

HEACANS OF  
COPPER  
CREEK  
BOOK FOUR



Some  
*Cowboys*  
Don't Like  
*City Girls*



NATALIE DEAN

# **SOME COWBOYS DON'T LIKE CITY GIRLS**

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KEAGANS OF COPPER CREEK BOOK FOUR

# NATALIE DEAN



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Cover Design by Deborah Bradseth (who has been amazing to work with! Thank you Deborah!)

# DEDICATION

*I'd like to dedicate this book to YOU! All of my wonderful readers that have been following my stories over the years.*

*We're embarking on another new journey through Copper Creek. I hope you enjoy these stories as much as you've loved the Bakers and Callahans*

*Thank you to my biggest fans.... There's a lot of you! Jess, Bernie, Wren, Judy, Sherry, Vicci, Phyllis, Debbie, Indra, Jennifer, Carol, Jeanette, Margaret, Paul, and I know there's more I didn't list. But thank you all!*

*And I can't leave out my wonderful mother, son, sister, and Auntie. I love you all, and thank you for helping me make this happen.*

*Most of all, I thank God for blessing me on this endeavor.*



*AND... I've got a special team of advance readers who are always so helpful in pointing out any last minute corrections that need to be made. I'm so thankful to those of you who are so helpful!*

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Though I try to keep this list updated in each book, you may also visit my website [nataliedeanauthor.com](http://nataliedeanauthor.com) for the most up to date information on my book list.

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## *Mason Keagan*

*The waves off the shore crashed into the sand, drenching Cornelius with its cold fingers. He sputtered, spewing the salt-laden water from his nose and mouth. Sand clung to his hair and his face.*

*Where was he?*

*Cornelius scrambled to his feet and stared wide-eyed at the darkening sky. Four moons stared back. He stumbled a few paces as a deep, unsettling feeling reared its ugly head. His fingers dug into his legs as he hunched over and retched.*

*His ship was gone, but that wasn't the worst part.*

*He was stranded on a planet no one had explored. There was no telling the dangers that awaited him just past the greenery at the edge of the beach.*

Mason's book was ripped from his hand and snapped closed. "Are you seriously reading another one of these books?" Carter turned the book over, a crooked and amused smile touching his lips. "I thought this sort of stuff was just for girls." He eyed Mason with an irritating smirk. "And *nerds*. Keagans aren't nerds, Mason. Haven't you figured that out by now?"

For years, Mason had heard it all. Most of his brothers felt the same way Carter did. They were all cowboys. They all struggled in school so much that reading was only done when it was absolutely necessary. Fortunately, Mason had managed to find an escape in his books—an escape his brothers never seemed to understand.

Well, no one but Daniel. But no one bothered Daniel about *his* reading habits—not if they didn't want to be clobbered.

Mason took a deep, calming breath. "Give me back my book, please."

Carter stared blankly. Figured. His head was probably empty. Most of the Keagan household, except for the older

kids, didn't seem to understand how the world worked. Not even Lucas seemed to have figured out that manners were what helped make the world go round. He was lucky that he'd found Ella, or he would have been alone for the rest of his life.

There was a reason why the four oldest had managed to snag spouses even with the Keagan name. They had their lives figured out.

"Carter," Mason muttered evenly, "give me my book. *Please.*"

"Or what? Is your astronaut gonna jump out of your book and get me?" Carter laughed as he tossed the book at Mason.

Catching the book against his chest, Mason glowered at Carter. Lately, his brother had been especially annoying. More than that—he'd been acting strange. It was like he was looking for any excuse to get off of the property. The second his chores were done, he'd disappear. The fact that he was here at the house on a Saturday afternoon made Mason question if something else was going on.

Mason shook his head as he got to his feet and shoved the book under his arm. It wasn't just Carter; it was Caleb, too. The twins were always a little on edge. Ever since they graduated, it was as if they didn't understand how important the family was as a whole. Then again, none of his family except Wade and Annabel seemed to appreciate their family like Mason did. Carter was probably just going through some stuff.

If Mason was honest with himself, he'd admit that, at times, he could understand that sort of mentality. His family had been a scourge on the community until recently. Even now, they still had their struggles. As much as Mason cared about all of them, there was a part of him that wondered if it would be smarter to strike out on his own.

One day, he might meet a girl and want to get married. How would it look if he couldn't find a way to provide for her or their future? Things weren't really progressing much around here. He needed to do more.

Mason moved his way through the house that was starting to look like a cozy and inviting home after all the work Brielle had put into it. Wade's wife was a master at design. No one thought she'd be able to do much with the money they got from Shane Owens. But then, she was a Callahan and Callahans knew their way around money.

The house wasn't *unusually* quiet. As far as Saturdays were concerned, they tended to be more peaceful, which was why he'd thought he could find a quiet place to read. With Carter disrupting his sanctuary, Mason had to find somewhere else.

He could take a ride to the outskirts of their property. There was a spot out in the middle of nowhere where the horses liked to graze. None of the Keagan household ventured out that way except to check on the fences they had surrounding their herd. Carter most definitely wouldn't follow him out that way.

Mason nodded resolutely as he hurried down the wooden steps. They creaked beneath his weight as if saying goodbye. His boots hit the dirt, flinging up a small cloud of dust as he walked. Out on that part of the property, there was a tree that, if it was bigger, he might have thought to put a swing in it. As it stood, he'd get some decent shade. That was all he needed. Some shade, a good book, and some peace and quiet.



*HE WAS STRANDED on a planet no one had explored. There was no telling the dangers that awaited him just past the greenery at the edge of the beach. Cornelius scanned the tree line, letting his gaze sweep along every shadowed area.*

*The only weapon he had on him was a dagger strapped to his ankle. That's all he'd need if he came across something dangerous. The shoreline to his right presented more problems than the woods. He knew better than to believe there weren't any creatures in that deep, dark ocean. Something told him that he'd been lucky to survive it when his ship came down.*

“Whatcha reading?”

Mason flinched and then glanced up. He hadn't heard the woman approach. Clad in a form-fitting, black tank top and shorts that were bordering on inappropriate, the woman started to climb over the fence that separated them. She wore a pair of black combat boots with loose laces, and her black hair was pulled up into what looked like a rat's nest on top of her head.

His gaze locked on a small rose tattoo on her forearm. The folks around here didn't have much in the way of body art. Most people stopped at one piercing and dyeing their hair. But this woman not only had that rose on her arm, she also had something just below her right shoulder peeking from behind the tank top strap. A small nose ring was displayed prominently on her left nostril. He wouldn't have been surprised if she had a bellybutton ring, too.

What was a girl like that doing in Copper Creek?

She hopped off the fence and wandered toward him, her hands in her back pockets. “I mean, I love books as much as the next girl, but the fact that you didn't even hear me coming has me curious.” Without even asking, she leaned down and plucked the book from his fingers.

Her nose wrinkled, and her eyes darted to meet his.

Green like the fields. Green like the freshly growing grass. This woman had eyes that would put the Emerald City to shame. And there she stood, watching him and waiting for a response.

A response.

What was it that she'd asked?

He scrambled to his feet and lunged for the book, but she held it out of reach. For Pete's sake! What had she asked him?

She smirked, tucking the book beneath her folded arms. “Fine, don't tell me. I'll find out eventually.” The woman backed up one step and leaned against the fence. “When I went for this walk, I didn't think I'd run into anyone. But I guess if you go far enough, you'll bump into someone eventually, right?” Her green eyes locked onto his, then swept



over his body from head to toe before she retrieved the book and flipped it over to read the back.

Mason lunged forward and snatched it from her grasp. He clenched it tightly in his hand so that it wouldn't be grabbed from him for a third time today. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave. This isn't your property."

Her laughter threw him off. Her eyes danced, and she didn't look bothered in the slightest by his request. "This land doesn't belong to anyone. It was here a lot longer than either one of us."

Mason bristled. She was one of *those* people. While there was a need for the open-minded, he had never gotten to the point where he'd actually liked one of them. They all had these ideas on how the world should work, and the problem was... they were wrong.

It didn't matter how many rules there were.

Land could still be owned. Water would always get polluted. His parents would never come home. And even if they did, well, they were probably better off without them.

Her laughter died down and she gazed at him with a look that said she wasn't going to let him push her around. "This land only belongs to you because somewhere down the line, your great-great-great grandfather took it from some helpless person."

Mason's eyes narrowed. Their family would have lost their property if his grandparents hadn't paid for it in full. Even then, several companies had tried to steal it from his family, and they would have, too, if Wade hadn't come to their rescue.

The whole place had nearly been condemned at one point.

He gritted his teeth. There was no sense in arguing with this woman. He didn't even know who she was or where she'd come from. For all he knew, she could even be a tourist who thought she had the right to go traipsing all over the town because land couldn't be owned. She was lucky she hadn't been shot already.

A heavy breath left his body and he turned away from her to get his horse's reins. He wasn't about to get into an argument he knew he couldn't win. He could tell it would be a pointless waste of breath to try and reason with her. Besides, he had a few things he needed to pick up in town—anything to get away from this current situation.

“Wait, where are you going?”

“Away from you,” he called back.

“Seriously?”

He chuckled. The locals weren't going to take kindly to her attitude. It was probably good for her to learn it now before she had to interact with people who might not be so patient.

“You don't even want to know my name?”

Mason pulled the reins from Stone's shoulders, grabbed onto the saddle horn, and pulled himself up. He couldn't believe she was still talking.

“It's Harley.”

He didn't bother looking in her direction as he urged his horse forward. Knowing her name wouldn't do him any good. He probably would never see her again.



MASON MOVED to the front of the bookstore with two books he'd found in the discounted pile. This was where he felt most at home. It was nice to be in a place with like-minded folks. Granted, most of the visitors were women, but there were a handful of men.

Mr. Abrams shot him a respectful smile. He was one of the quieter men in this town. He kept his cards close to his chest when it came to his family and his property, but no one seemed to mind. Those who wanted to be left alone got their wish.

Mason smiled back, then glanced away. Mr. Abrams faced him once more.

“You’re a Keagan, aren’t you?”

Uh-oh. That was never a good sign.

“Your brother, he’s Wade Keagan?”

He gave a sharp nod. “That’s my oldest brother.”

Mr. Abrams grunted. “I bumped into him the other day.” When Mason didn’t respond, he continued. “I mentioned that I had some extra work to do on my property because my assistant went and got himself married and then moved away.”

Mason stared at him blankly. He had no idea where Abrams was going with this.

Mr. Abrams cleared his throat, his grey eyes drifting to the books in Mason’s hands. They lingered there for a few moments, then he nodded resolutely. “Wade seemed to think that one of his brothers might be willing to lend me a hand temporarily, seeing as I don’t have any children of my own. I would continue looking for a replacement, of course.”

Mason continued to stare, but when Abrams didn’t expand on what he was rambling about, Mason’s spine jolted with understanding. “I’m sorry, are you... offering me a *job*?”

“Out of all of your brothers, I would wager you’re the one I could trust.”

“But you don’t even know me.”

Abrams nodded to the books in his hand. The top one was a recent release by his favorite Sci-fi author. Then Abrams held up a matching copy from the stack he held. A small smile spread across his lips. “Take some time to think on it. You can stop by my place to see what the job would entail before you make a firm decision.”

Mason gaped at the man. He didn’t have a chance to respond before the gal behind the counter called out for the next customer. Abrams nodded sharply. “I’m available most of the day tomorrow.” He turned to go to the register, then stopped himself, turning slightly to meet Mason’s eyes. “It’s

not gonna be your typical run-of-the-mill job. There are some additional... duties. But we can discuss them later.” He smiled, the bristles of his white mustache shifting once more. “I hope to see you then.”



## *Harley Pembroke*

Harley slogged through the tall grasses until she reached the trail she'd used to get to the edge of the property. The cowboy had been an easy target. Most of the men out here in Colorado were. They were all too sweet. Their lives had been too easy. They knew nothing of the real world.

Unfortunately, he hadn't wanted to take the bait and it left her hungry for more interaction. What she wouldn't give to see a cowboy blush.

She still couldn't believe she was stuck in Copper Creek for the next several months. Getting kicked out of her university hardly seemed like a bad enough offense to be banished to the middle of nowhere.

Mosquitos flitted here and there and she swatted them away. It wasn't just the fact that there was nothing to do out here. It was knowing that there would be no one of consequence to spend time with. Uncle Vern was as boring as they came, and from what she could tell, he didn't have any friends.

With no means of transportation, and no way to call an uber, she was stuck.

With each step she took to get back to the house, her fury grew. She was twenty-one, for heaven's sake. She was an adult and deserved to be treated like one—not have her car and her phone taken from her the second she arrived in this hillbilly town.

Her steps slowed and she reached for her back pocket. Ridiculous. Hadn't her frustration over her missing phone been enough? When would the muscle memory leave? Yes, she'd been glued to all of her social media accounts. That was part of the problem, according to her parents. They didn't like how she had aired the Pembroke dirty laundry all over the internet.

Well, these days, there was no such thing as privacy. No one had to follow the rules when it came to sharing one's life on the world wide web. And she was no exception. People wanted to see the heir to the Pembroke fortune just as much as they wanted to see the current pop sensation.

If her inheritance wasn't on the line, she wouldn't have put up with any of this. She needed the money if she didn't want to turn out like her uncle—out here, alone and unwanted. She slowed as she reached the edge of the property. The house was modest compared to what she was used to.

Okay, modest was putting it lightly. This place reminded her of a shack that wasn't worth living in. Sure, it was probably about three-thousand square feet of house, which was big enough for a single cowboy, but it wasn't what she wanted.

Besides being small, not on a beach somewhere, and completely isolated, his place smelled to high heaven when the breeze picked up just right. As if Mother Nature could hear her thoughts, the wind picked up and hit her square in the face. Harley wrinkled her nose and brought her upper arm up to her face. The smell from the cows in the barn downwind was atrocious, and that was only the start of the horrors she'd experienced since her arrival.

Harley groaned, then trudged forward. Her uncle's truck wasn't in front of the house, but there was no telling how long he'd be gone. He could come back at any moment, which meant she didn't have time to go snooping for keys to any of the other vehicles on the premises. And she had no idea how to saddle a horse.

This was purgatory, and her parents should have been ashamed of themselves.

At least with her uncle gone, she could slip inside and take a nap. She didn't think he'd be so terrible as to wake her up. If she was lucky, he'd let her sleep right through supper. Even better, when she woke up, she'd find out this was all a dream.



THUD. Thud. Thud.

Harley winced as she rolled over in her bed and peered through the darkness at the window on the far side of the bedroom. It was still dark out.

No way. She wasn't going to get up right now.

Clawing at the covers, she yanked them over her head and curled up into a tighter ball.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

The bedroom door rattled.

“Not even you can stay asleep with this racket,” Vern hollered through the closed door. “I promised your parents that I'd put you to work, and that's exactly what I'm going to do.”

Harley tossed in her bed and scowled with eyes shut tight. If she pretended she didn't hear him, maybe he'd go away. It was her first full day here. He couldn't make her do anything.

“If you don't come out, I'll just come in and get you.”

Her eyes popped open from beneath her covers. He wouldn't dare.

“I know you don't think I'd do it, but I'm telling you right now that your mother scares the dung right out of me and I'm not about to make any enemies.”

The doorknob didn't rattle. But there wasn't the sound of retreating footsteps either. Harley didn't know Vern well enough to know what he was capable of, but she did know one thing.

Blaire Pembroke had to be the scariest woman alive on the planet. Vern would be wise to tread carefully around her.

“Come on out. I have breakfast on the table. We've got early chores this morning.”

Harley tossed the covers aside with a loud moan. “Fine. I'm coming.” Still clad in her shorts and an oversized t-shirt, she pulled on her boots and stumbled toward the door. Whatever her uncle had planned couldn't last long. This ranch wasn't nearly big enough to warrant a full day of chores.



Her stomach growled in protest as she headed into the hallway and down the stairs to the kitchen, reminding her of her missed supper. She had to give Vern that—he hadn't woken her from her slumber when he'd returned home. She'd gotten more than enough sleep even with the lack of sun streaming through the windows.

Despite her uncle living on his own and not having any evidence of a feminine touch in his house whatsoever, the interior of his home was actually tastefully decorated. It was rustic with a few touches of modern décor. On top of that, it was clean.

She dragged her hand down the wooden railing, not surprised to find it dust-free. In fact, there wasn't a speck of dust to be found from her room all the way to the kitchen.

The second she rounded the corner in the hallway, the smell of breakfast hit her like a brick wall. Either she'd been too tired to notice, or the house had been designed in such a way that it could trap the smells in certain parts.

Once again, her stomach growled at the smell of sausage and toast. With her senses locked on the smell of breakfast, Harley completely overlooked everything else about the house she'd neglected to investigate. She propelled herself to the kitchen and then stopped in her tracks upon finding her uncle sitting at the kitchen table like this was the most natural morning either one of them had experienced.

He held a book in one hand and a coffee cup in the other. Vern didn't even look up at her from his place when he said, "Dish yourself up something hearty. We've got a lot of work to do today."

Harley rubbed her eyes. "What do you mean, we? I'm not your slave."

That caught his attention, and Vern lifted one bushy eyebrow as he peered over his book toward her. "No, you're not," he drawled. "You're my guest. As such, I've decided to offer you room and board. You have a bed to sleep in, a roof over your head, and food to fill your stomach. In return, I expect you to help me keep this place running."

“Don’t you have people to do that for you? I know you don’t have as much money as my folks, but Grandad left you the same thing he left my mom.”

Vern didn’t react to her statement. He didn’t even blink. The guy was like a gargoyle. He was a full fifteen years older than her mother, which said a lot about their sibling relationship. While Vern wasn’t nearly as intimidating as Blaire, he was still one of those men who was hard to read.

He closed his book and placed it along with his coffee mug on the table beside his plate. Then he crossed one leg over the other and rested his clasped hands on his knee. “May I remind you that the decision to come here was your own?”

“Is that what Mom said? No, it wasn’t. If I had my way, I would have gotten my inheritance, got on the next plane to Europe, and never looked back.”

“What I mean is that given the choice of losing that money you find so important or earning it back, you chose the latter.” Vern gestured around them. “That landed you here. Part of the agreement for my taking you in, is that you will help me run this place in whatever ways I deem necessary. Any misstep, and I will send you right back where you came from, and you will be forced to plead your case.”

Harley rolled her eyes.

“If I were you, I’d eat up. The food is getting cold.” He reached for his book once more and flipped it open to the page he’d been reading.

This proved one thing. Vern wasn’t about to go easy on her. He was going to make her work until her fingers were worn down to the bone. He probably thought it was his duty to make sure she turned into a good, hard-working member of society.

Well, if he thought he could break her like one of those wild horses out in the plains, then he was going to be sorely mistaken. Harley couldn’t be broken. Her parents had tried. Her teachers had given it their fair shot. The only one who

could make Harley do something she didn't want to was Harley.

Harley stormed across the room and yanked out the chair she chose to sit on. None of this was fair. Her only option at this point was for her mother to take pity on her and give her the gift early.

Fat chance of that happening.

It was like Vern had said before. Blaire was scary. It didn't matter that she was fifteen years his junior. Harley picked up a piece of cutlery and stabbed it into her food, then she glanced over at the book Vern was reading. She couldn't see much but the dark color scheme. Figured that her uncle preferred books to newspapers. Her mother had always said he was a little too much in his own world to bother with reality.

“So what are these chores I'm going to have to do?”

Vern turned a page and then took another bite of his toast.

“You realize you can't just boss me around when you feel like it and then ignore me. The road goes both ways. I'm not going to stay here if—”

“We both know you're going to stay here because you want that money. That's all you Pembrookes ever wanted.”

“Yeah, well, you got your share of money. Why shouldn't I get mine?”

Vern finally glanced over in her direction. He placed his book on the table. “And what would you want to do with your money? Would you plan on making the world a better place? Donate it to charities? Or would you do everything in your power to keep it all for yourself and your greedy desires?”

She huffed, her mouth falling open. “Who said I was greedy?”

The way he eyed her, letting his gaze sweep over her in that judgmental way he had when he'd picked her up from the airport, made her feel more vulnerable than she liked to admit. She'd never been intimidated by anyone besides her mother.

But suddenly, Uncle Vern was taking hold of that part inside her that cared what other people thought. She snapped her mouth shut and swallowed hard as she looked away. “I don’t know what I would do with my money,” Harley murmured.

“Well, when you figure that out, let me know. I’m very curious what your thoughts on the matter are.” Vern picked up his napkin and dabbed at his mouth before getting to his feet and retrieving his dishes. “Finish up. We’ve got a lot of work to do before my meeting.”

She straightened with curiosity. “You’re going to town?”

“No. I’m hiring some help around here.”

Before she could ask him if that meant she would have fewer responsibilities, he moved away from the table and commenced washing his dishes. Even though his quiet nature intimidated her, she wasn’t about to let an old man like Vern ruin her whole summer. She’d figure him out. She’d just have to do some digging.



## *Mason*

Mason climbed out of his truck at the edge of the property. It wasn't unusual for ranchers to block off their property with a large gate, but this one wasn't like anything he'd seen. From the looks of it, Mason wouldn't be able to move it even if he put all his weight behind it.

The gate was tall, constructed of intricate wrought iron, and it was electric. There was an intercom system set up with a keypad full of numbered buttons. Mason felt like he was trying to get onto the property of some famous person or a member of the royal family.

As far as he knew, Shane Owens was the wealthiest member of the community—as evidenced by the massive empire he'd created since his arrival. Vern Abrams was the quiet guy who didn't invite anyone to his property, and those who had worked for him were all hush-hush.

Granted, just because Mr. Abrams had a gate that would prevent the folks around here from gaining access to his property, that didn't mean he had any more money than the Keagan family. The ranch could have come equipped with this form of security long before Abrams arrived.

Mason moved toward the gate and peered through it. From the slope of the earth, he couldn't see the house or the barn. Actually, he couldn't see any evidence of life anywhere. If the GPS system hadn't brought him here, he might have thought he'd come to the wrong place.

He shuffled over to the intercom and touched the hard ridges. There was a button for him to push in order to call whoever was on the other side of that fence. At this point, he wasn't sure he even wanted to be here to find out what Abrams had in mind.

His hesitancy didn't stop there.

Wade might have recommended that Abrams ask one of the Keagans to help, but that didn't mean the rest of his family

would be on board. While Mason thought they didn't appreciate their large family as they should, his brother would definitely be offended that one of their own ran off to work for the competition.

Lucky for him, he hadn't agreed to anything. He doubted that Mr. Abrams could offer him anything worth walking away from his family over. There was nothing he really needed.

His thumb hovered over the button that would call the household. This was his crossroads. If he walked over the threshold onto the property, that would put a few things into motion.

Mason gritted his jaw tight. He wasn't scared of anything. And even if he chose to work for this man, it wouldn't mean he was any less of a Keagan for doing so.

With that thought, he pushed the button.

A quiet buzzing sound emanated from the device. He expected to hear someone speaking through the intercom, inquiring as to why he was here. Instead, a loud buzz and then a click came from the gate itself.

Mason jumped back even though the gate swung inward. He stared at the intercom, then up at a camera he only now realized was blinking at him. Then he swiveled his gaze to the open gate. He'd made his choice. Now it was time to find out if he'd made the right one.

The road wasn't as long as he expected. The hill gave the illusion that the house would be much farther away from the gate, but once he crested it, he was at the house within moments. Only one truck sat out front, but the house had a garage with four bays.

Based on the gate, Mason would have assumed Abrams was keeping his possessions safe from people who had reputations that rivaled the Keagan family. But after he'd asked around town, he had to wonder if Abrams was just an old kook. He wasn't the kind of guy who attended social functions. He made the occasional appearance at the annual auctions.

Beyond that, he'd sold, bought, and traded like the rest of them. He was simply one of those guys who no one knew much about. He didn't have a family, any close relationships, or a big staff of ranch hands.

As Mason climbed out of his truck, he couldn't decide if he should go to the house or to the barn. It was already nine o'clock—the time his brothers would usually be working with the animals after their morning feeding.

But from the looks of the empty corrals, Mason wasn't sure if the guy was even here. He had requested that Mason stop by this morning. And someone had let him in.

Mason shut the truck door and headed for the house. The likelihood that the mechanism to operate the gate could be found inside was greater than had it been installed in the barn.

He hurried up the two steps to the front porch. The house was larger than the one he'd grown up in, but not by much. It was well maintained with no peeling paint. It was nice—the kind of home he would have liked to have for himself. Aside from the crazy gate, Mason had been impressed with the property. It would have been the perfect place to start a family, which made him wonder why Abrams never had.

Before he could knock on the door, it swung open, revealing the older gentleman. Abrams looked him up and down and let out an approving grunt. He didn't smile, and his eyes remained guarded. "You came."

"I thought... didn't you want me to, sir?"

Abrams shot a quick look out at the barn before bringing it back to Mason. He stepped aside and gestured for Mason to enter. "I wasn't sure what I could expect from a Keagan. You understand."

Mason moved past him, entering the man's home with caution. Maybe he was being too trusting. What did he really know about this guy? He hovered as close as he could to the door after Abrams shut it. When the old man motioned forward, Mason froze. He didn't like having anyone at his



back. Not only that, he wasn't sure where they were going or if he needed to take off his boots.

“My office is just over there. That open doorway.”

The foyer was large enough to accommodate about a dozen people. Directly past it was a large entertaining space, including a living room, kitchen, and dining area. Off to one side was an open hallway with a couple doors—one of which would lead to the office that Abrams wanted Mason to find.

He cleared his throat and jerked his chin in that direction. “If you don't mind, I'll follow you. I would hate to make a wrong turn.”

Abrams studied him for a moment, then nodded. The office was the first door on the left and the entrance was flanked by two oversized maple doors that, when shut, would slide along a track to meet. Abrams moved right through the doorway and toward his desk without even looking back to see if Mason was following him.

Besides a large bay window, every single wall was covered in shelves from floor to ceiling. A long ladder ran on wheels to access everything out of reach. A desk made from matching maple wood sat directly in front of the bay window, with two chairs facing it. There were various objects decorating the room, from a chaise lounge chair to a globe on a copper stand. It was all very rustic looking and every bit as kooky as Mason would have expected.

Abrams definitely wasn't born and raised in Western country. He was cut from a very different cloth.

With a sweeping motion, Abrams gestured to the chairs in front of the desk. “Have a seat. I don't have much time before I have to go check on...” His eyes shifted to the door behind Mason, and then Abrams cleared his throat. “Have a seat,” he repeated.

Mason didn't move right away. All of this was beginning to feel a little strange. They didn't know each other. For all Abrams knew, Mason could have brought a gun and demanded whatever was in Abrams' safe. No, he didn't see one readily

accessible, but there had to be something based on that ridiculous gate.

“Fine, don’t sit. It’s nothing to me.” Abrams pulled out his own desk chair and sat. He rested his elbows on the table, steepling his fingers as he stared hard at Mason. “I want to offer you a job.”

“A job?” He practically choked on the words. “Sir, with all due respect, you don’t even know what my credentials are. You don’t know what I can do.”

“I know that you grew up on a ranch. I know that you’re willing to learn.”

“You can’t possibly know that.”

Abrams’ eyes narrowed into slits. “Am I mistaken?”

Mason shifted uncomfortably. “Well, no. But that doesn’t change—”

The older man leaned back in his chair and rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. The chair squeaked when the springs beneath it strained under his weight. “The funny thing about Copper Creek is that nothing remains a secret for long.”

Was this man seriously going to discuss the fact that this town was full of gossips?

“When I moved here, I found out right quick that if there was something I wanted guarded, I’d have to be very picky in who I hired and who I interacted with. I value my privacy, and I intend for my existence to maintain that anonymity.”

“I’m sorry, but what does that have to do with—”

“The *Keagan* name, on the other hand, has been blamed, joked about, and discussed ad nauseam ever since your folks high-tailed it out of town.”

A sharp, painful jab dug into Mason’s palms. He glanced down to realize he’d been clenching his hands so tightly that he’d broken the skin in one place. His face felt hot, and as he swiveled his eyes back to the man who managed to appear so nonchalant over the Keagan family name, he had to focus on his breathing to prevent himself from lashing out. He’d never

felt this defensive in his entire life. “So why exactly do you want to hire one?” he muttered through clenched teeth.

Abrams cocked his head slightly. “Because I think I’ve found the one in the lot of you that can value what I have to offer.”

“And what is that?”

“An escape. A chance at starting over. A future.”

Not even two weeks ago, Mason would have laughed in this man’s face. Who did he think he was, making that kind of offer? But something nagged at him. This man was different. He knew something Mason didn’t. How else had he managed to create this life for himself—one Mason was quickly starting to envy?

“You’re curious.” A hint of a smile touched Abrams’ lips.

“Of course I’m curious. That doesn’t mean I’m on board.”

“No, I wouldn’t presume that to be the case.” He leaned forward in his seat. “If there’s one thing that the town knows about me, it’s that I don’t have a family—no sons to pass this on to. After my assistant, Tanner, got married and moved to the city, it got me realizing something. I don’t want this place to go to the highest bidder. I want it to mean something to the person it goes to.” He shrugged, leaning back into his seat. “That might be you, or it might not. It’s too soon to tell. Regardless, I’d like to figure out if I was right about what I saw in you.”

“Do you know how crazy you sound?”

Abrams’ smile widened. “I’ve been called worse.”

“So you’re just gonna hire me... then what? Give this place to me when you die?”

“I’ve heard crazier stories.”

Mason’s jaw dropped. That was exactly what Abrams was offering. “And what if I realize it’s not for me? What’s gonna stop me from going around talking about how crazy you sound —” Mason snapped his mouth shut. Right here and now, he might have destroyed the lifeline Abrams was offering him.

The man wasn't wrong. Mason was smart enough to understand that the ranch could only sustain them for so long. Wade's need to provide for all his siblings was probably the one thing that had pushed him to tell Abrams to ask a Keagan before anyone else.

The man's eyes never left Mason's face throughout that entire tirade. His face remained stoic as ever, and then he stood. "Like I said. I'm curious how this would all go. But in answer to your question, you'll be paid far more than you will find anywhere else. If you decide this isn't the life for you, there's nothing stopping you from spreading gossip like the rest of the town. But something tells me that's not your style."

"And that's it? Help you around the ranch and I get paid gross amounts of money? It can't be that easy."

Suddenly, Abrams laughed. "Oh, that's only the beginning. Nothing in life is easy, son. You'll be supervising someone else, showing them the ropes."

Mason snorted. "I have eleven brothers and sisters. I think I can handle teaching someone how to do basic chores."

The amusement in Abrams' eyes remained. "You haven't met Harriet yet."



## *Harley*

The stench in the barn was unbearable. Harley's stomach roiled, and even though she focused on breathing through her mouth, she couldn't keep the smell of the animal feces from her nose. She gagged several times as she scooped the stuff with the rusty shovel and dumped it into a nearby bucket.

She couldn't believe that her uncle actually liked this sort of thing. Hadn't he gone to one of the more prestigious universities? She could have sworn her mother had bragged about him when Harley was younger. He had graduated with honors or something.

Stepping back, she glowered at the stall in disgust. Vern had shown her how to do the first one. It had seemed easy enough if it hadn't been so smelly. But then he said he was headed out to get some paperwork done, and he'd left her alone with this mess.

How on earth could one animal do so much damage?

Gagging again, Harley ran from the stall and into the aisle. Surprisingly, the smell wasn't nearly as bad out here. She didn't understand how it was so contained. Harley dropped the shovel to the floor and leaned over to gulp in some air that wasn't nearly as bad. Wherever her uncle was, it had to be better than what she was doing. This was his life, not hers, and she refused to let him push her around. There had to be some parameters while she was visiting. Even Blaire wouldn't approve of the way he was treating her.

Harley stepped over the shovel with disgust and headed for the door. Vern had to be around here somewhere, and they were overdue for a talk. She shot one more fleeting look at the shovel she'd left behind and stepped into the sunlight, only to collide with another human being. Stumbling backward, Harley sputtered. "Why did you leave me here alone? My mother might have wanted me to suffer, but this is just cruel and unusual punishment." She dusted off her clothes and

looked up only to come face-to-face with someone who was very much not her uncle.

He stood tall and confident like he owned the whole world, and it irritated her all the more.

Her eyes narrowed and her lips curled into a sneer. “*You.*”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he said. “You’re not Abrams’ niece, are you?”

Harley wrinkled her nose. “I don’t have to tell you anything.”

The cowboy stared at her without blinking.

She folded her arms and inched closer to him. “What are you doing here? Have you come to complain to my uncle? Are you seriously that upset that I stepped foot on your property? Because let me tell you something. My uncle could care less \_\_\_”

“Nope.” The cowboy turned on his heel. “I ain’t got no time for this.”

Harley gaped after him for what felt like a full minute, then followed in his wake. “What do you mean, nope?”

He continued to mutter something as he strode quickly toward the house. He wasn’t especially tall, but the way he carried himself more than made up for it. His strides were long and firm. His gait quick and sure.

“Hey! I’m talking to you.” She reached for his upper arm to stop him, but he tore away from her.

“Look, ma’am.”

“It’s Harley.”

“Honestly? I don’t care. I can’t say that it’s been a pleasure, either. But if you don’t mind, I’m going to get into my truck over there and head on out. It was a mistake coming here.”

“What are you talking about?” Her eyes darted toward the house. “Did my uncle say something to you? He wasn’t trying to get you to marry me, was he?”

The cowboy's brows shot up faster than fireworks during the Fourth of July. "Of course not."

"Good, because I wouldn't put it past him, though I don't think my mother would approve. I mean, you look nice enough, but I'm pretty sure she's got her sights set on a Yale graduate."

He stared at her blankly, then shook his head. "Give your uncle my regards. I don't think we're going to be crossing paths any time soon." He practically ran toward his truck. The tires spit the dirt and gravel into the air, spraying everything nearby and leaving Harley wondering what on earth had just transpired.

She glanced toward the house, and a set of curtains fluttered over the front window.

Her brows lowered as she faced the house fully. Whatever her uncle was up to wouldn't stand. Not by her mother and certainly not by her. They'd already hashed out how this whole summer was going to go. She would stay here, mind her manners, and keep out of trouble. Then she could get her money and go wherever she wanted.

Granted, she hadn't counted on her uncle trying to manipulate her into doing work. And she hadn't planned on her electronic devices being taken away. She probably should have had a lawyer draft a document for her because, at this rate, by the end of the summer she wasn't going to be any better than a country bumpkin who knew how to milk a cow and shoe a horse.

Harley knew better than to believe she could call on her mother for help. Seeing as this whole idea was hers to begin with, she'd probably just tell her daughter that Vern was only giving her a hard time and everything would settle the moment Harley accepted her fate.

Yeah, right.

Her uncle definitely wasn't scared to boss her around. And from the looks of it, he wasn't against playing matchmaker.



Well, if he thought he was going to manipulate her into falling for a sweet young cowboy, then he had another thing coming.

Rather than return to her chores, she stormed off in the direction of that property line where she'd met the cowboy in the first place. It was her best shot at finding him. And if she had to wander all over his property just to get to the bottom of this whole thing, then so be it. Anything beats hanging around here and waiting for her uncle to put yet another chore on the growing list.

