug sent an arrow of pleasure straight down to my core, and I thought I'd die from the delicious eroticism of it.

He dipped his head and caught my nipple in his mouth, sucking deep.

“Matt!” Spine arching in a bow, I shoved my hands into his hair and clung to him.

He filled me again, hard, deep, full.

Again, and again.

Releasing my nipple with an audible pop, he lifted his head to look down at me.

“Matt...” Hands still tangled in his hair, I brought his mouth to mine.

He shuddered as he came down on me, the hard weight of his body filling all the aching empty places within. His cock pulsed, setting already sensitized nerves on fire. With a weak moan, I clamped down around him.

He swore and reared back, thrusting into me harder, deeper.

Sobbing, I begged...pleaded for more.

And he gave it, thrusting hard, fast, deep, over and over again until we both shattered in each other's arms.

TWENTY-SIX

MATT

IT WASN'T RAINING.

That was what woke me.

All night, the steady downpour of rain on the roof had played its music in the background, first a wild symphony, then a soft ballad.

We'd fallen asleep to the sound of it.

Now, there was nothing but the soft sound of birdsong in the air as I opened my eyes and tried to figure out what had woken me. Confused at first, I lay there, not even sure where I was. Then Gabrielle mumbled against my chest, the soft caress of her breath teasing over my skin.

Memory came rushing back, everything from hearing Carl running his mouth to TD to seeing Gabrielle struggling to walk along the road.

And the moments after, they were captured in crystalline from the moment I'd swept her up in my arms all the way up to now. These seconds, even as they happened, seemed to be etching themselves indelibly on my mind. I could feel the strands of her hair, those crazy curls so soft and smooth, as they spread over my chest. She moved, one of her thighs moving higher on mine. My cock, all ready at attention, pulsed.

Closing my eyes, I curved my hand over her thigh, relishing in the smooth silken flesh under my palm.

"Ummm..."

The drowsy sound from Gabrielle made me smile even as my dick hardened.

"Morning."

Her sleepy murmur made me smile. "Come here." Not giving her a chance to refuse, I pulled her on top of me.

She came with a slow, sleepy, sexy as hell smile that made all vestiges of sleep fall away.

“It’s light out,” she murmured, her voice low and husky.

“Barely.” Sliding a hand up her thigh, I slid my thumb down until it rested in the notch between her thighs. Her lashes fluttered as I stroked her. Finding her morning wet, I took my time, circling her clit, then dipping lower and lower to stroke her entrance. “Let me in, Gabrielle.”

She hummed in the back of her throat and rose onto her knees to accommodate me, taking me deep inside.

Once I was seated fully, we both groaned. She twined her fingers with mine and began to move, each slow, teasing movement of her hips a sweet, torturous death all on its own.

Surging upward, I wrapped my arms around her waist until we sat with our torsos pressed together. Her eyes burned into mine.

“I’m crazy about you, Gabrielle Kennell,” I murmured, my fingers digging into her hips.

She lowered her head, her hair falling around us like a veil. “Same.”

Then she kissed me, her pussy going tight around me, and memory... thought...reason, it all faded away.

ALTHOUGH I KEPT the speed to a moderate pace, I couldn’t help but be aware of every last wince, every last bit of noise that came from Gabrielle. I wanted to bundle her up and sweep her off somewhere to be pampered, protected from everything until she felt better.

That, sadly, wasn’t an option.

I wasn’t even able to protect her from the storm that come at us from the main house as Yuriko slammed through the door and came stalking toward us.

“You two!” the slim, dark-haired woman snapped, shaking a finger at us.

Next to me, Gabrielle slowed to a stop, and I could sense her reticence about causing any sort of public display.

Fuck that.

Arm around her waist even as she tried to pull away, I steadied her against me and gave Yuriko a friendly smile.

She threw up her hands. “I swear, I was up half the night *worrying!*”

“Worrying?” I asked before Gabrielle could. “You did hear we were safe in the shelter area out by the highway, right?”

Yuriko swatted out with a hand, catching me on the arm unexpectedly, and it made me think of how long Yuriko had been here, how long she’d cared for Gabrielle. Yuriko was the closest thing to a mother Gabrielle had, and the love between them was plain to see.

The older woman must have been beside herself.

“She’s safe,” I said, softening my voice. “Bruised and battered, probably cold after the night we just had, but she’s safe.”

“She’s also still capable of talking for herself,” Gabrielle said, poking me in the ribs. She smiled, though, and looked at Yuriko.

But Yuriko still watched me. After a long moment, she gave a stiff, formal nod.

“I’m glad to see you’re both okay,” a low, familiar voice murmured.

Turning, I met Will’s normally easy-to-read features. His eyes were decidedly cooler when he looked at me, but they warmed considerably as he met Gabrielle’s. “Spent a rough night worrying about you. Do you need to go into town, get checked out at the hospital?”

“No.” She gave Will a tired smile. “I’m sore, but that’s all. I took a hit to the head, but the headaches are already gone.”

Frowning, I looked over at her.

She noticed and rolled her eyes. “Relax. I’ve hit my head before and had have more than one concussion—I don’t have one now. If I did, I’d go into town. A former ranch hand took a hit to the head once and ignored the headaches too long, ended up having long term complications from it. I’m not going to risk that.” A huge yawn cracked her mouth open wide, and she rubbed at her eyes. “Will, did the storm damage anything?”

“Not that we know of yet,” he said, voice gentle. “We need to do a ride around and take stock, but don’t you worry about that. Why don’t you get some rest?”

She gave him a grateful look. “I’m tired and sore enough that I think I’ll take you up on that.”

Words drifted to us, several different voices, carried on the light breeze.

Next to me, Gabrielle grumbled under her breath. “We should have gone straight to the house,” she said sotto voce.

“Go on,” Yuriko said, jerking her head to the big, sprawling spread of the

ranch house behind her.

But TD called out Gabrielle's name, and we both looked over to see the tall, lean man lengthen his loose-limbed easy stride to close the distance between us. Looking between the two of us as a smile spread out over his face, he gave a short, decisive nod. "Looks like you two decided to figure things out."

The words might have confused me, but before I could even puzzle over them, he shoved a hand at me.

Warily, I accepted.

With a quick, hard squeeze, he shook and let go. "I guess I don't need to tell you to be good to her, but I'm saying it anyway."

"Are we heading out or what?" Carl demanded as he drew even with us, barely sparing either of us a look. "Riding around in the muck and mud isn't my favorite way to spend the day, so I want to get it done."

Bright, friendly blue eyes going cold and hard, TD shifted his gaze to the approaching men and offered a smile that was almost feral. "You know, if you've got other things you'd rather do, Carl, you know you can walk away from the ranch at any time. We can replace you."

Ugly rage twisted Carl's features for a bare second before his face went blank and smooth. "Aren't you feeling friendly this morning?"

"About as friendly as you," Yuriko said coldly. "I noticed your concern in asking after Gabrielle's well-being."

Carl, red-faced, didn't respond.

TD laughed quietly. "Carl, this is about as friendly as I'll get when it comes to you anymore. Deal with it." After giving us both a short nod, TD turned and headed for the barn. "I'll start getting the horses saddled. Get some rest, Gabrielle."

"What crawled up his ass?" Fisher's lips twisted in a smirk as TD disappeared into the barn.

It took more control than I liked to admit to keep quiet. Between this asshole and Carl, the antipathy level was at an all-time high, and it hadn't exactly been unnoticeable before.

Gabrielle, apparently, had had enough.

"TD isn't the one you need to be concerned about. Or you, either, Carl, for that matter," she said icily. "I've had it with your bullshit, your petty complaints, and your attempts to instigate trouble. It all stops—now. Or you can just find yourselves another damn job. There will be no other warnings."

Will rubbed his hand over his mouth, but he couldn't quite stifle the smile, while Carl and Fisher both glared at her. Carl opened his obnoxious mouth—again—and I spoke, directing my words to her, not him. “Come on, Gabrielle. Let me help you get to your room so you can clean up and get a little rest.”

“You too,” she said, surprising me as she slid her hand down and took mine, ignoring Fisher's narrow, angry gaze and Carl's sullen snarl. Her hand tightened around mine, thumb sliding over the back of my hand in a small caress. The invitation in her eyes was open, plain for all to see, and it surprised the hell out of me.

From the corner of my eye, I could see the others, and they were looking at us. Yuriko had a smile on her face. But Fisher's face was flushed, and Carl looked like he wanted to spit nails.

“I'll definitely need some help getting up the stairs,” Gabrielle said, still smiling at me, although I knew she was just as aware of the two men. “You look like you need some rest as much as I do.”

Deciding I'd much rather focus on her for now, I put Carl and Fisher out of my mind. They'd be gone soon enough, I told myself. There was no way either of them would be capable of the attitude adjustments needed to keep working here. And Gabrielle had meant every single word.

TWENTY-SEVEN

GABRIELLE

“LOOKS LIKE YOU TWO DECIDED TO FIGURE THINGS OUT.”

A knot in my chest unraveled, all on its own, simply at the sight of seeing two men who meant so much to me come to an understanding.

TD glanced my way, that familiar smile on his face appearing as he looked back at Matt. “I guess I don’t need to tell you to be good to her, but I’m saying it anyway.”

I managed not to roll my eyes, but before I could utter the retort that sprang to my lips, Carl snapped, “Are we heading out or what? Riding around in the muck and mud isn’t my favorite way to spend the day so I want to get it done.”

Asshole.

My headache, brought on by exhaustion and the lingering soreness from the wreck, ramped up a notch or ten, and I almost missed the cold glitter that came into TD’s eyes as he turned to glare at Carl. “You know, if you’ve got other things you’d rather do, Carl, you know you can walk away from the ranch at any time. We can replace you.”

The bruising around Carl’s left eye clashed horribly against the ugly, red shade that now flushed his skin. It was almost eerie how quickly he blanked his expression, though, even offering a smarmy smile as he drawled, “Aren’t you feeling friendly this morning?”

“About as friendly as you. I noticed your concern in asking after Gabrielle’s well-being.”

Carl glared at Yuriko, but she wasn’t the one he should have worried about, in my opinion.

TD’s eyes had gone a cold blue, and he stepped toward Carl. It looked

like Carl had *really* gone and pushed the other man too far. The man was as laid back as they came, but once that switch flipped...

With a cold smile on his face, TD said, "This is about as friendly as I'll get when it comes to you anymore, Carl. Deal with it." He nodded toward Matt and me, then looked at Will. "I'll start getting the horses saddled."

Face softening slightly, he glanced at me once more as he started off. "Get some rest, Gabrielle."

"What crawled up his ass?"

Next to me, Matt stiffened slightly but remained quiet. My temper snapped. Fed up, I turned to glare at Fisher.

"TD isn't the one you need to be concerned about. Or you, either, Carl, for that matter. I've had it with the both of you. Your bullshit, your petty complaints, and your attempts to instigate trouble here stop—*now*. Or you can just find yourselves another damn job. There will be no other warnings."

Carl's eyes all but bulged out of his head, and he sputtered for several seconds.

Matt took that time to brush his fingers down my arm. "Come on, Gabrielle. Let me help you get to your room so you can clean up and get a little rest."

"You too." That was something else I was done with—hiding how I felt for this man, from myself, or anybody else. Twining my fingers with his, fully aware of Carl and Fisher glaring at us, I squeezed his hand. "I'll definitely need some help getting up the stairs. You look like you need some rest as much as I do."

Without saying another word, the two of us headed for the house, Matt supporting me with his arm around my waist the whole way.

Pain jolted up from my ankle with every step, but it was a dull throb now, the support from the bandage Matt had wrapped around it making it tolerable, if somewhat unpleasant, to put some of my weight on that side of my body.

At the top of the stairs, Matt paused to let me catch my breath, and I let myself sink against him, let myself *lean* on him.