Harley made it to the fence that separated her uncle's property from the cowboy's. Of course he wasn't there. Why would he be? She stared off in that direction and contemplated whether it was worth getting lost over there.

She looked up at the sky, noting the incoming summer storm. It wasn't that she was afraid of a little rain. She just didn't particularly like getting wet. The longer she stood on her side of the fence, the more antsy she became. She had so many questions and that cowboy hadn't given her any clues during their brief run-in.

Harley let out a groan. She was going to regret this; she knew it deep down. Hoisting herself over the fence, she jumped onto the other side and started her trek. The cowboy had to be near enough that a horse could make the trip. It couldn't be too bad.



HARLEY'S TEETH chattered as another large drop of water splattered on her head. The sun had completely disappeared behind the dark clouds. Boy, she'd never seen a storm roll in so fast nor the temperature drop so much in just a couple hours. It felt like spring all over again.

Her boots were covered in a thick layer of mud, making her regret even packing them in the first place. Her clothes clung to her body from the rain, and even though it wasn't raining as hard as it had been about five minutes ago, Harley

considered turning back simply so she could get warmed up. The longer she walked, the longer it would take to get home.

This was one of those examples of why her mother said she was so stubborn. She'd set out this way, and she wasn't going to turn back just because she was miserable and cold.

That cowboy owed her an explanation—mostly because she knew she wouldn't get anything from her uncle, and she needed ammunition if she planned on having the upper hand.

A brief thought over whether her uncle was worried about her crossed her mind, but she shoved it as far down as she could. He'd been the one to take her phone. If he wanted to be able to reach her, he should have thought about that beforehand.

Just when Harley was losing hope that she'd maintained a straight line on the trail—there was a particularly annoying rock she could have sworn she tripped on at least three times—she finally caught sight of a house. Or was it a barn?

It didn't matter. She'd found proof of civilization. It might have taken her a couple hours, but she'd made it, and she was going to march right up to that door and demand to speak to the guy.

Harley picked up her pace, nearly running by the time she made it to the edge of the yard. Well, it couldn't really be called a yard when the vast majority of it was just trimmed weeds. The house looked nice, though. It had been recently painted, and even Harley could tell they'd put a new roof on it.

It was probably about as big as her uncle's place, which meant there were likely a few others who lived there.

She slowed her steps. If there were a couple cowboys who lived here, then how was she going to ask for the one who had met with her uncle? She didn't have a name. Even his appearance was common.

Since her arrival in Copper Creek, almost every cowboy she'd seen had brown hair and brown eyes. That cowboy was no exception.

Male voices caught her attention a few yards away and Harley ducked down, darting toward the side of the house so she could hide.

“... it’s not like that. I only told him that we have hands to spare. I didn’t tell him to contact you specifically.”

“Really? Because it’s almost like he planned on being at that bookstore when I was.”

The second voice was more familiar than the first, but at this point, Harley couldn’t tell if it was the cowboy she was looking for. Either way, they both sounded on edge and she wasn’t about to get in the middle of it. The voices grew louder, but the men stayed out of her line of vision.

“I don’t understand why you’re so upset. It’s not like I sold you into indentured servitude. Have you considered that it might be good for you?”

“Yeah? How’s that? I already know everything there is to —”

The first voice laughed.

“What?”

“You’re never going to know *everything*. I don’t care how many books you read. The world is always changing. Variables are always fluctuating. People, animals, food supply...” He paused. “Weather. If you think that Mr. Abrams doesn’t have anything to teach you, then you’re probably the wrong fit anyway.”

“It doesn’t matter if I’m the wrong or right fit. I’m not going back there.”

That was him. That was the voice of the cowboy from the barn. Harley took a step forward from her crouched position to get a better look and her boot cut down hard on a twig. The sound of the snap echoed in her ear as loud as if it had been a gunshot. Her breath caught in her throat, and she shut her eyes tight. There wasn’t even a tiny chance that they didn’t hear her. And now, they were likely headed in her direction.

She heard their boots before she saw them. When she lifted her gaze, she found two cowboys. One was taller than the other, definitely older—though not old enough to be the younger one’s father. His hair peeked out from beneath his hat, dark blond.

The cowboy she’d met earlier stood beside him, shock and fury emanating from his eyes. “What are you doing here?” he seethed.

Slowly, she rose. Well, she’d been made. She might as well do what she came here for.

Harley crossed her arms and scowled at him. “You owe me an explanation.”



*Mason*

“*I* don’t owe you squat,” Mason snapped back.

“Mason—” Wade started, but he cut him off.

“*You* can shut up.”

“*Mason*,” he said with barely veiled exasperation. “That isn’t any way to treat a guest.”

“She’s no guest. She’s a trespasser.”

Harley straightened slightly. He could see it in her eyes—the irritation and temptation to correct him again about who owned what land. Well, she was outnumbered, and he wasn’t going to let her get a word in edgewise.

Mason gestured toward her, flinging a hand in her direction. “This is the reason I’m never going back.”

“I’m sorry?” she shot back. “I’m the reason for *what* exactly?”

Mason exchanged a look with his brother, indicating that if he were smart, he’d stay out of this, too. But Wade wasn’t having any of it.

“Did you walk all the way here in the rain?” His brother pulled off his sheepskin jacket and moved toward her to drape it over her shoulders, but the stubborn woman held up both hands.

“No, thank you. I’m just here to find out what *Mason* wanted with my uncle.”

“What *I* wanted?” Mason let out a derisive bark of laughter. “I didn’t want anything. Your uncle asked me to stop by, and I’m already regretting it.”

Her eyes made it clear she didn’t believe him. Why was it so hard to tear his own gaze away from her? Just like before when he’d first met her, he found himself easily getting swept up in the beauty of those eyes.

Mason shook his head and turned slightly to face his brother. “I’m going to take her home, and when I get back, we’re going to finish this talk. I don’t think anyone else is going to be too keen on what you did.”

“I didn’t do anything.” His older brother smirked. “And you’ll find it real hard to convince anyone else to be on your side.”

Mason glared at the brother he thought he could trust above all else. What was family for if not to stick up for each other and look out for one another? How was Wade able to believe he’d done something out of the goodness of his heart when it could mean tearing their family apart?

He didn’t bother demanding an explanation. Wade wasn’t about to concede anything—not without a fight. So Mason spun toward Harley and took her elbow.

She jerked it out of his grasp. “I can walk on my own, thank you.”

Mason stopped and held out a hand to gesture toward his truck. “Ladies first.”

Harley rolled her eyes. They headed toward his vehicle, and the closer they got, the more irritated she seemed to become. By the time they were standing beside it, her face was flushed bright red. “No.”

“No?” he muttered. “What do you *mean*, no?”

“I’m not getting in that truck without my answers.”

“I’ll tell you anything you want to know when we get there.”

She snorted. “Do you really expect me to believe a word you say? I know you don’t want to take me home. You could very well just do a drive-by and shove me out an open truck door. Just humor me and tell me what my uncle wanted.”

“Just go ask him yourself. I doubt he’ll give you much pushback. He’s actually a decent guy.”

For the second time, she rolled her eyes. By this point, he nearly thought she might stomp a foot for good measure,

though he ended up disappointed.

“You want to know what this was all about? It was a job offer.”

Out of everything she might have been expecting him to say, that one must have thrown her off more than anything else could. Her shoulders dropped, as did her jaw. “He did what? You want me to believe he’s offering you a job and you turned it down? Why?”

“What’s it to you?”

Harley didn’t respond right away. She shifted slightly, and then her whole body shivered. Her teeth started to chatter, and he let out a groan as he removed his own jacket.

Before she could refuse him, he shot her a dark look. “I’d rather you not catch your death. The last thing I need is for the town to think a Keagan contributed to the death of a lady.”

Harley lifted a single brow. “Lady? Seriously? Did I cross dimensions into another time period or something?” When he didn’t answer, she groaned. “Besides, it’s summer. I’ll be fine as soon as the sun comes out.”

“It’s summer in the *mountains*. The weather isn’t exactly the same as if you were in the city.”

“Whatever.” Her mumble died off the second the jacket was wrapped around her. While her teeth still chattered slightly, the rest of her body seemed to relax almost immediately. Her narrowed eyes locked with his. “I need to know because of the reason I’m in this forsaken place.”

Her statement didn’t make sense, and she probably already knew that because she continued.

“I’m not supposed to be here. I know. *Shocker*.” Harley adjusted the jacket enough for her to slip her arms inside. “Let’s just say my parents aren’t too proud of the young woman I’ve become. They want to teach me a lesson or something, and they thought sending me to a ranch would set me on the straight and narrow.” She rolled her eyes again. “Yeah, like that was ever going to happen. Now, my uncle has gotten it into his head that I need to help out around the ranch



to earn my keep. Can you believe that? He actually thinks that I'm going to go along with every little chore he sends my way. Fat chance."

Mason listened to her ramble with half an ear until she mentioned the money.

"... and it's all because they think that I don't deserve my inheritance. Every Abrams in the family line has been given an inheritance when we turn twenty-one. But somehow, my mother was able to postpone my payout because I flunked out of Harvard."

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. This woman not only had the privilege of being raised by both of her parents, who only wanted what was best for her, but she'd also been given every opportunity to have the perfect life.

Money. An education. A safe home. And she was nothing but ungrateful.

Mason held up both hands. "Wait a minute. You're trying to tell me that you're only here because your parents want you to learn some manners?"

Harley snapped her mouth shut and her eyes flashed with warning. "I beg your pardon?"

"*Manners*. That's quite literally all I can hear from your story. You're a spoiled little rich kid who wants everything just handed to you. I don't blame them for wanting to correct the course you're on."

The redness in her face deepened as the fury in her eyes exploded.

"No wonder your uncle wanted me to take the job as his head rancher. Part of the gig sounds like I'd be responsible for keeping you in line and teaching you the ropes."

Her face paled as her brows lifted. Understanding flooded her countenance, and her eyes darted to the side. Whatever she was trying to plan, he wasn't going to be part of it.

"Lucky for you, I'm not taking the job."

Harley's focus jumped back up to his face with curiosity.

“I’d rather sling cow dung for the rest of my life than have to show you how to be a decent human being. There. *Happy?* That’s why I was speaking to your uncle. And now you know why I won’t be going back.”

“Why exactly? Is he not paying enough?”

Mason’s stomach felt gutted. What was it with this girl and money? He shook his head, not dignifying her question with a response before he yanked open the truck door and motioned for her to get inside.

She scowled at him, their gazes holding the other in a battle that both of them desired to win. He wasn’t about to be pushed around by a spoiled brat, and she was definitely the kind of person who refused to be told what to do.

Her uncle had a long road ahead of him if he thought he was going to find anyone who would be patient enough to handle her. He could only imagine how bad it must have been at home for her parents to send her away.

Neither one of them moved. Not a single shift, flinch, or blink.

Mason grew tired and heaved a groan. “Will you get in the truck already? You’re cold and wet, and I’m sure your uncle isn’t going to be thrilled when he finds out you went missing.”

“I doubt he even noticed. And if he is worried, it’s all his fault. He’s the one who took my phone from me. He’s gonna have to put a GPS tracker on me if he wants to know my location at all times of the day.”

Mason’s scowl deepened. Every word that came out of her mouth only made the sour taste in his mouth intensify. He was inches away from just picking her up and shoving her in his truck when she finally climbed inside. “For the record, I didn’t do this for you, I did it because—”

He shut the door, cutting off her statement. There was no reason for him to care about why she got in the truck. All he cared about was that he could get her off his property. Mason marched around the side of the truck, climbed in, and started it.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve—”

Mason reached for the radio knob and turned the music up loud enough to drown her out. He had zero interest in having any sort of conversation with her. He’d already had enough to last a lifetime.

Harley lurched forward and turned the knob down. “Yuck! I thought when people said you guys listened to country, at least it would be more Tay-Tay and less... *this*.” She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t even like the pop stuff that much, but at least it’s better than what you’re listening to.”

He continued staring straight ahead. Her voice grated on his nerves. How could someone be so insensitive and brash and look like a complete angel... well, minus the nose ring and combat boots. Even the local pretty girls in town were better behaved than... *her*.

She fiddled with the buttons until she found a song she appeared to approve of before she sat back in her seat and stared out the window.

Raindrops pinged the glass, making it harder to see. Mason turned up the speed of his windshield wipers. Just another mile or so and he’d be free of her. No amount of money would ever be worth spending hours with a woman like her—and yet.

As Mason turned onto the short road where he had to type in the code—a code he still didn’t have—he couldn’t help but wonder if Wade was right. Would he be walking away from something great? Wade didn’t know about the deal Abrams had tried to make. He didn’t know what wage the man had offered, and there was no way Mason would share the even bigger bombshell of the whole place being handed down to him.

Mason had no doubt his brother would insist on taking the deal if he was aware of that. He gave Harley a side-eyed glance. What would she say if she found out that the monetary perks were likely even better than her own inheritance? Would she approve or would she be jealous?

While the thought of making her mad was tempting, Mason knew it went deeper than that. To be completely set for the rest of his life in a turn-key situation was far more tempting than he wanted to admit.

But no.

He wasn't going to fall prey to such an offer. If this was the path he was meant to be on, he would have been born to a family who made sure it would happen.

His destiny was to remain with his brothers on their family's ranch for the rest of his life. Of that, he was certain.

"It's eight, seven, eight, five."

Mason jumped, realizing they were parked right outside the gate. He didn't know how long he'd been mulling over the options he had in front of him, nor did he know if Harley had said anything else besides the code. "Thanks," he muttered as he rolled down the window and typed the code into the keypad.

The gate swung inward, and once again, he was driving along the paved pathway toward the house. When he stopped in front of the house, he didn't move.

She turned to face him. "Well? Are you going to walk me in?"

Irritation pulsed through his veins like venom. He glowered at her, his hands tightening on the steering wheel. "I don't know what you think this was, but it wasn't a date. And since you're not under the age of seven, you're clearly capable of making it from this truck to the front door."

She huffed without saying a word, then slipped out of the truck and headed for the porch. The second she pushed the front door open a crack, he drove off.

Good riddance.



## *Harley*

*H*arley slammed the door shut behind her. What was it about this backwards place? She thought people around here were supposed to have manners. But all she'd seen so far were hard-headed cowboys who refused to give in to her.

That hadn't happened before.

She blamed her parents. Ever since they'd sent her out to this terrible town, she'd been off her game. There used to be a time when she could manipulate anyone into doing anything for her.

Harley kicked off her sodden boots and stormed farther into the house. The smell of supper wafted toward her, and she realized just how hungry she was. Had she even eaten lunch? The day had gotten away from her and all she had to show for it were some half-completed chores and a growling stomach.

Thankfully, her uncle wasn't completely useless. Despite not having a wife to dote on him, he'd managed to find his way around his kitchen. That was a pleasant surprise.

She entered the kitchen and lifted her nose appreciatively. The smell of roast and potatoes filled the air, taking her back to a time when she used to enjoy family dinners with her folks. It had been nearly a decade since that time. The moment she'd hit her teens, she'd been labeled as rebellious and supper time had turned into a chore.

Uncle Vern stood at the counter, his back to her as he worked on their dinner. There wasn't a chance that he hadn't heard her enter the house. The way she'd slammed that door practically shook free all the pictures hanging on the walls.

Harley hovered there in the doorway, unsure of what she should do. Between her growling stomach and her growing fury, she was torn. It wasn't fair that she was expected to work, and it was embarrassing that her uncle thought she needed someone to keep an eye on her.

She crossed her arms, letting the fury take hold. “Who do you think you are?” she demanded.

Vern stilled, but he didn't turn to face her.

Stomping into the kitchen didn't hold nearly the same amount of satisfaction without her boots. In fact, her wet clothes only made the movement more pitiful. Still, she stood her ground. “I'm talking to you.”

“I'm aware.”

“Well? Are you going to look at me?”

“Why would I do that?”

“Aren't you the one who insists on respect?”

The air immediately got several degrees colder. She shivered, wishing she had chosen to change before entering the kitchen. Slowly, her uncle turned to face her. “I'm sorry? Did I miss the moment you officially earned my respect?”

Her mouth hung open. “But... you said...”

“I said that this is only going to work when there is a certain degree of respect. Unfortunately, respect has to be earned, and you have a long way to go before you deserve mine.”

Harley's fury exploded. “You're one to talk. There hasn't been one thing you've done to earn my respect. You stole my phone. You took my keys. You've put me to work until there are blisters on my fingers...” Her voice trailed off upon seeing a similar fury in her uncle's eyes. Normally so calm and collected, she'd never seen this side of him and he hadn't even uttered a word.

Her uncle took over the conversation. “I want to make one thing perfectly clear. This is my home. I don't need your respect, though perhaps you might start thinking about everything you've listed and come up with reasons they were good for you. The government might consider you an adult, but you're nothing more than a greedy child who needs to learn some manners. You may have your phone and the keys to your car when you've done the work to get them back.”

“What work?” she spat. “I don’t owe you anything.”

He straightened. “You’re right. You owe me nothing. But you do owe your parents something, especially if you expect to get that inheritance you care so much about.”

They locked eyes, neither one prepared to back down.

“If you want to take your phone and your keys, you’re welcome to. I will also be asking you to vacate the premises. You already understand the ramifications for making such a decision, so I’ll leave that up to you.” Vern turned back to the stove and shut it off.

The gurgling in her stomach persisted as she watched him take a pan of food to the table. She followed him and pulled out her chair to sit across from him. When he didn’t dish her up, she sighed. “Will you please pass the food?” Vern didn’t speak immediately, so she looked up and found his hard stare. Shifting uncomfortably, she tore her gaze away. “What?”

“In my house, we don’t eat until our work is done.”

Her focus flitted toward him once more.

“I distinctly recall that I asked you to muck out the stalls today—a chore that could have easily been completed before lunchtime. Imagine my surprise when I came to get you for our midday meal only to find that the job was only three-quarters of the way complete and you were nowhere to be found.”

Her fidgeting increased. “I went for a walk.”

Vern’s brows creased together so that his whole forehead wrinkled with a mixture of frustration and worry. “Then the storm came,” he said. His eyes swept over her body, lingering on the jacket she’d forgotten to give back to Mason. “I didn’t know if I would be making calls to the hospital or to your folks.”

“I can handle myself,” she muttered.

He didn’t respond to that comment.

Her eyes shot to meet his once more. “I went to talk to Mason, okay? I wanted to know what you were meeting



about.”

“And did he tell you?”

She glowered at him. “I don’t need a stupid babysitter. The fact that you think you can just pass me off to someone else just proves you’re exactly like my mother. When you guys don’t know how to handle me, that’s what you do.”

He settled back in his seat, watching her as she fought back the tears.

“Now, will you pass me the food? I’m starving.”

At first, he didn’t move. Then he shook his head slowly.

“What? Why not?”

“I told you. Chores first, then supper.”

She glanced toward the window and the darkening sky. Flinging her hand in that direction, she argued, “It’s getting dark. Can’t I just finish it in the morning?”

“You can, but you’ll be going without supper.”

Harley gasped. “You’re seriously going to starve me—”

“Missing two meals is hardly starving you. I’d be more concerned that you’ll get sick sitting in those wet clothes.”

The way he could brush her off without a care tore at her more than she wanted to admit. Sitting here at this table with him, practically begging for food, was only solidifying one thing.

Harley was on her own.

She always had been, and she always would be.

Slamming her hands on the table, she shot to her feet and stormed from the kitchen. Her cold, wet pants whipped around her ankles with every step she took. Hands and face felt colder than ever as she hurried up the stairs toward the room she’d resigned herself to call her own for the next three to four months.

Tearing the door open, she stepped inside and nearly slammed it shut when she stopped herself. Vern had called her

a child. He'd no doubt expect her to slam the door just so she could make him miserable. Well, he wasn't going to be right on that one.

Slowly, she shut the door all the way until she heard the soft click.

Turning, she leaned against the door in the dark, closing her eyes against the hot emotion that already leaked out onto her cheeks. She could have left hours ago. She'd already located where he kept her keys—mostly because she heard her phone buzzing when he'd gone out to get started on his work.

Unfortunately, he, along with her parents, were right. She needed the money if she wanted to make something of herself. She wouldn't be able to get far without it. Her stomach growled again, reminding her that she didn't have so much as a snack in her bedroom.

Vern couldn't guard the kitchen forever. All she had to do was sneak down there and raid the fridge or the pantry. Vern didn't have kids. He didn't have any experience thwarting someone like her.

She slid down the door and sat on the floor, her forearms propped on her knees. If she followed through with that plan, she'd be proving him right again, and she hated that more than anything.

Harley's head thumped against the door and she opened her eyes, though she couldn't see much besides the outlines of her bed, dresser, and chaise lounge chair across the room. There was a window seat with cushions and pillows—a place she would have loved to curl up and read when she was a child. Once upon a time, she used to love that sort of thing. It had been years since she'd picked up a book to read for the fun of it. Now, she just associated reading with coercion and authority.

She tore off her socks, then got to her feet and changed into something warmer. Harley picked up Mason's jacket from the edge of the bed and fingered the fabric. Her eyes darted toward the window. Without turning on the lights, she moved through the room and sat on the cushion to stare out at the

ranch below. Her window faced north, toward Mason's property, but from this distance she couldn't make out much.

If Uncle Vern liked Mason enough to ask him to step up and keep an eye on her, then maybe she should figure out a way to use that to her advantage. Heaven knew she wasn't going to survive the summer with her uncle breathing down her neck. Mason might be a hard shell to crack, but she had a better chance at breaking down his defenses than her uncle's.

If she could get him to be on her side, then she might have a chance to make it out on top. She glanced down once more at the jacket and then brought it to her nose. It smelled like cut straw and rain. There was a faint scent of soap, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was exactly. Minty maybe? Or was it more earthy than that?

A smile touched her lips. She could win him over if only to get him on her side. Then together, they could work on her uncle. First, she'd have to befriend him. He wasn't the kind of guy she encountered in the city, though, so she'd need to regroup and figure out what to say to convince him to give her a second chance.

Harley smelled the jacket again, breathing deeply. One step at a time. She might have to work harder in the beginning, but by the end of the summer, he'd be putty in her hand.

The door to the house shut and she straightened to look down below. Uncle Vern trudged toward the barn, a flashlight in hand. She watched until he disappeared inside and then as the light in the building turned on.

A golden glow flooded from the building. She watched for about ten minutes until she realized there was only one thing he could be doing.

Vern was mucking out the stalls. Had he actually thought she would go out there and get them done just to eat dinner? The guy was bonkers. There was no way he would break her. No one could.

Not her folks.

Not her uncle.

And definitely not some cowboy.



## *Mason*

The storm had passed throughout the night, but it left behind a distinctly cooler temperature. Unfortunately, Mason didn't have another jacket. The one he'd neglected to get back from Harley had been fairly new and his favorite. The old one he'd tossed due to being worn out.

By lunch time it would warm up, but until then, Mason was stuck wearing long sleeves. He grabbed his hat from the rack by the back door and headed out to do his chores. Wade and Elijah were the only ones who bothered getting up this early, but that was because they wanted to get as much work as they could completed before it got hot. The others, including himself, didn't do nearly as much work.

Mason was the only one who got up early just so he could spend some time on his own without his siblings pestering him. The house was too small for twelve people. Granted, Annabel and Elijah had moved out, but it was still too crowded.

His thoughts shifted to Mr. Abrams' home. That place was huge, and up until recently, it had only housed one person. What did a person do with all that extra space?

He probably had a room dedicated just to books. Based on the way he was talking about their similar interests, that's the only thing that made sense.

If Mason had that much space, he would do the same.

Right now, he didn't have time to think about what he would do with all that space. He had hooves to trim and cattle to brush down. Usually, he had to feed some of the animals as well. Whenever he went out first, the horses got restless. They wanted to eat the second they saw one of their humans.

His boots crushed down the tufts of grass that sprouted along the well-worn path to the barn. He'd walked this path every single day of his life. All of them had. Sometimes he wondered if his folks had done the same before they

abandoned their family. What had made his father and mother decide to live on a ranch in the first place?

He didn't care what had made them leave. Anyone who was willing to do that didn't deserve his thoughts. But for a couple to choose a life in the country intrigued him. He thought the same thing about Harley and her uncle.

They had the same blood running through their veins, and yet they were so entirely different. Sure, they weren't directly linked or anything, he could understand that, but it was still fascinating how they fell on the opposite ends of the spectrum.

None of his musings mattered at this point. Besides the occasional chance he might see her in town, Mason knew their paths wouldn't cross all that often. He didn't like the social scene, and something told him that she was the complete opposite. He wouldn't have been surprised if he had met her for the first time at that country club everyone liked to spend time at.

He shook his head as he retrieved the tools he'd need for the current job. As far as he was concerned, he'd been born in the wrong time period. If he'd been able to choose, he would have jumped into the generation before all of this technology nonsense.

Something told him that people were just better before the internet.

Mason pulled a stool over to the first horse after getting him harnessed and lifted the horse's leg to get to work on the hoof. He pried off the shoe and examined it before placing it aside. Using his hoof knife, he carved out the debris that had gotten beneath the shoe. Then, he used his hoof trimmer to get the edges cleaned up.

It was grueling and tedious work, but it allowed him to get lost in thought. Mason specifically shied away from thoughts of his neighbor and the proposition he'd been made. Instead, his thoughts shifted to his oldest brother. Wade still needed to explain why he thought their family would be better off by sending one of their own to another property. It couldn't just be the fact that they needed more space or more money.

Of course they did. But something told Mason that wasn't the full story. Had Wade finally realized something he wasn't willing to talk about? Just that notion made Mason's stomach churn.

His brother had never been one to keep secrets. Ever since he could remember, Mason had been part of the family meetings where his brother would lay it all out straight. This had been the first time he hadn't, as far as he was aware.

Mason moved onto the next shoe after reattaching the first.

Maybe he was looking at this too deeply. What if Wade was being as transparent as ever? Their family was the largest in all of Copper Creek. That meant more mouths to feed and more homes to maintain. If they wanted to stick together as a family, it would stand to reason that Wade would want to keep everyone physically close. There wasn't a ranch closer than the one that belonged to Mr. Abrams.

A scowl fell over Mason's face. If that was the case, then Wade should have told Mason before offering his services to their neighbor. It really felt like Wade didn't want him around anymore, which was ridiculous because he was one of the harder workers.

"Doesn't that hurt?"

Mason yelped, jumping so badly that he toppled the stool where he'd been sitting. The small wooden object landed on its side, and Mason right along with it. His head snapped up, eyes darting this way and that until they came to land on the offensive thing that had startled him so badly.

He didn't really need to find the source of the question. He would have remembered her voice if he hadn't heard it in over a year. Ten years, even. That was just how bad her voice grated against his nerves.

Mason glowered at Harley from where he kneeled on his hands and knees. "What are you doing here? You're like that darn black cat from that song."

The corners of her lips tugged, but only slightly. "There's a song about me?"



He groaned as he got to his feet and brushed his pants off with frustrated movements. “That cat that came back even though its owners tried to kill it.”

She blinked and her expression sobered. “There’s a song about killing cats?” Harley almost sounded like she felt bad for the fictional animal.

“What do you want?” he demanded. “I’m busy. I’m sure you’re supposed to be doing something back at your uncle’s place.”

Harley made a face. “Yeah. I have to muck out the stalls in like thirty minutes or my uncle is going to send me off to do something else and let me starve.”

He shot her a confused look over his shoulder but thought better of asking her to clarify. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

She fidgeted, shifting her weight from foot to foot until it almost looked like she was dancing. He didn’t have time to wait for a response. There was too much to do around here. Mason righted the stool and scooped up the tools he’d been using. Thankfully, the horse he’d been working on was old and not nearly as skittish as he used to be.

Mason moved the stool around to the backside of the animal. “If you’re just going to stand there, you might as well help me out a little. Can you grab that horseshoe?” He nodded to the one that had landed a few feet away from her boots. He didn’t know how it had managed to get that far, but he wasn’t prepared to get close enough to Harley to grab it for himself.

She picked it up and took a step toward him, but his sharp voice stopped her in her tracks. “No. Right there. You can toss it to me. Just don’t hit the horse, okay?”

Harley rolled her eyes as she rocked her arm back and swung it forward. The shoe landed with a soft thud in the straw where he sat. She watched him with a sort of curiosity that he didn’t think she was capable of. Her eyes watched every single movement he made, and when he hammered the shoe back onto the hoof, her eyes widened.

“Doesn’t that hurt?”

He glanced up at her, then down at the hoof. “Does it hurt when you clip your fingernails?”

“Of course not. But at the same time, I don’t walk on my toenails either.”

“But you wear shoes to protect them. Imagine if you had to walk barefoot all the time. I don’t think you’d like it all that much.”

“No,” she murmured. “I don’t believe I would.”

He got back to work but noticed almost immediately that he wasn’t making good time. Every shuffling sound she made, every sigh that slipped between her lips, caught him off guard. He was tempted to glance in her direction every single time but forced himself to stay on task. If he got done early enough, he was planning on heading to the city to check out the new bookstore that had opened.

It wasn’t the kind of bookstore he normally visited. This one specialized in books written by the independent author community.

“How long did it take you to learn that stuff?” she asked quietly.

Mason lowered the hoof to the ground and stared up at the source of his distraction. He let out another heavy sigh. “Just what do you want from me? I told you I’m not going to take your uncle up on the offer he made.”

She pulled her lower lip between her teeth until the soft, pink flesh turned white. “That sorta is the reason I’m here, though.”

Mason got to his feet and released the horse from the harness he’d strapped him to. Then he walked the animal back to his stall before retrieving the next. “I’m not going to leave my family’s ranch just because some old guy thinks it would be better for his niece. Sorry, but I could never do that. I care too much.”

“If you care so much, then why aren’t you helping him?”

“I care about *my family*. I care about *this ranch*. I thought that was clear.” Mason moved the stool to the front left hoof and got to work, his back to the woman who could mesmerize him with one sweeping motion of her eyes.

“But what about the money?”

That was the one question that got his hackles up. He tossed the tools aside and launched to his feet, crossing the distance between them so quickly that she ended up taking a swift step backward. Her eyes bugged from her head as she stared up at him.

Mason glared down at her. “I have already gone over this. The money isn’t worth the risk my family would take with me gone.”

“But don’t you have like ten brothers and sisters?” Her voice was small, nothing like the confident woman he’d encountered out in the field. “I bet they could spare one guy to help my uncle and me with his property. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

He was nearly nose to nose as he dipped his face lower. “Why do you even want me there? You have to already know that I’m not the kind of guy who would go easy on you because you’re a girl. I have two sisters, and they’re expected to pull just as much weight as the boys around here. You don’t want me to be there, I assure you.”

This time she moved close enough to him that he could see little flecks of blue in her green eyes. Her voice tightened along with the rest of her body. “Have you ever heard the saying that you should pick the devil you know over the one you don’t?”

“But we don’t know each other,” he muttered evenly, doing his best to ignore her voice, her eyes, and her scent. For the first time in his life that he could remember, he wanted to reach out and touch a woman. He wanted to feel the softness of her skin, the silken texture of her hair.

The weird thing was that he wanted to do these things with a woman he knew he couldn’t stand to be within five yards of.

“You really want me to take that job your uncle offered?” he said.

“I do.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Well, you should.”

He thought about it for a moment, then took a swift step back and shook his head. “I’m sorry, I have no interest in playing this little game you have planned against your uncle.”

“Who said there was a game?” she said.

He heard her follow him as he returned to the horse’s side.

She continued, “There is no game. I just don’t think I’m going to be able to handle the summer without some kind of buffer, and you seem nice enough.”

Mason snorted. “You’ve got the wrong guy.”



## *Harley*

*H*arley had never been one to beg, but even she could see that this whole plan of hers was slipping through her fingers. She was losing him. There had to be something she could do to convince him to take the job, but what?

According to him, he didn't care about the money. He didn't care about helping her uncle. And he certainly couldn't care less about helping her.

She had nothing. Desperation exuded from every part of her.

Mason turned from her, already moving on. He headed toward another stall and she hurried after him. "What do you want?" she asked.

That stopped him, though he didn't bother to face her.

"I mean it. Whatever you want, I can make it happen. I'm going to come into a lot of money after this summer. I don't know what my uncle is paying you, but I'm sure I could double it. I get that you don't care about that sort of stuff, but everyone needs money."

Still, he didn't turn around.

Hope flickered to life in her chest, and she gestured wildly at the barn. "Maybe you don't want money, but this place? Your home? What if I offered to fund the build of another barn? I've watched you guys long enough to see how many people live here. Or how about another house? A small cottage just for you." Harley was showing her cards, and she knew it. How else was she supposed to get the upper hand on him? She had to get on his good side somehow and then she could work her charm.

Once she stopped talking, the barn fell into silence. The only sound she could hear was a slight breeze blowing through the open doorway behind her. Even the animals seemed to be waiting for his response.

Mason faced her, his eyes narrowed. He didn't trust her; that much was certain. Lucky for her, that would be an easy change. Harley flashed him her most flirtatious smile, but it did nothing to soften his expression. "You're joking, right?" he said.

"Joking?"

He took a step toward her. "You realize that none of what you're suggesting is making any sense. Money can't solve all your problems—"

"You're right," she rushed to say. "Money can't solve *my* problems, but you can. And money can help you." She could feel her frustration rising. "Honestly, I don't understand what you have against any of this. You've basically been offered a dream job with all the perks. All you have to do is the same kind of stuff you do here."

"*And* teach you the ropes."

"Is that so bad?" she demanded.

"It might be," he said.

She gaped at him, her hands flying to her hips. "I'll have you know, people love me."

"I'm sure they do," he said flatly. "I don't happen to be one of them." He turned again.

"Why not?"

He snorted. "I don't have to explain myself. Not everyone has to like you."

Harley had never been the kind of person to really care what other people thought of her. Not her mother, not her professors, not even her uncle. But there was some reason his words stung more than they should have. They left her breathless, but not in a good way.

Her face flushed hot at the same time as her whole body went cold. Mason wasn't going to help her.

Karma.

That's what her friends would have called this. She'd come here with less than stellar intentions and she was going to walk away with nothing. That's what they would have said.

She refused to believe this was her fault.

"Fine. You don't want to help me? I'll leave you alone." Harley let out a huff but only got a few steps before his voice stopped her.

"I didn't say that."

Spinning to face him, she waited for him to elaborate. When he didn't, she moved toward him again. "So you do want to help me?"

"I didn't say that either." Mason turned partially. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, then dragged a ragged hand down his face. "I'll take the job."

"You're going to help me?"

"I don't know how much help I'm going to be." He eyed her once more. "Who knows why your uncle wanted to hire me—"

"He probably thinks you're the only one who can handle me."

Mason lifted a brow.

"Or maybe he just thinks you're gonna be harder to scare off." She shrugged. "Frankly, I don't care. All I want is a buffer." *And someone I can turn to be on my side.* Harley squirmed beneath his stare.

"I'm not going to go easy on you. I'd wager your uncle would be a better fit for what you're wanting."

She groaned, rolling her eyes as she did. "My uncle only cares about having someone he can boss around. I'm not his kid. He doesn't care what I do as long as the work gets done." Her thoughts shifted to last night when he'd let her go hungry.

Just the thought of it set her stomach on edge, and it gurgled loud enough that she wouldn't have been surprised if the ranches two miles away had heard it.



Thankfully, Mason didn't react. She already felt more off-balanced than she could ever remember.

Pushing aside that feeling, she shoved her hands into her back pockets and put on a brave face. She could fake confidence. She'd done so for much of her high school years. "Okay, so you don't want to help me, but you're going to take the job."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

Mason faced her fully. He touched beneath the brim of his hat to tilt it upward. "Does it matter?"

"Of course it does. I want to know what I'm up against."

"What you're up against? I thought you wanted me to take the job."

"I did—*do*." Harley groaned. "Why are you making this so hard?"

For a moment his expression didn't change. Then he flashed her a grin. "Because it's fun."

Harley blinked several times, letting his words sink in. She wouldn't have said she knew this man well at all, but she would have said she had been able to get a decent read on him. Mason was supposed to be an uptight cowboy. Realizing she probably looked ridiculous as she stared at him like he'd just admitted that he moonlighted as a zookeeper, Harley looked away. "Well, that's not very nice," she mumbled. "I'll tell my uncle that you're taking the job."

"I'm capable of making my own meetings."

She made a face but didn't comment back. There had been a brief moment when she had almost felt bad about her plan to manipulate him. It was the point between being desperate for his help and realizing that he simply didn't care for her.

Now she knew better. Mason wasn't like the city boys she'd dated when she was more impressionable, but he was still someone who didn't make room to be kind to strangers. After all, he'd only been willing to help when she offered to

build him something for his family's ranch. Money might not be important—unless it was used to help his family. On the one hand, he was sweet enough to think about those he cared about, but when it came to her, he couldn't care less.

Harley stopped as she reached the barn door. "Well, I have to get back to get started on my chores or I'm not gonna get any breakfast."

"Wait."

She didn't move, her hand resting on the edge of the doorway. "What?"

"Why don't you think you're going to get breakfast?"

"My uncle didn't let me eat dinner last night."

Mason seemed to let her words settle, not commenting further. She waited until the silence became unbearable. Then she tapped her fingers on the wood where they rested.

"Anyway, I guess I'll be seeing you later." Boy, how things had changed for her since she'd come to Colorado. She'd been at the top of her game. She had friends, money, and the freedom to do what she wanted.

Now what did she have? Nothing.

She was starting from ground zero.

There were new rules to follow. Okay, if she were honest, she wasn't going to follow the new rules. She was going to figure out all the loopholes and come out on top. No one was going to change her. In the end she'd get what she wanted, and not even Mason would be able to catch her off guard again.

Harley only made it about five yards out of the barn when she heard Mason's voice once again.

"Get in the truck."

She stopped in her tracks.

"Come on, I'm not going to let you walk all the way back to your place on an empty stomach."

Harley faced him, crossing her arms. "I'm a big, strong girl. I can handle it."

"Doggone it. Just get in the truck, will you?" He was already striding toward his truck, not waiting for her to agree. "Besides, you're still wearing my jacket and I want it back."

She glanced down. Oh yeah. Quickly, she shrugged out of it and draped it over her arm as she hurried after him. Mason climbed in behind the wheel and put the pickup in drive. The radio wasn't turned up enough to hear the music, so the two of them sat in silence.

That wasn't going to do at all.

Harley leaned forward and turned the knob, but nothing happened. She frowned and searched for the button that would turn on the radio, but when she couldn't find even that, Mason finally piped up.

"The radio doesn't work in this truck."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "The truck is over twenty years old. It gets me from A to B. That's all I need it for. I'd rather spend my money on something that matters."

"Like what? *Books*?"

Mason gave her a side-eyed stare. "Something like that."

She settled against her seat as they turned out onto the main road. "Well, if I were you, I'd look into fixing it. Music is just as important as books."

He chuckled.

The sound was warm like fresh honey and it made her insides feel just as gooey. She hadn't heard his laugh before. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing."

"Sure there is. Otherwise, you wouldn't have laughed. So, is it something I said? Or are you making fun of me?"

"I wouldn't dare make fun of you."

“But you’d judge me.”

Mason’s expression darkened, and she immediately regretted her statement. “Didn’t you do the same on the day we met?”

She flinched. That was true. She’d made several judgmental statements, but that was before she’d realized a few things about him that made Mason someone she wouldn’t mind getting to know a little better. Her eyes shifted to the road. They were coming up on their turn, but he wasn’t slowing down.

Harley sat up a little straighter, her eyes glued to the drive that would take them to her uncle’s property. Then she turned her head over her shoulder as they passed it. “That was our turn.”

“I know,” he muttered.

“Shouldn’t we... turn around?”

“We will.”

Her heart fluttered. For the first time since she’d met Mason, she started wondering if she had been too trusting. She twisted fully in her seat to look behind them again. “I really think I should go home. My uncle is going to have a cow.”

“I think only heifers can do that.”

Harley’s head snapped around so she could stare at him. “What?”

“A heifer. That’s a female cow.”

“I know what a heifer is.”

He glanced at her once more, the corners of his mouth twitching. “Then I don’t understand why we’re having this conversation.”

“Because—” She snapped her mouth shut, realizing once again that he was teasing her. How had she allowed herself to walk into that one? Harley scowled at him. “Turn around.”

“I will after—”

“Now. I want to go back. I’m tired of your attitude.”

He lifted a single brow. “My attitude? That’s interesting.”

“Take me home!” she demanded louder this time.

At that moment they pulled into a diner with a bright sign lit up overhead. Mason put his truck into park and pushed open his door. When she didn’t move, he paused. “Well? Are you coming?”

“Coming? Coming where?”

“Sal’s. You have to be hungry. I’ve heard your stomach growl at least a dozen times. You can’t do the kind of work your uncle wants you to do on an empty stomach.”

“But... he’s probably waiting—”

“I’ll call him myself if that makes you feel better.”

She peered out the window at the large diner. Through Mason’s open door, she could already smell the bacon, sausage and coffee they were cooking up. As if agreeing with Mason’s sentiment, her stomach grumbled louder than it had all morning. Mason gave her one last pointed look, then shut his door.

Well, it didn’t seem like she had any other choice.



## *Mason*

Mason shouldered his way into Sal's Diner and waved at Hope. She smiled back as she turned to grab the coffee pot and a mug. It wasn't often he came in for breakfast, but when he did, Hope knew what he wanted.

She hurried over to the booth he usually occupied, and just as he sat down, she placed the mug in front of him. "No book this morning?" Hope was one of those people Mason wouldn't have minded having as a mother. She was warm and kind. Her auburn hair was more red than brown and there were some streaks of gray in it. But the thing he liked about her most was her interest in what he was reading.

Mason shook his head. "Not today. I'm here with someone."

She glanced up toward the door, but it didn't open. Confusion flooded her eyes. "Are you sure, hun?"

He turned to look out the window only to find Harley's silhouette still in his truck. With a heavy sigh, he nodded. "I'm sure. I just don't know if she's going to come inside or if I'm going to have to take something to go."

This time Hope looked out the window, and then she smiled with understanding. "Well, if your friend stops being so gun-shy, I'll be more than happy to take your order."

Mason watched Harley through the window. There were a few moments when he nearly got out of his seat and went out there to drag her inside himself. Fortunately, she finally found the nerve to get out of his pickup and head inside.

She stood just beside the door, her focus sweeping through the whole diner before coming to land on him. Then she hurried forward. "I really wish you would have told me what we were doing."

"Would you have agreed to it?"

"I don't know, maybe," she said under her breath.

He picked up the laminated menu from between the salt and pepper shakers. “Well, I’m hungry, and you’re hungry. We might as well get something to eat, and then I’ll take you back.” Mason didn’t bother looking up at her while he perused the menu. At this point, he felt like he’d finally gotten a read on her.

Harley was just like all the other spoiled girls who lived in Colorado Springs. She didn’t know the meaning of accountability. She had the acrobatics of the kind of person who put their foot in their mouth several times a day. He didn’t think she cared much for anyone but herself.

All of that aside, he didn’t think it was right to starve her in order to get results. That was where her uncle had been wrong. Ranching was hard enough as it was without being starved. And Harley didn’t look as though she could wrangle a piglet, let alone a calf that needed branding. If he wanted to get much use out of her like her uncle was expecting, then she’d need to have a hearty breakfast every single day.

Hope returned to their table shortly after Harley’s arrival. She had her pad of paper ready but couldn’t hide her curiosity. Strangely enough, she stared with what could only be described as empathy. The empathy wasn’t the strange part because Hope was known to be one of the most tolerant people he knew.

It was something deeper—like she knew exactly who Harley was.

Mason cleared his throat, drawing Hope’s attention. She jumped and let out a soft laugh. “I’m so sorry about that. What can I get for you?”

“Just a coffee for me, please,” Harley said with a firm voice, daring either of them to argue with her.

Mason’s eyes locked with hers, but she didn’t add to her request. He sighed with exasperation. “Get me a double order of pancakes, bacon, sausage, eggs, and toast.”

Hope scribbled everything on her paper and nodded. “Anything else to drink?”



He lifted his mug. "I'm good with this."

"Wonderful. I'll be right back with your food."

The second she was gone, Harley huffed. "I hope you're not expecting me to eat any of that."

"It's nice to hear the venom return to your voice," Mason said flatly.

"I mean it. I only want coffee."

"You're telling me that you didn't eat supper last night or breakfast this morning, and yet you think you're going to be capable of doing heavy labor?"

She straightened in her seat, the stubbornness in her gaze telling him everything he needed to know.

"Fine. Don't eat. It's none of my business anyhow." While they sat across from each other, neither one of them spoke. Hope brought Harley's coffee over, and still there was no conversation. Then, finally, Harley nodded toward Mason. "I thought you were going to call Vern."

"Who?"

"My uncle. You said—"

"I'll call him in a few minutes."

Her lips thinned into a tight line, but she didn't argue. Instead, she turned her attention over to Hope where she hustled behind the counter. "Who is she?"

He glanced in the direction she was looking. There was only one waitress on staff this early in the morning. "That's Hope."

"How do you know her?"

"She works here."

Harley snickered. "Is that all? I thought in small towns like this one, everyone knew each other because you were all related or something."

"I'm not related to your uncle," Mason pointed out.

“You know what I meant.” Harley picked up a menu and looked it over. He watched her carefully, looking for any sign that she was regretting her stance on breakfast. At first, he didn’t see anything, but then there was a glimmer of something. It was small, and if he hadn’t been watching her closely, he wouldn’t have caught it. There were several swallows in succession. Her mouth was watering. Not hungry? There was no way.

Fortunately, he knew better than to challenge her on that front. Mason sat quietly, choosing instead to watch people come and go from the diner. There were the usual cowboys. Hope’s son, Finn, came in just before their food came out.

Hope stopped chatting with Finn long enough to bring them their food. She placed a plate in front of Mason and one in front of Harley. “Enjoy,” she sang, then scurried off.

Harley stared at the plate and her stomach made that incessant noise.

Mason bit back a smile as he picked up his fork and dug into his food. He purposefully didn’t meet her gaze as he ate. But just as he suspected she would, Harley finally picked up her own fork and started taking small bites.

They ate in companionable silence. It was actually quite nice. It wasn’t often he had company for breakfast when he came to Sal’s. And when Harley’s mouth was full, she was actually pleasant to spend time with.

About ten minutes into their meal, Mason grabbed his napkin and wiped at his mouth. He got to his feet, and only when Harley shot him a curious and slightly concerned look did he bother telling her where he was going. “I’m going to make that call to your uncle. I’ll be right back.”

He headed outside, pulling his phone out of his pocket as he reached the sidewalk. The number was saved on his phone. Originally, he’d been planning on calling Mr. Abrams today to tell him that he’d be passing on the job offer officially.

Mason stared at the number. He couldn’t believe he was about to call this man and tell him the exact opposite of what

he had intended.

The truth of the matter was that Harley had given him an idea. She'd made a good point when she'd said that money would solve some of the problems they had at the ranch. Wade would have killed Mason for bringing up such a concern. They'd finally pulled themselves out of the gutter. His oldest brother was a proud man, and he probably didn't want anyone to think they still needed help.

Perhaps they didn't. But that didn't mean that a little extra income would hurt.

Mason sighed. Mr. Abrams had made an offer that would be ridiculous to turn down. The money he would be getting would not only help with the ranch but also solidify another Keagan's future.

At this point, it wouldn't matter if Harley was bluffing or not. He didn't need Harley's money or the projects she'd promised. He only needed what Abrams had offered.

Mason hit the call button and brought the phone to his ear.

Abrams answered on the first ring. "Harriet? Is that you?" He cursed. "I get it. You're an adult who can do whatever she pleases. But understand this—"

"Sir, this is Mason Keagan."

There was a long pause. The shock coming through the speaker was palpable.

Mason cleared his throat. "I'm calling to inform you that I will be taking that job." He gave the man a few seconds to process what he'd just said. "And I wanted you to know that Harley is with me."

"Who?"

"Harley—Harriet. Your niece. She came to see me this morning. Apparently, she wanted me to take the job offer."

"Why's that?" Abrams didn't sound as pleased as Mason had thought he would, but then again, it was still early, and the man had been worried about her. He had every right to be cranky.

“Because I thought about what you said. I think it would be wise of me to take this opportunity and run with it.”

“You misunderstand. Why did my niece want you to take the job?”

Mason shifted uncomfortably even though he knew the man couldn't see him. “She said... she wanted the buffer between you.”

Abrams grunted. “And you believe her.”

“I don't have any reason not to, sir.”

There was another long pause. “I wouldn't take anything she says at face value. My niece can be one of the most manipulative people there is. If she wants you to take this job, I'd watch my back if I were you. Mark my words. She's got a plan.”

“Sir?”

“I don't know what she has to gain from it, but she's thinking of something.”

Mason turned to the window, watching Harley chow down on the breakfast her body desperately needed. “With all due respect, sir, I think I will be making my own judgments on the matter.”

“As you should.” There was some shuffling on the other end of the phone call. “When are you available to come over and sign some paperwork?”

“I'm not sure. But the earliest day I can start will be tomorrow. I need to have a conversation with my family first.”

“I understand.” The shuffling on the other end of the line resumed. “I'll see you tomorrow.” Before Mason could hang up, Mr. Abrams spoke again. “When can I expect to have my niece home? She's got chores she needs to complete.”

“I'll have her home within the hour, sir.”

Another grunt, and then Mr. Abrams hung up the phone.

Mason still watched Harley from where he stood outside. She had finished nearly half of her food. All of her bacon was

gone, and he watched in veiled horror as she reached across the table and plucked the last remaining piece of bacon from his plate.

He shoved his phone in his pocket with a shake of his head and hurried inside before she decided to commandeer his last sausage link, too.

After they were done eating and had pulled up in front of Abrams' house, Mason glanced at Harley out of the corner of his eye. Never in a million years would he have believed it if someone had told him he'd be taking a job away from his family and to *help* a girl he couldn't stand. Harley was barely tolerable, and he attributed the small part that *was* tolerable to her looks. He still couldn't believe someone like her existed.

She reached for the door handle, then stopped and her eyes locked with his. "Thanks for breakfast."

He nodded sharply.

"I don't know what my uncle has in store for me, but if I'm missing when you get here tomorrow, he should be the prime suspect." She smiled. It wasn't the cocky grin he was used to. Nor was it the kind of smile that demeaned him. This one was different from all the others he'd seen. It sent a chill down his spine that he wasn't prepared for.

The longer they maintained eye contact, the more Mason thought he needed to say something. But then Harley saved him from that when she pushed open the door. She paused once again just outside of his truck. "I had a really nice time."

Mason wasn't about to admit to any of that. He needed to keep the upper hand if he wanted to come out on top. So, he did what any rational person might. He told her the one thing that would push her off balance.

"I know your real name isn't Harley."

She froze much like he would have thought a gargoyle would—mid-shock.

"I'll see you tomorrow, *Harriet*."



## *Harley*

Harley gaped at Mason until he pulled his truck forward and she was forced to slam the door shut. She watched the truck drive away until it was out of sight. There was only one person who would have told him that.

Her hands balled into fists. She'd told everyone in her family, all her friends, that she never wanted to be referred to as Harriet. And her uncle had gone and done the worst thing he could have. This was worse than him withholding supper.

He'd spilled a secret she'd never wanted to follow her here.

Harley let out an exasperated growl and stormed toward the barn. If Vern was in there, he was going to get a piece of her mind. And if he wasn't, he would be lucky. She didn't even allow her mother to call her by her given name.

Unsurprisingly, Vern was nowhere to be found. He wasn't in the barn anyways, which was fine by Harley. No matter, she'd be seeing him for lunch after she got all her chores done. She'd rub it in his face and then let him have it for letting her name slip.

Over the next hour, Harley shoveled out all of the manure with a vengeance and dumped it in a bucket she'd retrieved from the storage shed. The whole time she worked, she went over and over what Mason might be thinking now that he knew what her real name was.

He probably thought she was just some prissy rich girl who was trying too hard to be something she wasn't.

Well, the joke was on him. She had decided long ago who she was. She didn't have a crisis of identity, no matter how much her mother would have loved to use that as an excuse.

She'd gotten every piercing and every tattoo knowing exactly why, and she loved every one of them. Harley had only gone to college because she'd stupidly thought that would be

enough for her parents to relinquish the trust fund she knew she was going to get.

*That* had been her only mistake and the one thing she regretted. If she'd been smarter, she would have figured everything out before she fell down the rabbit hole that led to her uncle's ranch.

In no time, the horse stalls had been cleaned out and were ready for the animals to settle in. Harley set her focus on the next chore her uncle had wanted her to do yesterday when he'd gotten her started—but only because she wasn't ready to face Vern and tell him off.

There was something to be said about manual labor and how it seemed to burn off her fury. The fire that had once roiled in her stomach had fizzled out, and now she wasn't ready for a confrontation.

The anger was still there. She could feel it pulsing quietly in the back of her mind. She despised her name for no other reason than it belonged to someone she didn't identify with. The memory of her late great-grandmother lingered no matter what choices Harley made. She could feel the old woman quietly judging her in everything she'd done.

On more than one occasion, Harley had been compared to her or reminded of her namesake. Why couldn't she uphold the family name the way it ought to be done?

That was why she'd changed her name—not legally, of course—but enough to make it clear she no longer wanted to be associated with it.

Vern wouldn't understand.

Or he wouldn't care.

Harley had made it to the loft of the barn and had dragged a bale toward the edge to toss down. She paused as that thought sank in. For all intents and purposes, she was alone. She'd thought she'd come to terms with that.

Apparently not.



Her fury continued to fade away, simmering into something less volatile. If she charged into Vern's office and yelled at him over telling Mason what her given name was, he would probably just give her one of those dead-pan stares of his. For all she knew, an argument would only lead to him adding to her list of chores. In the end, she'd be put in her place just like yesterday.

Harley gave the bale one final shove and watched it tumble to the main level. Now all she needed to do was grab the pitchfork and spread it. She spent the next hour painstakingly tossing the straw into the stalls.

By the time she was done, her arms and legs ached. She wouldn't have been surprised if they fell off right then and there. She wiped her head with her forearm, huffing and puffing and willing her heart to slow.

A shuffling sound behind her set her heart racing once again and Harley spun around to find her uncle standing a few yards away. His blank expression masked everything that might have given her a clue as to what he could be feeling.

Uncle Vern might not be as terrifying as Harley's mother, but he was still an Abrams. Drawing on what little strength she had, Harley straightened her back and lifted her chin. She wasn't going to show him weakness. No matter what else happened while she was here in Copper Creek, she wouldn't allow him to win.

He quirked one eyebrow as he glanced around her. "You missed breakfast," he grunted.

She stiffened, that latent fury returning. "You said I didn't earn it." She gripped the pitchfork with both hands until her hands went numb, itching to hurl a few accusations right back at him, but then he stopped her.

Vern jerked his chin toward the exit. "It's time for lunch."

"I—" She frowned. While her whole body howled with the strain of physical labor, she couldn't make sense of the fact that she'd lost track of time to that degree.

“It isn’t much. I usually just make grilled sandwiches for lunch.” He cleared his throat and looked away. “Anyway, it’s ready.” With that last statement, he headed out of the building, disappearing from view.

Not for the first time did Harley’s mouth hang open in surprise. What game was he playing? He had to be toying with her; that was the only thing that made sense. He was trying to throw her off balance.

Harley put the pitchfork against the wall, her eyes narrowing. Uncle Vern wasn’t going to get to her. She refused to allow him to push her around. As soon as she had Mason here and she was able to win him over, she’d be sitting pretty. The rest of the summer would be smooth sailing. She smiled. If she played her cards right, she’d be able to convince Mason to do most of her chores, too.

She followed her uncle into the house, pausing only when she saw the table set for two. There were plates with sandwiches, a bag of chips, and empty glasses with a pitcher of water nearby. Vern pulled out his chair and took a seat. He didn’t bother meeting her gaze as he dumped some barbeque chips on his plate. Then he filled his glass with water.

Every action made it clear that he didn’t care what she was going to do. He’d invited her. He’d gotten her food. That was all he was expected to do at this point.

Harley washed her hands and then approached the table, fully expecting her uncle to tell her that she better eat up now, because if she didn’t do more work by the time dinner rolled around, she’d be going hungry again.

Instead, he sat quietly munching. There was no mention of where she’d slipped off to this morning, though she figured Mason had told him everything. He didn’t comment on the job she’d done in the barn. The only sound was the crunching of the potato chips.

It felt eerily like the family meals she’d been forced to share with her mother... only not nearly as cold.

Sitting across from her uncle was different in one way. She didn't feel the absolute judgment she used to feel from her mother. If anything, Uncle Vern was giving her some indifferent vibes.

Harley picked up her sandwich and took a bite. The grilled bread hit her hard with a crispy, buttery and salty texture. The cheese stretched from her teeth as she pulled the sandwich from her mouth. She got a better look and noted spinach and tomato inside the cheese sandwich. It wasn't what she was expecting from a grown man who lived on his own.

She glanced in her uncle's direction, but he was focused on his own meal. She wracked her brain for everything she could remember her mother telling her about him. He'd never married, but she wasn't sure if that was because he'd never found the right person or if he'd never been interested—then again, those sounded like the same thing to her.

Picking up a chip, she fiddled with it as she contemplated the fact that he didn't have any kids of his own. He probably dodged a bullet with that decision. At least he didn't have someone he would be chronically disappointed in.

“You're free to do whatever you'd like for the remainder of the day.”

Her head snapped up and she stared at her uncle with surprise. “But my chores—”

“You did more than enough for your first official day.”

She wasn't sure, but she thought she saw a hint of a smile tugging at his lips. There was nothing she could say. Never in a million years did she think she could feel this elated over *not* having to work. Those chores had broken up the monotony in her day already, and it was only half-way done.

“Perhaps you'd like to go into town and pick out a few things from the supply store.”

Her nose wrinkled. What did she need with supplies? He couldn't actually be suggesting that she would want to get corn feed or tools, was he?

This time, Vern did smile. “I thought you might want to get some more appropriate clothes.” He nodded toward her. “Those shorts aren’t going to cut it when you’re riding.”

“Riding?” she squeaked. The last time she went riding was when her mother was going through a dressage and 4H phase. Mrs. Pembroke had insisted that all the girls Harley’s age were competing.

Unfortunately, Harley hadn’t figured out the best way to stay in the saddle. That experience was one of the first to push her away from her mother. Her failed dressage career was the first major disappointment for them both.

“Yes, riding.” Vern drew her back to the present. “You’re going to be working the ranch for the next couple months. You realize that is going to require you to get in the saddle and help out with the livestock.”

“But I thought... let me assure you, me getting in the saddle is the last thing you want.” There was a slight tremble to her voice, one she prayed he wouldn’t notice. Something told her that he wouldn’t care even if he noticed her nerves. Based on her recent experiences, she didn’t have much hope that her uncle would let her get away with keeping her feet solidly on the ground.

Vern wiped his mouth with a napkin. “Regardless, you’re going to need a good pair of boots and some jeans that don’t look like they’ve been put through the woodchipper.”

She sucked in sharply, cutting off the air that would have been a laugh. “I’ll have you know my pants probably cost more than...” Her voice trailed off as Vern met her gaze without humor. Once again, he was proving just how little he cared about her choice in clothing. Harley’s eyes dropped to her lap and she fidgeted. “Okay. I’ll pick out some new things.”

“Good.” Vern got to his feet, gathering his dishes as he did. He moved across the room toward the kitchen sink, then paused. “I don’t know what you said to Mason to get him to agree to working for me, but I want to make it clear I’m the one calling the shots.”

She went stiff, not daring to meet his gaze.

“You came here because you have made a series of unfortunate decisions. You’re here to gain some character. As such, you’re going to learn hard work and manners that your mother failed to instill in you. This experience will only be as easy or as hard as you make it.”

And just like that, Harley’s defenses went up. “This is a prison, not a vacation. I get it,” she muttered.

For a moment she thought he might comment back—to tell her that she was ungrateful and selfish. But he didn’t. Vern dumped his garbage, placed his dishes in the sink, and then left the room.



## *Mason*

This was a mistake. Mason knew it the second he drove up to Mr. Abrams' home. It wasn't just the fact that he would be forced to interact with Harley—a woman who continued to rub him the wrong way—but also the fact that he couldn't bring himself to tell his brothers that he'd been hired by a neighboring ranch weighed on him.

Wade didn't care. Elijah was who Mason worried about. Mason wasn't sure how his older brother would react. For all he knew, Elijah would get it in his head to disown any member who didn't support the family one hundred percent.

Mason let his truck door shut and leaned against it as he contemplated the consequences of driving away. Mr. Abrams wasn't like the more well-known families in town. He wasn't as wealthy as Shane Owens, and his reach didn't go as far as Mr. Callahan's. Even the Baker family had more pull in the community.

For all intents and purposes, Vern Abrams was a hermit. As far as Mason was aware, the old man didn't have any friends in town and didn't want any. That was why it was so surprising when Mr. Abrams asked Mason to work for him—even more shocking that he was willing to leave his estate to Mason when the time came.

A sigh burst from Mason's chest.

Who was he kidding? He knew better than to believe he could turn down Abrams' offer. The Keagans had always struggled to make ends meet. Even with a family of twelve, they couldn't bring in enough to support their family. Wade was doing a better job now that he had Brielle's help, but the Callahan influence could only go so far.

Mason reached into his truck through the open window and grabbed his cowboy hat. There were worse things than dealing with Elijah's wrath and Harley's annoying antics. He

wanted a good future—one where he could provide for everything his future wife and family would need.

He wasn't sure how much money he'd get from Mr. Abrams, but a turn-key farm was more than enough to get him started. Mason hurried up the front steps. The family should have been done with breakfast if they shared the same kind of schedule most of the farmers and ranchers around this area followed. That meant he'd likely find Abrams in his office or out working. From the looks of it, the former was more likely.

Mason couldn't hear or see evidence that anyone was out working with the animals or in the fields. He rapped his knuckles on the door and waited for someone to answer. When no one came, he headed down the steps toward the barn. There had to be someone around.

Mr. Abrams had agreed to meet with him to go over the paperwork for their agreement. Mason stepped into the barn and wandered along the stalls. Then a flash of something black caught his attention in the one to his right.

He stopped and moved closer. Harley sat among fresh straw. She had a phone in her hand and her thumb swiped upward as she stared at it. Her knees were pulled up to her chest, and that was where she rested her hand. Mason watched for a few moments, then rested folded arms across the stall door. "Done with your chores already?"

Harley's head snapped up and she dropped her phone. The look on her face made it clear she had been caught doing something against the rules. Her eyes darted to the straw where she retrieved the phone and she jumped to her feet. "How long have you been spying on me?" she accused. "Didn't your parents teach you any manners?"

Mason scowled. There was no way he was going to engage with her. Her statement was nothing but a big red flag. He couldn't work for Mr. Abrams—not when he would have to be around Harley every day.

He turned around and took a few steps toward the exit. "Do me a favor and tell your uncle that I've changed my mind." Mason tossed the words over his shoulder, not caring



that this decision would destroy any respect he might have gotten from Mr. Abrams. He wasn't going to get the farm anyway.

"Wait, what are you talking about?" Harley hurried after him, barreling past him, only to come to stand in his way with both hands held up. "You can't. You already agreed..."

Anything he might have said to her in that moment died on his tongue as his eyes swept over her outfit. She wore a button-up shirt rolled up to her elbows, a pair of overalls, and boots. For the first time since he'd met her, she looked like she'd been born and raised in Colorado.

A smile tugged at the corners of his lips as he dragged his gaze back to her face.

Her worry shifted to contempt. "What are you looking at?"

Mason shook his head, chuckling as he removed his hat to run a hand through his hair. "Nothing."

She crossed her arms, her eyes darkening. "You're making fun of me!" she snapped.

"I didn't say a single thing."

"You didn't have to. You're making fun of what I'm wearing. I can tell."

He placed his hat on his head, chuckling as he brushed past her. "I'm doing no such thing."

There was a brief moment when he thought Harley would leave the conversation where he had, but then she chased after him again. "You can't leave," she insisted.

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"Because... you agreed."

"Well, I changed my mind."

"Why?" She'd come around to stand in front of him again. This time her hands were on her hips. "Was it something I said?"

Mason's frown returned. "Maybe you just can't accept that you're not everyone's piece of pie. I don't owe you anything, and I'd rather not put myself through the torture of spending time with you."

She gasped and her face turned a delightful shade of scarlet. He took this moment to move past her once more. Nothing could have prepared him for the groan that burst from her small frame as she hurried toward his truck and blocked his door. Her hands were splayed out at her sides, preventing him from gaining access to his vehicle. "Don't go."

Lifting a brow, he kept his eyes trained on her. Before he could say anything else, she said the one thing that was enough to make him reconsider.

"Please," she whispered.

The desperation in her voice was enough to catch him off guard. Thankfully, he wasn't the trusting type. "I don't understand why this is so important to you. Do you have a bet going on with your uncle or something?"

She flushed again. "Of course not. I..." She pressed her lips together firmly. "I just think it's going to be easier for me if I have someone else to take the brunt of the work off my plate. The way I see it, there's only the two of us here. My uncle and me. I know my uncle well enough to see that eventually, he's going to have me doing a lot more than I'm able to."

"You don't know that." His eyes swept over her for a second time. "Seems to me he's doing a good enough job at easing you into it. Didn't take long to have you dress the part."

Her blush deepened, as did her scowl. If looks could kill, he might have been turned to dust right there. "The agreement I made with my mother is to be here for the summer and learn a thing or two about working hard. If I do a good enough job, there's a chance my sentence could be shortened. I don't know. Maybe you would be able to... put in a good word with my uncle." She lifted her shoulders listlessly, then dropped them.

He snorted. “A good word would have to be earned, and you aren’t instilling that kind of faith in me.” He watched a myriad of emotions flit across her face before she dropped her eyes to the ground.

“You don’t like me. I get it. But maybe after you get to know me—”

“Fat chance.”

Still she didn’t look up at him. A twinge of guilt swept through him and he heaved a sigh. Somehow, he’d grown soft. Helping Harley out wasn’t something he should have felt pressed to do, and yet here he was feeling bad for her. She didn’t belong here; that much was clear. She hated it here, and all she wanted was to be set free. She was like a wild creature who didn’t want to be caged.

Mason groaned, dragging a hand down his face as he turned back toward the house. He could hear her shifting behind him, though she was smart enough not to utter a word. She could probably sense that he was close to giving in. Well, she was going to be disappointed. All he needed to do was find Mr. Abrams and let him know that this wasn’t going to work out. Harley would have to find a different character witness to help manipulate her uncle.

“Where’s Mr. Abrams?”

“I thought you’d already seen him.”

Mason faced her, shaking his head. “I haven’t seen him.”

Instant worry crossed her pretty features. “He wasn’t in his office? He said after his ride this morning, he was going to wait for you in his office.”

Mason’s chest tightened and he glanced toward the barn. “Did you see the horse he took? Is it back?”

She paled, shuffling away from the truck as she shook out her hands and then crossed her arms. “I don’t remember.”

“How can you...?” Mason pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath. She wasn’t used to being here yet. And instead of working, she was hiding away. She probably had no

idea what was going on around her. “What direction did he go riding?”

Harley shook her head, lifting her shoulders and dropping them.

“You’re telling me you don’t know what direction he might have gone or if his horse even came back?”

Slowly, she shook her head again.

He released a groan and charged toward the barn.

“What are you doing?” Harley hurried to catch up with him and fell into step beside him. “Are you going to go looking for him?”

“What other choice do I have?”

“We could call the sheriff. I bet they have a search and rescue team they could send out.”

He stopped and faced her. “I know you’re new here, but Copper Creek isn’t that big. The search and rescue team would take too long to organize. We don’t know how long your uncle has been missing or if he’s hurt. It’ll be faster if I just head out there on my own. Your uncle’s property isn’t as big as some of the others out there. The trails are worn enough that chances are good I’ll find him.” Mason hurried toward the barn. “You should stay here, though. If he gets back and needs help, then you should call someone.”

Harley scrambled to keep up with him the whole way until he had a horse saddled. He led the animal out to the nearest and most weathered trail.

Mason mounted the horse and stared down at Harley grimly. “If I’m not back in thirty minutes, call the sheriff.”

“Call the—what do you mean, if you’re not back in thirty minutes? Do you think you might actually get lost?” Harley’s eyes darted this way and that, fear emanating from every strained muscle.

“You’ll be fine. You have your phone. Just don’t come looking for us. Stay put, you hear me?”

Harley nodded. "I understand."

With that, Mason pulled the reins around and tapped his boots into the horse's flanks. As calm and confident as he'd been when giving Harley instructions, he couldn't deny the anxiety he felt in this very moment. If Mr. Abrams was hurt or worse, then what would happen to this farm? What would happen to Harley and her family? He didn't want to think about any of that at the moment.

He just needed to find the old man and make sure he would be able to figure out what to do with his property.

The farther he rode, the more one thought overcame all the others in his mind. If he were honest with himself, he'd admit that he already knew what needed to be done. If Abrams was hurt or incapable of working, he'd need someone who could take care of things until he was on his feet again.

Well, there went every chance he had at walking away now.

Mason was stuck.

About seven minutes into his ride, movement ahead on the trail caught his attention. A chestnut brown mare grazed on some grass that grew on the side of the trail. If the horse was here, then Abrams would be nearby.

At least, that was what Mason prayed for.



## *Harley*

*H*arley paced in front of the barn. Every few seconds she looked down at her phone where she'd set a thirty-minute timer.

She should have never snuck into Vern's office to get her device while he was riding. Maybe if she'd been working, she would have noticed that he hadn't returned in a reasonable timeframe. If she had paid better attention, she might have been able to call for help sooner. She felt like such an idiot.

On top of that, she hadn't exactly oozed likability when Mason had caught her with her phone. He didn't even know that she wasn't supposed to have it yet. If she'd only played the whole thing off as being startled, maybe she wouldn't have scared him off.

How impulsive of her! She'd been so utterly reckless, and this was her life she was gambling with.

Her pacing turned to stomping as she stared out in the direction where Mason had gone. He'd only been gone ten minutes, but he had grown so antsy that she was considering calling for help already. What would he do if she broke the rules? The worst that would happen was that he'd walk away from the gig. Then she'd be on her own to fend off the demands her uncle had made of her.

That didn't sound nearly as bad as finding out that her uncle could be injured somewhere. There was only one reason she could think of for why he wouldn't have shown up on time.