I think I'm falling in love with you.

Nuzzling his chest, I murmured, "You meant what you said last night?"

"Every word." He cupped his free hand around the back of my neck and held me closer. "Nobody's watching, tough girl. If you're that sore, I can carry you to your room."

"Hey, I'll have you know I *am* a tough girl. And I'm so tough, I'm not

worried if anybody sees you carrying me.” Poking him in the chest, I tipped my head back to stare at him and found myself being kissed within an inch of my life.

The kiss ended as abruptly as it had begun, and Matt swept me up into his arms with startling ease. With a surprised laugh, I wrapped my arms around his neck. “My, Mr. Hartwell, you’re very strong.”

The smile he gave me was delightfully roguish, sending tingling warmth through me and chasing away the lingering chill that had settled into my bones throughout the night.

As he put me on the edge of the bed, all sorts of dirty thoughts raced through my mind. They got even dirtier as he hunkered down in front of me. The silk of his hair was cool against my fingers as I slid my hand through it. “I’ve got a beautiful man on his knees in front of me. Maybe I *did* hit my head harder than I thought, and I’m dreaming. If so...don’t wake me up.”

He slanted me a look from under his dark lashes, a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “And what else would I be doing in this dream?”

“Hmmm. I don’t know. I’m open to suggestions.” When he started to unwrap my ankle, I poked my lip out. “That’s boring.”

“I’m just getting started, ma’am,” he said.

The husky timbre that came into his voice made things inside me melt, and I sagged back onto the mattress, weight on my elbows. “I guess I just have to be patient, then.”

“Sounds like a wise idea.” He kissed my knee through my jeans and kept unwrapping the bandage until finally, my ankle was bare. “It’s not so swollen now. How does it feel?”

“Sore if I put weight on it,” I admitted, then hissed out a breath as he rotated my foot. “Or if you do something like *that*.”

“Sorry.” Head still bowed, he ran his thumb along my instep in a firm stroke. “Nothing is broken, I don’t think, but you probably need to plan on taking it easy for a few days. You got any anti-inflammatories?” He paused, then suggested an over-the-counter pain killer.

“In the bathroom closet. Guess you want me to take something now, Dr. Hartwell?”

“Yes.” The look he shot me spoke of all things carnal, and my breath caught. “Now...before.”

Swallowing against the sudden rush of heat, I said, “Can you run downstairs and get me a glass of water?”

Saying nothing, he rose, going into the bathroom first.

“The right side of the medicine cabinet,” I called to him when I heard him looking around.

He reappeared a few seconds later with the bottle in hand, putting it on the nightstand before turning to leave the room.

Once he was out of sight, I reached for the bottle and picked it up with trembling fingers.

“Wow,” I breathed out silently. That look he’d given me, so hot and potent, it was a miracle my clothes hadn’t been incinerated from the intensity.

He was back before I’d managed to fumble the lid back onto the bottle, standing there waiting until I was done before trading me the glass for the remaining medication, which he put on the nightstand again.

“For later,” he said. “So, you’re not hobbling around unnecessarily on that ankle.”

After washing the pills down, I glanced toward the door leading to my bathroom.” I could really use a bath.”

“Want me to get it started?”

“Yes.” I hesitated, then added, “The tub is big enough for two.”

His pupils spiked, nostrils flaring as he drew in a deep, slow breath.

As he turned away, I reached for the buttons on my shirt. My fingers felt clumsy, and I only managed to get four of them done before he reappeared in front of me, once more going to his knees.

“Let me.” He nudged my hands out of the way and took over the task, head bent as he slowly freed one button after another until the simple top was open all the way down. That done, he peeled it away from my shoulders, then down off my arms.

His lips brushed over my shoulder, but when I tried to pull him closer for a kiss, he didn’t let me.

“Pretty,” he whispered, tracing the butterfly charm that hung between my breasts at the center of my bra, a flirtatious little decoration on the otherwise plain black lingerie.

“The panties match.”

“Really?” With a look of mock seriousness, he said, “I think you should show me so I can check. It was too dark last night for me to notice.”

“And here I thought you just had other things on your mind.”

He was laughing as he nudged me onto my back, unbuttoning and unzipping my jeans.

The muscles in my belly clenched and jumped as he peeled the denim open, baring a triangle of black cotton—and the little butterfly charm. “Look at that.”

“I told you.”

“So you did.” Matt leaned down, kissing my belly just above the waistband of the panties, and my breath hitched, caught. I barely noticed as he peeled the jeans away, so enraptured by the feel of his mouth on my skin. Then he was on his feet, pulling me upright and urging me to stand, all the while carefully supporting me so I didn’t have to put weight on my injured ankle. “Let’s get you into that bath.”

I was tempted to tell him to just forget the bath.

But he leaned in and nuzzled my neck. “I want to see you all slick and wet, pink from the heat.”

“Oh. Well, then...”

Once more, he lifted me, and I cuddled close as he carried me into the bathroom. But he didn’t put me on my feet. He sat me on the wide lip of the tub. “Can you get your panties off without standing up?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw when I looked up at him, stark hunger written on the lines of his face.

“Yes,” I whispered, deciding against teasing him. For now.

“Get in the tub then.”

Before he could back away, I caught his wrist. “You’re joining me.”

“Yes. I am.” The expression on his face couldn’t be described as anything but ravenous...and I was the focus of that savage, hot hunger.

Releasing him, I dealt with my bra before tackling the task of my underwear. It wasn’t graceful, but I managed to wiggle and shimmy out of the cotton. Aware of his intense scrutiny, I turned and slid into the tub. Water lapped at the walls, against my body as I settled back and lifted my gaze to his.

Only then did he look away from me and then just long enough to turn the water off.

When he reached for the hem of his shirt, I licked my lips.

A smile flirted on his. “Going to watch?”

“I might as well. If I ask really nice, would you make it into a show for me?”

A dull red flush spread over his high cheekbones. “Yeah, that’s not going to happen.”

“Well, damn.”

A self-conscious laugh escaped him, but as he peeled the shirt away, his movements seemed to be...deliberately slower. Muscles flexed, inviting my touch. But he stood so far away.

“Come closer,” I whispered.

“In a minute.” From under his lashes, he watched me as he slowly unbuckled his belt, then tugged it off, one slow loop at a time. Then the bastard neatly coiled the well-tooled leather and walked over to put it on the sink instead of just dropping it on the floor and getting on with it.

The aching throb between my thighs had me clenching them closer together, and under the water, I closed my hands into fists.

The rasp of his zipper was excruciatingly loud in the quiet. Mouth dry, I licked my lips as he hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his jeans—then stopped.

“Damn.” That wry smile appeared again. “I forgot my boots.”

I wanted to whimper, almost did as he walked closer and sat down—at the very *far* edge of the tub. The play of skin, muscle, and sinew as he bent forward was so incredibly beautiful, my heart stuttered, and I barely even noticed the time it took for him to kick those boots off. On his feet once more, and closer now, he hooked his thumbs in his jeans.

Eyes on mine, he cocked his head. “Are you sure that tub’s big enough for us both?”

“If you don’t get in here *now*, I’m going to crawl out of the tub and tackle you,” I warned him.

Smug male laughter filled the room, the warmth of it filling me as he *finally* peeled the jeans *and* his boxer briefs away.

The heavy ridge of his cock sprang free.

My clitoris pulsed, my pussy clenched, aching to be filled.

The water level rose higher as he climbed in. Shifting forward so he could settle behind me, I shivered, sensory memory swamping through me, my body primed and ready. No foreplay was needed. I didn’t even *want* it. I just wanted him inside me.

But when I wiggled against him and tried to make that happen, he caught my thighs and pinned me in place. “Be still,” he ordered, nipping my right ear. “I need to wash you.”

“Matt...” That keening, pleading voice...was that *really* me?

He nipped my ear again, and under the water, he maneuvered so he could

use his legs to spread mine. “Hush, baby. You wanted a bath. I’m going to make sure you get a good one...that you’re good and clean.” He pushed two fingers inside me. “Inside...and out.”

I shuddered and clenched down around him, my nails sinking into his thighs. The sound that escaped me was a low, wordless thing, hungry and pleading and desperate.

Matt withdrew his fingers slowly, then plunged them back in.

Tightening around him, already on the brink, I sobbed out his name.

He understood, flicked his thumb over my clitoris.

I came.

“UM...” Lax and pleased so completely, I snuggled against him once more as he carried me out into the bedroom. A drop of water ran down his chest, and I lapped it up.

A sharp breath escaped him, and I lifted my head to smile at him drowsily. The control he’d wrapped around himself in an iron grip seemed to finally be faltering.

“What’s wrong?”

He said nothing as he put me down on the bed, perched on the edge. As he went to back up, I caught the front of the towel he’d wrapped around me and peeled it open.

His eyes dropped, mouth parting.

While he was distracted, I grabbed his towel and pulled it off, baring him. Without pause, I reached out and wrapped my hand around his cock and leaned forward, taking him in my mouth.

Hands shooting out to clench in my hair, Matt swore viciously. “*Fuck.*”

Thinking he might pull back, I caught his hips and dug my nails in.

But he didn’t pull back. He fisted one hand in my damp hair, holding me in place while palming my neck, adjusting my angle with the other. Then he began to move, thrusting his hips so he filled my mouth, the head of his cock bumping the back of my throat with each movement.

My eyes watered.

My pussy clenched as dirty, raw words left him, filling the air and twining around me like silken fingers.

Then, abruptly, he stopped, pulling out and grabbing me around the waist, levering me farther onto the bed before hooking his elbows under my knees and thrusting deep.

“Matt!” His name escaped me in a startled shrill cry just before he swooped down and slammed his mouth over mine.

He pounded into me, chest crushing my breasts, heart pounding against mine, and his cock so thick and hard, I felt bruised. And I loved it, begged for more.

I came, once, then a second time before he finally went rigid over me, his cock pulsing as he orgasmed, the hot rush of it flooding me.

TWENTY-EIGHT

MATT

ALTHOUGH I'D NEVER BEEN IN HER ROOM BEFORE, I KNEW WHERE I WAS before I even opened my eyes.

The scent of Gabrielle surrounded me, and I drew it in, let it fill me like the most erotic perfume.

My cock stirred. Ruefully, I thought, *Down, boy.*

The *boy* wasn't interested in listening, but as I cuddled her closer, the vicious hunger eased, held back by her nearness and warmth. Now that she was asleep, I let myself think about the car I'd come across, how I'd found her

Fear swelled inside, panic I barely managed to throttle down.

Fuck, I could have lost her, so easily.

Gabrielle had let Will know where the car was when she'd radioed the ranch this morning upon awakening, and the foreman had promised to take care of it. I was glad, because the lost expression on her face when she mentioned her father tore at me, and I knew the loss of the car, of that tangible memory, was gutting her.

I was also glad for another reason—once I had time to talk to Will, I wanted to tell him to get the car inspected. I'd take care of the cost, even if it meant getting it towed to a qualified mechanic in another state.

When I'd asked her about the wreck earlier, she'd said the memory of the wreck was still sort of hazy, but she knew the brakes had gone out. Her confusion had been clear, though. "I haven't driven that car more than a few times since Dad died," she'd told me, "and he had the brakes changed a month before his heart attack. I don't understand how they could just go out like that."

It seemed like a couple of odd, weird things had happened around the ranch since her dad's death—the fence getting trashed out by where my car had died just being one of them.

And now the brakes on the car.

Head whirling as I thought it all through, I turned my head, searching for a clock. I didn't see one, and I had no idea what time it was, but I wouldn't have been surprised if it was already late afternoon.

We'd gotten to the ranch well before eight that morning, but the night in the shelter hadn't exactly been restful, the narrow bed designed only for one and the constant roar of the wind not the most soothing lullaby.