Vern had to be seriously hurt. He could be unconscious somewhere. What if he'd hit his head on something and he couldn't remember who he was?

While she hated the idea of staying here with him, it was the lesser of the two evils that had been presented to her. The other option had been to stay home with her mother and partake in her high society events.

Harley's heart continued to pound away like it had been fueled by nuclear power. She stopped her pacing and watched for Mason again. Chewing on the inside of her cheek, she looked down at her phone and considered the consequences of calling for help once more.

No, Mason had insisted she wait the full thirty minutes. She could do that for him. That wasn't too difficult.

She just had to wait.

Suddenly, a brown horse materialized over the edge of the hill where the trail disappeared. Her whole body went stiff and numb. That wasn't the horse Mason had taken. It had to be her uncle's.

She stood on her toes, holding her breath until she felt light-headed. The horse continued to trot toward her and she grabbed at its reins just as another horse, led by a tall cowboy, lumbered over the hill. On the back of the horse was another figure.

Harley blew out her anxious breath, her pulse roaring in her ears. Mason had done it. He'd found her uncle. Emotion burned behind her eyes and she leaned into the horse as her knees buckled.

She'd only been here for a couple days, but she'd grown attached to her uncle in a way that surprised her more than anything else. He'd infuriated her. He'd bossed her around. But somehow, he'd also made her feel safe.

Pushing down that strange thought to a place where she didn't have to deal with the confusion it created, she focused on the men as they approached.

It felt like it took forever for them to arrive at the barn, and the moment they came close enough that she could get a good look at her uncle, the concern returned. His face was pale, and he held his arm at an awkward angle.

"What happened?" she demanded.

"I'm fine, Harriet. It's just a broken arm," Vern said. "Mason here will drive me to the hospital, and I'll get it casted."



“I think there’s something wrong with his leg, too. Might be his hip,” Mason said.

Harley’s eyes darted to Mason. For a brief moment their gazes locked. A chill swept through her as she realized just how bad this could have been. With both a leg and an arm out of commission, Vern wouldn’t have been able to make it home. Clearly he hadn’t taken a phone with him, which was why he didn’t call. And she’d been so distracted that she wouldn’t have noticed he was gone until later in the day.

Her stomach roiled. His injuries might not have been her fault, but it would have been her fault if he hadn’t been found in time. They were lucky that Mason had scheduled an appointment today.

She looked down at the phone she still held. Maybe her uncle had been right to take it away from her when she’d arrived. Harley dropped it in her pocket quickly so her uncle wouldn’t notice. She’d return it to his office while he was gone.

Mason handed her the reins for the second horse and helped her uncle down. Together, they hobbled toward Mason’s truck. It wasn’t until he had Vern all situated that Harley realized she didn’t know what to do with the animals.

“Wait!” she called.

Mason stopped before opening the driver’s side door.

“What do I do with these guys?” She lifted the reins in either hand.

“Put them in their stalls,” Mason called back.

He got in his truck before she could clarify that she wasn’t sure how to remove all the gear or what to do next. Harley watched them drive away, feeling even more lost than she had when she’d arrived.

“Come on,” she muttered to the horses. “Let’s see if I can get you guys situated.”



HARLEY SAT on the porch waiting for Mason to return with her uncle. She'd searched the internet for how to take care of an animal after going for a ride. After she'd clumsily taken the gear off, she'd brushed them down and given them water.

It was a different kind of an experience than she'd ever had before. The horses seemed to enjoy the brushing and one of them even nuzzled her a little bit for it. Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad experience out here after all.

Now she didn't know what to do. Lunch had come and gone. It was at this point she wished she had Mason's number. She'd nearly called her mother a few times but then thought better of it.

Instead, her thoughts had shifted to Mason and how he'd taken control of the situation. She'd never seen a guy take responsibility like that before. Mason was something else. No wonder her uncle wanted him around. He was her complete opposite.

As the afternoon continued to grow later, Harley became more antsy. Her stomach growled with an intensity she didn't think possible. Maybe she should go find something in the kitchen to make for when the guys got back.

She got to her feet and that was when she saw the truck rumbling up the road. Her whole body went on high alert for reasons she wasn't sure of. She stood on her toes and watched as the truck continued toward her.

As soon as it pulled to a stop, she hurried down the steps toward it and pulled open the passenger side door. Vern had one arm in a cast and a sling. His leg was also casted to the point he couldn't bend his knee. Her eyes widened and she covered her mouth with a shaking hand. "You said it wasn't bad," she whispered as she brought her eyes to her uncle.

"It's not," he grunted. "I've had worse." He waved her off as Mason came up behind her. She stepped back, and Mason

helped Vern out of the truck. He slung Vern's good arm over his shoulder and they made their way slowly to the house.

Harley shut the screen door and followed after them. Her uncle's dismissal of her had stung, but what did she expect? She hadn't exactly been the best guest so far. Mason helped Vern inside, and she lingered out on the porch, feeling more helpless than ever.

She'd expected Mason to come back out soon, but what should have taken ten minutes max ended up being closer to forty-five minutes. When the door opened, she jumped. Mason let the door shut quietly behind him. "He's gonna need rest tonight. Do you think you can handle being on your own?"

Her first instinct was to snap at him. She was an adult, after all. But she held back. It wasn't his fault that he had a certain opinion of her. She hadn't exactly shown him otherwise. Harley cleared her throat and nodded. "I'll be fine."

The silence that surrounded them felt heavy, weighing on her in ways she wasn't expecting. She glanced at him briefly, so many questions burning in her mind. But the only thing she could muster was, "Thank you."

His eyes darted to hers sharply.

She continued, "You didn't have to go out there and find him. And you definitely didn't have to take him to the hospital. That was really... kind of you."

Mason moved to the edge of the porch and leaned against it. "I didn't do more than anyone else in Copper Creek would have."

"That may be true, but you still didn't have to." Harley released a slow breath through pursed lips. The adrenaline that had been coursing through her body since they'd discovered her uncle was missing was still wreaking havoc. She couldn't seem to get to a calm state. "Did they tell you how long it's going to take him to get better?"

Mason turned away from her, resting his elbows on the railing as he stared out at the property. "Due to his age, they

think it's going to be at least two months, but more likely, it will be closer to three."

"Three months? That's the rest of the summer!" Harley glanced toward the house as if she could see through the brick and wood siding to see her uncle. "What are we going to do?"

"What do you mean what are we going to do?" Mason shot a look at her over his shoulder. "I'm going to help run things as planned."

Her eyes snapped back to him. "You are? I thought—"

"If I were you, I would consider staying quiet. I'm still not too keen on being here. Your uncle needs me more than you do, and I plan on running this place to his exact specifications."

Though she couldn't fault him for his words, that didn't mean they didn't sting. What else did he have to go off of? She hadn't exactly been the warmest of people. That, combined with what her uncle might have shared, would add up to some pretty deep prejudices.

Her jaw tightened, and she gave him a sharp nod. They were stuck with each other. Perhaps she had been too quick to believe she could manipulate him to do her will. This summer was proving to be a much bigger hassle than she originally thought.

"While your uncle is out of commission, you're going to have to step up. I hope you're aware of that." Mason turned to face her fully. There wasn't a degree of kindness that she could read in his gaze. What she'd seen glimpses of before had been shielded away.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning," he drawled, "you're going to have to prepare meals for your uncle."

The realization hit her hard enough to almost knock her off balance. She'd never had to take care of someone before. Could she cook a decent meal? Well, that depended on what Mason would consider decent. Did he expect her to help her uncle bathe or handle other private matters? Her gut clenched,

and she stared wide-eyed at Mason. “I don’t think he’s gonna want me to—”

“Relax. I’ve told him that I can spend my days here to help with... personal matters. I’ll be here before he gets up in the morning and leave after he’s gone to bed.”

She snorted. “You might as well stay here at that rate.” When she caught sight of his judgmental gaze, she looked away. “Well, there are plenty of rooms. I doubt you would want to travel back and forth...”

“I’ll be fine. It’s not that far.” Mason straightened. “Clearly, none of us planned for this to happen, so we have to make the most of it. I stand by what I said. I’m not going to put up with you messing around. If you’re going to be here, you’re going to pitch in. I have several siblings and we were all raised to do just that.”

“How many siblings do you have, really? Cuz I don’t believe for a second all those people are your family.”

He ignored her question. “Now, I would imagine that there are several things left to do today that didn’t get done. Your uncle is resting now, but he should eat something before he turns in for the night. Do you think you can manage?”

The way Mason spoke to her felt familiar in a way. She couldn’t place what it was about the authority that exuded from him, but it was nothing like the judgment she got from her mother on the regular. She glanced at him once more. “Yeah. I think I can do that.”

He gave her a sharp nod. “Good. I’m going out to the barn to take care of the horses.”

“The horses?”

Mason was down two steps when he stopped and glanced at her. “Yeah. I need to give them a good brushing so they don’t develop skin issues.”

“I already did that.”

“You... did?” Mason couldn’t hide his surprise.

She hugged herself, pleased that she'd finally thrown him off. "I'm not so useless after all, am I?" With that, she turned and escaped inside. She didn't need another snide comment from Mason. He'd made it all too clear how he felt about her.

Well, if he thought he had her all figured out, he was dead wrong. She'd show him. No one truly knew the real Harley Pembroke.



## *Mason*

Sure enough, when Mason entered the barn, he found both horses had been taken care of. Not only had she brushed them down, but she'd also given them the food and water they needed. Based on what he could see, all of the horses had been taken care of.

That didn't mean there weren't other things that Mr. Abrams had on his list to complete for the day. The list had been drawn up before Mason had even arrived. The old man wasn't the type to allow time to be wasted.

Fortunately, most of what was on said list was simple enough. Vern was a produce farmer. He had a couple animals—mostly horses—but he also had a chicken coop with twelve birds, a cow, and two goats.

Mason simply needed to attend to the animals and then move the water source for the potato field. Even as he completed these tasks, he couldn't help but go back to how Harley had surprised him. Mr. Abrams had insisted she didn't know much. She would have put the horses in their stalls and then used her phone to check her social media accounts. Mason didn't have the heart to tell him that Harley had already been caught with her phone. When he'd come back, he'd noticed it wasn't anywhere in sight. He hoped she'd been smart enough to put it away.

Still, he wondered what had prompted her to take care of the horses if she wasn't familiar with them. How did she know what to do? There was a small part of him that was severely impressed by the fact that she'd taken the initiative. There was a very real possibility that he had underestimated her.

When he finally finished with his work, the sun had set over the crest of the mountains in the distance. He couldn't go home until he ensured that Mr. Abrams was settled. The man would likely need help getting his casts wrapped up for a shower. Thankfully, he had one of those nice showers with the seat inside and one of those fancy shower heads that you could



hold in your hand. Not even Mason could sleep without a hot shower after working outside.

He headed inside the front door without knocking, closing the door quietly and taking stock of the front room. Neither Mr. Abrams nor Harley was present. He took off his hat and held it against his leg, unsure if he should call out for them or just head into a home that didn't belong to him.

The house was larger than his own. He wasn't even sure where the kitchen was located. Most likely it was toward the back of the house because right now, all he saw was a large entertaining space and a hallway that led to the office and a bedroom.

A deer bust was prominently displayed at the end of the hallway rather than in the front sitting area. He couldn't figure out why that would be, seeing as Mr. Abrams hadn't been married, and usually, a man would only care if his spouse did. He got a good look at the entertaining space. It wasn't anything special. The man had decent taste if he picked out everything himself, but Mason wouldn't have been surprised if he'd hired a decorator to do most of the work.

Loud clattering sounds echoed through the house, coming from an arched doorway on the far side of the sitting room. Through the arched opening, Mason could see what looked like a large pine display with ceramic plates and cups.

He glanced toward the hallway, then opted to move toward the arch. Following another clatter came a muffled curse. He stopped, a smile tugging at his lips. The closer he got to the kitchen, the more he could smell what she had prepared for supper. It was familiar, but he couldn't place what it was.

Mason turned the corner and got his first good look at Harley playing homemaker. She was still in those ridiculous overalls, but somehow she'd found an apron to go with them. She wore two oven mitts and had jumped back from an open oven. There was smoke—no, wait—heavy steam emanating from the appliance. She fanned it away and muttered something else as she reached for the pan.

Okay, maybe there was a little bit of smoke.

Mason hurried forward, catching her attention just in time for her to hold up a hand. “Stop right there. I’ve got this.”

His brows lifted and he backed up a step, watching with amusement as she pulled out a casserole dish.

Harley placed the pan on the stove and shut the oven door with a flourish. “See? Don’t you believe a word if anyone ever says I don’t know how to cook.”

Mason lifted his nose to get a whiff of the food, then peered at the pan. “Is that... macaroni and cheese?”

“And sausage,” she said triumphantly.

“You made macaroni and cheese,” he said with disbelief.

“What? It’s food, isn’t it?”

He bit back a grin. For someone with her background, he would have thought she’d want something classier. This was food for peasants.

“What?” she demanded again. “You said I needed to make supper. This was the only thing that would feed three people. My uncle needs to go to the grocery store. I mean, he doesn’t even have stuff for chocolate chip cookies.”

“Three?” Mason glanced at the food and his stomach growled.

“Yeah, aren’t you staying for dinner? I have corn and some watermelon, too. I was just about to make some instant lemonade, but I think we might stick with water tonight.”

Mason hesitated. He’d told her he would be staying until her uncle was in bed, but he’d never mentioned whether or not he would be eating with her. Her invitation had been unexpected.

“Here, will you set the table?” Harley shoved a stack of plates into his hands. “Vern had to go to the bathroom and insisted he didn’t want my help. He’s been in there a long time. You might want to check on him because heaven knows I’m not going anywhere near...” Her face flushed and she spun around so she didn’t have to meet his gaze.

“Yeah, I’ll check on him.” Mason moved to the kitchen table and put out the place settings. He peeked at Harley a few times, but she kept her back to him. First, the horses. Now, the dinner. He was beginning to wonder what other surprises she might throw his way. Harley wasn’t anything like he’d expected her to be.

Was she selfish and bull-headed? Yes. He’d seen that stubbornness first-hand. She was also the kind of person who didn’t shy away from sarcastic comebacks—something that was a big pet peeve of his.

But at the same time, she appeared to be just as stubborn in the opposite direction. Was it possible that she just needed a reason to prove herself?

Mason refused to put her in a box like that. Harley wasn’t like anyone he’d ever met before, and he wanted to see more. He waited until she glanced in his direction, then he thumbed over his shoulder toward the door. “I’m going to get your uncle. I’ll be right back.”

She nodded but didn’t utter a single syllable. He returned shortly after with her uncle and helped him take his seat. Mason opted to sit beside Mr. Abrams and across from Harley. The older man seemed a little better off; his nap must have done wonders. Mr. Abrams’ focus danced across the table, his countenance brightening. “You made this?” There was some wonder in his voice as he shot a look in Harley’s direction. “I didn’t even know we had the ingredients for it. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had macaroni and cheese?”

Mason watched Harley as a smile stole across her face and she looked down at her lap. “I think it’d be a good idea if I went to the store tomorrow. You have stuff for sandwiches and canned chili, but there isn’t much more.”

Mr. Abrams stabbed his fork into a piece of pasta and sausage. “There’s a lot of meat in the deep freezer in the garage. I have roast and steak, chicken, and pork chops. I’m sure you could make something great with any of that.”

Harley shook her head. “I’m actually not a very good cook. I... Mom usually used hired help for that.”

Mason watched the exchange between uncle and niece with veiled interest. Something familiar passed between them—an understanding perhaps. But just as quickly, it passed. He took a small bite, surprised at just how good it was.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” Mr. Abrams murmured. “It takes me back.” He pointed his fork at Harley. “Did you know that I used to make this for your mother and me when we were younger? We’d sneak the ingredients out to the pool house when I was a teenager, and I’d cook it for her. Granted, I was fifteen years older than her, so she was around five years old when I moved out.”

Harley’s surprise flashed across her face. “Really?”

Mr. Abrams nodded. “Really. She must have picked it up. Did she teach you?”

Harley shook her head vehemently. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen my mother lift a finger to cook.”

“Well, if she didn’t teach you how to do this, then she told the cook how to. I can tell. It’s just like what I used to make, and I certainly didn’t teach you.”

Harley blinked a few times and stared at her plate. “We *did* have a cook once teach me how to make it.” Her voice was quiet, thoughtful. Then she lifted her gaze. It was as if she’d forgotten that Mason was even there. “I thought you were scared of my mother.”

Her uncle chuckled. “Oh, I’m terrified of Blaire. But it didn’t always used to be that way. It happened slow, you know? I could see her changing whenever I’d come home to visit. But it wasn’t until your grandmother passed away that I saw the full effects of that loss.”

Mason fidgeted in his seat. This conversation didn’t seem like the one to be sharing with the hired help. He kept his gaze trained on his plate so he didn’t draw any attention.

Apparently, wealthy families had just as many struggles as poor families. And rebels could come from either home.

They finished their meal, shifting to other topics. Occasionally, he’d catch Harley looking at him, studying him

as if that was all she had to do to figure him out. That's when he'd turn his attention to her uncle and they'd discuss what needed to happen for the next week.

Either it was the macaroni or the pain meds, but Mr. Abrams didn't seem nearly as cross. Mason even caught him smiling. He helped his now employer to his room, first helping him get ready for bed and then finding him a book to read. As soon as he was assured that Mr. Abrams didn't need any more assistance, he slipped out.

Today had been one surprise after another. None of his brothers would believe him if they heard him go over the day's events. It was probably best just to keep quiet. Elijah would be the first to notice when Mason wasn't around the house as often, and that was when Mason would have to break the news to everyone.

A lot of changes were coming. The paperwork he'd signed was only a preliminary agreement. The original plan had been to get the farm, property and all, along with a lump sum as a jumping-off point.

After today, Abrams had insisted he needed to discuss something more. Mason wasn't sure what "more" would entail. All he knew was that Abrams wanted to talk to his lawyer first.

Combining this new information with Harley's offer would have the Keagans finally getting a step up—that is if Harley followed through with her promise. Based on how he'd treated her, he wasn't sure she'd agree to any of it. None of that mattered anyway. The farm, the property, and any money that he could squirrel away would be more than enough. Abrams was actually a decent man.

And Harley was turning out to be more than he bargained for, but this time in a positive way.

Mason headed down the hall toward the kitchen. He could still hear the clattering sound of dishes, and when he arrived at the doorway, he was surprised to find Harley washing everything by hand.

Slowly, he crossed the floor and pulled one of the dishes from the rinsing side of the sink. He grabbed the hand towel that had been left on the counter and started drying the plate. “You realize that your uncle has a decent dishwasher, right? You don’t even know what I would have given to have one of those when I was younger.”

Harley smoothed her shocked expression, handing him another plate. Using his same tone, she said, “You realize that the dishwasher does more damage to nice dishes than anything else, right?”

“It does?”

She nodded. “Anything of value needs to be hand-washed. You can’t just put the good stuff in there. If it doesn’t get broken, it will get water spots.” Harley gave him the last plate, her fingers brushing against his.

Her touch was soft, and unexpected. He stared at his own fingers where they had been touched just a little too long, interrupted only when she chuckled.

“These aren’t *that* nice. You should see the ones my mom has.”



## *Harley*

To say Harley wasn't prepared for the shift in Mason's demeanor was an understatement. He was actually being nice to her.

Okay, perhaps nice was too strong of a word. He was being respectful. He was helping clean up, that was all. Hadn't he said himself that he came from a large family who all pitched in?

Large family.

She worried her lower lip as she scrubbed at the casserole dish she'd used to make the macaroni. "I'm sorry about earlier."

Mason grunted.

"About dissing your family—when I said your mother should have taught you manners."

He stiffened. "It's fine."

"I'm not trying to make excuses, but I want you to know I was defensive because you startled me."

Mason peeked at her. "Yeah. I figured. You weren't supposed to have your phone."

Her eyes widened and she flushed as she held out another glass. "Did Vern tell you that?"

"Yeah."

She groaned. "Does he know I had it today?" That deep, sick feeling returned to her stomach. "Please tell me he doesn't blame me for what happened today."

Mason stopped what he was doing and faced her fully. "Why do you think he would blame you?"

Harley shrugged. "Maybe because I should be blamed."

"Did you throw your uncle from that horse?"

She huffed. "I don't see why that would matter."



“Answer the question.”

“No, I didn’t throw my uncle from his horse,” she muttered with derision.

“Then none of what happened today is your fault. You couldn’t have predicted what happened to your uncle any more than I could have. Sometimes things just happen.” Mason took the glass from her hand and dried it a little rougher than was necessary.

Harley studied him as his agitation grew.

“Regardless, if I didn’t have my phone, maybe I would have noticed that he wasn’t back yet. Maybe I could have called someone or—”

“Neither one of us blames you for what happened, okay? It was an accident. He’s just lucky that we were both here to be able to help him.”

Harley turned to the dishes again. “I suppose you’re right.”

They continued washing and drying the dishes until every last one was clean. Together, they put everything away. Once the kitchen was clean, Harley fully expected Mason to take off and tell her he would be back in the morning. Instead, he leaned against the refrigerator, hovering as if he wanted to say something.

She moved a few paces from him and hoisted herself up on the island. “So... big family.”

“Yeah, but you already saw it first-hand.”

Harley grimaced. That was right. She’d spied on him. “It must have been nice. I bet you were really close to everyone growing up.”

“It wasn’t without its challenges,” he said. “I would say the same thing about your family situation, but based on what you and your uncle discussed at dinner, I suppose that wouldn’t be accurate.”

She made another face. “Let’s just say that growing up in my house wasn’t the most uplifting or encouraging setting. Every activity I was forced into doing. It was so my mother

could brag about her perfect little family in her perfect little house.” Harley snorted. “Except that house was like three times as big as this one and three times as lonely.” She didn’t dare look Mason in the eye. This was all too much information to be sharing with someone she barely knew.

“Sounds tough.” While she’d expected his voice to hold some kind of resentful judgment, she was surprised to find his tone was void of any of that.

Her eyes darted up to meet his, and she straightened a little. “More than you know.”

“I suppose money has its own kind of problems.”

Harley shrugged. “I don’t know. Money seems to be the only thing that helped. With money, I was able to escape. I got into a school across the country. I could buy the best gadgets and cars so I could escape the life my mother insisted I have.” She pulled her tank top off one shoulder. “You should have seen the look on her face when I came home with this. That had to be the best day of my life.”

Mason glanced at the tattoo and then looked away as if he were embarrassed to be looking at her.

She returned her strap back to her shoulder and bit back a smile. He had the cute, innocent cowboy thing going for him. If she wasn’t so intent on getting her trust fund and moving far, far away from where her mother could reach her, then Mason might just be the kind of guy she would want to get to know better.

“Anyway,” she continued. “That’s why I’m here, you know? I have a trust fund that I was supposed to get when I turned twenty. But here I am, twenty-four and...” She shrugged. “No trust fund. My parents amended the legal documents when I turned sixteen. They put something in the fine print that prevents me from getting a dime unless one of three things happen. Either I graduate from a college with my bachelor’s, I marry a college graduate, or I demonstrate undeniable maturity.” She rolled her eyes. “Seriously, it’s like... how vague is that?”

Once again, she couldn't maintain eye-contact with him. One glance in Mason's direction had her too embarrassed to go on. There were a thousand things he could judge her for, and her wanting the trust fund money was only the tip of the iceberg.

"Sounds like you need to distance yourself from your folks." He said it so quietly she wasn't even sure she heard him correctly. The way he stared off at a blank spot on the wall had her wondering what he was thinking about.

"I know, right? That's why I'm here. This is how I'm supposed to demonstrate maturity. They said if I could last three months out on Uncle Vern's farm, then I should be able to make mature decisions when it comes to my inheritance. So that's what I'm doing. I'm here to prove that if I can handle working hard under my uncle's thumb, then I can handle anything."

"And what would you do with the money if you got it?" He was watching her as he asked his question this time. His eyes drilled into her so deeply that she almost felt like he could see right through to her soul.

Harley squirmed beneath that piercing gaze. Before she'd met him, she might have said that it didn't matter what she wanted to do with her money. It was hers, after all. But now she felt like she needed a good reason.

The problem was that she didn't have an inkling of what she could do with that much money. Swallowing hard, she looked away. "I suppose the first thing I'd have to do is make good on that promise I made you." She glanced up at him, but his expression was unreadable. "You know, the one where I build you a cottage or another barn or something?"

Mason was quiet for a long time—longer than she'd expected. He didn't like that answer. Or did he? She couldn't tell, no matter how long she stared at him. Finally, he cleared his throat. "You don't have to do that. Your uncle is compensating me just fine."

She shook her head. "Uncle Vern might be well off, but I assure you, when this is all over, I'm going to have more

liquid assets than he does. He's in retirement. I doubt he's budgeting to give you what you need."

"It's fine," Mason muttered, pushing away from the fridge. "I should probably get going. We're going to have a rough couple of days getting everything figured out and on a good schedule. What time do you want to serve your uncle breakfast?"

Harley's voice died in her throat. The whiplash from the change in subject wasn't kind to her. "What?"

"Breakfast. I assured your uncle that I'd be here for his first meal, so you don't have to see him... indisposed."

For a countless moment, she couldn't believe what she was hearing. Mason was practically a stranger, and here he was, preparing to move heaven and earth to be there for her uncle.

"Well?" he asked.

She blinked. "Breakfast. Usually, he gets up at four... though I doubt he will do that tomorrow. Should we plan on six?"

"I'll be here at five-forty-five." Mason nodded to her and then headed for the kitchen door.

She turned to watch him go, torn between walking him out and staying put solely because she wasn't sure she could get out a coherent thought. It was already nine o'clock. For him to be here at that early hour meant he wouldn't get much sleep—at least *she* wouldn't. It always took her an hour to fall asleep, and that was on a good day.

Today had been, well, it had been one for the history books. It was best to leave Mason be. He was stuck in a bad enough situation as it was. She didn't need to add insult to injury.



TRUE TO HIS WORD, Mason arrived at five-forty-five on the dot. Vern wasn't up when there was a knock on the door, but

Harley was quick to answer so as to let her uncle sleep.

It was strange the way her world had tilted on its side since coming to Copper Creek. She still hadn't figured out what she was doing. For reasons unknown, she wasn't nearly as bitter.

She'd fixed a simple breakfast, miraculously not burning anything. Mason wandered off to do his own thing, coming to the kitchen only to grab Vern's plate before disappearing again. After about ten minutes, he returned and fixed himself a cup of coffee.

Harley sat at the table with her own mug, watching Mason with veiled curiosity. The rebel inside her wanted to push against everything he represented. If her uncle hadn't been injured, she would have debated whether it was better to mess with him to make him quit or if keeping him around suited her more.

Now, she could see that the answer was definitely the latter, though it wasn't without its own drawbacks. Harley got to her feet and moved across the room to stand beside him. Each of them seemed lost in thought, the only sound coming from the early morning news that Vern watched on the television down the hall.

"I hope you had breakfast," Mason said before taking a sip of his coffee. "You're going to need all the energy you can get."

"Did you eat before you came?" Even she could hear the accusation just beneath the surface of her voice. Authority did not go over well with her natural personality.

He lifted a brow, glancing in her direction out of the corner of his eye. "Fine, don't eat. But if you pass out in the middle of the field, I'm going to let the turkey vultures get you."

She wrinkled her nose. "Eww. That's a little dark, isn't it?"

Mason eyed her once more. "I said it before. I'm not a babysitter. You're an adult. You either want that inheritance of yours, or you don't. I couldn't care less what you do. But I'll tell you one thing right now, I can't handle this all on my own. If I have to find someone else to replace you, your uncle has

already agreed to pay them out of the funds your parents would have given you.”

Her mouth hung open. “You’re joking.”

He took one last swill of his drink and then turned to put the mug in the sink. “Life’s hard. You should have learned that a long time ago. Thankfully, you still have a chance to figure things out. I suggest you listen to what your uncle is trying to teach you. I’m just the mouthpiece.” He moved across the room with sure, long strides.

“Wait!” Harley put her mug on the counter a little too fast and the coffee sloshed over the rim. She chased after Mason through the door, down the stairs, and toward the barn. Her hand landed firmly on his shoulder. “What’s wrong with you?”

That irritating brow lifted once more. “What’s wrong with *me*? Nothing. That’s why I’m the one in charge.” The corners of his mouth twitched, lifting upward.

What a jerk! She’d underestimated him, and it was finally showing.

Mason turned and strode once again toward the barn. “I’m going to take one of the horses and check on the cattle. I need you to clean out the stalls and feed the other animals before I get back.”

“Before—” Harley shook her head. “I can’t do all of that before you get back. It takes me hours to clean out those stalls.”

“Then I suggest you get faster.” Mason didn’t even look in her direction as he tossed that statement toward her.

Harley swallowed down a growl. This was what she’d wanted, wasn’t it? He was the one who could help her out of this mess. She didn’t have to like him. She just needed to get him to like her. Gritting her teeth and clenching her hands, Harley forced a smile as Mason readied his horse. She watched him mount and then ride off.

In any storybook, this scene would have made the heroine swoon.

All she wanted to do was throw a tomato at his head.  
In due time.





## *Mason*

Normally, taking a ride out into the surrounding fields was something that put Mason at ease. It was like reading one of his books. He could escape the life he was currently living and just exist in a sort of bubble.

This time it was different. As hard as he tried, he couldn't make his mind go blank. He couldn't forget that the second he got back to the ranch, he'd have to be on guard. Harley might be playing nice right now, but she had plans. Both Mason and Vern had agreed on that.

The horse beneath him plodded along as if nothing were different. They were going for a ride and she could enjoy the sights and smells of her home. Oh, to be an animal without a care in the world.

Harley's face filled his thoughts, triggering memories of his dreams. She'd visited him there. Her green eyes flashing with amusement. Her soft touch setting his heart racing. Seeing her in person this morning had been nearly more than he could bear.

Fortunately, he'd managed to put up his barriers so he could avoid any manipulation on her end. Mason released a sigh as he adjusted his hold on the reins and forced himself to stay focused. The next couple of months would be long, but the reward at the end would be worth it. He could already hear the congratulations from his family as they added more assets to what they were building.

Contrary to what Mason told Harley, he took his time with the livestock. He wanted to give her as much time as possible to do the work he'd assigned to her so she felt at least a small degree of accomplishment. That was how things worked with his younger siblings. They all needed to have a moment where they felt like they were contributing and making a difference.

If Harley felt she was moving toward a goal, perhaps this whole situation would go more smoothly.

He hadn't expected her to get to feeding the animals. The stalls in the barn were a job that would have been time-consuming enough. However, when he returned to unsaddle his horse, not only did he find the stalls in excellent condition, but it appeared that the animals had been fed and the workbench near the door had been organized.

Harley wasn't anywhere in sight.

Mason had to prevent his heart from going into overdrive. She wouldn't have run off, would she? That was a stupid thought. Of course she'd go running off. She'd done so before—a couple times to his ranch and possibly more times he was unaware of. For all he knew, she was sending him a message.

He put the saddle away and hurried out of the barn to check the surrounding areas. She wasn't by the chicken coop, nor was she in the corral with the goats. She wasn't sitting on the porch or beneath the tree in the front yard. Mason sprinted toward the house and made a quick sweep but didn't find any evidence that she'd come inside since breakfast.

Thankfully, all the vehicles appeared to still be where he'd left them. Mason headed toward the pastures again, spinning around to watch for her in the direction from where he'd come. He'd taken too much time. He should have known better than to leave her unsupervised.

At this point it didn't matter that she'd gotten her work done. She was gone and probably getting into all kinds of trouble. What was he going to tell Vern? He couldn't exactly go inside and say he'd misplaced the man's niece.

Mason tore his hat from his head and raked a shaky hand through his hair. One day. He'd been here one day and he'd lost her.

“What are you doing?”

He yelped, jumping away from where she had suddenly appeared at his side. Harley smirked, her eyes sweeping over him. “You look like you could use a drink. But I doubt they sell much in the form of hard liquor around here.”

In a flash, Mason's hands grasped her upper arms and he gave her a little shake. "Where were you?" he demanded.

Her eyes widened. For a moment she remained frozen under his stare. Then she blinked and the spell was broken. She tore away from him. "I went next door to see if I could get some fresh apples, geez. What's gotten into you?"

Mason shifted his attention to where the neighboring property was. In the distance, there were rows upon rows of trees. His eyes dipped down to her hands, where she held a grocery sack weighed down with pink and red apples. "You... went to find apples?" His eyes narrowed as he lifted them to meet hers.

Harley shifted, her green eyes flickering like the flames of a fire about to get out of control. "Yeah. Apples. There's barely anything in that kitchen, and apparently, we're tossing aside our modern ideals of feminism now that you expect me to cook for everyone."

"This has nothing to do with feminism."

She placed a hand on her hip, popping it out as she let her sharp eyes drill into him. "Oh yeah? Then why aren't you cooking? Let me guess, your mother never bothered teaching her sons the importance of something like that."

A fire matching the one in her eyes burst to life deep inside him. "Will you leave my mother out of this? I *can* cook." Mason glowered at her, his voice calm but menacing. "I'm upset because you took off without leaving so much as a note. On top of that, I was gone for longer than expected. I didn't know if you were messing with me or if you ran away... heck, something bad could have happened to you and I wouldn't know where you were so I could help." His voice had risen toward the end, his temper finally showing.

Throughout his whole life he could count on one hand how many times he'd lost his temper, and this was one of them. She'd triggered something inside him, and he didn't know what to do about it.

There was a flicker of something behind those green eyes of hers. It was too short for him to evaluate, though. She was too good at hiding her feelings. Harley took a step toward him so suddenly he nearly stumbled backward.

“This is not a prison,” she said through gritted teeth. “I can accept that I’m here because of some bad choices I made, but that doesn’t mean you get to slide into the role of judge, jury, and executioner. May I remind you that I *asked* for you to accept this position because I thought it would be easier to work with you.”

He snorted. “I doubt that.”

She paused as if his retort had to sink in before she could continue. “Whatever you might think is going on, you’re wrong. If you weren’t so worried that I’d split, you might have noticed that I got a ton more done while you were gone. Maybe you should give me the benefit of the doubt before you go off treating me like a criminal.” Harley shoved the apples into his arms and stalked toward the house.

Mason turned in time to see the door slam shut.

Well, that didn’t go the way he’d wanted it to. He glanced down at the apples, feeling even more guilty than he probably should have. She was right about one thing, though. He shouldn’t have immediately jumped to the wrong conclusion. So far, she’d done what he’d asked of her. He didn’t have any reason not to believe she would follow the rules. Harley might have had a history of being manipulative, but he hadn’t actually seen it first-hand.

He heaved a sigh as he peered off toward the barn. They were ahead of where he’d wanted them to be. After he gave the horse a good brush-down, he’d have to make it up to her.



MASON PLACED the grocery bags on the kitchen table. The house was quiet—too quiet for his liking. It was a little later than he liked to eat lunch, but after brushing down the horse in the barn, he’d had to run home to deal with something Elijah

needed. Then he'd run to the market to get some groceries for Harley to use the next time she felt inclined to cook.

Granted, he wasn't sure if she'd ever pick up a spatula again after their little argument.

His ears strained for any indication that she was on the main level of the house. When he heard nothing, he started pulling the groceries from the bags and putting them away. He hadn't been lying about his ability to cook. In fact, he was probably one of the better cooks in the house, but Charlie was the one who loved it more, so he didn't get much practice.

It came with his joy of reading. If he hadn't been born into this family of ranchers, he might have decided to go to culinary school.

Mason left out the ingredients for simple fried chicken. He'd opted to purchase the meat without bones so he could cut it into strips. The breading was a simple combination of egg coating and breadcrumbs with his preferred spices. In no time, the chicken was sizzling in the cast-iron skillet. After flipping over the chicken, he retrieved the book he'd been reading. Two paragraphs in, Harley's voice tore away his concentration.

"What are you doing?"

For a second time that day, Mason nearly jumped out of his skin. He shot a disgruntled look in her direction, grateful she wasn't immediately beside him like last time. "What does it look like?"

"It *looks* like you're cooking." Harley moved over to the kitchen table and peered inside the bag he'd left out. "It also appears as though you've gone shopping." Her eyes darted to him, then back to the bag. For a moment it looked as though she was disappointed. Should he have offered to take her with him?

He shook off the thought. She'd been angry. The last thing either of them would have wanted at that time was to be stuck in the same vehicle for an errand. Mason turned back to the chicken and flipped the strips once more. "Yeah. You said

there wasn't much in the way of food. I thought I'd help out." He half-expected her to tell him he should have asked for a list at the bare minimum. But she didn't.

"Thank you."

Peeking at her, he found her staring into the pantry. "It was nothing," he said gruffly.

She stepped inside the small pantry, disappearing from view. Then she poked her head out, a smile hinting at her lips. "You bought chocolate chips."

"I did."

"Are you going to make cookies, too?"

He shook his head. "I don't bake."

"But you said—"

"I said, I cook. I don't bake. Two different things."

This time, her smile stretched a little wider. "Do you hear how ridiculous that sounds? It's all chemistry, isn't it? The mixing of ingredients and putting them in certain conditions to create a delicious reaction."

He chuckled in spite of himself. "Fine, I'll admit it. I can make cookies, but only because I have several siblings." Mason pointed at the pantry with the tongs he had in hand. "But I'm not doing a thing with those chocolate chips. I'm here for meals only because I'm helping your uncle with the day-to-day stuff. I'm not a housekeeper or a chef."

"But you're cooking right now..." There was a teasing lilt to her voice and the sparkle had returned to her eyes. She looked almost like an otherworldly creature, and it made him pause a moment too long. She stiffened, staring wide-eyed behind him. "Is the pan supposed to be smoking?"

Mason spun around, removing the pan he'd been working with from the heating element. Thankfully, most of the chicken had been removed and only two tenders had been slightly overcooked.

When he glanced back in Harley's direction, she'd disappeared back into the pantry. That had to be the most normal conversation they'd shared.

It had been... nice.

Mason's focus lingered on the door to the pantry, willing her to make another appearance so he could see that smile again. When she didn't, he turned back to the task at hand. The salad was already in the fridge and ready to go. The chicken was hot, crisp, and smelled like heaven. The only thing left to do was pull out the baked potatoes from the oven. By the time he'd dished up the food for Vern and taken it to him, Harley was seated at the table and waiting for him.

He took his own seat, but before he could dig in, she held out her hands across the table. Mason stared at them, his brow furrowed. She wanted him to hold her hand? Had she lost her mind?

Harley let out a laugh. "Don't you say grace?"

Mason replied, "Sure, but we didn't say grace at breakfast. Nor did we say it that day you bombarded me at my home. I didn't think it was something you did."

She shrugged. "There's more to me than you might realize. I suppose I've been avoiding that part of my upbringing."

"Why?" He shouldn't have blurted the question, but it was too late to take it back.

Harley nibbled on her lower lip. "I suppose part of it was out of spite. My mother was the one who always insisted on it. But the other part was because I didn't feel like God would want to hear from me."

He studied her for a moment, letting her words sink in. He believed in God. He'd go to church occasionally. But never once had he thought along those similar lines. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

She offered him a wan smile. "Sometimes. It makes you wonder, you know. How someone so perfect could still love someone... like me." Before he could argue with her, she

lifted her hands again. “Come on. The food is getting cold. Might as well start some good habits, right?”

“Right,” he murmured.





## *Harley*

Harley ate quietly, suddenly feeling very self-conscious. She didn't know what prompted her to say any of that stuff to Mason. He probably thought she had done so in order to make him think more highly of her.

And why would that matter?

Because while Mason was infuriating, he was also more genuine than any guy she'd met back home. He didn't pretend to be something he wasn't. Even when he was upset about her disappearance, it had been nice to realize that he was worried about her.

On top of that, he was a decent cook and he'd bought her chocolate chips. A smile stole across her face and she covered it the best she could with her glass. This had been a nice surprise. She hadn't been looking forward to another sandwich day.

Feeling his gaze on her, she glanced up at him and then immediately regretted it. Mason was staring at her like he'd never seen a woman eat fried food before. It unnerved her the way he didn't even bother looking away when he'd been caught.

"What?" she demanded.

"Nothing."

"Then stop looking at me like that."

"Stop looking at you like what?" Mason fiddled with his napkin, but his eyes didn't leave her face. "I'm not looking at you like anything."

"Yes, you are," she insisted. "You're staring at me like..."

"Like what exactly?" One side of Mason's mouth quirked upward as he settled back in his seat. "Like I'm trying to figure you out?"

"Well... yes."

“Am I not allowed to do that? Is there some unspoken rule that says I can’t study you?”

“No,” she stumbled over her words, “but it’s not polite to stare.”

He chuckled. “You know what I think? I think that you don’t want me to watch you too closely because you’re worried I *will* figure you out.”

Her strength waned and she looked away. “There isn’t much to figure out. I’m just some spoiled rich kid who disappointed her parents just enough to make them crazy. And I have an uncle who is just as crazy as they are who was willing to take me in so he could teach me a lesson.”

“I don’t think you believe a word you’ve just said.”

Her eyes snapped to meet his. “I’m not lying to you. I’m sure you’ve heard the whole story from Vern. I’m trouble with a capital T. And you shouldn’t trust me.”

“Oh, I don’t trust you.” His words conflicted with the grin he sported. “But that doesn’t mean I’ll immediately believe that you’re trouble. You already put me in my place earlier today for nearly doing just that.”

“So you’re admitting you were wrong,” she hedged.

“I’m admitting I was wrong,” Mason murmured so quietly she nearly couldn’t hear him. “I shouldn’t have suspected that you were doing anything wrong. Heaven knows I’ve seen people change. Shoot, my family had a reputation to overcome and we’re *still* trying to fix the way the town sees us. I guess what I’m trying to say is that I’m sorry.”

She stilled. In her entire life, she couldn’t remember a single person in authority apologizing to her. Every single one of them had made excuse after excuse. Never were they at fault. “You’re sorry.”

He nodded. “I’ll try to remember that you’re not who you were when you came here a few weeks ago. You’re not who you were yesterday.”

“What does that even mean?”

“It means that our experiences shape us. I’m going to judge you based on this point forward and not on your past. Don’t let your past define you.”

This time, Harley couldn’t bring herself to look away from him. His words had a profound impact on her psyche. A clean slate. That was what he was offering her. She could make her own choices from this point forward and they would add up to how he viewed her.

The concept was freeing.

“Does that sound acceptable?” Mason asked quietly. “Or do you have to think about it and check with that stubborn side of yours?”

Sour. That’s how his last statement tasted to her. Hadn’t he just said he wasn’t going to judge her? Wasn’t that word—stubborn—a label? As much as Harley wanted to believe him, she couldn’t bring herself to trust him like he probably wanted her to. She pressed her lips together in a tight line. “I suppose we’ll have to see, huh?” She pushed away from the table and grabbed her plate. “I’m going to eat outside on the porch. I need some fresh air.”

Where did Mason get off? He was so two-faced she couldn’t believe it. One second he was sweet and caring, making her believe that things could be different. Then, in the next breath, he showed his true colors. He would always view her as a stubborn brat. That was basically what he’d been telling her with that statement. He might have been smiling when he said it. His tone might have been light and teasing, but she could hear the underlying meaning behind the question.

Her parents used the same tactic. It was underhanded and it stung.

Harley stopped in her tracks, no longer pacing the back porch with her food in hand. She stared at nothing in particular as the realization hit her hard in the chest. She’d wanted to have that clean slate. Never before had she wanted something so *normal* in her life. She practically craved Mason’s approval.

What was wrong with her?

Harley shoved her dinner plate on a small table that likely used to hold a plant, then resumed her pacing. Something had changed. It had taken less than twenty-four hours and she was already disregarding everything that made her who she was. What had happened to her desire to be the one in charge? It was as if her mother's proximity was the one thing that fueled her.

A few days away from that woman, and Harley had lost all desire to cause problems for others. She groaned, flinging herself against the railing as she did so. Yes, she knew she wasn't going to win any Nobel Peace Prize with that mentality. But she'd never wanted that sort of thing for herself anyway.

She stared out at the pastures that spread out before her. What was it about Mason that made her want to change for the better? It wasn't a crush—for though he was reasonably attractive, she'd never stoop so low as to change her personality for a guy. It had to be something else.

Spinning around so she faced the house, she noticed the kitchen table was now vacant. Mason had left—probably to get more work done. Or he'd gone to tend to her uncle. Either way, she was no longer pinned beneath his stare. Her sigh eased the tension in her chest as her head continued to argue what sort of insanity she was currently dealing with.

Maybe she'd become terminally ill. That would explain her sudden longing to leave the dark side. Harley gnawed on her lower lip. This change wasn't a *bad* thing. And for all she knew, it was temporary. The second she left this place, everything could very well return to normal.

Her eyes drifted to the vacant chair where Mason had been seated. He stirred something within her that hadn't been entirely unpleasant. It had merely given her a momentary crisis of identity. She was still Harley Pembroke. She still had a plan. But perhaps she could amend the how of that plan.

No longer hungry, Harley headed inside to clean up lunch. Then she'd track Mason down and pretend whatever had happened during lunch was all a dream.



HARLEY PUT the last dish in the dishwasher, shut it and pressed the button. Every muscle in her body ached from the day they'd had. For some reason she couldn't decipher, she'd continued to push herself harder and harder just to keep up with Mason. Maybe she wanted to show him she was just as good as he was. Maybe she wanted to impress him. Or maybe she was just tired of people underestimating her abilities—including herself.

She rubbed her left shoulder with her right hand as she tilted her head from side to side. If this was what she had to look forward to for the rest of her summer, she wasn't sure how long she'd be able to do it. At some point she was certain she'd burn out.

That was fine. For now, she was trying to prove something, and she was okay with that.

Her thoughts shifted to her uncle. She hadn't gone into the other room to visit with him since Mason had set him up. He hadn't ventured out into the rest of the house since that first dinner either.

Something told her that it was for the best. They didn't have the best relationship at the moment. If she was honest with herself, she'd admit that no one had a great relationship with her.

Harley scowled, pushing aside yet another disparaging thought. Since when had she started judging herself so harshly? She couldn't recall a moment in her life when she had taken a good, hard look at her weaknesses. Not even when her mother was lecturing her on the way she'd styled her hair in junior high.

She took a deep breath and expelled it. Even if Mason wasn't going to follow his own rules, she would. No more letting her past define her. Starting here and now, she was going to be a better version of herself—at least until she found her way out of this ridiculous phase.

With the lights flipped off and the house quiet except for the television coming from her uncle's room, Harley headed toward the stairs only to stumble to a complete stop. Mason sat on the living room couch with his back to her. The only light on was the one that glowed just over his left shoulder. His head was turned down—reading a book, no doubt.

Harley took a step toward the stairs, then hesitated. That strange feeling that pulled on her whenever he was around called to her. Even if she'd wanted to head up the stairs to her room, her feet weren't going to allow it and she found herself wandering into the living room.

She passed Mason and headed straight for the bookshelf, peeking over her shoulder as she did. Sure enough, Mason was reading one of those books he constantly had at his fingertips. He didn't even bother looking up as she passed. Harley stood at the bookshelf, glancing in his direction every few minutes, wondering what was so interesting about his book that he could sit so still after a day like they'd had. He wasn't even reclining.

“What do you want, Harley?” Mason said quietly as he turned a page.

“I didn't say anything,” she said simply.

“No, but you're hovering.”

“I'm not hovering.”

Mason lifted his eyes to meet hers. “Yes, you are.”

She flushed. “Fine. I was wondering what you were reading.”

He shook his head. “It doesn't matter.”

Harley skipped closer and plopped herself beside him. “It does to me.”

Snapping the book shut, he got to his feet. “No, it doesn't. It's just a book. I don't ask you what you like watching on television or what music you like to listen to.”

She peered up at him, still seated on the couch. “But you could.”

“That’s beside the point. I don’t share what I read with others.”

She frowned. “Why not?”

He didn’t answer right away. There was a definite hesitation on his part that was almost comical.

Her eyes dipped to the book in his hands, but she couldn’t see the title. “It’s one of those sci-fi books, isn’t it?”

His grip tightened, and she could have sworn that his complexion turned a shade darker.

Harley glanced from his face to the book once more, then jumped to her feet as she grabbed the book from his grasp. He lunged for her, and she narrowly escaped as she turned the book over to see the cover. She caught a glimpse of a couple in the throes of an embrace, though they were clearly not residents of the earth as she knew it.

Mason charged forward, and she lifted the book over her head. Due to their similar heights, he was unable to reach for it with her quick movements. His dark, impatient gaze landed on her, inches away from her face. Chills swept through her body and the humor fled from her own expression.

“Please give me back my book,” he said through clenched teeth.

Slowly, she brought the book down and handed it over, though he didn’t move away. His scent overwhelmed her, making her feel safe and terrified all at once. The smell of the fresh hay overpowered the musk and mint, but it was surprisingly pleasant.

His eyes remained locked on hers. Each of them was breathless after their little chase. The warmth that emanated from his body was almost too irresistible. If he had been any other guy she had met in a bar somewhere, she might have toyed with him, teased him.

But that didn’t feel right.

Mason was different.

He was special.



When he finally took a step back, she released a sharp breath. “You don’t have to be embarrassed. I know a lot of guys who read a variety of things. Sci-fi fantasy isn’t nearly as weird as you’re making it out to be.” Harley tossed the statement at him before she fled the room. There was no way she could meet his eyes. Not now. She needed to catch her breath and figure out what to do with her newfound attraction.



## *Mason*

Mason couldn't believe it. Harley was nothing like he'd expected when he'd met her at the spot where their properties converged. There was a depth to her that he wasn't even sure she was aware of.

Over the next several weeks, Mason got to know Harley better and better. He even saw a side of her he quickly grew to admire. She left out a lot about how she was raised. All he'd gathered was that her mother was incredibly strict and that Harley had grown up with money.

Most of their conversations revolved around taking care of the animals and the work they had to keep up on. After their little chat about the book he'd been reading, she hadn't pushed him on the subject again.

He continued enjoying his books in the living room after supper was finished, and occasionally she would join him, though she didn't read. At first, he didn't know what she was up to. She'd sit on the other end of the couch with her knees propped up with whatever it was in her lap.

But then he caught a glimpse of a small sketchbook and his curiosity got away from him. "You draw?"

Her eyes were the only thing he could see above her knees. "I draw," she confirmed.

"What do you draw?"

Harley's focus dipped to her sketchbook once more. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"It's just that I've never seen you draw before."

She didn't respond to that statement, though he could imagine her smiling behind her little wall.

"You haven't mentioned that you liked drawing," he said.

"So, just because I haven't talked it doesn't mean that I can't do it."

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” he muttered. “Fine, if you don’t want to tell me, then don’t. I’ll leave you be.”

Once again, Harley didn’t bother responding to his statement. The room fell back into silence, but this time it wasn’t one that comforted him. This kind of quiet was heavy, pressing on him like he’d never experienced before.

He couldn’t take it. “What if I tell you about my books?”

Her eyes darted to him and she paused. Then, just as quickly, she returned to her sketchbook. “I know what you read.”

“No, you don’t.”

She flipped her book closed, dropped her knees into a cross-legged position and tucked her book into her lap. “You realize that I can just look up any author or book title online and find out exactly what you’re into, right?”

“Of course I do.”

“So there’s nothing you can offer me that would make me want to share something so personal with you.”

“Personal? Drawings aren’t personal. They’re art.”

She snorted. “If that’s what you think, then you’ve been living under a rock.”

“Okay, convince me. How is art something personal? People share their art with everyone.”

Harley tapped her pencil against her lips, drawing his attention to their lush fullness. It was incredibly difficult to keep his thoughts from going to that place he’d insisted he couldn’t visit. They’d nearly kissed that one day when she’d stolen his book. She might not have been aware of it, but he’d been so tempted to pull her against him just so he could steal a kiss from those teasing lips.

She cocked her head, and the movement was enough to draw his gaze back to her eyes—those teasing eyes. Harley watched him, making him feel far more vulnerable than she had any right to do. “Art is like a window to the soul. People

who create—it's the way they share their feelings about the world around them. Think about it. Every big artist in history had something to teach us. It might have been about appreciating art in and of itself, or it might have been to demonstrate a deeper emotion like grieving, joy, triumph... lust." Her eyes darted from his and she brushed her chin against her shoulder as she glanced toward the bookshelves. "You can't tell me that there is even one author over there who isn't teaching you who they are through their words."

Mason followed her gaze but only briefly. "I doubt that some of those authors were thinking of the greater good when they wrote about outer space, interstellar wars, or different species found on various planets. All of that isn't real."

"You're looking at it too literally, Mason. Those authors are creating a world for you and them to escape into. They're discussing the philosophy of what might be out there. They're teaching you how they feel about certain laws or rules that are, in their own right, archaic. Those books might not be paint flung on a canvas, but they're still capable of teaching you something about their creator."

"Name one." Mason chuckled. "One author who was able to teach us something."

"Jane Austen."

"What?" He laughed. "Didn't she just write about relationships?"

"She did, but there was a deeper meaning to it all. She pioneered a way for the narrator to find a voice. She wanted people to accept that while women were expected to be seen and not heard, they were, in fact, witty and independent thinkers. She might have just been a romance novelist, but what she contributed to literature was important."

"I suppose you learned this in that fancy school of yours," he said quietly.

"I had to take my share of literature courses. They were terribly boring. I preferred the time I got to spend behind an easel."

The two of them continued to stare at one another long after Harley grew quiet. Mason never had the opportunities like she'd had. He often wondered what classes he might have chosen had he been able to attend. Thankfully, he'd never let his lack of opportunity stop him from learning what he wanted to.

Mason's eyes dipped to the book again. "So you're not going to show me even one picture?"

She picked up the book, fingering the edges thoughtfully. "I suppose I could show you one picture. But you have to tell me what it is about those sci-fi stories that makes you want to keep turning pages."

He rolled his eyes. "Isn't it obvious? They're my escape. I never got to travel anywhere in my entire life. I will likely never see any place past Colorado Springs. I'm stuck in this snow globe of a town with nowhere to go. Wouldn't you want to find a way to leave this place by any means necessary?"

"I don't know. I think I'm growing to like it here." She offered him a smile, one he recognized as being the only genuine smile she had. "Living out there in the big world isn't all it's cracked up to be. Believe me. The work might be hard here, but it's not so bad once you get used to it."

His mouth fell open with his exaggerated response. "I don't think you'd ever make it if a cult found you."

Harley laughed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you were brainwashed far too easily. All they'd have to do is keep you hungry and tired, and you'd do their bidding."

She let out a half-gasp, half-laugh and threw a pillow in his direction. He ducked, and it flew through the air until it landed with a thump on the floor. "Take that back," she demanded.

"Nope. I'd rather not lie."

Her mouth fell open. "You're such a jerk!"

"A jerk who's waiting to see what you've been doodling. Please tell me you aren't doing that MASH thing."

“MASH thing? You mean the little game where I predict who my husband will be and where we’ll live? *That* MASH thing?” Harley tossed her head back and laughed. “I can’t believe you even know what that is.”

“I have sisters,” he defended himself.

She shook her head in disbelief.

“Come on now, stop trying to take the conversation elsewhere.” He held out his hand. “Let me see what you’ve got.”

The book came to her chest and she squeezed it tightly in a bear hug. “I don’t know if I’m ready to share this part with anyone.”

“You promised.”

“No, I said I *might*.”

“Yeah, if I told you about my reasons for reading fantasy. Your turn.”

Harley seemed to hold her book even tighter. “And what if you think they’re dumb. I’m not willing to be laughed at right now.”

He sighed, emphasizing his hand still being held out to her by curling his fingers inward a few times. “I’m not going to laugh at you. Whatever you have in that book has got to be better than anything I could do. And I’m a big supporter of the arts.”

The skepticism in her eyes was almost too much. He thought for sure she would jump up at any moment, taking her book with her as she made her escape.

Finally, she pulled the book far enough away to stare at it. Her voice lowered, becoming almost somber. “I’ve never shown anyone my drawings before.”

“No one?”

She shook her head. “No one.”

Mason nearly rescinded his request. What she had in her hands was likely the biggest secret she kept from everyone. No

wonder she was so nervous about sharing.

Harley adjusted her grip, then slowly held it out to him. “You promised you wouldn’t laugh.”

“I won’t,” he assured her, taking the book with reverence. Mason glanced up at her, watching her closely to make sure she didn’t want to take back her offering. His calloused fingers caught the edge of the hardbound cover and pulled it open. The first page didn’t have anything on it besides the manufacturer of the sketchbook.

Mason turned the page to find a haphazard sketch of a horse’s eye. It was simple and messy at the same time. The only bit of detail was in the reflection of the pupil. There, it appeared the horse looked at someone’s hand gripping a coiled rope.

His eyes darted up to meet hers, finding Harley staring at him. She blushed, then shifted in her seat before launching to her feet and pacing the room. Still, she didn’t speak, though it was clear she had a lot to say.

Mason turned the next page to find a full image of a horse’s head. From ear to nostril, no detail was left out. Even the texture of the hair had been included. He couldn’t bring himself to look away.

Tracing his finger along the image, he breathed a sigh.

“What?” she demanded.

He glanced up at her. “This one looks just like that horse your uncle rode.”

Her eyes darted to the image. “That’s because it is. I drew her before she became a big pain in my—” She flushed again. “Before she threw Vern out of the saddle.” She moved a step closer. “Do you really think there’s a resemblance?”

“Resemblance? I could tell just by looking at her.” Mason shook his head. “It’s uncanny.”

Harley plopped down right beside him, her leg bumping into his as she took the next page and flipped it. “What about this one? Do you recognize him?”



Mason chuckled. “You realize if you were to show these to anyone off the street in the city, they’d say all horses look the same.”

“But you’re not just some guy off the street.” She poked the paper with her finger. “What do you think?” Their eyes remained locked for far too long. All he could hear was the sound of his heart beating and Harley’s mildly labored breathing. She parted her lips slightly, and he could have sworn she leaned closer, but then something broke the spell and she blinked rapidly before tapping the book again. “What do you think?” she whispered.

He returned his focus to the book and then flipped through the pages before allowing the book to fall open on his lap. It opened to an image of a cowboy with a book open in his hands. He leaned against a tree trunk, so deep in the story he hadn’t even realized she’d picked him for a drawing subject.

Harley gasped, lunging for the book. It was his turn to play keep away. He turned his back to her and stared at the picture of himself. Harley had captured every nuance, from the way his hair hung over his ears to the dimple in his cheek when his jaw was tight.

“This is amazing,” Mason said.

“It is?”

“There aren’t any words to describe it.”

“Technically, you used the word amazing.”

He faced her, gesturing to the picture. “I’m not playing around. I can’t believe you did this. Is this what you went to school for?”

She snorted. “I don’t think my folks would have been too thrilled if they thought I was taking art classes. The majors at my university were the boring ones, and let me tell you, I’m so glad I left.”

“Are you going to find a school that can cater to your abilities? Please tell me you’re not going to let this talent go to waste. You could do so much with it.”

Her expression didn't change one bit from the moment he'd first complimented her to now. Perhaps she thought he was teasing. Mason reached for her hand, tugging her to sit beside him again. "If I had this talent, I would guarantee that you wouldn't see me out here working on a ranch." He wanted that to sink in. She had to accept that she had something great here. Unfortunately, she was distracted.

Harley stared at their hands. His fingers interlocked with hers.

And she wasn't pulling away.



## *Harley*

*H*arley forgot how to breathe.

Her heart refused to do its job.

Every muscle in her body had gone numb.

Mason was holding her hand, and for once, she didn't feel the need to make a snarky comment about it or run away. None of her past attractions had ever lasted. She could blame it on her own internal feelings of inadequacy or the fact that most of the guys she'd spent time with weren't exactly boyfriend material. Mostly, she chose not to think about it too hard.

Right now, that was proving difficult. Mason's hand was slightly larger than her own, but not so large she felt dwarfed by it. His fingertips were calloused, but that was to be expected with his line of work. His nails were trimmed short so they could be kept clean. The longer she stared, the more she realized something.

Their hands fit together like they were made for each other. That was ridiculous, wasn't it? They were just hands. It wasn't like they were divinely created to come together.

The small flutter in her chest intensified as she slowly dragged her gaze up his arm and locked with Mason's eyes. She would have given anything to know what he was thinking.

No, she didn't want to know what he was thinking. What if he was attracted to her? Or worse? What if he wasn't?

Harley snatched her hand from his grasp and jumped to her feet. She scurried toward the door just as he called after her.

"Where are you going?"

"Out," she called back.

"But it's dark out."

"I don't care." She needed to clear her head. It had cooled down today with signs of a storm that might arrive early

tomorrow morning. A stiff breeze should be enough to help her make sense of what she was going through. Harley pulled on her boots and only got to the edge of the porch before Mason grabbed her hand.

He pulled her around to face him so swiftly that she stumbled up against him. Mason covered her hand against his chest as her other one grasped at his forearm to prevent her from falling. Against her better judgment, Harley met his gaze. His eyes were warm and safe. She didn't know what had gotten into her.

“Did I say something?” he murmured.

“What? No, of course not. You didn't say anything,” she stuttered.

“Then why did you take off like a little white rabbit back there?”

Harley scowled at him. “Because I needed some fresh air.”

“Well, you have it now.”

She glanced around them. “So?”

“So, you don't have to escape.” His brows creased as his eyes delved into her. He was unwrapping all of her secrets so effortlessly.

Exhilaration battled the panic that grew within her. “What do you want?” she demanded. “Why did you follow me out here?”

“Because...” His voice died, and he finally looked away.

“That's not an answer.” She meant for her voice to sound stern and accusatory. She would have felt better about all of this if she could get the higher ground. “For heaven's sake,” she whispered, “will you just tell me what's going on so my heart will stop with the acrobatics?”

Mason's eyes darted to meet hers. “What's going on...”

“That's what I said.”

The hand that kept hers pinned to his chest released it, but only so he could grasp place a hand on her cheek. “So you feel

it, too.” It wasn’t a question. While his eyes seemed to convey a curiosity she found adorable, everything else about him exuded a quiet desire. “Tell me you feel it, too,” he whispered this time.

“Feel what?”

Mason shook his head. “Don’t play that game with me.”

“What game?”

He groaned, slipping his free hand around her waist to keep her close. “I’m attracted to you, Harley. Against my own better judgment, I find you... irresistible.”

She wanted to point out that his statement wasn’t going to be the kind to win her over. He couldn’t possibly think she’d want to hear any of that. What woman wants to be told they’re a bad idea?

Unfortunately, her heart won that argument. Once again, her lungs refused to work. “You’re attracted to me.”

His quirked, half-smile was almost more than she could bear. The warmth of his touch set her skin on fire. She was paralyzed by the whole concept that a cowboy wanted to be with her.

Not just any cowboy—Mason Keagan.

“Well?”

Harley’s eyes widened slightly. “Well, what?”

“Are you going to say something? Do you know how hard that was to confess to you?”

“I’m sure you say that to all the girls.”

His hold on her tightened and that goofy smile disappeared. “I’ve never told a girl anything like that in my life.”

“You haven’t?” Her disbelief was apparently more offensive than she thought it would be.

“Is that so hard to believe?” Mason shifted his focus to her face, tracing her jawline with the back of his knuckle before

securing her head with his hand. At some point, she'd moved to grasp him behind his neck. To anyone on the outside, they looked to be at the start of an embrace. "I don't know what's going on with me, but I have the strangest urge to kiss you right now."

If she'd been with anyone else, she might have laughed.

This was not that moment.

Her lashes fluttered, and her heart could have beat a racehorse around the track for how fast it was pounding. She hadn't come out here to find romance. It was a negligent thing to do. She had plans for her future, for heaven's sake.

And yet all of those arguments floated out the window, carrying no weight with them.

"So kiss me." She breathed out the statement so quietly that she couldn't be one hundred percent sure he even heard her.

Mason stared at her hard, searching her eyes, caressing her face with his gaze. Then, she tilted her head so her chin lifted. His lips lowered to meet hers, gently, sweetly, and intoxicating all at once.

There had been a time in her life when she might have called this kiss timid. A man of Mason's background shouldn't be shy. He was a cowboy who should know how to take charge in a moment like this one.

The old Harley would have judged him for the way he took it easy.

But not tonight.

She closed her eyes and allowed herself to dive into this moment. The breeze brought with it the smells of the ranch that she'd grown accustomed to. Their comforting presence, combined with the delicate hold Mason had on her, made this moment more perfect than if it had been written in one of Mason's books.

Her knees buckled, but her grip around his neck tightened. She leaned into him, offering herself to him—her whole self.

The movement must have caught him off guard because he stiffened and stepped back so suddenly that she nearly collapsed on the floor.

It was then that she noticed her own shallow breathing and the heat in her face. She glanced over to Mason, her eyes clouded from the passion that had enveloped them. Had she done something wrong? There was now a good two feet between them.

Harley shivered, unwilling to ask him why he'd broken their kiss. Instead, she wrapped her arms around her middle and turned to the side so she could look out at the place she'd started to accept as her home. "That was..."

She could hear his footsteps, the heavy boots across the wooden planks as he came to stand beside her. His shoulder brushed up against hers as he leaned down and rested his forearms on the porch railing. "Yeah," Mason's voice cracked.

The heat that burned just beneath the surface intensified. While that had certainly not been her first kiss, and it hadn't been the deepest one, it ranked at the very top for passion. They'd barely gotten anywhere, and all she could think about was how much she wanted more.

Harley rubbed her chin against her shoulder as she glanced over at him. "What now?"

Mason didn't turn toward her. In fact, he didn't seem to move even a muscle. "What do you mean?"

Her heart stumbled. While she'd thought the kiss was everything, she'd completely forgotten the fact that he'd pulled away first. Knots replaced the pleasant, warm butterflies in her stomach. "I'm sorry. I'm such an idiot. I can't believe I just did that—"

Mason straightened and pried one of her hands free. When she looked over toward him, he slowly lifted her hand to his lips before brushing a kiss to her knuckles. "I'm not great with words," he muttered. "It's one of the reasons I like reading so much. I don't want to say something I'll regret later. I hope that makes sense."



“It sounds like you don’t want this to happen again.” She hated how much the disappointment seeped through.

“What?”

Harley attempted to pull her hand free, but this time, Mason showed off just how strong he could be. His grasp on her was immovable. She forced a sad sounding laugh and looked away to prevent him from seeing the emotion on her face. “It’s fine. I promise. I’ve had my share of flings.”

“I haven’t.” He turned her to meet his gaze once again. “Whatever this is or might become doesn’t matter. We don’t have to put a label on it. That being said, I want you to know that I’m going to be sticking around.”

She snorted, the ache still deep inside her. “You don’t exactly have a choice. Neither one of us does now.”

“Even if that weren’t true...” He waited until she glanced toward him. “Right here, right now, all I care about is seeing where this might lead. I hope that’s okay with you.”

“Are you asking my permission?” she demanded, voice full of disdain. Though secretly, she allowed herself to get swept up in the moment. “Because if you are, you’re gonna have to do a great deal more than just give me a kiss.”

“Oh, I plan on it.”

“Yeah? What does that entail?” Harley couldn’t bite back the smile any longer. The excitement had burst every bubble she had. Mason was a catch. But more than that, he was smart and handsome. He could have played a starring role on television if he’d ever been discovered, not that he would have wanted to with his humble demeanor.

He kissed her hand once more. “How about a real date?”

“I like the sound of that. Let me guess. You’re going to take me dancing.”

Mason wrinkled his nose.

“No? Okay, a picnic and a horse ride. That’s what people do around here, right?”

This time, he shook his head. “Try again.”

“I don’t have any more ideas. You have to give me a clue.”

Once again, he shook his head. “I guess you’re going to have to wait and find out.” He released her hand and moved toward the front door. Stopping, he glanced over his shoulder. “As much as I’d like to show you off to the folks around here, I think we should keep this thing quiet until we know what it is ourselves.”

“I think you’re right,” Harley said as she nodded. “I’d rather not involve the town in my love life. You mention one date and everyone becomes a glorified matchmaker.”

He chuckled, his hand on the knob. “You’re pretty smart for a city girl.”

She gasped exaggeratedly. “You can’t say that.”

“I just did.”

Before she could retort, he’d disappeared inside the house. Harley’s grin couldn’t have been scrubbed from her face with sandpaper—not that she’d want to give it a try. She spun around, both hands gripping the railing tight. If he wanted to keep this relationship quiet, that would successfully rule out several outings. She’d have to get creative if she wanted to find out what he had in store for her.

Harley stifled a squeal. This moment was made even better due to the fact that if her mother were here, she would be white as a ghost. Mason wasn’t exactly husband material. He wasn’t even boyfriend material.

Lucky for Blaire, Harley had no intention of getting *that* close to Mason. For now, she’d happily accept this strange turn of events until Mason, or she, lost interest.

And who knew when that could be.



## *Mason*

Mason couldn't focus on the book in his hand. His mind continued to wander to Harley ever since that kiss they'd shared. He knew he was going to regret it, but so far none of those pestering thoughts of guilt had reared their ugly heads. The nice thing about getting closer to Harley was that she'd more than likely be more amicable when it came to their daily chores.

But that wasn't the biggest thing he looked forward to.

Harley had proven to be incredibly bright. But then, of course she had to be. She'd been accepted into a top school. Granted, she was no longer in attendance, but that didn't mean she wasn't cut out for it. If there was one thing he'd learned about Harley, it was the fact that she didn't want others to tell her what to do—even the small stuff.

She was her own little rebel, and surprisingly, that little personality quirk was something that had drawn him to her in the first place.

“What are you doing up so late? Don't you have to be at the Abrams' ranch in the morning?” Elijah's bitter voice was all it took to convince Mason to put down his book.

“I could ask the same thing about you. Don't *you* have work to do here in the morning?” Mason's focus flitted to the others who had come in with Elijah. Henry and Carter flanked their older brother, staring on with curiosity.

Elijah huffed. “I've never had any issue pulling my own weight here. Even when I started helping out at Scarlett's dad's property. You, on the other hand, have been doing less and less ever since you started working for Abrams.”

“Come on, Elijah, Mason is just doing what you did. Why are you being so hard on him?” Henry chuckled as he plopped himself on the other side of the couch. “You went out in search of something more.”