My belly gave a low rumble. Grateful for a distraction, I carefully eased away from Gabrielle, my muscles still somewhat stiff from the night on that damn miserable bunk. I could have used another ten hours horizontal, but another demanding rumble in my belly managed to lessen the lure of Gabrielle's bed—of Gabrielle—temporarily.

After ducking into the bathroom to tug on my jeans, I slid from the room. It wasn't until I was halfway down the stairs that I remembered Yuriko and winced as I looked at my bare chest.

Hell. I didn't want to go back into Gabrielle's room only to leave again, all because of a shirt.

Yuriko would understand me not wanting to wake her up, I figured, so I finished jogging down the steps.

To my surprised relief, Yuriko wasn't in the kitchen where I normally saw her. Assuming she had to go to the store or something, I opened the fridge and rummaged around in the compartment she'd once told me held all the makings for sandwiches.

I constructed one in record time and demolished it, then started building another, slower this time and letting myself filter through the morass of thoughts tangling in my brain.

The brakes.

The fence.

Immediately, my mind went to that odd conversation between Carl and Fisher. Maybe...

Off in the house, a noise caught my attention.

Pausing in the middle of adding another layer of ham and cheese on the already towering monstrosity of a sandwich, I looked up as that faint noise came again.

Head cocked, I listened. Nothing. No, wait—
Again.

And again.

Then there was a low, smothered sound that sounded suspiciously like a cry.

Hair on the back of my neck stood on end, and my thoughts raced once more to the possibilities I'd just been pondering.

I'd been willing to assume I was just paranoid, and okay with it, as long as I put my nerves to rest, assured that Gabrielle and those she loved were safe.

But as that low noise came again, a deep, certain fear settled in my gut.

It came again, louder, followed by a low, guttural voice, too low for me to parse out the words. But I caught the note of anger, command...*threat*. Thinking only of Gabrielle lying upstairs, asleep and injured, I slid from the kitchen on quiet feet, seeking the source of the sound.

I'd made it halfway down the hall when another noise caught my attention—from *behind*.

I spun around, but it was too late.

A blinding blow caught me across the head, and everything went black.

TWENTY-NINE

GABRIELLE

MATT WASN'T NEXT TO ME WHEN I WOKE. I KNEW WITHOUT EVEN LOOKING, and I had to fight the immature urge to pout. Even though we'd slept skin to skin and he'd given me multiple mind-blowing orgasms, I still craved him, his nearness, his touch, the scent of him filling my head.

Below me, I heard people moving through the house. My belly chose that moment to let out a hungry growl. Matt was likely in the same state—famished. Sitting up, I took a mental inventory and decided my body was in better shape than I'd expected, probably thanks to the hot bath and the ibuprofen Matt had insisted I take.

Even a few slow rotations of my sore right ankle weren't too bad. Matt had rewrapped it before joining me in bed, and it had been a wise decision. Hopefully, after a few days of babying it, the damn thing would be back to normal.

Keeping that in mind, I dressed and pulled on a pair of lace-up boots instead of tennis shoes or the boots I normally wore around the ranch. The stiff leather and high shaft would provide additional support.

After twisting my hair into a haphazard knot and securing it with a couple of hair sticks, I started downstairs.

Moving slowly, I took each step with care and was pleased that my ankle could support my weight as long as I held onto the railing. Still, I didn't foresee myself traveling up and down a lot for the next day or two. Normally, the idea would annoy the hell out of me, but I had every intention of convincing Matt to spend as much of that time with me as I could.

What was going to happen between us?

I had no idea, and the worries were more than I was ready to ponder,

considering the lingering aches in my body and how new everything was. Maybe it was foolish, but I shoved the dilemma aside for now. We'd just confessed how we felt. Was it really a bad thing to want to enjoy it for a while?

I finally reached the bottom of the steps and lingered a moment, not really out of breath, but more exhausted by the effort than I liked.

A noise caught my attention.

I frowned, pushing away from the banister. That hadn't come from the kitchen, and it sure as hell didn't sound like somebody trying to make a snack.

Bypassing the kitchen, I went in search of the sound, my frown deepening into a scowl as the noises grew louder, then a voice, low and hard, rose above.

"I told you to shut the fuck *up!*"

My dad's—my office. That's where the commotion was. Just ahead, and the door was open, light spilling onto the mellow, golden gleam of the oak floor of the hallway.

Nobody should be in there. Yuriko went in on the days she cleaned, but that wasn't on Saturdays.

Rounding the doorway, I caught sight of Fisher. Anger exploded to life inside me as he bent over my father's desk, rummaging through the drawers. Movement from the corner of my eye had me turning my head, and that anger became a supernova.

Matt and Yuriko sat on the floor, arms pulled behind their backs. Yuriko had a strip of duct tape over her mouth and an angry bruise spilling down the side of her face. Her eyes met mine, and I saw the worry and fear flicker there before I looked away to meet Matt's gaze.

His dark blue eyes were angry as well, but there was a cool, calm present...a warning.

"Fisher."

The man rummaging in the desk came to a stop, slowly lifting his head.

He paled at the sight of me. "Gabrielle."

"What in the *hell* do you think you're doing?"

THIRTY

MATT

THE BLINDING PAIN STILL LINGERED WHEN I CRACKED OPEN ONE EYE. WOKEN by rough hands that flipped me onto my front, I went to push up only to have my face smashed into the wooden floorboards. Blood filled my mouth.

“Be still, you fuckhead,” Fisher said from behind me.

Maybe it was the threat in his voice. Maybe it was instinct. But my mind spun into high gear, burning away the fog.

“Shit, boy,” a new voice said. “Ain’t you got those zip ties on him yet? Get him tied up—*now!*”

Whether it was instinct or luck, I had no idea, but I’d woken just as he flipped me onto my front and dragged my hands behind me.

“What’s it look like I’m doing, Carl?” Fisher snapped.

That warning had me reacting instinctively, positioning my hands just as Fisher jerked a zip tie tight around my wrists.

Thanks, Dad...I really owe you...

Back when my father had been running the foundation, he’d instituted a biannual, mandatory program that all employees had to attend—and he’d insisted my brothers and Mom come as well.

Disaster prep, the training classes had been called.

Each course focused on different disasters, but every program devoted a specific period of time to the personal sort of disasters—like kidnapping. My brothers, parents, and I had all received more specialized classes, thanks to my father’s paranoia after the son of a friend was kidnapped and held for ransom.

Thanks to those classes, I knew the basics of how to get out of restraints and had even practiced.

I'd never, in a million years, thought I'd need to put that practice into action.

As Fisher and Carl hauled me to my feet, I tested the zip tie even as I jerked away from them.

"Son of a bitch," Carl said, reacting by driving his fist into my gut.

I doubled over, momentarily winded. The two men took advantage of it, dragging me down the hall and into a room I hadn't seen before. I stiffened at the sight of Yuriko, her pale skin marred by an ugly bruise and a piece of duct tape over her mouth.

"What the fuck?" I muttered.

They dumped me onto the floor next to her, and then Carl was in my face, grabbing the front of my shirt. "You know, if you'd just left like you said you were doing, you could have been away from all of this. But you had to run back and come sniffing around that bitch, didn't you?"

Yuriko made a noise behind the gag. It was unintelligible, but her dark eyes spat fire.

Carl sneered at her. "Be quiet before I knock you around again."

"Ain't no reason for that, Carl," Fisher said.

"I decide whether there's reason or not," Carl said over his shoulder before putting his face in mine again. "I bet you regret coming back here, don't you?"

"What I regret right now is having you so close, Carl," I said. "It smells like you haven't brushed your teeth in a month. Either that or you've been eating shit and corpses. With you, either option is possible."

Face going red, Carl straightened. I saw his fist coming but couldn't do much to block him. As I straightened, I spat blood on the floor and stared him down. He just laughed and backed away.

"I'll be back, Fisher," he said as he turned on his heel. "Get a move on. We need to be out of here. *Soon.*"

TIME AND PATIENCE. Those words echoed through my mind as I continued to twist and work my wrists in the confines of the zip ties. The nagging fear at the back of my mind, of course, was that I didn't *have* much time.

Carl had been damn insistent on Fisher hurrying, and although he hadn't stated just what Fisher was to *hurry* on, the way the other guy was going about ransacking the office made me suspect he was tossing the place for cash. Twice, Carl had reappeared with a demanding, "*Anything?*"

Each negative made his scowl deepen.

Now, sitting on the floor and watching Fisher continue to ransack what had been a quiet, orderly office, I forced myself not to jerk and twist against the zip tie as hard as I could.

Time, I reminded myself. That was all it would take. *Time*. So far, Fisher was distracted and Carl was out of the room, but I didn't take that to mean that I had plenty of time. Panic and desperation urged me to hurry, but I kept my moves slow and steady.

A flicker of movement near the door caught my attention just as Yuriko went stiff.

Terror lit inside me when my gaze landed on Gabrielle.

Her eyes narrowed, hot with fury as she looked at us, gaze lingering on Yuriko where I knew she was taking in the other woman's bruised face before coming to rest on me.

I had no idea how bad my face looked, but the rage on her expression deepened.

Time was up.

I knew it as clearly as if somebody had shouted the words.

Gabrielle took a step into the room, making no attempt to quiet the sound. "What in the *hell* is going on here?"

Fisher jerked upright, his face going pale as he caught sight of her.

Fuck. Giving up any attempt at being subtle, I tore at the zip tie. Finally, some headway just as Fisher came out from behind the desk, hands held up in a placating gesture.

"Gabrielle," he said, voice low, almost gentle.

She took a step forward and jabbed him in the chest. "Answers, Fisher. *Now*."

"Or what?" Fisher demanded, tone now bordering on belligerent. "You'll fire me?"

Gabrielle sputtered out a disbelieving laugh, but it cut off fast as Fisher took a step toward her. "Don't," she warned. "I'll make you eat your teeth if you come a step closer."

They kept talking, back and forth as I jerked at the tie. One more violent

jerk at my wrist...and there was slack. Working my thumbs free first, I then managed to get my hands out.

And Carl appeared behind Gabrielle, wrapping his arms around her in a bear hug.

“Hi there, boss,” he whispered against her ear.

THIRTY-ONE

GABRIELLE

“LOOK, I’M NOT GOING TO HURT ANYBODY,” FISHER SAID, HIS HANDS UP IN front of him.

“You’re not going to *hurt* anybody?” Not attacking him, right then and there, took so much control. The bruise on Yuriko’s face imprinted on my memory. And Matt’s beautiful features were marred with blood and swelling, his lip split and an ugly stain spreading down his left cheek, as if he’d been smashed in the face with something hard.

But he wasn’t going to *hurt* anybody?

Fisher had the grace to flush, something that might have been guilt flickering in his eyes. But he just hitched up a shoulder. “Yuriko tried to attack me. As to your boy toy...” An ugly snarl filled his voice, but he didn’t look away.

That just showed he had *some* intelligence because I was waiting, just *waiting* for an opening. Taking another step toward him, I demanded, “Is that what this is about, Fisher? You got your dick in a twist because I never was interested in sleeping with you?”

The flush on Fisher’s face increased, but he shook his head. “No. I’m finally getting one thing through my head...there’s just no accounting for taste, is there, Gabrielle? You spread your legs for this fucker, for TD. But not for me. Whatever your hang-ups are, they’re your problem, not mine. I’m not going to get bent out of shape over it anymore. This is just...business.”

“Business?” Curling my lip at him, I said, “Well, you never did strike me as having much more than shit for brains, and this just proves it, if you think *tying people up* and digging through *my* personal property is a smart business move.”

His eyes flicked past me.

“I’m not going to fall—”

“Hi there, boss.” Hard hands clamped down on my shoulders, then one smashed over my mouth while a strong arm, rosy with muscle, wrapped around me and yanked me back.