“*Wrong*. Lucas dragged me into helping out when Scarlett needed it. I wasn’t out looking to move away from our family.” Elijah shot Mason a dark look. “One day, he’s just not gonna be here anymore.”

“Maybe that would be smart,” Carter muttered. Elijah and Henry didn’t seem to notice the comment, but Mason’s eyes cut to his younger brother with curiosity. What did he mean by that? He’d just graduated a month or so ago. Maybe this was just talk from someone who was antsy to make their own way.

“I’m telling you, Henry. Mason here is going to abandon our family for that Abrams guy and his niece. Wade said that Mason is getting paid pretty nice. How much do you want to bet that the second Mason has enough money, he’ll be gone for good,” Elijah said.

Henry laughed. “Mason? Yeah right. He’s too busy with his nose in a book to come up with some plan to leave. He’s a Keagan. He knows we stick together, don’t you, Mason?”

All eyes turned on Mason, pinning him to his spot. If Elijah hadn’t made him feel like the criminal of the family, he might have told his brothers his plans to merge the two properties and add to the Keagan wealth. He’d tell them that he’d only agreed to help because it was too good of a deal to pass up.

Instead, he kept his mouth shut.

Elijah didn’t let up. “See? He’s feeling guilty. I bet he has a go-bag ready. What are you even doing here? You leave before the sun comes up and get back after it goes down. You might as well be living there.”

“Maybe I will,” Mason shot back.

“Don’t let him get to you, Mason. He’s just upset that you didn’t tell him first.” Henry pulled his hands behind his head and grinned at all of them. “The way I see it, any added income is good income. Eventually, that Abrams guy is going to stop needing Mason’s help. Then he’ll be right back here where he can exercise the horses and muck out the stalls when

Carter here doesn't do them well enough." He chuckled, but no one joined in with him.

"I guess only time will tell," Elijah muttered as he left the room.

Henry laughed after their brother had left. "Sometimes I wonder if he shouldn't have been the first born. Ever since he and Scarlett got together, he's gotten a lot more annoying. You know what I think it is?" No one answered, but that didn't stop him from continuing. "I think he's worried about providing for her. I mean, he's got Scarlett's family's business to fall back on. I doubt they're going to be as bad off as we were."

Neither Carter nor Mason added to that statement either.

"Sheesh, what's with you two? It's not like punches were thrown. You guys need to lighten up." He got to his feet and nodded to Carter. "Don't forget we have to go check the fences tomorrow. There's a windstorm coming tomorrow night, and we want to make sure all those posts are secure."

Carter nodded grimly.

Henry whistled as he left the room, leaving Carter alone with Mason. For a full minute, Carter just stood where he was, then he moved farther into the room and sat down on the chair across from Mason. He hunched over, his elbows resting on his knees. "Why do you put up with that?"

"Put up with what?" Mason picked up his book again.

"Elijah. He can't treat you like that. He's not our father."

"No, but he's second in charge after Wade."

"Who says?" Carter challenged. "What if one of us didn't want this life? What if one of us didn't want to constantly worry about where our next meal was going to come from or whether we're going to have enough money to fix the tractor when it fails?"

Mason eyed his brother, then put the book down beside him again. "Are you tired of living here? Is that what you're saying?"

Carter didn't meet his eye. Instead, he raked two hands through his hair and collapsed back against his chair. "All I'm saying is that we haven't really been given a choice. We've always been told what to do around here, and I'm getting tired of it."

It wasn't hard to read between those lines. Carter felt stuck. Mason couldn't say he hadn't felt the same way once or twice when he'd been a similar age. It was hard living in such a large family without a pair of guardians who were supposed to protect them. Wade and Annabel had done a decent job, but they weren't their parents.

Mason leaned forward and gave his brother a hard look. "You're not trapped, you know that, right? No one would stop you if you wanted to go."

Carter's eyes darted toward Mason. "Yeah, right. I bet you if I walked away, moved to the city, then Elijah wouldn't let me come back."

Mason shrugged. "*That* is something he wouldn't have control over."

"Wade neither. The whole point of living here, even when we couldn't feed ourselves, was to stick together."

Mason tried to interpret what his brother was upset about. Having a strong family unit wasn't something to sneeze at. He wouldn't be surprised if it only took a few days for Carter to realize what he'd lost if he took off one night. He'd come back with his tail between his legs and beg forgiveness.

"You think I'm being short-sighted," Carter accused. "You think that if I left, then I wouldn't hack it."

Mason sat up straighter and shrugged again. "I don't know what would happen. That's the thing with taking chances. You never know."

"Would you hate me for leaving?"

He laughed. "I can't hate you, Carter. You're my brother."

"Would you let me come back?" That one was said quieter, almost under his breath. He stared at the floor this time. It

looked as though he'd been through the wringer emotionally. "Even if I hurt you?"

Mason studied his brother. He was young. He was just searching for something—for a purpose. Hadn't Mason been doing something similar just before Abrams offered him the job? He wanted to be able to provide for his own family someday.

For some reason, what Carter was suggesting was different. There was something in his voice that set off alarms in Mason's head. Unfortunately, there was nothing he could do about it. Carter was going to make his own choices. Eventually, he'd have to learn for himself what those sacrifices would lead to.

"Of course, Carter. You're my brother."

Carter lifted his eyes, emotion shining through them. It was as if he'd already made a decision, though what that decision was, Mason didn't know.

Scooting to the edge of his seat, Mason narrowed his eyes. "Are you planning on hurting me, Carter?"

The fact that his brother didn't respond right away was all the answer Mason needed. Of course, Carter shook his head. "I don't want to hurt you, Mason. I... just don't know how much longer I can stay here. I... want to see the world, you know? I can't live my whole life elbow-deep in horse manure."

"I get it," Mason said. "Sometimes you have to find out for yourself where you belong."

"Yeah," Carter said quietly. He got to his feet and headed for the door. As he reached the threshold, Mason stopped him.

"I love you, little brother." It was something he'd said to several of the younger siblings, but recently, he hadn't used that exact phrase.

Carter glanced back at him, nodded, and then disappeared into the hall.

Mason stared at the empty doorway, losing track of time. He probably should tell Wade about that conversation. Then



again, it felt like a violation of privacy. In the long run, it wouldn't matter what Carter wanted to do. He'd do it whether or not there was an intervention.

He just had to hope his little brother would come to terms with whatever he was struggling with and stick around to see just how much he was needed at home.

Mason glanced at his watch, then lurched into action. It was almost time for him to get Harley. Everything was in place, and she wasn't going to expect a thing.



MASON STOOD outside beneath Harley's window. There was a dim glow coming between the slats of the blinds. She hadn't gone to bed yet, though she might be close. He glanced down at his feet and picked up a few pieces of pea gravel.

One by one, he tossed them up at her window. It took about ten right in a row for her to finally open the blinds and peer out into the darkness. When her eyes found his, her brows creased to form an amusing expression.

Harley flung open the window and put her head outside. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"You owe me a date," Mason called back.

She laughed. "I do, but I wasn't expecting you to come when I was getting ready for bed."

"That's sorta the point, isn't it? I can't sweep you off your feet if you're prepared for it."

Harley shook her head with another laugh. "What are you up to?"

"Come down and find out."

This was one of the moments that would stand out in his mind for years to come. He knew it just by the way she smiled at him—like he was the prince of some unknown European island. No one had looked at him like that before.

His chest tightened. Their first date was supposed to be a way to get on her good side—and possibly to explore their compatibility. He wasn't an idiot. He knew that one day, at the end of the summer, she'd go home.

Unfortunately for himself, his heart didn't seem to realize that whatever started between them would inevitably come to an end.

Mason motioned for her to join him. “Well? Are you coming or not?”

She rolled her eyes but shut the window anyway. The second Harley disappeared from the window, Mason hurried around to the front of the house.

Here went nothing.



## *Harley*

Harley tip-toed down the stairs, her heart racing. It wasn't that she'd never snuck out before. She'd even had her share of sneaking out to meet a boy.

But this was different.

She was seeing Mason—bookish, quiet, strong, handsome cowboy, Mason.

And she didn't want her uncle knowing that was where she was going.

Knowing him, he would probably approve of this form of rebellion and all because Mason was someone he trusted. That was ridiculous. But so was sneaking around just because she didn't want him to like what she was doing.

Harley got to the front door, picked up her boots and slipped outside. As soon as the door latched, she was down the steps. Mason leaned against the passenger side of the truck, his arms folded and a boyish grin touching his lips.

“Hey there, beautiful.”

If she was the type of girl who could swoon, she might have done just that. Thankfully, there had been several men in her life who had tried to impress her, and she wasn't going to let some cowboy manipulate her into feeling something just because he was showing her attention.

At least, that was what she told herself. Who cared if it was a lie?

He reached out to her, and she took his hand. Mason pulled her close and their bodies collided. The air was knocked from her lungs, but that was nothing compared to the way he stole her breath away with another one of those kisses.

His lips claimed hers as if she hadn't been kissed a thousand times before. It was as if her head, her heart, and her mouth had forgotten what it was like to connect with someone else.

What was happening to her? One kiss? One date? And suddenly, she was willing to consider what a life could be like with this man.

Mason broke their kiss first, leaving her lightheaded and craving more. He sidestepped, avoiding another kiss but also preventing her from bestowing one on the window of his truck. He chuckled, pulling the door open as he did so. “You ready?”

“Ready for what?” she whispered as if they were still trying to hide from her uncle.

“You’ll see.”

Harley climbed into the truck, and he shut the door for her. She watched him walk around the front of the vehicle and then open the driver’s side door before climbing in beside her. “So you’re not gonna give me any clues?”

“Come on, Harriet, what kind of fun would that be?”

Even she couldn’t hate his use of the name she’d left behind in the city. The way his lips wrapped around those letters started the flutters all over again. She shook her head and nibbled on her lower lip. If he knew her thoughts at this moment, she would have been mortified. Time to get her head on straight.

They drove off the property and turned onto the highway. When they reached the town limits, she started getting nervous. “You’re not gonna take me out somewhere and dump my body, are you?”

He peeked at her, a funny look on his face. “I assure you, if your life was at stake, I’d be the first to sacrifice myself.”

She blinked. That response wasn’t expected. He wasn’t being serious. This was just a role he was playing. Normal guys didn’t say stuff like that.

And yet, his tone said otherwise.

Mason grinned, reaching over to grasp her hand. His thumb traced over her knuckles before he lifted them to his lips.

“Is this for real?” She uttered the question without thinking. She definitely sounded strange now. Harley prayed he hadn’t heard her. Then he wouldn’t give her a peculiar look or ask her what she meant. Because if he did, she’d have to tell him that this wasn’t her first rodeo.

He peeked at her but quickly turned his attention back to the road as they left the lights of the city behind. “Why wouldn’t this be real?”

“You’re not... like... manipulating me... are you?” Her face flushed hot. There she went, saying stupid things again. Why couldn’t she just keep her mouth shut and enjoy herself? Mason was genuine. Deep down, she knew that.

This was her own self-esteem issues bubbling to the surface.

“Harley, I would never manipulate you. I’m going to be frank with you. If tonight goes well, then there will be more than one perk to it.”

“What’s that?” Her throat had turned dry. Here it was. Mason had ulterior motives. “Please tell me this isn’t to impress my uncle. He didn’t tell you to ask me out, did he?”

Mason’s burst of laughter startled her so much she couldn’t help but gape at him. He glanced at her once more. “No one knows that I’m taking you out tonight. Not your uncle. Not my family. It’s just you and me.”

The smile returned to her lips, one she couldn’t hide even if she wanted to.

“Okay, then, what are the perks?”

Mason kissed her hand once more. “Well, it will be nice to be on better terms with you.” He winked at her, stirring up additional flurries. “The thing I’m looking forward to the most is...” He cleared his throat, and his brows furrowed. “I like you, Harley.”

“Yes, you did mention that.” Harley would never openly admit it, but she adored the way he got nervous when he discussed his feelings. Her concerns went out the window and

her confidence returned. “So, what you look forward to the most is...” she guided him into his statement once more.

He pulled the truck off to the side of the road at a sign that said mile marker twenty-three. Then he faced her. “I was being honest with you when I said I’ve never told anyone I have feelings for them. The whole truth is that I’ve never dated anyone before and I’m looking forward to seeing what that might mean. With you.”

Harley studied him in the darkness of his truck. He sure knew how to say all the right things. But if he’d never done this before, he certainly wouldn’t know how to manipulate her. This was more than simply being genuine. This was so much more than anything she’d ever been offered.

Mason was a diamond in the rough.

She scooted closer, framed his face with both of her hands and kissed him. Deeply and with her whole heart. She’d never given of herself like this before. There had always been part of her that she’d held back. And yet here she was handing him the key.

Harley couldn’t explain just what it was about being with Mason that made her trust him. Perhaps it was how he seemed to see right through her—past the shields that she’d put up. Their kiss grew more heated by the second. Every last bit of reservation she had about spending time with him faded away.

She hadn’t planned on becoming serious with him. Even when she’d accepted his request for a date, she’d figured she would just be having fun.

It was beyond her control now.

Harley’s head swam with every possibility of a future with him. Her world was spinning off its axis, and for the first time, she wasn’t worried about where it might lead. She pulled back when she could no longer handle the dizziness. Pressing her forehead against his, she let out a breathless laugh. “Okay,” she whispered.

“Okay?”

She nodded, nibbling on the inside of her cheek. “Let’s see where this could go—that is... if that’s what you want to do.”

He smirked at her. “Sweetheart, you’re late to the game if you think I’m going anywhere.” He reached for her, holding her face gently in his hands. “I have a feeling things are only going to get better.”

“I can’t wait,” she murmured right before his lips crushed over hers again.

She’d expected Mason to put the truck back into drive so they could get to where they were going, but instead, he stepped out of the truck. Harley blinked and peered out her window with curiosity. They appeared to be in the middle of nowhere. She could see the slight glow from town just down the hill. But beyond that, she couldn’t get her bearings at all.

Mason opened the back of his truck, climbed into the bed and moved a few things around. Then he climbed down and opened her door. “Coming?”

“Where?” she demanded. “We’re in the middle of nowhere in the dark. I refuse to get lost.”

He chuckled, taking her hand and pulling her from the truck. “Just trust me.”

Rather than take her into the neighboring field, he guided her to the bed of the truck, where he’d unrolled some sleeping bags. She lifted a brow. “I don’t know what you’re planning, but something tells me that the towns folk would not approve of us spending the night here.”

“Will you just get in? I’ll be taking you home soon enough.”

She climbed into the bed of the truck, pleasantly surprised to find there was some kind of foam padding beneath the sleeping bags. She settled down on the makeshift bed, resting her head on a small pillow and stared up at the sky.

Shooting upward with a gasp, she stared wide-eyed at the sky. There had to be a million specks of glitter just hanging out up there.



Somewhere in the back of her mind, she heard his warm chuckle. The truck shifted as he climbed up beside her and settled down on his own sleeping bag. Her eyes darted to his for only seconds. “I have never seen so many stars.”

“That’s because of light pollution. When it’s bright out, it’s harder to see the natural light. Out here, we’re just far enough we can see even the dimmest star.” Mason tugged her to settle down beside him and she complied, resting her cheek against his shoulder as she kept her eyes trained on the night sky.

Mason pointed to a cluster of stars and gave them a name that immediately vacated her head. He told a story about them, but all she could hear were the dancing beats of their hearts. His fingers brushed along her arm, up and down, as he told story after story.

“You must really like astrology, huh?”

He chuckled. “Astronomy.”

“That’s what I said.”

Another laugh, then he pressed a kiss to her temple. “Yeah, I like the stars. They make me feel like there’s something bigger out there waiting to be explored.”

She craned her neck around so she could look at his profile in the darkness. “Like your books.”

“Hmm?”

Harley leaned up on one elbow. “Those sci-fi books you like to read. Don’t they explore space?”

Even without the light from the moon, she could see the way his muscles formed that endearing smile. “Yeah, like those books.”

She continued to study him, realizing just how much more there was to him than she’d understood. “Do you ever wish you were born in a different life? One where you could explore the unreachable parts of God’s creations?”

He turned his head and stared at her like she’d just asked him if he’d considered wrestling alligators. For all she knew, he might have preferred to do that rather than wrangling cattle.

“What?” She laughed. “Did I say something wrong?”

Mason shook his head. “No. It’s just...” He shook his head again. “It’s nothing.” Turning his attention to the sky, his expression turned contemplative. “I’ve always thought there was something more out there. I guess it’s always been... comforting.” His explanation made her think back to when they’d discussed God’s existence and the role he played in their lives.

Slowly, she settled back against him. “I suppose you can’t doubt much when the evidence is right there for you to see, huh?”

He shifted beneath her, his hold on her tightening somewhat. “Yeah. I guess not.”

She listened to him tell story after story about why a constellation was called one thing or another. Mason knew what bright dots were stars versus which ones were satellites and planets. Harley had never been interested in what might be out there in the universe—at least not until this moment.

The cadence of his voice soothed her. Harley’s eyes drifted closed at some point, and she allowed herself to escape into a world of mythology mingled with modern-day science.



## *Mason*

Something loud thundered near Mason's head, jolting him from his sleep. His eyes flew wide, and Harley shot up from where she'd been slumbering beside him. She blinked through bleary eyes.

Someone cleared their throat, and Mason's head snapped around to find Wade on horseback at the side of his truck. With one brow arched and his lips in a grim line, Wade's judgmental stare wasn't going to be the worst part of the day, and Mason already knew it.

Harley gasped. "What time is it?"

Wade's eyes didn't leave Mason's face. "I thought you knew better."

Mason rubbed his eyes with his finger and thumb. "We weren't doing anything wrong."

Wade chuckled and peered out into the fields that surrounded them. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

Harley swore under her breath, drawing Mason's attention. She glanced at him. "My uncle tried calling me over a dozen times. I didn't even know he knew my number, let alone that I snuck out my phone." Then she grimaced. "So did my mom. I'm never going to hear the end of this one."

Wade chuckled. "You know it's bad when Abrams tracks down my phone number and calls to ask if you and Harley are together. He was worried when you didn't show up for work this morning. Even more when Harriet didn't come out for breakfast. You can imagine my surprise when I checked your room."

Mason stifled a groan. He'd never been late a day in his life. Sure, his work was at home, but he always made sure no one had to get him up for it. "How bad is it?" he muttered.

"Pretty bad." Wade's eyes flitted to Harley. It was clear he wanted to say something about this whole thing, but he was

restraining himself for her sake.

“How did you even find us?” Mason peeked at his brother and then got started cleaning up everything they’d used.

“There’s this little thing called tracking a phone.”

His head shot up. “*You tracked my phone?*”

“*No*,” Wade drawled. “Someone named Blaire tracked hers.”

Harley swore again. “I’m never gonna forgive her.”

Wade pulled the reins of his horse to turn the animal around. “Seeing as you wasted most of my morning with this little issue, I’m gonna need you to pull double duty today so we can catch up. Elijah is already upset about you not pulling your weight at home—”

“But you said I should take the job.”

“That’s true. But if I were you, I’d try to play nice and just make sure you’re not the reason we get behind in our work today.”

Mason scowled at Wade but didn’t argue. He made a good point. After their little discussion last night, Mason wasn’t willing to add to the drama with Elijah.

“See you at home.” The horse took off at a gallop, leaving the two of them alone.

Harley groaned. “I’m so sorry.”

“What do you have to be sorry for?” He stopped rolling the sleeping bag and stared at her. “I’m not sorry.”

“That we got caught. I shouldn’t have brought my phone.”

He chuckled. “Just because you brought your phone doesn’t make this your fault. My phone died. It’s what I use for my alarm. If I had kept it charged, then we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

She bit back a smile. “I bet you’ve never been in a mess quite like this one.”

“You’d be right about that.” He started rolling up his sleeping bag again. “Have you?”

“Oh, several times.”

He paused again, this time doing his best to hide the jealousy that slipped through his defenses. “You’ve woken up in the back of trucks with men several times?”

She crawled toward him, a sly grin touching her lips. “No. I’ll admit this is a first. But I’ve missed appointments or been caught not in my room by my mother several times.”

That didn’t make him feel any better. He looked away, but not fast enough.

“Hey,” she murmured, touching his face and turning it so she could see his eyes. “What’s the matter?”

Mason shook his head. It wasn’t attractive to show envy. That was one thing he knew without a doubt.

Her eyes delved into his, and her smile broadened. “You’re not *jealous* are you?”

“No,” he muttered. “You had a life before you met me. So did I.” Though his life was less colorful than hers.

“Hey,” she said softer this time. “I had a really good time last night. I don’t think I can recall a date I’ve loved more than this one. And it’s just the cherry on top that you managed to irritate my mother at the same time.”

“You didn’t seem all that pleased with that tidbit.”

She shrugged. “I was more worried about what it would mean for you. I can handle my mother. The worst that’s gonna happen is that she’ll extend my sentence.” Harley leaned closer and brushed a gentle kiss to his lips. When she pulled back, she grinned once more. “I can think of worse fates.”

Harley moved away and got to work helping him clean up. The steady fire that had been lit only intensified as he watched her. Abrams would be upset, but from what Mason could tell, it was totally worth it.

When she glanced in his direction, he finally tore his focus from her. There was work to be done, and as much as he would like to spend the rest of his day with her nestled into his side, he couldn't.



“I SHOULDN'T HAVE to remind you that you are here to prove you are capable of running my farm when I retire. At this point, I'm not sure you will be ready when that time comes.” Mr. Abrams picked up a pair of reading glasses and put them on before he reached for a newspaper at his side.

“Sir—” Mason took a step toward Vern Abrams, but he held up a hand to stop him.

“The terms of our agreement were clear, were they not?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You were to keep an eye on my niece and my farm. But this morning, you did neither.” The older gentleman released a heavy breath through his nose and adjusted how he sat on the chair in his bedroom. His leg was propped up on a cushioned bench, but he didn't appear comfortable at all.

“With all due respect—”

One sharp glance from Mr. Abrams and Mason snapped his mouth shut once more. Harley had insisted that she wouldn't let Mason get fired for this little mishap. She had said her uncle wasn't nearly as scary as he appeared to be. But right now, Mason could see only one thing.

The farm was slipping through his fingers like grains of sand.

“When your brother recommended you, I was skeptical. I needed a young man who wouldn't be swayed by my niece's manipulative behavior. I needed someone who would take this job seriously.”

“Sir,” Mason said firmly. “I was not manipulated. The date was my idea. I wanted to spend some time with your niece

away from the farm. Respectfully, I don't agree with your judgment of my interest in your farm." Mason straightened his back, lifting his shoulder as he stared at the man with an unwavering gaze. "I may not have been working for you long, but I assure you that there is nothing I want more than to be the man you can count on to take care of your property."

The air turned colder as the silence stretched between them. He could imagine Harley listening behind the closed door, lying in wait to see what would happen next. They'd been caught on their first date. There would be no keeping this from anyone in town after Wade told everyone what had happened.

Abrams pressed his lips together in a thin line, his facial hair prickling out much like Mason would imagine a porcupine would. His eyes narrowed, drilling into Mason worse than any dark look Elijah had shot in his direction.

Whether from sleeping in the bed of his truck or the exhaustive way he held his spine in this moment, Mason's back ached. He couldn't remember a single moment in his life that felt worse than this one. "Please, sir. I don't want to miss out on this opportunity."

Abrams tapped his fingers on his armrest. "Do you know the kind of tongue-lashing I received from my sister when I told her that her daughter was missing?"

"I would imagine it wasn't great."

"No, it was not." Abrams stopped his tapping. "That being said, I will admit to my relief when your brother informed me that the two of you were together. Afterward, the conversation I had with my sister wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been." He looked pointedly over the rims of his glasses. "I wonder, Mr. Keagan, if you understand the implications of what I'm saying."

"Sir?"

He pulled the glasses off and placed the temple tip at his lips. "While I understand my niece's propensity for getting



into trouble, I had thought I could trust you. At this point in time, I am unsure who is going to be influencing the other.”

Mason opened his mouth to assure Abrams of his intentions but didn't get the chance.

“Might I make a suggestion, Mr. Keagan?”

“Of course, sir.”

“If you are to take over this farm, you will need to be capable of handling more than just the day-to-day work. You will have to make decisions you might not always like. Running this place requires you to have a clear head and an eye for the future.”

“I feel I possess those qualities.”

“I feel the same.”

Relief pooled within him. The awkward conversation would soon come to an end and then Mason could get back to Harley with the good news.

“Unfortunately...” Abrams continued, “I don't believe my niece is good for you.”

“I'm sorry?”

“Harriet is many things, son, but a farmer isn't one of them. I've run this place since the very beginning. Once upon a time, I thought I'd found a woman to share my life with, but I was wrong.”

An argument clung to his tongue, but Mason held back. The last thing he wanted was to alienate his benefactor.

“I care for my niece. I want to make that clear. But I don't think she's suited for this lifestyle. As much as I would love to see her choose another path, I simply can't see her doing so. At the end of the summer, she will chase after that money her mother dangles over her head like the carrot it is. She will leave this place—and you—behind once and for all.”

Mason's jaw tightened. While Abrams could be right, he was choosing not to believe it. They'd made a connection last night, and he intended on tending to that connection until it

grew into something more. “Are you requesting that I no longer spend time with your niece in a dating capacity?” There was an edge to his voice he wasn’t able to contain, and even in that moment, he regretted asking the question.

“No. However, I will make one suggestion if you’re interested.”

Mason nodded sharply.

“Choose what path is most important. Risks should be calculated and weighed. Look at your choices from every angle before you settle for what you think you might want.”

“And if I want more than one thing?”

Abrams returned his glasses to his face and picked up the newspaper. He didn’t lift his gaze to Mason after that, choosing only to make a final statement. “To that, I say good luck, Mr. Keagan.”



## *Harley*

“*W*hat did he say?” Harley demanded the second Mason exited her uncle’s bedroom. “Did you get fired? Was he mad?” She followed a morose-looking cowboy down the hall toward the kitchen. When he didn’t respond, she reached out and took his hand, forcing him to stop. “Mason, what did my uncle say to you?”

She couldn’t get a read on him. Mason wouldn’t meet her gaze. His features could have been carved from stone for as much as they gave away.

Harley squeezed his hand. “Please tell me what happened. He’s not going to make you leave, is he? If he fired you, I’ll go right in there and—”

“I’m not fired,” Mason said. “He just gave me a lot to think about.”

“So everything is okay?”

He nodded, though he was less than convincing.

Harley swallowed hard, her eyes dipping to where she clasped his hand tight. “*We’re* okay?” she whispered. She hated this feeling—being so vulnerable in front of him. She’d worked so hard at creating an impenetrable shell that kept her feelings in check. She didn’t like showing others that they could hurt her. This thing that had started between them felt so raw, like it could combust at any given moment and leave her shattered. While she didn’t think Mason was capable of doing her wrong, she had to remind herself that she didn’t know him nearly well enough to guarantee such a thing.

Mason hooked his finger beneath her chin, lifting her gaze gently to meet his eyes. “As far as I’m concerned, everything between us is perfect.”

She wanted to believe him. Deep down, where her stomach swirled with excitement and something she couldn’t describe, she wanted to pretend that everything *was* perfect.

Unfortunately, she'd been hurt too many times to ever accept that.

Mason might think everything was perfect, but something was off, and he was hiding something from her.

He gave her a quick kiss and then withdrew, leaving her cold and longing for the connection they'd shared last night. Mason slowed as he reached the kitchen door. "Let's get some late breakfast and then head out to get our work done. I'll have to leave for a few hours to help out my brothers, and when I come back, we can do something together. Sound good?"

Harley nodded. "Sounds good." She'd do anything to get back those feelings from last night.



"How's this?"

Harley leaned back against Mason, her hands wrapped tight around the arm at her waist. Beneath her, the horse plodded along the trail that would take them around the perimeter of the property. "It's not as bad as I thought it would be." She craned her neck to look back at him and grinned. "Then again, I don't think it'd be nearly as enjoyable if you weren't riding with me."

He nuzzled her when she faced forward again. His nose right behind her ear. "No, I don't suppose it would be nearly as enjoyable for me, either."

"Do you think my uncle is going to be upset when he finds out we're together like this?"

"I don't know that it matters. The fences needed to be checked. We took one horse instead of two."

Harley snuggled against him once more. "My mother would be upset."

Mason didn't comment right away, and then he shifted so he could hold the reins with both hands. "Why would your mother be upset?"

“Okay, I don’t know that she would be upset, but I know she wouldn’t approve.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?” The warmth from his voice disappeared, leaving behind an edge that could slice through a brick of cheese.

She frowned thoughtfully. “I’m only guessing, but I have a feeling she wouldn’t want me dating someone who didn’t go to college.”

“Oh,” he mumbled.

“She never approved of my uncle coming out here and spending his money on a farm either. I think it was just beneath her.”

“I get it,” Mason ground out.

“Hey.” She laughed softly. “That’s not how *I* feel. Besides, this has nothing to do with her.”

“Then why did you bring it up?”

She turned as much as she could to get a brief look at his face. “It was just conversation. After the whole thing with my uncle and my mother finding out, I just thought...” She shook her head. “You’re right. We don’t need to bring her up.” The air turned thin after that conversation, making it hard for her to feel like they were on steady ground.

Anything she thought she could bring up in the form of conversation would only make the tension between them worse.

“I don’t have a great relationship with my mother, either.”

Her ears pricked up. Mason’s quiet confession wasn’t anything like she’d been expecting. She almost didn’t dare breathe for fear that she would scare him into not sharing. Mason didn’t talk much about his family besides the usual “a family has to stick together” nonsense. There wasn’t one thing he’d shared about his folks. She wasn’t even sure if they were around anymore.

When he didn’t add to what he’d said, she shifted once more. “You don’t?”

More strained silence befell them.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” she assured him. “But if there’s anyone who would understand an overbearing parent, it’s me.”

“That’s just it. I almost would prefer an overbearing parent.”

The horse came to a stop, but she couldn’t tell if it was because there was a creek nearby or if it was because Mason had ended their ride because he wanted to talk. He rose from his seat and dismounted easily, then reached for her.

Harley placed her hands on his shoulders and awkwardly climbed down from the saddle. Mason only glanced at her before he guided the horse to the water, forcing Harley to chase after him. “What do you mean? If you didn’t have an overbearing mother, what was she like?”

He huffed. “What’s the opposite of overbearing?”

She looked down at her feet. “One who doesn’t care?”

“Bingo.”

“Oh, Mason. I’m sure that’s not how it was. Mothers are ingrained with the desire to care for their children. So much so that some of them turn out to be the worst kinds of parents.”

Mason shook his head, a derisive chuckle vibrating from his chest. “Tell that to the woman who abandoned her twelve children so she could run off with another man.”

Harley’s mouth fell open of its own accord. She couldn’t tear her eyes from Mason as she tried to make sense of what he’d said. “How... when...”

“Shortly after Charlie was born. She realized she didn’t want to be a mother, I guess. It was too much responsibility.”

“And your dad?”

“I’m assuming something similar happened with him. Either way, our family was left without parents.”

“Mason, I’m so sorry.” She gasped, her hand flying to cover her mouth. “I’m such a jerk.”

He shot a curious look toward her.

Blushing, she covered her face with her hands. “I can’t believe I said that stuff about your mom.”

“Oh. That.” Mason shrugged. “It wasn’t a great moment, but you also didn’t know.”

She peeked through her fingers. “I guess we both got an unlucky draw, huh?” Harley grimaced again. “I’m not trying to be insensitive. Losing a parent... that must have been incredibly hard.”

“It was.”

Suddenly, all the issues she had with her mother didn’t seem as bad as they could have been. Her mother was still the most controlling woman on the planet, but she was still around. She still cared about Harley, even if it was misguided.

“Well, I think you turned out amazingly well for what you had to go through.”

“It wasn’t all me, you know,” Mason said, moving closer to her. “If it wasn’t for Wade and Annabel, I don’t think we would have made it.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.” He rubbed the back of his neck and peered at her through squinting eyes. “Do you know how hard it was to feed twelve mouths while running a ranch? To have to feed the animals my parents didn’t sell off for drugs? You don’t have any clue the kind of privileges you were offered simply by being born into the family you have.”

What could Harley say? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. She didn’t have the kind of relationship that Mason did with his family. Even though he complained about some of them, he still cared about them, deeply. Everything he said rang with truth. She couldn’t imagine what it would be like to go without just so someone else wouldn’t starve. Her work ethic was severely lacking. Mason barely had anyone to take care of him, and yet he turned out ten times better than she had when she’d been given everything. There was no doubt that he was a good man.



Better than she probably deserved.

Her perspective had changed. The things she found important had shifted. The money she wanted, the future she was clawing for, none of it mattered as much as being a person who could help the world be better.

Harley slipped her arms around his neck. “Have I ever told you how impressive you are?”

For the first time since they’d stopped, he smiled. “No, you haven’t.”

“Well, you are.” She tilted her head as a fresh wave of thoughts swept through her head. The money she was slated to get would do so much more if she could find a charity that would help people who were like Mason.

She didn’t dare tell him of her plans. Doing so right here in this moment could embarrass him or make him think she was manipulating him in some way. No, it would be better if she made plans for after she was given her trust.

“What’s that smile for?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she murmured.

“No, that’s definitely something.”

Harley shook her head. “Nope. I’m just enjoying spending time with you.”

He kissed her lightly on her cheek. “Well, I’m enjoying spending time with you, too.”

When he pulled back, her smile widened. “Does this mean what I think it means?”

“What do you think it means?” he murmured, his forehead pressed against hers.

“That maybe the two of us... that there might be something bigger happening...” She blushed deeply, hating how hard it was for her to keep her heart off her sleeve these days.

“I think that right now, I want to see where this could go.”

“Good,” she whispered. “Me, too.”



“WHAT DO YOU MEAN—I’M not going to get my trust? I’m doing everything you asked me to do!” Harley paced in her bedroom, her face hot with fury. She raked her fingernails through her hair, her pacing getting faster and harder with each turn. “I came down to this forsaken place, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did.”

“I gave Uncle Vern my devices. I started doing the chores he asked me to do.”

“And your father and I are very pleased with that.”

She growled. “Then what is the point of this phone call?”

Her mother was enjoying this conversation, Harley could tell. Without even seeing her face, she knew Blaire was smirking. She’d found a way around giving Harley the money unless she did something extra.

What more did her mother want?

“The point of this call is to finish what we failed to during our last conversation.”

“You mean when you called to chew me out about sneaking out with Mason.”

“Is that his name?”

“Mother! This isn’t right. You can’t take away the inheritance Grandpa left for me. It’s mine.” Her breathing was labored by this point, and each word came out in a puff.

Her mother didn’t respond. This was what she did. It was her way of maintaining control during a conversation. For all Harley knew, her mother had hung up and was sitting there in her favorite chair, waiting for Harley to realize she needed to call her back.

“Mom!”

“Don’t yell at me, dear. This was your father’s idea.”

“What’s his idea? None of this makes any sense. That money is mine. Or at least it should have been mine when I turned twenty-one. You just got the lawyers to help you delay it. I will get that money.” And she was going to spend every last cent of it on Copper Creek if it meant infuriating her mother into the grave.

“He suggested that we look over the terms of the trust. We discovered an optional contingency.”

“An optional, *what?*”

“Contingency, dear. You need to marry before you get the money.”