“See, Fisher?” Carl heaved out a sigh, the sound thick with mock sympathy. “I told you the bitch didn’t have any decency in her. All the years you worked for her, and that’s how she talks about you? Shit for brains? I ought to teach her a lesson or two.”

The shock passed fast, and I reacted out of instinct, sinking my teeth into the meaty part of Carl’s palm while smashing my booted foot down on top of his. He yowled and yanked his hand away. But that was the most damage I did, and all it did was piss him off. Although the boots I wore were sturdy, Carl was wearing a decent pair of his own, and I didn’t do much, if any, damage.

He shoved me away, catching my arm at the last minute to spin me around. Instinct had me shoving my hands up to ward off the blow, but still, it sent me staggering back, and I crashed into my father’s desk, a pained cry escaping me.

“Carl!” Fisher yelled, dismayed.

“Shut the fuck up,” the other man snarled. “You’re too damn soft when it comes to her.”

He started toward me.

Matt flew at him, surprising all of us. I had no idea how he’d gotten free, but he smashed into Carl with the fury of a demon. His lunge took the older man to the ground, and he drove a fist into Carl’s startled face.

“You son of a bitch!” Fisher bolted forward, moving to intercept them.

I shot out a foot, hooking it between Fisher’s as he passed me, sending him flying. It happened to be my *injured* foot, and I swallowed back a pained curse as I turned to face Fisher. He’d crashed into a bookcase, barely managing to keep from going down, and when he turned to me, blood smeared his face.

“Oops,” I said, shrugging.

He swiped his hand over the back of his mouth and looked down, staring at the blood before lifting his gaze back to mine.

Behind us, the struggle between Carl and Matt continued, but judging by the sounds coming from Matt, and the low, pained noises that I assumed were

Carl's, Matt was winning.

Fisher made to move toward them, and I stepped between them. "Not happening."

"What are you going to do to stop me, sweetheart?" he asked.

But he made no move to confront me, and I realized then that Fisher really didn't want to hurt me. Maybe he'd hit Yuriko, maybe he hadn't. I had no doubt he'd been involved in helping mark up Matt, but he seemed to have no interest at all in putting his hands on me in violence.

So, I'd use it.

When he moved again, I shifted, keeping my body between Matt and Carl once more.

"Get out of my way," Fisher snarled.

Instead, I pressed closer. "Nope."

He caught me by the shoulders.

Smiling sweetly at him, I covered his hands with mine, then, quick as a snake, drove my knee up into his balls. Once. Twice. Three times. As he doubled over, face going pale, I grabbed his hair and yanked his head down, bringing my knee up once more to smash his face into it.

Blood fountained from his nose, and his eyes rolled back. He collapsed into a heap, and I shot a look at Matt and Carl just in time to see my lover rising from the older man's limp body. Rushing around the desk, I went to yank open one of the drawers and stopped, realizing its contents had already been dumped on the ground. The item I needed was right there on the floor by my boot. Grabbing the duct tape, I straightened and hurried back around the desk.

Matt dragged a hand down his face, smearing the blood. Eyes still burning with rage, he looked at Fisher. A smile curved his lips at the sight of the man bent over, moaning pitifully as he clutched at his balls.

When he caught sight of the tape in my hands, he reached for it. "I'll do it. You take care of Yuriko."

Another trip to the desk and I had one of my dad's pocketknives, which I used to saw through the zip tie on Yuriko's wrists. The skin was rough, raw, and abraded, evidence of how she'd struggled to free herself. Once the tie fell away, she lifted a hand and jerked the tape off, not even wincing as she ripped it from her lips.

Eyes hot with rage, she erupted from the floor and went to the fireplace, grabbing a poker.

Carl stirred just as she took up position next to him.

He groaned and started to lift a hand. Yuriko, sounding like the very devil, growled and pressed the tip of the poker to his throat.

Carl went still.

“I’m going to tell you what you said to me,” Yuriko said with deadly calm. “Try to fight, and I’ll rip you open...*bitch.*”

Carl paled.

Matt approached and nudged the man with the toe of his bare foot. “On your front, pal.”

“I ain’t your pal,” Carl said, his voice thick with wet things.

“Thank God for that.” Matt, face hard and brutal with rage, nudged him again. Harder. “On your front...or should I ask Yuriko to convince you?”

THIRTY-TWO

MATT

GABRIELLE HAD ONE ARM BANDED AROUND HER MIDDLE, A HAND CLENCHED into a fist while the other clutched the phone. She spoke softly to the dispatcher on the other end of the line while Yuriko stood watch, and I first hauled Fisher, then Carl into the chair. I checked their pockets, finding a knife on each of them.

Carl had a gun stowed in the back of his pants too.

Yuriko hissed out a breath at the sight of it, and when I held it out so everybody could see, Fisher went pale. “Damn it, Carl! I told you I didn’t want no part of this if you were bringing guns!”

“Shut the fuck up, you stupid pussy,” Carl growled.

But Fisher wasn’t in the mood to shut up. Whipping his head up, he looked first to Gabrielle, then to Yuriko and me. “I swear, I had no idea he was bringing a gun. All he said we was going to do was take some money before we got the hell away from here. We were owed it and all, seeing as how hard we’ve worked here and the old man up and left everything to Gabrielle, Yuriko, and Will.”

“I said, *shut up!*” Carl swiped out with his foot, trying to kick his irate partner.

Moving out of the way, I put the gun down on the desk. Gabrielle stared at it, her features expressionless, save for her eyes, which were dark and angry and turbulent.

Yuriko stepped forward, pressing the tip of the poker to his throat. “I’m still contemplating how much fun I’d have using this to rip your throat open, Carl. Don’t tempt me.”

Both men took one look at her and paled.

I gave her an assessing look.

She met my gaze, and I smiled at her.

Yuriko huffed.

“Yes, they are, or *were*, armed. Knives, and my boyfriend just took a gun away...”

Carl’s mouth flattened out as he caught those words coming from Gabrielle. I stepped between them, cutting off his view of her. “What’s the matter? You didn’t think you might not get away with it? That’s the problem with arrogant, lazy idiots. They never think things through.”

“The sheriff and his deputies are on their way,” Gabrielle said from close behind me. “So is Will. I got through to him on his radio. I tried reaching TD, but no luck.”

Fisher’s eyes fell away, but Carl just smirked. A single prod from Yuriko wiped the man’s face clean, though.

“Where’s TD?” Gabrielle demanded, the tension underscoring her voice striking me square in the heart.

Reaching out, I stroked a hand down her back, but I didn’t look away from Carl. “She asked you a question.”

“What kind of man are you?” Carl asked. “She’s fuckin’ him, and you don’t care?”

I hit him. Hard. The chair rocked back, and he went with it, crashing into the floor. Gabrielle beat me to him, though, bending down with her hair falling like a veil around them.

“So help me, Carl, if you don’t tell me where TD is...”

“He’s in the tack room,” Fisher said.

Gabrielle turned to the other man, and I moved around, grabbing Carl by his thinning hair, hauling him upward. The sound of him cursing and howling in pain only made me smile. I’d never realized I had such a bloodthirsty streak in me. Not until I’d realized Gabrielle might be in danger.

Fisher was babbling, probably panicking as the reality of the situation crashed into him.

“He came back,” Fisher said. “And Carl said we had to take care of him because we already had Yuriko tied up, couldn’t risk being caught.”

Gabrielle listened for several more moments as he continued to ramble on, but finally, she held up a hand. He instantly went quiet. Turning her head, she looked at me. “Can you go find him?”

Yuriko went to the desk and picked up the gun. After passing the poker to

Gabrielle, she competently checked the weapon, then took the safety off. Turning her eyes to me, she said, “Go find TD, Matt. We’ll watch these two.”

“SON OF A BITCH,” I breathed, catching sight of TD’s face through the pallid light filtering in behind me. The bulb overhead must have been dead, but I had no doubt that the bruising and bloodied TD would look much, much worse in the full light of day.

“TD.”

He didn’t even rouse when I said his name. His chest rose and fell erratically. If his face was any indication, somebody had seriously whaled on him. I said his name louder.

This time, he stirred.

Okay, that was a good sign.

Hunkering down behind him, I winced at the sight of the rawhide cord that had been used to bind his wrist, tied so tightly, it bit into his skin and had chafed him raw. “TD, man, can you hear me?”

“...um?”

He muttered something else under his breath, but I couldn’t make sense of it. Frustrated and worried, I picked at the knot on the cord a few times before realizing the futility of it. “I’ve got to get a knife or...”

“TD!”

The sound of Will’s voice had me rushing out into the barn. The older man’s face was flushed but set into hard lines. And he had the rifle he usually kept with him already drawn and lifted.

Once he recognized me, he lowered it. “Where’s Carl and Fisher?”

“Tied up with both Gabrielle and Yuriko watching them. Yuriko has a poker from a fireplace, and Gabrielle has a gun. Hell, it might be the other way around. I don’t know. The sheriff’s department has men on their way.” Glancing toward the tack room at TD’s battered face, I asked, “You got a knife?”

Will holstered the weapon and nudged the horse into motion, bringing the big gelding to a stop by me. When he caught sight of TD, his face hardened. “Aw, hell.”

He moved with the speed and agility of a man half his age as he

dismounted, lingering only long enough to secure the reins of the horse before moving into the tack room. “TD, son,” he barked in a commanding voice. “Look at me.”

This time, TD’s lashes flickered, then opened. Pain-fogged eyes stared out at me when I knelt in front of him. “You with us, TD?”

“Gabrielle...’Riko...”

“They’re safe,” I told him. “You think you can move?”

The fog in his eyes cleared with each passing second. “Is that fucker, Carl, in the house?”

“Tied up,” I told him. “And Yuriko’s holding a gun on him.”

“Good.” He bared his teeth and didn’t even seem to notice that it made the cut on his lip split open and start seeping blood.

It took me nearly fifteen minutes to get him back in the house. Will, after I’d assured him I could handle it, went in to back up Yuriko and Gabrielle. Yuriko appeared in the door not a minute after the grizzled older man disappeared in the house, and I could tell even from all the way across the sprawling yard how she paled.

“I think we’ll be lucky if she doesn’t use that gun on Carl before we get there,” I told TD, hoping to distract him. He was favoring his right knee, and from the way he’d moved when I helped him up, I suspected Carl had got in a few licks to his ribs too.

“The only thing that would be unlucky about that would be missing it,” TD said through gritted teeth. “That little fucker came at me from behind. Fucking coward.”

“Don’t feel bad. Fisher did the same to me.”

We spent the next several minutes cussing them both out, then it was back to TD stifling his pained grunts as I helped him move closer to the house.

“Sounds like you could do with some whiskey.”

“Maybe half a bottle.” We’d finally reached the foot of the steps, and he let out a low curse. “Or maybe a bottle.”

“Tell you what, help me get you up the stairs so I can show Gabrielle you’re okay, then you and me can dig up a bottle of Jack or whatever they’ve got here. Hell, you let me get you to Gabrielle, and I’ll buy you a bottle of whatever booze you want. Price isn’t an issue. Sky’s the limit.” I didn’t mention the ambulance I was positive either Gabrielle or Yuriko would call once they saw him.

“Don’t go saying shit like that unless you can back it up, Hartwell,” he said with a pained grin. But he lurched toward the step.

“Scout’s honor, TD. Come on, two more steps...”

“You ever heard of Pappy Van Winkle?” he asked. “One of the best bourbons out there.”

“Come on, you lazy asshole. You going to let a few bumps and bruises slow you down like this? Fuck, you’re a pussy.”

“Asshole,” he said with a groan. But he took the last step. “You now owe me a sixteen-hundred-dollar bottle of bourbon, *asshole*. Pappy Van Winkle, Family Reserve 23. Don’t think I won’t sic both Yuriko and Gabrielle on your ass if you skip out on it.”

“You’ll get your damn Pappy’s Reserve. Come on now. You’re not there yet.”

But we were both smiling a little as we pushed through the door Will opened.

I was right about the ambulance. The moment I got him into the office, Gabrielle’s faced pale, and she snapped at Yuriko, “Get back on the phone. He’s going to need an ambulance.”

“Aw, shit,” TD said with a grunt.

I eased him into the overstuffed armchair by the door. “Just go with it, TD. Think about that bottle of bourbon coming your way.”

“You were shitting me about that,” he said, even as he eyed Yuriko and the phone with distrust. When he shifted, a harsh exhalation of pain escaped him, and he collapsed back into the chair, panting and swearing.

“No. I wasn’t.” Grinning, I straightened over him just in time to see his mouth gape open.

“Be still,” Gabrielle snapped as she rushed back into the room.

Spying the first aid kit in her hands, I backed up and took position by Will. He’d brought his shotgun in with him and held it in a loose grip.

TD gave the first aid kit in her hands a murderous look. “Will, maybe you can come over here and protect me instead of worrying about those shitheads?”

“Don’t be a baby,” Gabrielle said.

“Shit...”

The startled exhalation came from Fisher, and I looked over to see him gaping at TD. Finally, he swung his head around, glaring at Carl. A mix of panic and shock twisted his face.

“What the hell were you thinking? What the hell did you do that for?”

“Shut *up*,” Carl snarled.

“The hell I will. You think I’m going to let you get me in more trouble than I’m already in?” Shaking his head, Fisher looked away. “No. No fucking way. I ain’t letting you drag me into this.”

He looked over at us, disgust on his face. If he expected any of us to feel sorry for him, he was sorely mistaken.

“Carl told me that he just wanted me to make sure hotshot over there got out of the way. And I didn’t plan on anybody really getting hurt, either, Hartwell. The brakes shoulda gone out a mile or two away from the ranch—”

“Shut *the fuck up!*” Carl lashed out with his foot, but he was too far away to make contact, and by the time he was able to try again, Will had stepped closer and raised his shotgun.

“You’re the one who wants to shut the fuck up now, son,” he said in an easy drawl.

“No,” Gabrielle said in a cool voice as she used a gauze wipe to dab at the blood on TD’s lower lip. “Let him talk. Please. Are you saying you two messed around with the brakes on my dad’s car?”

“Nobody was supposed to get hurt. Maybe banged up a little. The brakes were supposed to still *work*...just be kinda weak,” Fisher said, his voice almost pleading. “And you weren’t supposed to be in the car.”

“If you don’t shut up, I’m going to rip your tongue out and strangle you with it.” Carl had gone so red, it might have been concerning—if I gave a shit.

But Fisher didn’t shut up, and when the sheriff arrived, Carl was still bellowing at Fisher.

It might have been funny if I hadn’t still been so pissed.

THIRTY-THREE

GABRIELLE

“WE’VE GOT TO PICK UP THE PAIN MEDICATION THE DOCTOR ORDERED ONCE we’re out of here, then we’ll head back there...TD, boy, don’t you give me any lip,” Will snapped on the other end of the phone line.

I bit back a laugh at TD’s sour response, which I heard clear as a bell. “Tell the poor baby I’ll have Yuriko make him his favorite breakfast in a few days...once he’s feeling up to chewing.”

“I think I’ll keep that to myself for now.” Will snorted, temper in his voice. Then, tone softening, he continued, “You get some rest now, Gabrielle. I mean that.”

The line went dead, and I put the phone down just as the door to the bathroom opened.

Matt emerged, and his eyes met mine across the room. One hand rested on the frame of the door as he studied me. “Was that TD?”

“Will.” In the back of my mind, a quiet storm brewed, waiting to break, but I held it back through sheer force of will. “They’re discharging TD from the emergency room soon, then they’ve got to get the pain killers the doctor prescribed before he’ll be here.” Chills broke out over my spine. “I already told Will to make sure he bullies TD into taking one of the guest bedrooms downstairs for the next few days. He’ll be too sore to want to move much, and one of the rooms has a decent jacuzzi tub. A long hot soak would probably help.”

“Any broken ribs?”

“No.” I’d been worried about that. “He lucked out. Overall, considering everything, he was lucky. We all were...considering. I mean, things could have been so much worse, right? And the car...what Fisher and Carl did.

Hell, as psychotic as Carl seemed to be by the time the cops got here, who knows how far he might have gone on...oh.”

Matt pulled me up against him, wrapping me up in his arms so tight and secure, nothing else in the world seemed to matter. Shivers broke out over me, and I buried my face in his chest.

I’d held it back for so long, but now reality crashed into me, and I couldn’t stop reaction from settling in.

With long, slow strokes of his hand, he soothed me. “It’s okay, Gabrielle. We’re *all* okay.”

“I know.” I didn’t want to cry right now, so I pushed the reality away for a little while longer...and lied. Pasting a bright smile on my face, I looked up at Matt. “Thanks for letting me hover and worry over TD. I mean, I know you understand he and I aren’t a thing, but I guess it wasn’t easy watching me climb into the ambulance with him and everything.”

“You wouldn’t be the woman I loved if you didn’t have the need to take care of a friend.” He stroked my hair back from my face, his dark blue eyes somber.

“Well, I guess, but after...”

“Don’t,” he said, pressing his fingertip to my mouth, silencing the words. “I already told you I overacted the other day, about what I overheard. But... well, there’s more to it.”

The expression on his face had me tensing, but the way he bent down and kissed me so soft and gentle had me melting.

“Come here,” he murmured. Then, before I knew what he was doing, he swept me up into his arms and carried me, not to the bed, but to the overstuffed armchair I used for reading. “I’m not the kind of person to overreact. It’s just not in my nature. Getting mad like that...” He stopped, staring over into the distance for a long moment. “Maybe I should explain things differently. I’ve got four brothers. I never told you about them.”

Eyes widening, I stared at him. “*Four* brothers?”

“Yes.” He smiled, twining a curl around his fingers. “I’m the oldest. I imagine that won’t come as a surprise.”

“Well, no...but I’m still kind of stunned by the *four brothers* thing. I always wished I had even *one* sibling.”

“I’ll give you one or two of mine.” The amusement faded from his eyes almost as quickly as it had appeared. “I love my brothers, my parents...my grandparents. I’ve been lucky, I know. We’re all close, but my brother,

Keith...he's the one I'm closest to in age, and personally. We are...or *were* best friends. Hell, we still are. I know that. I've just been messed up for a while."

Cuddling closer, I cupped his cheek in my hand and guided his face to mine. "Tell me."

And he did.

Some of it was hard to take in, especially as he told me about the foundation his family ran—that *he* ran. My mind whirled, trying to understand that he and his family had a net worth in millions. I wasn't poor, by any means. Thanks to smart decisions made by my father and his parents before him, the ranch was successful even as many struggled. If I ever made the choice to sell, I could possibly spend the rest of my life comfortably and never have to lift a finger. *Comfortably*, not *lavishly*.

The kind of money Matt seemed to be talking about...

But then he started telling me about the past few years, how changes in the economy and other factors had begun to affect the foundation itself. And the foundation, it seemed, was as important to the Hartwell family as the ranch was to mine.

"I had to do something," he said softly, stroking his thumb over the tight muscles of my lower back. "I didn't want to be the one who *didn't* keep the foundation going. I make things *work*, Gabrielle. That's what I do. It was my responsibility—"

"Bullshit."

His eyes shifted to mine. He'd been staring out the window without seeing anything, but now he focused on me, frowning. When he went to speak, I held my hand over his mouth. "Bullshit," I said again. "It sounds to me like this foundation is a *family* thing, right?"

Under my hand, his mouth twitched. Slowly, I pulled away.

"Yes, but—"

"No *buts*." Glaring at him, I said, "As a family thing, that means *the family* shares the burden, Matt. It's not you alone against the world. That... I've been so lonely since my father died. I've got Yuriko Will, TD...but it's not the same. Family is supposed to back you up, share the burdens, the triumphs, all of it. If your family is as close as you've led me to believe, I get the feeling it probably hurts them to think you didn't trust them enough to share *this* burden."

"It's not about trust. It's..." A deep groove appeared between his

eyebrows. “Look, I was the one who took over running the foundation, and I —”

“You what? You alone made every single financial decision for...what?” Pursing my lips, I pretended to think. “It sounds like things have been sliding downhill since the big recession that hit the country after the housing bubble burst more than a decade ago. I don’t think *you* can take all the responsibility for that, Matt.”

He scowled, but after a few seconds, the grim expression faded away into a faint smile. “How is it you manage to make me feel a little foolish about it? Mom, Dad, my grandparents, my brothers...they’ve all been telling me the same basic thing for months, longer. But I wasn’t listening.”

“Sometimes, it takes an outside point of view.” Kissing the corner of his mouth, I pulled back. “Tell me what this has to do with your brother...and TD. Me.”

“I’m getting to it.” Pushing a hand through his hair, he closed his eyes. “There’s this guy in Boston. Clinton Ives. Kind of like Midas, but a total dick. Everything he touches turns to gold. And his daughter...”

Something in me went cold. “Matt, I swear, if you tell me you’re engaged, especially after the day I had, I’m going to get that poker from Yuriko and bloody you with it.”

“I’m not engaged.” His lids lifted a fraction, revealing a sliver of blue. “I was...intending to be. He had a daughter, Nikolette. She wanted to marry into an established family, old money. The Hartwell family is definitely that. Her father would donate to the foundation, get it steady again, and I’d marry Nikolette.”

Unsettled, I inched back. The hollow look in his eyes made me want to cuddle him. But the idea of him marrying for money...

“Did you like her?”

His bark of laughter was cold and abrasive, like sandpaper on my skin.

“Save for Nikolette, I don’t think *anybody* likes her.” He closed his eyes once more and took a deep breath before looking at me. “No, Gabrielle. I didn’t like her. I couldn’t *stand* her, and if I’d thought things through from a personal standpoint, instead of thinking about money and stressing about the foundation, I would have realized what a mistake I was making a lot sooner. She would have come between my family and me. She would have made me miserable, and I knew that, but coming between me and my family...that’s a different story altogether. And Keith...hell, he knew all along what kind of

mess I was getting into.”

Relaxing a little, I smoothed his rumpled hair down. “What happened?”

“He met this woman. Veronica. And he set her up with me. Well, not exactly, but he arranged for us to meet, and Nikolette was always there. At least the first few times.” He went quiet for a long moment before continuing. “Anyway, Nikolette went after Veronica because she couldn’t stand anybody who threatened her *or* stood up to her. I ended things with Nikolette and asked Veronica out. I didn’t realize that Keith had a thing for her. He’d told me he didn’t, that he’d wanted us to meet.”

Once more, he was staring outside, that distant look on his face.

“You fell in love with her.”

“I thought I did. Or I thought I was falling in love with her.” His gaze came back to me. “She was...different. Different from any of the women I’d been out with before. She didn’t care about my money or the Hartwell name. She was with me because she just liked spending time with me.”

“Matt, baby...” My heart clenched inside my chest even as I thought it broke a little. “If you haven’t had anybody spending time with you because they just liked spending time with you, then you’re hanging around the wrong people.”

“Yeah, well...” He laughed softly. “I don’t get out a lot. Something of a workaholic.”

“I never would have guessed.”

He kissed me, soft and sweet. “I thought things were going fine. We got along well, enjoyed each other. But then she ended things. Told me she had somebody else she cared about more. She didn’t tell me who. And...” His eyes came back to mine. “A few weeks later, my brother turned up at my place, and I found out who it was. Turns out, she went to talk to him the night she ended things with me, and they ended up sleeping together that same night. Look, I know it’s not the same thing, but from the moment I met you, I felt something, and nothing else even comes close. I...don’t have a lot of experience with this stuff. I’ve never been in love...until you.”