“*What?*” Harley seethed. “That’s so backwards! I’m going to call my lawyer. This can’t be right. Grandpa wouldn’t—”

“It’s exactly what Grandpa would do. Ask your uncle. He only got half of what was owed to him because he refused to marry that sweet little Lorelei.”

Harley’s blood ran cold. She stopped in her tracks and stared at the closed door to her bedroom. Her uncle was supposed to get married? Who was Lorelei?

“Anyway, one of the stipulations is that you marry someone of good breeding.”

She groaned. “Not that again.”

“Honestly, Harriet, I don’t know why you’re making such a big deal about this. Getting married would be the least of your problems.”

“Harley,” she said, her tone terse.

“What?”

Her voice lowered to a deep growl. “Could you please call me Harley.”

“Oh, you’re still doing that, are you? Anyway, your father and I have agreed that this trip didn’t work out the way it was supposed to. You clearly haven’t learned anything if you were willing to sneak out with some hoodlum.”

“Mason isn’t a hoodlum, mother. He’s a good—”

“So, we’ve decided to pick someone out for you.”

“You *what?*” Harley screeched. “You can’t do that.” She became coldly calm and spoke through gritted teeth. “Give it away.”

For the first time since Harley could remember, she’d caused her mother to go speechless.

“I don’t care about the money. Give it all away. Donate it to the club. Do whatever you want. I’m not going to take it.” Before her mother could argue with her, Harley hung up the phone. She felt lightheaded and dizzy. Her stomach roiled.

What had she just done?



## *Mason*

The next few days were strained at best. Between Vern's advice hanging over Mason's head and the pushback he was getting from his brothers, he wasn't sure what he wanted anymore. Something told him that Harley wouldn't want to settle down in Colorado any more than he'd want to pack up and move to the city.

He couldn't see himself in a suit and tie. He definitely didn't want to go to the charity functions he read about in high society. Based on what he could gather from Vern Abrams, that was what the Pembroke family was all about.

Then Harley would enter the room and his insecurities would fade away. In a perfect world, he would be with her forever. They'd settle down and raise a couple of kids. But unfortunately, she wasn't exactly the country girl type. It had taken a lot of convincing to get her to even ride a horse.

She'd come a long way with the work around the ranch. She'd improved her time on several chores, and she no longer made sarcastic comments about carrying her own weight. Maybe he was overthinking this whole thing.

Harley seemed genuinely interested in him. Mason just needed to bury the fear that he was making the worst mistake of his life. Right now, he'd live in the moment. They had the rest of the summer together.

And after that?

There was no telling what could happen next.

Besides, Mason had bigger things to worry about. Carter had been acting even more aloof lately. And Elijah seemed more concerned about Mason's absence from their ranch than he was about the others in their family.

At the moment, he should be grateful at least one thing was going the way he wanted it to. That was why he planned on taking Harley out tonight to show her what Copper Creek was like.

After he helped Vern with his usual evening routine, Mason headed home to get ready for their date. Upon arriving back at the house, he couldn't shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen.

This feeling wasn't common, but every time he experienced it, he ended up dealing with more than he bargained for. Mason was on edge. There was no other way to describe it. He didn't know if the bad thing that might occur would happen at home or at Abrams' ranch. It might even happen with Harley—a thought he'd worked hard to push down so deep it wouldn't be found again.

Mason rubbed his slick palms on his pants as he stood outside the front door. He could do this. They'd spent so much time together that tonight wasn't supposed to be so nerve-racking. If anything, they should be relieved, because now Vern knew exactly where they would be.

He lifted his hand and knocked. Funny how strange it felt to knock on the very door he'd let himself in so many times before. Harley opened it within seconds. Her hair floated down around her face after the gust of air lifted it. Soft curls softened her features despite the darker makeup she had put on.

The dress she'd picked out matched the look she must have been going for. It fit her form like a leather glove. Low cut in the front and even lower in the back, it wasn't exactly the kind of dress the ladies in town would wear.

Mason averted his eyes, ignoring all the warning bells that went off. This was the first time she'd worn something so revealing, and he wasn't sure if it was even appropriate to suggest that she change. "You ready?"

"Yeah, why?" Harley said as she stepped outside and shut the door behind her.

"Don't you think you should get a sweater or something? The weather said it would get colder later tonight." He didn't notice it at first, but there was something in her countenance that reminded him of when they'd first met.

“I’ll be fine. One time, I wore this dress to a New Year’s Eve party in New York.”

Mason’s eyes widened.

“Yep. I know what you’re going to ask. It was *outside*.” Harley laughed. The sound was different. He couldn’t place how it had changed, but it had. She was still the same Harley he’d come to know, but he couldn’t figure out what was going on.

“Around here on New Year’s Eve, we tend to stay inside. Out of the cold.”

“Oh, I believe it. I’m sure it gets real bad out here, huh? Lots of snow?”

He nodded. “One year, we had a big avalanche right before Christmas. Since then, it hasn’t been that bad, though.”

Harley grabbed his hand as they headed down the steps, toward the truck and even held onto it as she climbed inside. She only released it when he shut the door. They drove to the local country club, and all the way, Mason tried to talk himself off a ledge. Nothing had changed. He was just trying to find some evidence to sabotage this relationship.

When they arrived, he climbed out of the truck, his gaze remaining locked on her while he walked around the front. And then it hit him.

Rebelliousness. That’s what her eyes were showcasing.

Whatever was bothering her, it was affecting her desire to be real with him. Mason pulled open the door and stared hard at her. “Okay, spill.”

“What?”

“Don’t give me that. You and I both know we’ve been off our game lately. You can’t hide it any more than I can.”

She folded her arms, her defiant eyes flashing. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I don’t have time to have this conversation with you.”



Harley smirked. “Good, neither do I. Let’s go dancing. That’s what we’re here to do, after all.” She hopped out of the truck and hurried inside. This was the old Harley. The one that he’d disliked yet been intrigued with at the same time.

He shut the door, knowing full well that he’d come to regret whatever was to happen next. Upon entering the club, he glanced around but couldn’t locate her right away. There were too many couples mingling and dancing.

This had been a mistake. He should never have brought her here. It was just asking for trouble. If she’d been an alcoholic, he wouldn’t have taken her to a bar. Harley was a party girl. He could tell that from the second he laid eyes on her. And bringing her here was like offering her a hit of the stuff she craved.

Mason could hit himself over the head right about now. He needed to find her and get her out of there before something really bad happened tonight.

It was like that feeling he’d had when he arrived at the house. Tonight was going to end badly.

He caught sight of the dress she’d worn and followed her through the crowd. “Harley!” He called, but she didn’t look back. Instead, she headed outside through the back doors.

The second he made it around the corner, she came to a sudden stop and spun around.

He sucked in sharply and took a step back. “Geez. What is going on with you tonight?”

“Why?”

“I’m sorry?” Mason glanced around them. “Were we in some kind of conversation I wasn’t aware of?”

She grabbed the lapels of his suit and pulled him closer. “Why do you like me?”

His nervous laugh sounded more like a dying mouse. “Because.”

“That’s not an answer. Do you like my money? Do you like the fact that I’m related to my uncle? Are you toying with

me? Because I need to know.”

He was stunned. There were no two ways about it. These questions had come out of nowhere.

“If you don’t have an answer, then—”

“Will you give me a minute? Sheesh. What’s gotten into you?” Mason pried her hands from his suit and placed them at her sides.

“Why do you like me?” This time, she asked more quietly. “Because I need to know. I need to know that I didn’t make the biggest mistake of my life.”

Mason peered at her. “Why do you think you made a mistake? Did something happen?”

“Will you just answer me? I feel like you should have said something by now.”

He reached out and caressed her face. “I like you because you’re... you.”

She groaned, shaking her head. “That’s not an answer either.”

“Well, it’s gonna have to do for now.”

Harley let out a frustrated breath and spun away from him. “When I came here, I planned on doing the bare minimum, you know?”

“Yeah, I figured that was your plan.” He moved closer to her, slipping his arms around her waist and pulling her against him as she stared out at the land that surrounded this place. “Turns out, you realized there was more to being out here than meets the eye, huh?”

“I’m serious, Mason. I wasn’t expecting to come out here and meet a guy. I most certainly wasn’t coming out here to fall for my uncle’s ranch hand. I just wanted to do my time and be done with it.”

He smiled, his lips grazing against her neck. “I didn’t realize I was so irresistible.”

She huffed, and his smile widened. Harley turned around in his arms and stared into his eyes. “The more I got to know you, the more I started to realize I could do more around here at the ranch and in Copper Creek. I could be a help. Heck, I could go back to school and make something of...” Her voice trailed off and she blushed. Her tone had an underlying weight to it, but he worried if he pointed it out, she’d close herself off to him.

Mason pulled her in for a hug. “I’m sure that whatever you decide to do, you’ll be great. The world can always use a good person who wants to go above and beyond.”

She wrapped her arms around him, her hands coming up to hold him in a vise grip. “Do you really think I could make a difference?”

“I know you can.”

“You really don’t think I’m just some city girl who has nothing going for her except her reputation?”

Mason pulled away from her. “Is that what this is about? You don’t think I see you as anything more than a rich girl?”

She shrugged. “What if I wasn’t? Rich, that is.”

“Money isn’t everything.”

Harley’s ghost of a smile returned. “Yeah, I’m beginning to see that.” She shivered and he gave her a pointed look. Harley let out a laugh. “Okay, okay. You were right. I guess I was reverting back to the person I was before we met.” She eyed his suit coat. “Maybe you could share?”

He rolled his eyes, but his smile gave him away. “Do you even want to be here? We don’t have to stay.”

“And miss out on going dancing? I wouldn’t even dream of it.” She held out her hand after she’d donned his jacket. “Take me to the dance floor.”

They didn’t make it ten steps before Shane Owens ran into them. He seemed more surprised by Harley’s getup than anyone else in the room. Mason could empathize with the man for keeping his gaze trained on anything but her outfit.

He held out his hand. “Mason, how’s it going?”

“Great. This place is as busy as ever.”

Shane glanced around at his business. “It never ceases to amaze me how much the folks out here enjoy this place.” He glanced once more in Harley’s direction. “I don’t believe I’ve met your date.”

Mason placed his hand on the small of Harley’s back. “This is Vern Abrams’ niece. She’s here for the summer. Harley, this is Shane Owens. He runs this place.”

Her eyes widened, and he could already tell she was trying to compute the amount of wealth the man had.

“Mr. Owens is also the head of several charitable organizations. He even contributed to a fund that helped my brother get our ranch back on its feet.” Mason didn’t miss the sharp look Harley sent his way. “It was only a few years ago that our house was practically crumbling,” Mason said and chuckled. “And Shane saw to it that we didn’t have to tear the whole thing down and start from scratch.”

“You’re making it sound like I saved your place,” Shane brushed him off. “But none of it would have been possible if your family didn’t have all of those hard workers.” He flashed Harley a smile, then one to Mason. “It’s been nice catching up, but I have a few other people I need to see. Pleasure to meet you, Miss...”

“Pembroke.” Harley held out her hand and gave Shane’s hand a firm shake. “The pleasure is mine, I assure you.”

Shane nodded to her and then disappeared into the crowd.

“So, he really just gives his money away, huh?” Harley mused.

“Yep. In fact, this place was built to help those who are disabled or military vets who need therapy. Shane’s got the biggest equine therapy setup in the state. Now, you were saying you wanted to dance...” Mason took both her hands in his and tugged her toward the dance floor. “So, dance with me.”



## *Harley*

*H*arley couldn't shake the feeling that she was doing something wrong. There was now a new pressure weighing down on her. It wasn't just the call she'd had from her mother that made her rethink her whole existence; it was everything she'd learned about Shane and Mason, too.

Sure, she could plaster a smile on her face and pretend she was okay. Harley could even make plans to stay here in Copper Creek—to see if a future with Mason was a possibility. That's what she'd told her mother she'd do anyway, wasn't it?

There was just one big problem.

She'd seen just how much good she could do with the money she would be getting if she gave in to her mother's demands. The amount she knew was hidden away in that account could make such a big difference to people like the Keagans. More than that, she could donate to Shane's project.

If she put her desires into that perspective, then she was being selfish. Wasn't it better to sacrifice the affection she'd developed for Mason in order to make a bigger difference?

Her heart and her head ached from that realization. Never before had she been so conflicted. Harriet Leigh Pembroke was known to get whatever she wanted, no matter how many people she had to step on to do it.

She wasn't proud of it. That was just the way things had been.

From the moment she understood what social standing was, she'd taken advantage. She'd put a fake version of herself out there to promote what she felt would get her the most attention. Every cause she could link herself to, she'd done it.

And it had all been to make herself look good to the online society.

Now, as she stared at her phone that sat inches from her on the table, she felt sick to her stomach. No longer did she care

what the public at large thought of her. There were bigger issues at play. And a lot of them could be solved with money.

“You okay?” Mason whispered beside her. “You haven’t touched your food.”

Harley glanced toward him. It had been almost a full week since they’d gone dancing, and she knew he could sense the shift between them. Mason was a sweetheart, though. He hadn’t openly pointed it out. He hadn’t demanded that she tell him what was bothering her.

Boy, she wished she could tell him everything.

Unfortunately, she was terrified of what he might say. Mason would most definitely judge her for even considering taking her mother up on the offer to get married to some stranger. He’d remind her that money wasn’t everything.

She forced a smile and a nod. “I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? Because you’re not eating and—”

“I must have caught something. My stomach has been acting up.” Harley could feel her uncle’s eyes on her. Tonight was the first night since the accident that he’d joined them in the kitchen for their meal. He’d been abnormally quiet as well. Harley wouldn’t have been surprised in the slightest if she’d found out that her mother had spoken to Vern about the new stipulation. It was only a matter of time before Mason would find out and then Harley would have to explain herself.

She pushed away from the table. “I’m going for a walk.”

Mason stood as well, but she held up a hand. “I’ll be fine. I won’t leave the premises. Just need some fresh air.” She grabbed her plate and walked it to the sink, then hurried out of the kitchen like her pants were on fire.

They might have well been with how hot her whole body became.

There were two choices laid out before her. One would allow her to become a better person—to help the world be a little brighter after all the darkness she’d contributed.

The other was a chance to be happy—to be truer to the self she'd only just discovered. And the worst part about all of it was how she already knew what she needed to do.

Hot, relentless tears burned behind her eyes, released by the rapid blinking that took place the second her feet hit the dirt. She'd been a fool to think that she could have it all. Hadn't her mother told her every single day of her life that sacrifices were part of living?

She distinctly recalled a conversation where her mother had made it clear that life was pain.

Who knew that a broken heart hurt more than a broken bone?

Harley clutched at the thumping organ in her chest. She gripped the T-shirt in her fist just as she reached the barn. One hand slammed against the wooden frame, and she hung her head. She couldn't remember the last time she'd succumbed to her mother before she'd come here. Accepting her fate to live the summer at Uncle Vern's home had been the final promise she'd made herself that she'd never let her mother bully her into a life-altering event again.

Turned out, her mother was just better at playing the game than she'd let on.

It wasn't fair. Harley scowled, dragging her hand down the barn wall before turning and leaning against it. There had to be a way she could get out of this. Knowing her mother, there would be a contract Harley would have to sign—a prenup with an added clause regarding her inheritance.

Harley groaned, lifting her face to the sky. She finally felt like she'd found her place. With all the turmoil swirling within her, maybe she was making the wrong choice. What if her happiness was more important? Wasn't a change of heart enough?

Would Mason even want her if he knew she wasn't going to see a dime of that money?

She *had* promised him that new cottage or barn or whatever.



Footsteps dragged her from her wallowing, and she focused on Mason's silhouette in the darkness. With the light from the house at his back and him sporting that cowboy hat, he looked like every hero in every Western novel.

"Something's up."

"I said—"

"I know what you said," he said, moving closer to take a seat beside her. "I don't believe a lick of it." His shoulder pressed against hers as they sat there in the darkness. "So, tell me what's going on."

She couldn't bear to look at him even though she could barely see the worried planes in his face that were lit by the reflection of the moon.

"Is it us?"

Harley stiffened.

He sighed. "I thought so. Did your uncle say something?"

"What? No! Did he say something to you?"

Based on Mason's silence, she knew. They'd had a talk—probably about how they were too different, and he needed to find someone who was better. Harley's scowl deepened. "My uncle doesn't like me very much, does he?"

"He never said that."

"He never had to. I've always been a disappointment. From the moment I could walk, not a single member of my family thought I had what it takes to be a Pembroke."

"Then maybe you were never meant to be a Pembroke," Mason said softly.

Harley snorted. "That is probably the first thing you've said that my mother would agree with you about."

"I doubt that," Mason mumbled.

"You haven't met my mother."

"Parents are overrated."

She glanced at him, their conversation about parents coming to the forefront of her mind. They really shouldn't be comparing notes on parents. It was too much of a sore spot between them. There was only one thing that was important enough for them to discuss right now, and she wasn't sure she'd be able to handle it. "Mason, I think we need to talk—"

"You were right."

Her mouth snapped shut and she stiffened.

"You first," he amended.

"No. You can't say something like that after what we'd been discussing and expect me to just go along with it. What am I right about?"

He shook his head. "I shouldn't have said anything. You go."

Harley scrambled to her feet and stared down at him. "Was it my uncle? Or was it about us? What did you guys talk about?"

Mason peered up at her from beneath his hat, but all she could see was a glint in his eyes. "It doesn't matter because I don't care."

"But *I* do," she insisted. "What did Vern tell you?"

He heaved a sigh. "Will you sit down?"

"I'm good where I'm at, thank you."

"I'd really prefer it if you'd sit."

She crossed her arms, causing him to sigh once more.

"Fine. You want to know what he said? He said you were a bad influence. He said that I needed to think really hard about whether or not I wanted to be with you when I had so much on the line."

"So much on the line?" she said with derision. "Like what? That dump of a house or that crumbling barn?"

The silence was deafening, cold, and unwavering. She could only imagine the fire burning from his gaze in that

moment. Even if she apologized for what she'd said and swore she didn't mean it, none of that would have been enough.

Harley covered her face with her hands and let the frigid tension wrap around her like a venomous snake cutting off all the air to her lungs.

"Is that what you think? That I don't have anything worth risking?" He climbed to his feet, finally. "That's it, isn't it? You think I'm too dumb to plan for my future. I bet you make fun of me behind my back. Poor Mason and his huge family who can barely afford to feed themselves. Well, the joke's on you because you're wrong."

Pressing the heels of her hands into her eyes, she shook her head. "I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

"Really? Because it sure sounds like you did. I don't know of any other way I could have interpreted it."

"Mason—"

"No." He held up a hand. "I don't want to hear anymore tonight. You've clearly had a bad day. We've been a little out of sync, and I think we just need to regroup before we continue moving forward."

Before she could argue further, he pushed past her and headed for the house. Mason got about five yards away when he stopped and called back, "I'm going to help Vern get ready early, and then I'm going to head out."

"You don't have to..." Her voice trailed off. He was too far away to hear her anyway.

Apparently, she hadn't changed like she'd hoped. There was still that snarky part of her that threw up her shields the second everything got too real.

It didn't help that her uncle had blamed her for the two of them sneaking out—no matter how right he'd been. Mason was an adult. He could make his own choices. Unfortunately, she had a history of doing things without thinking and not even Uncle Vern was immune to placing blame where it would stick more easily.

Her shoulders slumped and she stumbled back a few steps to lean against the building. Mason was mad. Vern was disappointed. And her mother would likely stop at nothing to make sure Harley would fall in line. This wasn't about the money for Blaire Pembroke. No, this was about control.

Harley refused to be a pawn in her mother's game. She'd put up a fight for as long as she could bear it. Her mother didn't know what she had coming.



A POUNDING on the front door dragged Harley from her sleep. She stared blearily toward the clock on her nightstand. Her eyes were puffy and dry. She couldn't remember the last time she'd cried herself to sleep.

While it had been cathartic in the beginning, just like a hangover, Harley regretted it the second she jumped to her feet. Her head pounded, her vision swam, and she nearly collided with the door as she hurried toward it.

Either Mason had decided to change his plans and he'd arrived bright and early Friday morning, or someone they weren't expecting had shown up on Uncle Vern's doorstep.

Harley pulled her robe around her tightly as she scrambled down the stairs toward the front door.

"Harriet? Who's at the door?" Vern called.

"I'm getting it now. Are you expecting anyone?" she called back.

"Mason said he wouldn't be able to come by until nine at the earliest." Vern appeared in the hallway just as she passed it to get to the door.

"Well, it's only seven-fifteen."

"And you don't know who it is?"

"If I did, I would have told them to come after lunch," she shot back, her tone abrupt. Harley instantly regretted it the

second she saw Vern's judgmental eyes. Her uncle was probably right to think so poorly of her.

Maybe that was the lesson she was to take from this situation. She needed to make a change if she was going to be better.

Harley pulled the door open, half-hoping to see Mason standing there, prepared to ask her forgiveness. Yes, she was aware that she was the one who should be apologizing. But it wouldn't have mattered anyway, because the person standing in front of her wasn't anyone she'd met before.

Or had she?

He was tall, about five inches taller than Mason. He had a familiar face, clean-shaven with warm brown eyes. And when he smiled, his eyes crinkled enough to make it clear he did it often. His hands were deep in his suit pockets, and he looked like he belonged in a boardroom rather than on a ranch.

"Harley?"

"Yes?"

He extended his hand. "Anthony St. James."

She stared at his hand for a good long moment until her uncle's labored breathing came behind her.

"Ah, Mr. St. James. Blaire said you'd be arriving, but I thought we weren't expecting you until tomorrow."

Harley's eyes widened as she stared at her uncle, feeling more betrayed than she had when her mother had sent her here in the first place.

"My business trip was cut short, so I thought I'd come early. I hope that's not an inconvenience for you."

"Not at all. Come on in. There's a guest room on the second floor. It might need to be straightened up, but Harriet can see to that." Vern grasped Harley's elbow and pulled her out of Anthony's way.

Just as she'd suspected. Blaire Pembroke wasn't going to take Harley's refusal lying down, and Anthony's arrival

proved it.



## *Mason*

Mason knew he needed to cool off after his argument with Harley. He'd also figured they'd have some bumps in the road after they'd started seeing each other regularly. He just hadn't counted on how deep her words could cut.

Thankfully, Vern hadn't asked too many questions after Mason came back from his talk with Harley. He'd even told Mason to take the weekend off.

Mason had assured him that wasn't necessary, though he was willing to come in a little later if that was okay. Even still, he couldn't bring himself to head inside. It was five minutes before nine, and he didn't want to face Harley at all.

They'd probably get into an argument, and then he'd have to tell her that she needed to grow up or they couldn't be together.

Ultimatums weren't smart when it came to relationships. Everyone knew that. Harley wouldn't do well with one, and he was already steeling himself for *that* conversation.

Mason sighed, the sound bouncing off every corner of the inside of his truck. He might as well get it done and over with. The sooner they could have a conversation about mutual respect, the better.

He'd apologize for being short with her and leaving without giving her the chance to defend herself, and she'd apologize for snapping at him. Then everything would be right as rain.

Mason reached for the door handle, then his whole body tightened. The front door to the house opened, but instead of Harley, a tall, handsome businessman exited the building. He paused and turned toward the door as Harley emerged dressed in a pair of jeans and a formfitting T-shirt.

It wasn't hard to see her eyes drift in his direction, even from this distance. She'd seen him, and she either didn't care,



or she wanted him to notice. The two of them took seats on chairs that sat beneath the porch awning.

Mason reached for the steering wheel out of habit. He gripped the faux leather that wrapped around it, his hands tightening so hard the leather creaked. Harley smiled at the man, then laughed at something he said.

His stomach erupted with pain, discomfort, and nausea. Who was this guy? Was he a cousin? A family member? Whoever it was, he had to be well-known enough for Vern to invite him inside his house.

The stranger laughed right along with Harley, and then he reached for Harley's hand.

Fire.

Hot, molten lava erupted from within Mason. He'd never considered himself a jealous guy.

Not until this moment.

He hadn't been dating Harley for very long, and already he was ready to go to war for this woman. The worst part was how she didn't even pull away from him. Her eyes remained trained on this tall, dark, handsome stranger. Not once did she glance in Mason's direction after he first arrived.

Either she was trying to make a statement, or she was so wrapped up in whoever this was that she didn't care.

Regardless, Mason wasn't having any of it.

He shoved the door open, slammed it shut and charged forward.

The sound of the door cracking against the vehicle was the only thing that seemed to draw the attention of the stranger. His eyes followed Mason as he hurried up the steps. They remained glued to Mason even as he hovered over this man with his fists at his sides.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd release my girlfriend."

"Mason—"

Mason jerked his eyes to Harley. “*No*. You don’t get to say anything. Right now, this is between me and him.”

At least the stranger had good enough sense not to say a word. There was a great deal of confusion in his gaze. Still, he held onto Harley’s hand, something that Mason noted with growing irritation. “I said, *release* her.”

Harley shot to her feet, dropping this man’s hand, her eyes narrowed. Before she could utter a word, Mason reached for her hand and pulled her aside.

“What are you doing? One fight and you go off and get someone new?” he asked.

“It’s not what you think,” she said almost in a whisper. “This is bigger than you will ever understand.”

“Try me,” he seethed. “I get that things work a little differently in the city, but they shouldn’t be so different that you go and find a new boyfriend just because we get in an argument.”

Harley shook her head. “That’s not what this is about.”

“You have yet to explain any of this to me. I’d love to know what’s going on.” Mason shot another dark look at the stranger. “And don’t think you can claim that he’s your cousin. I won’t believe that for a second.”

She looked away, making it clearer than ever that she wasn’t proud of what was taking place at this moment in time. Mason dropped her hand and took a step back. She didn’t have to say a word for him to know what that look meant.

Harley had made her decision. She’d chosen someone else.

And he didn’t know if he had the stomach to hear her say as much. What he wouldn’t give to rewind the clock and listen to Vern’s advice. Who knew how long Harley had this planned? If there was anything that taught Mason just how different they were, this moment was it.

Still, he couldn’t bring himself to drag his body down those steps and get into his truck without hearing her confess what had happened.

“Harley,” he whispered. “What’s going on?”

She didn’t lift her eyes, instead keeping them trained on her hands. “That’s Anthony.”

“And Anthony is…”

“My fiancé.”

“Your…”

“My *fiancé*,” she repeated.

“I don’t…” His brain fogged up like a mirror in the bathroom during a steamy shower. He couldn’t compute what was happening. Had Anthony been in the picture before she’d arrived in Copper Creek? No, Harley wouldn’t have strung him along like that.

At least, he hoped so. Unfortunately, he wasn’t sure what he knew to be the truth about her.

“It’s part of the agreement I have with my mother,” Harley said flatly. “Apparently, our little outing triggered another clause in the plan.”

Mason’s brows lowered over narrowed eyes. “You’re joking. Please tell me you’re joking.”

Slowly, she shook her head. “This is part of it. Anthony is here to get to know me before we fly home and start the wedding preparations.”

His heart crumbled like rotting wood. One poke and the whole thing turned to dust. This couldn’t be real. He’d crossed over into another dimension. That was the only plausible explanation for what she was saying.

“No,” he said.

“No?” Harley released a sharp laugh. “You don’t have any say in what’s happening.” She glanced back at Anthony. “Honestly, it looks like I don’t have much of a say either.”

“What is that supposed to mean? Of course you have a say. You’re not locked into anything.” Mason could hear the desperation in his voice, and at this point, he didn’t care. “You’ve made your point. You were hurt by our argument—”

“This isn’t about some argument! Geez, Mason.” She threw her arms up in the air. “There’s so much more to this than you realize.”

“I have yet to hear an explanation for what you think is going on.”

Harley groaned, taking his wrist in her hand as she pulled him from the porch and out onto the lawn. Her voice lowered so that Anthony wouldn’t overhear her. “Our argument did one thing and one thing only. It made me realize just how different we are. We come from different worlds.”

He scowled, ripping his wrist from her grasp. “No.”

Her expression softened. “This isn’t about you. It’s about me.”

“Don’t—just don’t.” Mason couldn’t understand what was happening inside him. The only thing he knew was that he didn’t want to go down the path that Harley was insisting they should take.

She sighed, her eyes darting to the man on the porch. “This is for the best.”

“What? So you can get your inheritance? Please tell me you’re not walking away because of the *money*.” He spit the word out like it was poisonous. “I thought you were better than that.”

Her eyes clouded over. In fact, her whole expression had turned cold. “I would think that you, of all people, would understand.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” he demanded.

“Uncle Vern told me, Mason. He laid out everything he’s offered you to babysit me. Money. The ranch. All of it. Do you expect me to believe that you took the job out of the goodness of your heart?”

His mouth dropped open. He hadn’t expected Vern to throw him under the bus so quickly.

“Yeah. That’s right. Don’t forget how this whole thing started. I begged you to help me out. I offered to build you

something for your family—for you. And that’s when you agreed. Guess I’m the idiot here. I thought you wanted something for your family—but it was so much worse than that. You’re getting everything handed to you if you put up with me.” Harley let out a bitter laugh. “It makes so much more sense that you were worried about losing something of value. If Vern decided you weren’t worthy of getting this place, then you’d have to make a hard choice. Me or the ranch.”

“That’s not what any of this is about,” he started, but she appeared to grow tired of their conversation.

“So, I made the choice for you. Now you don’t have to worry anymore. You get what you want.”

“How do you know what I want?” He snatched her hand and pulled her closer. “We still have a chance to make this work.”

A tear slipped from the corner of her eye and dragged down her cheek. “That’s just it, though. This was always going to happen. No matter what way you look at it, I was always going to end up with a Yale man or someone with money.”

“But money isn’t everything.”

“Don’t you get it? Money is everything. It’s what makes the world go round. It’s how people survive. Money is the one thing that will make both of our lives better.”

His gut twisted with her confession. As much as he wanted to argue with her and insist that they only needed each other, he couldn’t. She was right. Money was the reason he had agreed to this job.

Mason just hadn’t realized how hard he would fall for the woman in front of him. It was like she said, they came from different worlds, but they had each made a decision that showed they agreed on one thing.

They wanted to be taken care of. He needed the money so he could start a family and create a life he was proud of. She wanted the money she’d grown accustomed to.

The whole situation made him sick to his stomach.

Mason dropped her wrist and pulled back. “So that’s it then? You don’t even want to see what life could be... here in Copper Creek?”

She dropped her gaze and shook her head. “We have to accept what’s going on. We just don’t work together.”

But they could have. At least, that was what his heart wanted to believe. The bitterness returned to his gut. Harley wasn’t willing to make a sacrifice. She wanted that successful, cream-of-the-crop, sort of guy.

Mason wasn’t what she was looking for.

He tore away from her, spinning on his heel to head for the house. Anthony stood by the front door, ever the silent observer. Tempted to tackle the guy, Mason shot one seething dark look in the stranger’s direction. If Harley wasn’t standing right there, he might have given in to that temptation. Instead, he yanked open the door and headed inside.

The house was quiet, but the faint sound of a television led him to where Vern was resting. Mason sucked in a deep breath, ready to purge every last feeling of betrayal he had, but then Vern lifted his hand.

“Before you go and say something you’re going to regret, let me tell you something. Harriet was always going to head back to the city. She is her mother’s daughter, no matter how angry that makes her. I’ve never seen an Abrams walk away from the family fortune. It’s a curse.”

“*You* did,” Mason shot back. “You got all of this.”

“Is that what you think?” He twisted in his seat and stared at Mason. “The only Abrams money I took with me was what I had in my pocket. I sold everything that was mine, came out here, and started from nothing.” His eyes grew distant. “I don’t think even Blaire knows what really happened. After I refused to marry...” His focus returned to Mason sharply. “The point is, I wanted to remain in control of my life. My father didn’t approve of my decision and disowned me. Everything I have, I can safely say I earned on my own. I refuse to depend on anyone for my livelihood. You can understand that. Don’t

think I haven't noticed how hard you work. Whether it's here or at your place, I'm positive everything will work out for you."

"And that's why you sabotaged my relationship with your niece? You thought that with her out of the equation, I'd turn into the kind of man you need me to be in order to get this place?"

The old man chuckled. "You misunderstand. I would never dare tell you or anyone what to do. I hated living under my father's thumb, and I won't be the thumb that pressures anyone else. Unfortunately, Harriet's mother doesn't feel the same way. They're going to make their choices. I just gave Harriet all the information she needs to make her own decisions."

"You're wrong," Mason snapped. "You might think you're not meddling, but that's exactly what you were doing."

Vern shrugged. "There's nothing I could have done to change the outcome. My sister had Anthony in her back pocket from the moment you and my niece snuck out. I tried to warn you, but you didn't listen. Perhaps now you will see things my way. This place needs a strong man who won't be easily influenced by others."

Mason gritted his jaw tight. The whole family needed to take a good hard look at their priorities. That was the only thing he would take from this experience. "Looks like you picked the wrong guy." He charged from the room, ripping through the house like the last animal in a stampeding herd. If he didn't set foot on this property ever again, it would be too soon.

He didn't bother looking in Harley's direction as he made his escape. Vern would no doubt tell her what had happened. But none of that mattered. He'd learned a valuable lesson.

It was just too bad his heart had been broken in the process.





## *Harley*

*H*arley dug her hands into her scalp, but no amount of scrubbing would make her feel normal. The Harley she used to be would have jumped at the chance to get out of working her uncle's ranch.

And marrying a cute guy? The choice should have been easy. But as she wrapped up her shower, she couldn't shake the feeling that she'd made a grave mistake.

The problem with the current outcome was how she felt about Mason, pure and simple. The second her uncle had told her what Mason had agreed to, she'd realized he wasn't who she thought he was. He cared more about money than she'd thought. For all she knew, he wanted to be with her because of her inheritance.

Well, the joke was on him. If he wanted to be with her, they'd both be penniless. At least, that was how her uncle made it sound.

But it was more than that. Why keep the money a secret? Mason could have confided in her that he was going to get everything Vern wanted to leave to him. She wouldn't have cared.

Harley towel-dried her hair and then stared at her desolate expression in the mirror. She hadn't agreed to her mother's request for herself. There were deeper reasons—reasons she didn't feel Mason would understand.

She could do a lot of good with the money that she wouldn't be able to do otherwise. She just had to make sure Anthony was on the same page.

At this moment, he was seated at the kitchen table, waiting for her to get ready for an afternoon out—one where her uncle couldn't spy on them. It would be nice to know that Mason wouldn't interrupt them, either.

She still hadn't had a chance to ask Anthony why he was on board with the arrangement. Between the conversation with

her uncle and Mason showing up, she'd only had enough time to joke with Anthony about how meddlesome their parents were.

Harley sighed. She should have known it was only a matter of time before her mother would get to her. She simply hadn't realized how far her mother's reach would stretch. One of the biggest reasons she'd finally agreed to come out to Colorado was because she knew she could hang up on her mother if their conversations got to be too much.

Now there was a guy sitting in the living room downstairs waiting for her so they could hash out what would happen next, and all she could think about was Mason and what they'd said to one another.

A stifled groan slipped from her lips as she slicked her hair into a ponytail. She might as well get this over and done with. The sooner she found out what Anthony knew, the sooner she'd be able to make plans for her own future. Most marriages were partnerships, anyway, right?