That crack in my heart deepened, but not in a way that hurt this time. It filled me, remade me, changed everything inside me. “Matt.”

His arms came around me, and he cradled my face, bringing my lips to his in a kiss so sweet, so tender, tears stung my eyes. “You’re everything, Gabrielle. What I feel for you...everything else pales.”

He went to speak again, but I kissed him, the need inside me so big and

consuming, I couldn't think for it, could barely breathe.

THIRTY-FOUR

MATT

THE FEEL OF HER MOUTH ON MINE SNAPPED THE RIGID BANDS OF CONTROL I'D somehow managed to maintain, and I hauled her against me, one hand fisting in her hair, the other palming her ass. Through the denim, I kneaded that supple flesh and groaned when she tore away from me.

“Come back here,” I ordered.

With a husky laugh, she stripped her shirt off then reached for mine. “Not yet. I want you naked.”

Since having her naked against me was one of life's finest pleasures, I decided not to argue. Once she was done with my shirt, I reached between us and cupped her, grinding my hand against the heat of her. “Naked,” I said when she tried to pull me back. “Remember?”

She groaned but reached for my belt buckle while I fumbled with hers.

There were a few awkward moments and some swearing when we both had to break apart so we could fight with our boots, but once that was done, once we could strip away our jeans and underwear, we were plastered together again.

I pulled her to straddle me, guiding her knees down to either side of my thighs, careful of her ankle, although only the bandage there managed to penetrate the fog of lust.

Her lips skimmed over my face, seeking my mouth.

The cut hurt under the pressure of her kiss, split open, and she drew back, paling at my wince. “Matt, I'm sorry—”

“Be quiet and kiss me,” I ordered, tangling my hand in her hair once more and tugging until she complied.

The soft fullness of her breasts went flat against my chest, her nipples

tight and hard, stabbing into me. She rocked closer, and I felt her heat, slick and seductive, stroke over my cock.

“Now,” she whispered against my mouth, as if desperate, as if greedy.

“Now.” Holding her hips, I lifted her. “Put me inside you, baby.”

She reached between us and did just that, fitting the head of my cock to her and sinking down. It wasn't a slow, teasing claim, either. No, she pushed down hard and fast, her spine bowing as she took me completely.

“Matt!”

Cupping her ass, I groaned. “Move, Gabrielle. Fuck, please...move.”

So, she did. Lush, rolling movements of her hips that had me stroking almost to her very soul had moans falling from her lips. She braced her hands on my chest for leverage and began to move faster.

Lashes swept down, shielding her gaze, and her hair fell forward to veil her face.

“Look at me,” I said, pushing her hair back.

Those dark twilight eyes met mine, mouth swollen from kisses. “I love you,” she whispered.

The words hit me, deep and hard, slamming into me and filling all the empty places.

“I love you.”

Then there was no time for talking, just the desperate, hurried, hungry movements as she rode me, and I arched up to meet her. The sound of our breathing and flesh striking flesh as we came together, the bite of her nails into my shoulders, the scent of our bodies rising in the air, it all slid together, adding to the maddening fire of lust and love.

Her pussy clenched tight around me, so tight, so sweet, milking me as she came closer and closer to orgasm.

Then she was falling over, tumbling over, and I arched into her, pumping hard and fast, once. Twice. Three times.

As I came, she collapsed against my chest, a hungry, broken moan escaping her.

Wrapping her in my arms, I buried my face in her hair and held tight.

I wasn't letting her go.

No matter what it took, no matter what I had to do, Gabrielle was mine, and I wasn't letting her go.

“WE NEED TO TALK.”

Gabrielle lay next to me, face down. At my words, she made a low, unintelligible noise, and I smiled.

We’d had sex again once we made it to the bed, then we’d dozed.

Once, Yuriko had come up and tapped lightly on the door before peeking inside. At my shake of the head, she’d retreated. That had been nearly an hour ago, and I’d sensed Gabrielle waking only a few short minutes earlier.

“Gabrielle?”

“Umm...don’t wanna.”

Laughing, I stroked a hand down the smooth expanse of her spine and forced myself into sitting up. “Come on, honey. We need to talk.”

She cracked open one lid and peered at me through the veil of hair that had fallen across her face.

“Why?”

“Because I’ve got something important to tell you.” Stroking back the heavy, silken mass of her hair, I rubbed my thumb across her lip. “Sit up and talk to me...I’ll go downstairs and get you some food after we’re done.”

Her lashes drooped as she heaved out a sigh. “Fine.” She pushed up onto her elbows, a position that plumped her tits together and momentarily dulled my ability to reason. Her gaze lowered to see what I was staring at, and a sultry laugh escaped her. “Hmmm...” she murmured, pulling a pillow in front of her to block the view. “I think we’ll have a more productive discussion if we do it this way.”

Giving her a wide smile, I said, “Don’t cover up on my account.”

“I’m not. I’m doing it for me. I’m hungry,” she said primly. “Now...what on earth do we need to talk about?”

The humor in her eyes faded as I reached over and cupped her cheek. “Us.”

“What about us?” she asked softly, her throat working as she swallowed.

“There *is* an us, isn’t there?”

“Yes.” She rested her chin on the bunched pillow, still watching me soberly. “I love you, Matt. More than I thought I could love a man. But... South Dakota, this ranch...this is home.”

“I know.” Pressing my finger to her lips, I said, “Trust me. I know.”

That was a knowledge that went deep down to my bones. And strange as it was, this place was beginning to feel like home to me, as well. There was so much peace here, a steadiness and quiet I’d never found. I hadn’t even

realized I'd been looking for it, either, but now that I'd found this place, I realized how empty some part of me had always been.

"I'm not giving you up," I told her softly. "We'll make it work. I always assumed that running the foundation was the right thing for me, what I was meant to do. But I've been happier here than I ever was trapped inside the four walls of my office. I don't want that life anymore. I want this one...with you."

Her eyes glittered, wet with tears she didn't shed, even when she pushed up and climbed into my arms, curling hers around me. "Matt, are you sure?"

"I've never been so sure of anything in my life." Nuzzling her neck, I breathed in the scent of her and felt everything within me settle. Or...*almost* everything.

Gabrielle eased away and cupped my face, studying me.

"You have to fix things with your brother."

Crooking a grin at her, I said, "Are you reading my mind?"

"No." Rubbing her nose against mine, she whispered, "He's important to you, so you have to fix it. That makes it important to me."

Pressing a kiss to her brow, I said, "I was just thinking that just about everything in my life finally feels right. Then I remembered Keith. You're right. I have to fix things. And I will. I'll call him tomorrow."

"Good." She snuggled closer to me. "My dad would have liked you, Matt."

"Yeah?"

She nodded against my chest.

"You know, I'm going to have to tell that asshole brother of mine 'thanks' when I talk to him."

She lifted her head to give me a questioning look.

"If he hadn't shown up at my place and told me about what had happened between him and Veronica, I never would have left Boston, never would have come out here, never would have had the car break down, never would have taken that walk...all of this, every last bit of it has just been a path that's led me straight to you."

A beautiful smile spread across her face.

"Well, in that case, stop calling him an asshole." Still smiling, she leaned in and kissed me.

It was a long time before I made it downstairs to get her something to eat.

THIRTY-FIVE

ALICE

NOVEMBER 1951...

“I’M SCARED.”

In the seat next to me, Matt tightened his hand over mine and lifted it to his lips. Boston’s skyline rose in front of us, a reminder of the life we’d both left behind. I’d run from it in fear of Lewis. Matt had left it because he loved me, because he wanted to take care of me.

“We don’t have to go back,” he said after pressing a kiss to my hand, to the finger that now bore his ring. At least, that was what it looked like. “We can go anywhere you want, Alice. Just say the word.”

“No more running, Matt.” It had taken all my courage to talk to him about coming back, to stay the course as we made the long drive across the country. “I miss my family. You miss yours. I just...well, you know there had to be a scandal, one of the esteemed Hartwells disappearing with another man’s fiancée.”

With a curl of his lip, Matt said, “Ask me just how much I care about what anybody thinks, sweetheart.”

Some variation of that response had been the answer each time I’d mentioned these worries. And I knew he wasn’t concerned about scandal, about Lewis or his father, a powerful judge who could cause so much trouble. But then again, Matt was a Hartwell. His family was like a bedrock in Boston. Even *my* family couldn’t hold a candle. Neither could the Van Hornes.

“I know you don’t care. And I don’t care about the scandals myself. But I don’t want this...what happened...hurting people we love, either.”

“Don’t worry about my family, Alice.” A faint smile crooked his lips up at the corner. “Trust me. My parents can take care of themselves.”

Giving him a nervous nod, I averted my gaze and looked out the window. I could barely make out my reflection, my newly shortened hairstyle, and the Juliet cap Matt had bought me to cheer me up when we stopped near St. Louis a few days earlier. It was cold and ugly outside, the trees already bare.

“We missed the fall colors,” I said.

“Next year.” He squeezed my fingers gently.

Neither of us spoke of why we hadn’t been able to come back east sooner. There was no need.

“How do you think your parents are going to react?” Nervous, I looked back at him, this man who owned my heart, who loved me enough to give up everything. I loved him too much to let him. “Will they like me?”

A slow smile curled Matt’s lips, transforming his face into something so beautiful it made my heart ache. “I think they’ll love you, Alice. Now stop worrying so much.”

A SLIM, pretty brunette opened the door before we’d even managed to climb halfway up the steps. The rain had started nearly twenty minutes earlier and was coming down hard and fast, like icy needles on my skin. Matt held the umbrella over me, his head ducked against the blowing wind as he escorted me up the wide steps.

I suppose that was why he wasn’t recognized right away.

Finally, we reached the porch and the shelter it offered. He looked up as he swept the umbrella away, eyes on me.

I doubted he noticed the way the young woman’s eyes widened or the sudden flush in her cheeks.

I did. I also noticed as she gestured madly to somebody outside my line of sight.

Nervous, I looked at Matt just as he snapped the umbrella shut and gave it a shake.

“Are you ready?”

A shadow cut off the light falling from the door, and I resisted the urge to look away from Matt. Summoning a smile instead, I said softly, “I don’t think it matters.”

Then I angled my chin to the door.

He turned and looked at it the same time I did, and both of us took in the sight of the big, brawny man bearing down on us, and the equally tall woman with lush, ripe curves moving almost as fast.

I recognized her eyes instantly.

Matt’s eyes.

The big man came to a stop a few feet away, his jaw working.

But the woman kept coming, and when she reached Matt, she flung out her arms. “Matt...my boy.”

He didn’t let go of my hand, even when he wrapped his free arm around her in a tight hug.

And they both noticed.

She drew back from him to study our joined hands, and the ring, before kissing Matt on each cheek. Then she stepped toward me.

“Alice, I presume,” she said with a faint smile.

“Ma’am.”

The smile widened a little. “Darling, as I suspect I’m now your mother-in-law, please do not call me *ma’am*.”

“Mother...” It was the first sound from the big man who had to be Matt’s father. The two men had been staring at each other in silence, but now he looked at me, then at our hands, and at the ring. Slowly, he looked up at his son. “Perhaps we should talk.”

“Yes.”

Matt said nothing else until we were in the parlor, a fire burning away merrily in the hearth. The woman who had opened the door was the housekeeper, and she’d served tea and coffee before disappearing. Now, the doors shut, we all sat in silence.

Finally, Gabriel Hartwell looked at me. “The last I heard, you were supposed to marry Lewis Van Horne.”

“Yes, sir.” My cheeks heated even as other parts of me went cold and clammy. We’d debated on how much to tell them. Matt had insisted that if they knew the full truth, it would change nothing. But I was so afraid...

Something in Gabriel’s dark eyes softened as he studied me.

But it was Grace, Matt’s mother, who came to me and sat down by my

side. Taking my hand, she said, “I’ve met men in my life who I instinctively know I should steer clear of, men who I would never allow near a daughter of mine, had I been lucky enough to be blessed with one. They are the sort of men you cross the street to avoid, the sort of men you don’t invite to your home for dinner parties and the like because you’ve heard the stories of how they’ve treated the female employees, even the daughters of some friends.” She lifted a brow. “When I met Lewis Van Horne the first time, he was perhaps fourteen years old. And I all ready knew he’d likely become one of those men, the kind a smart woman avoids. I now think, sadly, that my fears proved true, didn’t they, Alice?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She brushed my hair back from my face with a gentle hand. “Whatever he did to you, I’m sorry.”

It was those kind words that gave me the courage to speak, to tell them the truth only Matt had known until now.

And when I’d finished, while Matt’s father stood staring outside with a stony expression, Grace hugged me and pressed a handkerchief into my hand.

“He will try to cause problems once he knows I’m back.” Shaking, despite Matt’s numerous reassurances, I stared at the woman next to me. “He’ll go to his father. Both of them, they can be so cruel.”

“Let either of them try,” Gabriel said, his voice sharp.

I flinched.

Gabriel turned, and once more, his face softened. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I’m not angry with you. Just with what you’ve gone through, what was done.” He looked at his son, a slow, thorough study. “They can’t touch you. Either of you. And I’ll make damn sure both Lewis and that vindictive ass he calls a father are well aware, should they even make a move in your direction.”

“No,” Matt said softly as he stroked a hand down my back.

My eyes flew to him, but he was staring at his father.

“Alice is mine to protect, Dad. I won’t mind you supporting me. Actually, I’d appreciate it, truth be told. But I’m going to be the one to let the Van Horne family know they’ll leave her the hell alone.”

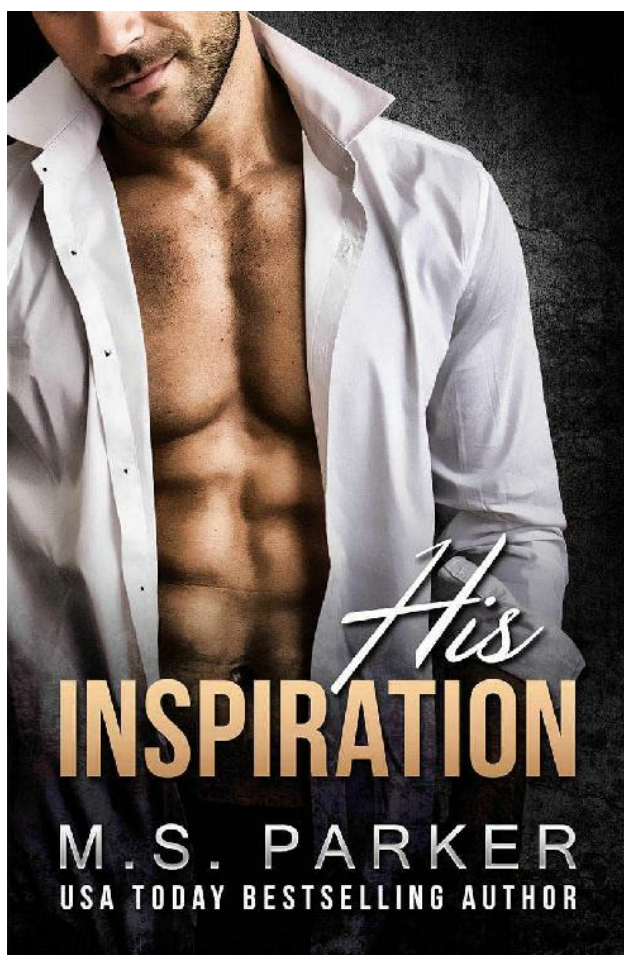
A slow smile, one filled with pride curved Gabriel Hartwell’s lips as his son turned to me.

“You’re safe, Alice,” Matt murmured, cupping my cheek. “You’re home...and you’re safe. I’ll take care of you. I’ll always take care of you.”

THE END

The Hartwell Brothers continues in *Jamie*, the third book in The Hartwell Brother series, coming February 2020.

HIS INSPIRATION: PREVIEW



ONE

TRISSA

“I DON’T KNOW WHY THIS SURPRISES YOU. YOU’VE KNOWN ME FOR, WHAT, ten years now?”

I raised an eyebrow at Bevyan Kelly, my roommate and best friend. She had one of those poker faces that made it virtually impossible for me to tell if she was joking or serious. The fact that she was one of the smartest people I knew didn’t even factor into the equation since I’d once watched her search for her phone while holding a conversation on said phone.

“Five, Bevyan,” I said finally. “Ten years ago, we were both fifteen and living on opposite sides of the country.”

She frowned, a slight crease appearing between her eyebrows. “Huh. I guess you’re right.”

“I have to ask. Were you forgetting how long it’d been since we were in college, making us older than we actually are, or were you forgetting that we’d met in college?”

“I’m not sure.” She smiled, her pewter gray eyes lighting up. “But at least we’re at an age where it’s always nice to remember we’re not as old as we think we are.”

One of the things I loved the most about her was her inability to stay down for more than a few minutes before her naturally bubbly personality chased the darkness away. It wasn’t that she didn’t know how to take things seriously, but rather that she always looked for the silver lining. She was so genuine about it that I never managed to stay annoyed when she did it to me.

“I always assumed that you didn’t know how to drive because a lot of native New Yorkers don’t bother learning since there’s so many public transportation options.” I stood as the timer on the washer reached one

minute. It was all too easy to get distracted when talking to Bevy, and I didn't want to spend the entire night at the laundromat.

Bevy reached for a strand of hair to twist around her finger, then scowled when she remembered that she'd cut her dark blonde locks short to break this exact habit. I would've thought it was a bit drastic a move simply to prevent playing with hair, but I was the one who'd had to help her two weeks ago when she'd cut off circulation in her finger and hadn't been able to free herself.

"My parents wanted me to learn how to drive, even if I didn't need to." She hopped off the out-of-order dryer and came over to join me. We folded our clothes as she continued her story. "I told them I didn't think it was a good idea, but Mom said I needed to know how to drive, in case I was ever kidnapped."

I wished I could say that particular bit of information shocked me, but I'd met Bevy's parents. Francie Kelly had come from the sort of old money, high society family where kidnapping had been an actual threat. Add in the fact that Bevy's father was one of the top television producers in New York and neither of the Kellys was overreacting when it came to their daughter's safety.

"Anyway, she and Dad hired this bodyguard to teach me defensive driving. The kind you'd use when being chased, all that."

Bevy's voice, as usual, carried, and I watched the two older women at the far end of the washer row turn in our direction. I gave them a sheepish, embarrassed smile, but didn't bother trying to quiet my friend. It wouldn't do any good. At least this way, everyone got to hear what was sure to be an entertaining story.

"No one bothered to tell Harris that I also needed to know basic driving skills. I'd never been behind a wheel until I went for my first lesson, and I spent almost two months with Harris teaching me all these maneuvers and tricks." Bevy held up my black cotton bra, a disapproving expression on her face. "This should be hand-washed and hung to dry."

It wasn't the first time she'd told me that. I snatched the bra from her and dropped it in the basket with the other clean clothes. "I would do that if there was a space anywhere in our apartment that wasn't already being used for your lingerie."

She grinned at me and went back to her story. "Anyway, my parents sent me out to take my driver's test without bothering to ask if any of the hours

I'd put in had been regular driving. So the license person got into the car and told me to pull out of the parking space." She shrugged. "Let's just say I'd never heard the phrase 'flunked with flying colors' before."

"How have I never heard that story before?" I asked. "I mean, you'd think it would've come up at some point."

"And when, exactly, would it have come up?" she countered. "When we were being chased by assassins through Beverly Hills?"

I pointed at her. "Your sarcasm, my friend, is much appreciated."

"You'll appreciate my driving if we're ever caught in a car chase."

"I'm sure I will."

The bell over the door dinged as the two older women carried their baskets out. For a moment, I wondered if that would be me and Bevy in the future. Then I remembered that she and her boyfriend, CB, had been talking about moving in together. And that wasn't even considering the fact that she might just decide to go back to New York and leave both me and CB behind.

I pushed those thoughts aside. Planning for the future was one thing. Worrying about what things may or may not happen due to circumstances I had absolutely no control over was pointless. I'd learned that as a kid.

"Does this mean you're going to teach me to drive?" Bevy picked up one of her shirts and folded it in half before dropping it into our basket.

I watched it fall and then looked at her. "Will me teaching you to drive have better results than when I tried to teach you how to fold your clothes?"

"I already knew how to fold my clothes," Bevy countered. "I've just always sucked at it."

"Your parents didn't hire someone to teach you how to properly fold garments?" I laughed as I said it, but I wasn't entirely joking.

She shook her head. "We had a housekeeper who did the laundry, but I had to fold and put away my own since I was a kid. That and cleaning my room were always my responsibilities. I had other chores growing up, but those two things were always mine."

"Is that why your room is such a disaster?" I asked. "You had to spend your childhood cleaning up after yourself, so now you don't want to?"

"Exactly."

My phone buzzed with a text alert, and I fished it out of my pocket.

Thank you for the model heart. It was exactly what I wanted. Love Meg.

I smiled as I hit reply. *I'm glad to hear it, but I can't take all the credit. Kevin told me you'd asked for it.*

“Meg?” Bevyan asked.

I nodded. “I have to remember to give Kevin something extra nice for his birthday. He was exactly right.”

“Meg’s a little scientist,” Bevyan said. “Not surprising. You said she was smart.”

“She is.” I sent off a good night text and put my phone back in my pocket. “Is it weird that I hate what my dad did to my mom and our family, but I love Meg and Madison to pieces?”

“Not weird at all,” Bevyan said. “Meg and Madison are awesome.”

“You’ve never met either of them,” I pointed out.

“Not true.”

“FaceTime does not count.”

“It does too count. FaceTime introductions are just as valid as face-to-face ones,” she informed me. “But I still want to meet the munchkins for real. I’ve met everyone else in your family.”

“Maybe I’ll take them for a weekend in the summer,” I said. “Three days and two nights with an eight-year-old and a five-year-old should cure you of ever wanting to spend time with anyone else in my family ever again.”

“If your teenage brother shooting spit-balls down my shirt during dinner wasn’t enough to chase me away, then I don’t think two little girls would do it.”

“You never did much babysitting, did you?” I asked with a laugh.

“Only child, remember?” She stuck her entire head and shoulders into the dryer and emerged with a single sock. “Dammit.”

“Another deposit for the lone sock drawer,” I said, plucking it from her hand. “Didn’t any of your friends growing up have younger brothers or sisters?”

“Yes, but those families had nannies.”

“Ah, yes, of course. Nannies. Why didn’t I think of that?”

Bevyan threw a wet sock at me. I caught it and tossed it into the dryer. “We’ll get pizza and ice cream and watch Disney movies.”

“Meg’s a vegetarian and Madison is lactose intolerant.”

“Not a problem,” Bevyan said. “I know how to make lactose free, vegetarian pizza.”

“Bevy, I love you,” I closed the dryer door, “but I’ve seen you try to cook. You lost the security deposit because you blew up the microwave a month after we moved in.”

“In my defense, it was the fork’s fault the microwave blew up.” Bevyan pointed at me. “And you’ve never seen me make pizza.”

“True, but you did leave the fork in the popcorn bowl.”

She planted her hands on her hips. “That’s it. We’re stopping at Whole Foods, and I’m making pizza for a late-night snack.”

I was too busy explaining to her the reasons why we couldn’t stop for pizza making supplies that I didn’t notice a third person entering the laundromat until he grabbed my purse off the counter and ran.

“Shit!” I nearly twisted my ankle turning so fast. Bevyan shouted after me, but I was already heading to the door. She’d call the cops, but by then, the thief would be long gone with my purse.

I didn’t have much cash, but it was all in there. I’d worked my ass off for every penny of it, and I’d be damned if I was going to let some jerk run off with it.

I hit the bar on the door with both my palms and it flew open. The sun had already set, but the street lights in this area were surprisingly good. I assumed that because I’d seen him turn right, I’d be able to spot him running away.

And that might have been the case if I hadn’t run into something large and hard before I’d gone more than a couple steps.

I bounced off and landed on my ass, hard enough to jar my spine and clank my teeth together. I’d put my hands out too, and I knew I was going to feel it all in the morning, but I couldn’t let myself feel it now. I didn’t have the time. I let out a string of curses as I tried to pull my feet underneath me, but as soon as I did, white-hot pain shot through my ankle, and it buckled.

“Fuck!”

“Let me—”

I looked up at what I’d hit and found a huge man leaning over me. “What the fuck were you thinking?!”

TWO

JOSHUA

I DIDN'T REALIZE SOMEONE HAD RUN INTO ME UNTIL I'D TAKEN TWO STEPS back and she started cursing at me from the sidewalk. I wasn't the most social of people, but I'd always assumed that I had basic conversational skills for situations such as this. Knock someone down, help them up and apologize.

I stared at her, completely at a loss for words. I couldn't tell how tall she was, but she looked delicate from where I was standing. Shoulder-length jet-black hair and porcelain skin made me think of Snow White, but her mouth was definitely not Disney-rated.

To my embarrassment, my mind instantly went to other non-Disney things she could do with her mouth, and blood rushed south. I clamped down on those wayward thoughts and started mentally singing the Fluffy Bottom jingle. No better way to kill an erection than singing about toilet paper.

She tried to stand before I could offer her a hand but swore again as her leg buckled. A new wave of guilt washed over me as I realized she was hurt. Not just guilt, I realized. An unfamiliar wave of protectiveness hit me too.

"Let me—"

"What the fuck were you thinking?!" she snapped, her dark eyes angry.

My eyebrows shot up. I had no problem taking part of the blame for the collision, but she hadn't been paying attention to where she was going any more than I had been.

"I didn't see you," I said as I held out my hand.

"Are you blind as well as rude?" She glared at my hand. "I was right behind the thief who stole my purse. You managed to not run into him."

I remembered seeing a guy running across the street about half a minute before she hit me, and I turned to look, but he was already gone. He could've

been anywhere. I knew of at least half a dozen alleyways he could've used to get to the next street over where he had too many escape possibilities to count.

"I would've caught him if you hadn't gotten in my way."

I turned my attention back to the girl who was now gingerly touching her ankle. I'd first put her age around nineteen or twenty, but now that I studied her a bit more closely, I added a few years to put her closer to twenty-five than twenty.

And I noticed something else. She wasn't being bitchy because she was some self-absorbed teenager. She was angry at the situation, including the fact that she was hurt and vulnerable in front of a stranger.

"He went across the street," I said as I leaned down to put a hand under her elbow. "I didn't see where he went from there. It's too easy to disappear in this damned city."

She jerked her arm away the moment we made contact, and I mentally smacked myself as I realized that my previous statement wasn't very supportive.

I took in a deep breath and tried again. "My name's Joshua Lexington. I just want to help you up, I swear."

Her eyes narrowed, but she let me set her on her feet, her hand tightening on my arm momentarily as she tested her injured ankle. When she released me, I felt the strangest urge to tell her she could lean on me as long as she wanted.

"Let's go inside, and I'll call the cops while you get off that ankle."

The look she sent my way said that my suggestion wasn't a welcome one.

"I have my phone," she said, her voice softening a little. "Besides, my friend should have called them all ready."

I was surprised at how curious I was about this 'friend' of hers. Was she saying that as a protective measure, something to chase me away if I'd been looking to prey on a lone woman? Or did she have an actual friend waiting for her? A guy who might want something more? A girlfriend, maybe?

What the hell was I thinking?

I shook my head as she turned back the way she'd come. The laundromat she'd come out of was only a couple yards away, but I'd seen the pain on her face when she tried to put down her full weight. A part of me doubted she'd be able to make it even that far without help, but a larger part thought that she'd do it just to prove she could. Whether she'd be proving it to me or to

herself, I hadn't yet figured out.

I followed a few steps behind her, wondering if at any time she'd turn around and tell me to get lost or she'd be calling the cops on me too, but she didn't. She stayed focused on her goal, and the reflection in the glass front of the laundromat showed me the determined look on her face.

I had to admit, I was impressed. She'd charged after a thief, but even after she knew she wouldn't be able to continue giving chase, she hadn't called for help. She said she had her phone still, so she could have called her friend. No one would have thought any less of her.

"Trissa!" A slender blonde came running the moment the girl – Trissa – stepped inside. "What happened?"

"Ask him." Trissa jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "Gigantor back there got in my way."

"Gigantor? Really?" I wanted to laugh, but this didn't seem like the best time or place.

She turned toward me as she leaned against a washer, and I saw that her eyes weren't brown or black like I'd assumed, but rather a deep purplish-blue that I'd never seen before. Not in someone's eyes anyway. Her fingers snapped in front of my eyes, and I realized I'd been staring again.

"I said you can go. Bevyan already called the cops so we'll wait for them here."

"What if he comes back?" I countered. No decent guy would've let two young women wait alone in a laundromat after they'd been robbed. I could be a jerk sometimes, but I was close enough to my mother to hate thinking about what sort of guy would do that to her.

"Why would he?" Bevyan asked. "He knows that Trissa was chasing him and that we'd call the cops. If he got away free and clear with one of our purses, why would he risk getting caught?"

Logically, that made sense, but I knew criminals didn't always think logically. "Maybe he'll think that if he gets to you, he can keep you from pressing charges."

"Shit." Trissa's eyes went wide. "My license and my key were in there."

"That settles it," I said. "You two can stay at my place tonight."

"Excuse me?" Trissa's expressive face told me exactly what she was about to say. "You're just a stranger I *literally* just ran into. Why are you any safer than the punk who took my purse?"

I opened my mouth to give her a list of reasons and then realized that

those reasons didn't mean anything if she didn't know that they were true. For all these two knew, I was working with the thief, or I was someone worse than a purse snatcher.

"You're right," I said. When both girls tensed, I quickly clarified. "You don't know me. *I* know I'm trustworthy, but you don't know that. But you two shouldn't be alone tonight."

Why was I pushing this so hard? I didn't know these women. Sure, one of them had run into me, and as a result, had lost the person she was chasing, but I didn't owe her anything for that. I might not have been paying as much attention as I should have been, but neither had she. The only reason she'd been the one of us to get knocked down was the difference in our sizes.

"We won't be," Bevyan said, putting her arm around her friend's shoulders. "We'll stay with my boyfriend."

If I hadn't been looking at Trissa, I might've missed the annoyance crossing her face. Something told me that Trissa wasn't a fan of Bevyan's boyfriend, and Bevyan didn't know it.

"Is he on his way?" As soon as I asked it, I wanted to take it back. Everything I said was coming out wrong, making me seem like I was one of those creepy stalkers or serial killers who lurked in the dark, searching for single women to assault or kill.

"He's working, actually," Bevyan said. She yelped as Trissa dug an elbow into her side. "What? If this guy was going to turn us into lampshades, he would've done it by now."

Fortunately for both Trissa and me, the sound of police sirens filled the laundromat, and we all turned toward the door to watch the blue and red lights flash as a cop car pulled up front. I stepped back, my hands hanging open at my side. I didn't want to get mistaken for a criminal simply because I was a big guy in a room with two women more than a foot shorter than me.

The first cop rushed through the door, eyes wide in a way that made me think this was his first crime-in-progress. The way his hand hovered over his gun worried me as much as the fact that the kid nearly tripped over his own feet as he skidded to a stop. Then his gaze zeroed in on me, and he swallowed hard.

"What...who...I mean..."

The door opened again, and the other police officer came in. I wondered if the exhaustion on his face was from all the nervous energy his partner was putting out or something else.

“I called,” Bevyann announced. “Some guy stole my friend’s purse.”

“Wait, a purse?” The younger guy’s eyes darted from me to the girls and then back again. “I thought it was a robbery in progress.”

Bevyann put her hands on her hips and sighed. “It was when I called. This guy came in here, grabbed my friend’s purse and ran with it. She chased him but had a little...accident.”

“He’s not a little accident,” Trissa muttered, glaring at me. But I didn’t feel the heat of anger in the look this time. When her gaze met mine, pink crept into her cheeks.

No, not anger. Maybe interest? Something else?

“What did you do to her?” The younger cop stepped between me and the girls, cutting off my crazy thoughts. The action made me respect him a little more since I was several inches taller and definitely outweighed him.

I held up my hands, palms out. “I was out running, and when she ran out to follow the thief, we collided.”

“And then you followed her?” Now, the older cop was giving me funny looks.

“She hurt her ankle,” I explained, trying to keep the exasperation from my voice, “and I didn’t think it was safe for the two of them to wait here alone. In case the guy came back.”

“If we take you in, are they going to say the same story?”

How had I ended up a suspect? I’d just been trying to help.

“He didn’t steal my purse,” Trissa cut in. “He’s annoying, but not a thief.”

I huffed out a breath. “Thank you?” I turned my attention from Trissa back to the older cop. “Before she and I ran into each other, I saw someone in a hoodie run across the street. I didn’t get a good look, but he was probably a little under six feet tall and skinny. Fast.”

“Are you sure it was a man?”

“I’m sure,” Bevyann interjected. “I looked over when he first came in. The hoodie was dark gray, and he was wearing blue jeans and sneakers.”

“I saw his hands when he grabbed my purse. He had light brown skin,” Trissa said. “Like a really good summer tan.”

“Anything else? Identifying features?” The younger guy jotted down notes as we answered the questions he and his partner asked.

Now that I’d given them all that I had to offer and they knew I wasn’t involved in the theft, it’d be easy to leave. The cops wouldn’t keep me here,

and the women were safe.

Once they were done here, they'd go to Bevy's boyfriend's house for the night and then deal with changing the locks and canceling credit cards... and why was I even going through a mental checklist of the things they'd need to do? I'd already made this too much of a thing. I had my own life and my own problems. I needed to get back to them.

"Do you need me for anything else?" I asked during a pause in the interview. "I only wanted to make sure that the ladies were safe."

"Can you give me a number where you can be reached if we think of any additional questions?" the older cop asked.

I rattled off my cell number and then headed for the door. I could feel eyes on me as I left, but I didn't turn around. I just wanted to finish my run and go home. It wasn't late, but I'd had a long day already.

I'd cooled down while waiting, so I walked a few feet down the sidewalk and stretched my muscles back out, then bounced on my toes...but didn't take the next step and start jogging.

Dammit.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't walk away and not know they at least made it safely from here to where they'd go next. The cops probably wouldn't escort the pair home unless they asked, and my gut said that they'd tell the cops they needed to finish their laundry or something like that.

Mind made up, I jogged up and down the sidewalk, never going far enough that I couldn't keep an eye on the doors. When I saw the cops drive away after another five minutes, and no sign of the girls, I knew I'd been right.

How had those two survived in LA as naïve as they were? Maybe I was misjudging them, and maybe I was being a little chauvinistic, wanting to protect two young women, but I wasn't going to apologize for it. Not when all I wanted to do was keep them safe. I couldn't explain why I felt so strongly that I needed to do it, but I did. Once I knew they were safe in the boyfriend's place, then I'd go home.

END OF PREVIEW

The story continues in *His Inspiration*, coming on Amazon at the end of the year. But you can read it now! Become a M.S. Parker VIP.

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