Harley headed down the stairs, hearing only the sound of the television in her uncle's room. There were no voices, no conversation between Anthony and her uncle. She couldn't decide if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Vern had known Anthony was coming. That fact, along with knowing what he'd said to Mason about her, was all the proof she needed to ensure she never trusted him again.

When she arrived in the living room, she stopped short. Anthony's back faced her as he stood at the bookshelf on the far side of the room. His fingers trailed along her uncle's books before he pulled one from the shelf and looked at it.

She didn't have to be beside him to know he'd grabbed one that was similar to the ones Mason read. Harley had spent more than enough time looking at those books in particular, trying to get up the nerve to read even one of them. It wasn't because she was interested—in fact, the opposite rang true. It was because she wanted to have something to discuss with Mason that he enjoyed.

Her heart twisted, yanked from the comfortable spot within her. Mason was gone—literally and figuratively. He would never be coming back, and she'd never have a reason to read one of those ridiculous novels.

Anthony glanced over his shoulder toward her. She couldn't tell if he'd heard her or if he'd sensed her arrival. At this point, it didn't much matter. Harley sighed, her shoulders lifting with effort and then dropping like they weighed a hundred pounds. "So, what's next?"

"What's next?" Anthony repeated before placing the book on the shelf. "What's next is that we plan the wedding, right? At least that's the most logical course of action."

She didn't move from her place in the doorway. As she studied him, she couldn't help one thought that continued to race through her mind. "Why you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Why did my mother sign off on you? When you got here, all anyone told me was that you had agreed to marry me and our folks are the kings of meddling."

He chuckled. "I would have thought that you'd ask me what was in it for me."

"That too. But first, I want to know what it is about you that makes my mother so eager to marry me off to you. Please tell me you're not some backwards a-wife-should-be-seen-and-not-heard guys." Harley folded her arms. It would be so like her mother to find someone like that just to make Harley miserable.

"Hardly." He laughed.

"Then why you?"

He didn't answer right away, his hesitation setting off even more red flags than before.

She continued, "I'm sure you've heard of me and all of the havoc I've wreaked."

Anthony nodded. "You'd be right."

“Then what on earth are you getting out of this? And why are you so special?”

He smiled. “I figured we’d have a chance to get to know each other a little more before you jumped into the harder questions.” He gestured to the couch. “How about you take a seat, and I’ll tell you.”

“Just like that? You’ll tell me everything,” she muttered with suspicion. “Are you sure my mother is on board with that? Because in my experience, the more I find out, the less likely I am to *behave*.”

His brows creased, but he maintained that certain air of gentlemanly behavior she was certain her mother adored. Once again, he motioned to the couch. “I’m going to take a seat. I suppose it’s up to you if you’d like to ask your questions from the doorway or in a more comfortable location.”

Harley rolled her eyes, huffed, then slogged over to the couch and took a seat just as he settled beside her.

“First, in answer to your question, I believe all you need to know is that I come from a family of money, status, and I have a Yale degree. From what I understand, those were the only qualifications your mother inquired about.”

She snorted. “Of course they are. She doesn’t care if you’re abusive or if you’d treat me right.” Her eyes flitted away. “She wouldn’t care if you’re going to make me want to be a better person.” This time, her voice was so low she was certain he couldn’t hear her.

Oh, how wrong she was.

“Is that what you look for in a suitor? Someone who will push you to become the best version of yourself?”

Harley’s eyes darted back to Anthony and her face flushed hot. She didn’t know what to say to that question. She couldn’t brush it off, and yet admitting to it made her sound weak.

The corners of his lips tugged upward, and he held up both hands as if he were a cowboy trying to wrangle a wild horse. “I’m going to be frank with you. For as much as you feel you aren’t interested in settling down with a guy who may or may

not check your boxes, I never thought I'd let my folks set me up either."

"Then why are you here?" she snapped. "What could possibly convince you to throw your life away on someone you don't love."

He stared at her then, his eyes delving into her like he could see every secret she kept, every weakness she tried to cover up, and every desire she'd ever had.

Harley tore her eyes away, clasp ing her hands in her lap much like she'd done when she was scolded as a child. "Sorry. I shouldn't have talked to you with that tone. I'm still... just... trying to wrap my head around this."

Anthony adjusted his position on the couch and then reached for her hand. "Honestly? I think I would have been more worried if you had gone along with this from the start. I know it took me a while to come to terms with this. My folks agreed to this weeks ago."

Her head snapped up. "Weeks ago?"

He nodded, a chuckle dragging from his lips. "I wasn't ready to accept it either. But I came around."

"How?"

Anthony tilted his head, his eyes doing that thing they did, causing her to look away. "You made it sound like your mother hadn't told you anything about me."

"Yeah. That's my mom," Harley said matter-of-factly.

"Then you wouldn't be aware that about two months ago, my wife passed away."

Her whole body ran cold. Even though she didn't want to, she lifted her eyes to lock them with Anthony's. "You were married?"

Fresh pain flitted across his face but lingered in his eyes. "She was... my *whole* world."

Harley couldn't breathe. She had no one that would fit that description. The only one who'd possibly opened that door

had to have been Mason. She shook off that thought as fast as it had appeared. She wouldn't compare these two men. That wouldn't be fair to either of them. "What happened?"

He grimaced. It was small, but she'd noticed anyway. This was the first time he'd shown anything less than complete control. His face crumpled but for only a moment. "We were at a charity function." His eyes darted to Harley and then away. "We got into an argument. She wanted to go home early because our daughter had a fever. I insisted we had to stay. You can probably predict how the night ended."

Harley blinked back emotion. She couldn't imagine what he'd gone through. And a kid? All at once, she froze again. "You have a daughter?"

"She's about nine months now."

"Nine months," Harley whispered.

"I don't think it's necessary for me to go over every detail as to why I'm on board. At this point, I'm struggling just to keep my head above water. I don't like the idea of my daughter being with a nanny all day, and my parents aren't exactly the type to fill the role of doting grandparents. It was my mother who suggested I consider an arrangement such as this one."

Harley's face flushed again, and she looked away. "I'm sorry you got stuck with me."

His brows furrowed, and he ducked his head to get a better look at her face. "Why would you say that?"

She shook her head. "It's just that... I'm sure I'm not the sort of woman you thought you'd get. I failed out of college. I'm a disgrace to my family's name. I—"

"I'm going to lay it out for you straight. I didn't expect everything to fall into place just like that. Clearly, I come with my own sort of baggage. I'm positive you need some time to think about becoming a mother."

Her throat closed up. He was right. She'd never seen herself as being the motherly type. Her relationship with her

own mother was such that Harley would have been just fine skipping that part of her own future.

“Harriet—”

“Call me Harley,” she mumbled. It was an automatic response, and when she noticed the confusion in his eyes, she released a strained laugh. “I’ve always hated Harriet, so I combined my first and middle name. Harley is so much better suited for me than Harriet Leigh.”

A smile tugged at Anthony’s lips. “Harley, it is.” He was quiet for a moment, then he shifted in his seat again. “As I was saying, I’m not going to expect you to agree to any of this right away. Heaven knows I had to take a few weeks to grasp what this arrangement would mean.”

“And what would this arrangement mean to you exactly?” she whispered.

Once again, they found themselves in silence. Her stomach knotted up, twisting and curling as if anticipating the one thing she wasn’t sure she was ready to hear. What did he want? Love? Companionship? A partner?

Her heart fluttered at the implications. He’d married the love of his life. If she were to want love in the future, could she put aside the feelings of not quite measuring up to what he’d had?

And then the kid.

“That is something I don’t have an answer for. I’d like to know where you are in all of this.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Harley said, trying to be firm but kind at the same time.

He chuckled, the sound a balm on an otherwise heavy conversation. “Ideally, I’d like to get to a point where we can get closer. I think it would be better for Allison if she were to have two parents who cared about one another.”

“Allison.” She tried out the name, but even to her, it sounded so foreign. “That’s your daughter.”

“Yes.”

“And you want... a mother for her. A wife for you...”

“It’s so much more. I hope you can see that. But if you want to reduce this arrangement to roles, then I would be open to writing up an amended contract—from the one our parents put together.”

She gnawed on her lower lip. “You realize what I’m doing this for, right? I’m sure you’ve heard.”

“Your inheritance.”

Harley could feel the heat creep back into her face. “It’s not just the money. It’s what I want to use it for. You mentioned a charity function. I want to do more than just attend ridiculous parties where people make themselves feel better about their wealth by donating to one cause or another. I want to make a real difference.”

Anthony tilted his head as if contemplating what she was saying. “I think that’s an admirable—”

“No. You don’t get it. I’m not going to live in some expensive house and drive a top-of-the-line car. I’m not going to spend my money on clothes that cost as much money as it would take to feed a small community. If you hitch your wagon to mine, I want to make it clear that the lifestyles we led as children aren’t going to be the way we live after we’re married. I’d expect you to become a partner in that plan. I’d need you to back me up when my mother inevitably tells you to rein me in.”

“Noted.”

“Really? It’s as easy as that?”

Anthony nodded. “I don’t know what your experiences have been with other men, but I’m not going to try to control you. As far as I’m concerned, you have a free pass.”

She lifted a single brow. “Would you feel the same way if I told you that I wanted to do something abhorrent? I mean, charities are easy to agree to—”

“Harriet—Harley—I don’t think I could control you even if I wanted to. That being said, from our short interactions with



one another, I think I can safely say you wouldn't be interested in anything... *abhorrent*." A smile tugged at his lips. "Luckily for us both, we seem to be a better match than either one of us could've expected."



## *Mason*

Mason hid away in the loft of the barn with his book, but he couldn't get into it. He'd attempted to start the novel a dozen times and failed. Right about now, everyone at home would be coming out to do their daily chores.

Due to his agreement with Elijah, he should be doing the same.

Unfortunately, his brother would be left disappointed. If Mason couldn't find the energy to do what actually brought him joy, he definitely wouldn't find the energy to do the grueling work his brother assigned to him.

"What are you doing up there?"

Mason froze. There wasn't any chance that whoever was talking was speaking to him. He just needed to keep quiet.

"Mason, I can see your boot from here. What are you doing in the loft? Aren't you supposed to be out in the pastures checking on the cattle?"

Shoot.

Mason pulled his foot closer to him and then scooted to the edge of the loft. He poked his head out to where he could see Carter. "It's none of your business what I'm doing up here. Aren't you supposed to be working, too?"

Carter shrugged. "Probably."

"Then what are you doing here?" Mason demanded. The longer they conversed, the higher the likelihood that he'd get caught.

His brother shrugged again. "Why aren't you out at the Abrams property?"

Mason scowled. "None of your business."

"Is that all you know to say?"

Mason's scowl deepened. "What do you want, Carter? I came up here to be alone. If you're going to keep talking, then let me know now so I can find a new hiding place."

Carter glanced over his shoulder and then moved to the ladder.

"That wasn't an invitation. I meant what I said when—"

"Move over." Carter got to the top of the ladder, their stares battling with one another. By the looks of it, Carter wasn't willing to let him be. Any attempt to steal away and find a new hiding place would end up with Carter tagging along.

"Don't you have a twin you could bother instead?"

"Caleb went out of town with Henry. They're looking to get a few new horses."

Mason's brows shot up. "Can we afford that?"

Carter shrugged, pushing past Mason to take a seat beside him. "I don't know, and I don't care."

"You should care. If we don't have enough money to keep this place going, then we're all out of a home and jobs. You won't have enough money to move out and start a family. Isn't that something you want?"

Carter gave his brother a flat look. "I'm nineteen. I don't think I should be planning a wedding any time soon. Besides, I'd rather not be a cowboy for the rest of my life."

Mason snorted. "Good luck with anything else."

Carter's blank expression darkened. "I just need a way out. Then I can make my own way."

"What does that even mean? A way out?"

"Money."

Mason glowered. "Money isn't everything, Carter. The sooner you understand that, the better."

"You're wrong," Carter snapped. "Money is the great equalizer. Money would allow me to travel somewhere else."

Money would give me the chance to go to a university where I would be able to get a different job. Money is the answer to all our problems.”

“And the reason for all the biggest problems in the world,” Mason shot back. He’d never raised his voice to his brother like this before, and it showed with the shock written all over Carter’s face. Mason sighed, dragging a hand down his face. “Money causes problems, too. People who don’t know how to manage money can make mistakes right off the bat. Those who don’t make those mistakes become greedy and spend their whole lives searching for a way to get more.” Vern came to mind. He’d walked away from a fortune only to spend his whole life building up a different one and choosing to live his life alone.

“And you think that I would fall into those categories?” The accusation in Carter’s voice stung slightly.

Mason shook his head. “I don’t know what you would do for money. I don’t know if you’d let it poison you. Shoot, you could be the exception to the rule and end up being the one person who can think with a level head. But I do know one thing. Money in and of itself is not the one thing that fixes everything. You have to make an active decision to chase after what you want. We don’t get anything in life for free. You must make sacrifices for the things that are worth the most.”

He got to his feet with the intention of leaving, but Carter stopped him. “What happened?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mason muttered.

“Yeah, right. Something happened. That’s why you’re not working. That’s why you’re here instead of over at the neighbor’s place. Did Abrams fire you?”

“No,” Mason ground out. “Abrams didn’t fire me.”

“Then why—”

Mason let out a growl. “When I said it’s none of your business, I meant it. Besides, you wouldn’t understand.”

“You don’t know that,” Carter snapped. “Just because I’m younger than you doesn’t mean that I’m not without my own experiences. If there’s anyone who’s an expert at dealing with misery, it’s me.”

“Yeah? What makes you think you could understand what I’m dealing with? Have you been put between a rock and a hard place? Where you have to choose between being with someone or taking money?”

Carter seemed to perk up. “Did you have to pick between someone and money?”

“No!” Mason spat. “I’m the other person. I’m the one who got brushed off because I wasn’t worth the loss of money.”

Carter’s brows creased with confusion.

“Harley’s only been here so she can earn her inheritance,” Mason said through gritted teeth. “I was naive enough to think that I was important to her. I thought that if I could give her a decent life by taking Abrams up on his offer, she’d be willing to stay here. Apparently, the kind of money I was slated to get wouldn’t be nearly enough.”

“What are you talking about?” his brother asked.

“I’m talking about being the one Abrams wanted to give his ranch to. I’m talking about the property, business, and accounts that could give me a future. But Harley wanted more. She didn’t think I had anything worthy of losing.”

“But you’re still getting the ranch, right?”

Mason shot Carter a dark look. “Aren’t you listening? She walked away from a life I wanted to give her so she could have more.” Looking back on that argument, it had become a blur. He still couldn’t make sense of why she had been so willing to walk away. He couldn’t recall her being angry—just disappointed in him. For what? Because he was fighting for a future where he could take care of himself?

“But you’re still working for Abrams, right?”

“No, I’m not!” he hollered. “I quit. Money only causes problems. Agreeing to work for the guy just so I could get my

foot in the door of a decent future was the problem.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Carter said quietly. “Sounds like Harley wanting *her* money was the problem. Please tell me you didn’t burn those bridges.”

Mason couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He stared at his brother, unsure of where to go from here. “Are you saying I should go back there and take the job from a guy who didn’t think I was good enough to date his niece? Mr. Abrams was in on the whole thing. He knew that Harley would choose the other guy. He practically pushed her toward him.”

“I don’t know what’s going on with you and Harley or whoever this other guy is. All I know is that we’ve been working our butts off to make something of ourselves. I would guess that if Wade heard you talking about all of this, he would disagree with you, too. That property and those connections would help—”

Mason threw his hands into the air. “If you think it’s so important, how about you go over there and ask for the job? I’m sure he’d be happy to take another Keagan under his wing.”

Carter snapped his mouth shut, a mask of unreadability now plastered to his face.

“What? You don’t like that idea? Let me break it down for you again. In order to get *money*, you have to make *sacrifices*. For you, you’d have to agree to learn the operations of the place and manage everything on your own.”

“Yeah? Sure doesn’t seem like you were required to sacrifice anything,” Carter snapped as he got to his feet. “From what I can tell, you walked away from something because you were upset she didn’t pick you. News flash, just because Harley chose an inheritance she’d been counting on for her whole life over you doesn’t mean she was being vindictive. The amount of time you spent with her lasted only seconds compared to the lifetime she had to look forward to her future... one that you weren’t originally pictured in.”

Mason couldn't decide if he was impressed by Carter's insight or infuriated by it. Carter didn't understand what Mason had lost because his heart had never been on the line. Shaking his head, Mason got to his feet.

"Where are you going? Are you getting your job back?"

He had no energy to respond to his brother. Carter hadn't listened. He didn't get it, and he likely never would. This sort of situation was only written about in books. Mason moved to the ladder and started down.

Carter's face appeared overhead. "If you can pay me more than Wade and Elijah, I'll come work for you."

Mason shook his head again. "Drop it, Carter. I'm not going back."

"That's a mistake," Carter called after him. "You're walking away from something great out of pride."

He froze at the base of the ladder and then glanced up at his brother. "And you're blindly telling me to do something that would only cause me additional pain."

Carter rolled his eyes and disappeared from the edge of the loft.

The conversation Mason had with his brother left a bad taste in his mouth. If he were to go back to Abrams to get his job back, he'd be haunted by all the memories he had of Harley. He was better off keeping his nose in his book and avoiding ever stepping foot on that property again.





## *Harley*

*H*arley stared out the window of the private jet. They were finally on their way home.

*Home.*

The word didn't fit the same way it had when she'd left for Colorado. Staring out at the Rocky Mountains, she realized just how much she'd miss this place when she was gone. There was a heavy weight resting on her shoulders now. At the beginning of summer, that weight had been due to the unknown and the work she knew she'd inevitably be forced to do.

Now, it hit her differently.

Now, she was leaving a different kind of home. She felt a connection with Copper Creek she'd never thought possible. More than that, she'd felt a connection with a certain cowboy she would never see again.

Not for the first time, she wondered if she was making a mistake. Her heart ached from missing Mason more than she would have ever thought possible. At night, it got so painful she found it hard to fall asleep, and when she finally did, it felt like only moments before she had to be up in the morning.

Anthony was great. She received no pushback from him whatsoever. It was as if he knew doing so would destroy the agreement they'd made. She couldn't tell if he was scared or just grateful that someone was willing to jump into the role of his deceased wife.

"You don't look happy." Anthony's deep voice dragged her from her view. She turned in her seat to stare at him with a flat look.

"I told you I didn't want to spend money on stuff like the private jet."

He chuckled. "To be fair, you only mentioned a nice car. But I'll make note of the jet, too." Anthony pulled out a laptop

from his computer bag and placed it on the table in front of him. She eyed it as he signed in and opened up spreadsheets that she didn't have a prayer of understanding. When he glanced in her direction, the amusement filled his face again. "We never went over what I do for work, did we?"

"No, we didn't." Harley shifted in her seat. "But I suppose it doesn't really matter."

"It doesn't?"

She shook her head. "We both come from money. I have more coming to me than I could spend in several lifetimes. If you wanted to quit your job and become a street performer, then I wouldn't stop you."

This time, he laughed. "A street performer, huh? Anything specific? Painter? Singer? Dancer?"

"Mime?" she said.

His laugh grew louder. "I think I'd have to draw the line at being a mime. Somehow, I don't think my daughter would approve of me dressed as one. They tend to go hand in hand with clowns."

Harley bit back a smile. "No, I suppose you wouldn't look great in makeup." She nodded to the computer. "Looks like you work with numbers, though."

"Most businesses do."

"Finance?"

He shot a quick look at her out of the corner of her eye. "Good call. Is that what your father does?"

She shook her head and then shrugged. "Actually, maybe he does. I don't know."

"I work in a corporate loan office overseeing accounts from some of the biggest corporations all over the world."

"That sounds... boring."

"Yeah, it's definitely not as exciting as scooping up the excrement left behind in a horse stall."

She gasped. “That isn’t my job.”

“Really? Because that’s what you were up to when I showed up,” he teased.

Their lighthearted banter was almost enough to help her forget the man she’d left behind. Anthony was sweet, funny, and kind. But there was one thing he wasn’t, and it was becoming increasingly obvious.

He didn’t challenge her. He might be the kind of guy who could support her. He might even offer to help her do what she wanted to achieve. Unfortunately, the more time she spent with him, the more she wondered what he would do if, one day, she decided to throw out her ideals and let go of her dreams. What if she regressed into the person she didn’t want to be anymore?

Would Anthony push her to be a better person?

Mason had. Harley didn’t even realize it until this moment. Mason challenged her to be a better person, but it wasn’t just that. He did so simply by being an example. Somehow, he made her want to be good simply by being himself.

“Uh-oh, there’s that frown again.”

Her eyes darted to Anthony. “What frown? I’m not frowning.”

“Yes, you are. There’s this perpetual crease between your brows, and the line of your mouth is distinctly turned downward. I get the feeling that you’re not happy.”

She turned away from him. “Well, you’re wrong.”

“No, I’m not.”

Harley snorted.

“It’s okay. It takes a lot of time to figure out what you want and how you want it to go. That’s why we’re going to have an updated contract drawn up when we get back.”

“That’s not going to fix what’s wrong.”

Anthony was quiet for a moment. “See? I knew something was wrong.”

“Yeah, okay. I don’t know if I’m making the right decision. There’s so much to consider—what I’m leaving behind, what I’m gaining, what *you’re* gaining... heck, what you’re losing too.” She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. “What if we agree to this before we realize everything that is at stake. What if my mother holds my inheritance over my head until we have a child?”

“Can she do that?”

She whipped her head around to stare at Anthony. “Short of summoning the devil himself, I’m certain my mother can find a way for everything. If it’s not done with her blessing, then it’s not going to happen.”

Each of them grew quiet. The realization hit her square in the chest. Her mother might withhold the money simply because she expected Harley to fall in line with some crazy plan. Then, all her new ideals, all of her good intentions would be for nothing. She would have walked away from Mason... for nothing.

“If it makes you feel better, I’ll get my lawyers involved and we’ll figure out a sure-fire way to get your inheritance released the second you say ‘I do’ at our wedding.”

She forced a smile. “I don’t think it will be that easy.”

“Maybe, maybe not. But it’s worth a try.”

“You’d do that for me?” Her voice was quiet, thoughtful. Anthony was proving to be even more of a sweetheart than she probably deserved.

But he wasn’t Mason.

Anthony reached for her hand. “Of course. You’re agreeing to be my wife. As far as I’m concerned, it’s my obligation to make sure you get everything you need. If that means we should put up some boundaries between you and your mother, so be it.”

She stared at their clasped hands, willing the emotions she’d felt with Mason to appear. Nothing would make her feel better than to have even a tiny spark created from their

connection. She longed for it like a dying man in the desert longed for water.

He squeezed her hand, drawing her attention. His head tilted to the side as he studied her. “I have a feeling that’s not what you’re worried about most.”

Harley carefully extricated her hand from his and placed it with the other in her lap. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry.”

She nodded. “I’ve already agreed to this whole thing. We’ve discussed the reasons behind our respective decisions. And all I’ve done since we’ve gotten on this plane is second-guess everything I’m doing. I can’t help but wonder if we’re making a mistake.”

For the first time since she’d met Anthony, she could see a hint of her own insecurities in his eyes. He wasn’t certain about their arrangement. He’d been hiding it so well, and now she’d opened the door to doubt.

Harley let out a strained laugh and sliced her hand through the air dismissively. “What am I saying? People who get married always get cold feet at one point or another. Why should we be any different? How many people go through this with no contracts at all and they’re fine.”

“You mean the people who are in love?”

She froze.

“Is that what this is about? You know you can tell me, right? I’m not just some stranger your mother is forcing you to marry. If you want to back out, I’m not going to hold it against you.”

Harley looked away. “Well, that’s not true. You’re exactly some stranger that my mother wants me to marry. It’s going to look good for both our families if we tie the knot.” She peeked at him again. “What do you think they would say if one or both of us backed out? I can bet you one thing that wouldn’t happen. They wouldn’t understand.”

“Is it that cowboy? The one who was working for your uncle?”

Pain shot through her like a thousand splinters.

“Mason, wasn’t it?”

She squeezed her eyes shut.

“I could tell something was going on between you when you had that argument. There was so much... fire.”

Harley shifted so she could open her eyes and not give anything away. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I might not know you very well, Harley. That’s going to have to come with time. But I was married once, and I know how to read certain signs. I would guess that you and this guy have feelings for each other.”

She huffed. “If Mason truly loved me, he wouldn’t have kept secrets from me. I was nothing but open with him.”

“What kinds of secrets?”

“Well, my uncle was going to give him the whole farm, for one. They had an arrangement. Why would he keep something like that from me? He knew I was working only to appease my mother.”

“Maybe he didn’t think you were willing to stay.”

Her head snapped toward him. “Willing to stay?”

“Weren’t you considering it?”

She looked down at her hands. The thought had crossed her mind but only briefly. If Mason had asked her to stay with him, she didn’t know how she would have answered.

“Did you love him?”

“Yes,” she whispered, her eyes brimming with tears. “I think I did love him.”

Anthony pressed his lips together and then released a breath out his nose. “Then maybe that’s what’s causing these unsure feelings deep down. You know it’s not right for you,

and you're trying to rationalize that this is what you're supposed to be doing... and for what?"

"I told you," she said hesitantly, not sure if he would make fun of her. "I want to use the money for good. Being here for a couple months has taught me a few things—shown me how I can make a difference in the lives of the people who live here. Did you know that Mason is one of twelve children? His folks abandoned them when they were kids. They've had to learn how to get on in this world without the help of anyone. I can't believe they've made it this far."

He lifted his brows in surprise.

"If I go home to my mother and tell her I'm not going to marry you or anyone she approves of because I want to make a difference *here* in Copper Creek, then I might as well set fire to my entire inheritance. I won't be able to help out one family, let alone a whole town."

Anthony didn't move. She couldn't tell if he was proud of her or if he finally realized what she'd meant when she said she wanted to use her whole inheritance for charity. There was a chance he might have thought she was kidding or that she was just trying to make herself look good to him.

Harley sighed and stared out the window. There was nothing more she could say on the matter.

"If you really love him, you should go back."

"I can't," she insisted.

"Why not?"

"You know why not. I'm sticking with our arrangement. I'm going to do whatever it takes to get my mother off my back. If that means being married to someone she approves of, then that's what I'm going to do."

Anthony shifted closer to her, but she refused to look him in the eye. "And what about love? Is that important to you?"

She shrugged. "I don't think I ever expected to find love in my life."

"But you did."



Glancing at him then, Harley offered him a sad smile. “And maybe I’ll find it again.” That was all she could promise—the hope of something in the future that both of them could gain. Anthony had found love once. She had no clue if he was anticipating that he’d find love again—or even if he thought he might find it with her. At this point it didn’t matter. They’d both agreed before they got on this plane. No amount of uncertainty would be enough to derail her plans.

Anthony nodded, not saying anything more. He turned to his computer and started his work. The landscape passed beneath them through the window as they made their way to New York, each minute bringing her closer to the woman she dreaded seeing since she’d come to Colorado in the first place. The woman who always tried to control her life.

With Anthony by her side, she’d have a buffer between herself and her mother. Maybe this next encounter wouldn’t be nearly as bad as she expected.

Harley glanced out of the corner of her eye toward Anthony. He was a terrific man.

But he wasn’t Mason.

He looked up to find her staring at him.

“I have an idea...” she said, the corner of her mouth slipping into a smile.



## *Mason*

A knock on Mason's bedroom door had him lifting his eyes reluctantly from the book he was reading.

"We have a problem," Henry muttered.

Mason rolled his eyes. "I'm sure you can handle it."

"No, it's a big problem." Henry glanced down the hall both ways before slipping into Mason's room and shutting the door.

"You realize that shutting my door won't do you any good if anyone is in the rooms beside mine. The remodel might have made everything look decent, but they're still thin walls."

"Everyone is downstairs right now," Henry muttered as he moved closer. "When was the last time you saw Carter?"

"I don't know, yesterday?"

Henry shook his head, his arms folded over his chest. "No. He wasn't in his bed two nights ago. Not even three nights ago. Honestly, I can't remember seeing him for at least a week. Do you think someone is covering for him?"

Mason stared at his book but was unable to read the line he'd been working on. This couldn't be happening.

"Elijah wanted to know where he was, but no one could place him. He's not picking up his phone, and the work truck is missing."

Still, Mason didn't move. This had been something he was worried about in the back of his mind, but then, after what had happened with Harley, he'd let it slip. Slowly, he lifted his gaze to his brother. "Where do you think he went? Have you tried calling around? Maybe someone in town saw him."

Henry frowned. "Don't you think I've tried that already? No one has seen him in at least five days. I don't know how he managed that with his chores, but that's what I've figured out with asking around. I don't know what he thinks he's doing, but he's barely out of high school. He can't have any plans. I

doubt he has money. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he dipped into the family emergency fund.”

“Have you checked it?”

“What? The fund? No, why would I do that?”

Mason tossed the book to the side. “Because we have a much bigger issue if Carter decided to steal from the family before he ran away.”

Henry's hands dropped to his sides. “Ran away? You think he actually ran away?”

“Yeah, why? What did you think he was up to?”

“I don't know. Maybe he drove down to Nevada to do some gambling. He's been really angry lately. I just figured he needed to burn off some steam.”

Mason shook his head, muttering, “No one ever listens to anyone around here unless it suits their own needs. I can't believe you didn't realize he's been wanting to escape this lifestyle.” He made his way past Henry, but his brother's arm shot out and blocked him.

“And *you* knew? Why didn't you tell anyone.”

Mason shrugged away from Henry's touch. “To what end? Do you honestly think it would have helped anything? Of course it wouldn't. It'd only prolong the inevitable. If Carter wants out, then he's gonna get out. The best we can do now is try to find him and bring him home.”

Henry snorted. “With that logic, he's gonna stay gone if he wants to stay gone.”

“Whatever. Are you going to help me find him, or are you going to stand there being upset because you weren't smart enough to see when our baby brother was hurting?”

Neither one of them was willing to admit they were in the wrong, but there was one thing they could agree on.

They needed to track down Carter before Wade and Elijah found out. Those two would have a fit—especially if he stole money from the jar they kept in the cupboard above the fridge.

“Come on then,” Henry muttered. “Where do we look first?”

Mason pulled out his phone, opened the find app, and then muttered a curse. “He locked me out of seeing his location.”

Henry leaned over his shoulder. “He used to share that with you?”

“Yeah, but not anymore.”

“Why didn’t he share it with me?”

Mason gave him a flat look.

“What? I thought we were close enough.”

“Does it matter?” Mason shot back. “He’s covering his bases. I don’t know where we’re going to find him if we can’t get him to answer his phone or see his location.”

Henry wagged his finger at the device. “What about the last known location?”

“It doesn’t work that way. We’d have to call the phone company. And seeing as Carter isn’t a minor, I doubt we’re going to get them to spill any information.” Mason searched his thoughts for any ideas that would help him know what direction to look. The only thing he could come up with was that Carter wanted to go to the city. The closest city would be Colorado Springs. It was the most obvious choice but not the only one worth looking at. Mason nudged his brother. “Go check the jar. I’m gonna check his room for any signs. Then we’re headed to the city.”

“The city? You mean Colorado Springs?”

“It’s the closest one. I don’t think he’s got the motivation to make it work all the way out in Denver or one of the other bigger cities. He probably just wants to dip his toe—see what it feels like to have a little freedom.”

Henry scoffed. “Freedom? Doesn’t he understand that we grew up in the epitome of freedom? We didn’t have parents to breathe down our necks and tell us what to do. We didn’t have to listen to anyone lay down the law—”

“That might have felt true to you, but not Carter. He’s been bossed around by all of us. Most kids only have to impress and fall in line with two parents. Carter has nine older siblings. Do the math. He’s feeling suffocated.”

Henry threw his hand through the air. “He’s nuts if he thinks moving out on his own is going to be easier than it is living here. Everyone has each other’s backs here.”

“This isn’t about how you feel. This is about Carter. He’s been alienated for long enough that he found out a way to escape it. I don’t even know if we’re going to be able to get him back if we *do* find him.” Mason all but shoved Henry out into the hallway. “Now go check the jar and make sure no one catches on to what you’re doing. We don’t need anyone else poking around.”

“Are you guys talking about Carter?”

Mason and Henry jumped, spinning toward the end of the hallway where Caleb stood partially cast in shadow.

“Geez, Caleb! What are you doing spying on us like that?” Henry pointed a finger at Carter’s twin accusatorily.

“He’s gone,” Caleb said.

“Yeah, we know, that’s why we’re going to go looking for him.”

Mason’s eyes darted between his older brother and his younger one as they spoke.

“You’re not going to find him. He said he got some money and he’s going to make a life for himself far away from here.” The pain in the twin’s voice, who had been left behind, was palpable.

Henry charged forward. “You knew he was leaving and you didn’t tell anyone? You didn’t even try to stop him? What were you *thinking*?”

“*Henry*, leave him alone,” Mason warned.

“No! He’s an idiot if he thinks that letting Carter leave was a good idea. We can’t just let him think we’re abandoning him.”

Mason and Caleb stared at Henry, and that was when Mason realized what Henry was so upset about. This wasn't about Carter starting off on his own. This was about losing another piece of their family.

Henry snapped his mouth shut, then stepped back. The silence that befell the hallway roared in Mason's ears. He glanced toward Caleb and shifted closer. There was one thing that they had yet to try. "Has Carter stopped sharing his location with you?"

Caleb glanced at Henry, the hesitation written so clearly on his face.

Mason held out his hand. "Give me your phone. This is important, Caleb. We need to check on him. Whether either of you can accept that, we need to do something. I won't make him come home if that's what he wants. We just... let me make sure he's okay."

Caleb's hesitation wavered. Then he pulled out his phone and placed it on Mason's outstretched hand. "Don't tell him I gave it to you."

"Okay," Mason promised.



"Do you really think he's in there?" Henry said as they stood in front of the motel door. "What if he gave his phone to someone else to throw us off the scent?"

"He wouldn't do that," Mason argued.

"Why not? He left. We still don't know where he got the money."

That was the one thing they couldn't figure out. The whole drive to the city, both Mason and Henry attempted to come up with a logical explanation for where the money could have come from. Carter hadn't given Caleb any clue as to where he might have gotten it, either. There was only one thing they did know; Carter hadn't taken anything from the family jar.

“Well?” Henry nudged him.

“What?”

“Are you gonna knock, or what?”

The door swung open. “You two are ridiculous. This is a cheap motel. I can hear everything you guys are saying. Toss out the fact that I have no idea how you found me in the first place, I’m going to just ask you to leave.” Carter blocked the entrance of the motel room, his dark eyes drilling into Mason.

“Carter, we only wanted to talk to you about—”

“I don’t care what you want to say. You came. You saw me. You can leave.”

“That’s not fair. You can’t just leave without telling anyone,” Henry stepped forward. “You’re part of this family whether you like it or not. We wanted to make sure you’re okay.”

Carter snorted. “Well, clearly, I’m doing fantastic.”

Henry laughed. “Living in a dump like this? Yeah, right.”

“Sorry to break it to you, but this place is just as good as where I grew up. At least here, I can lock my door to keep people out. Speaking of which...” He moved to shut the door, but Henry put his boot in the way. Carter’s eyes darted down, then flitted up and narrowed. “Please move.”

“No.”

“No?” Carter shook his head. “Don’t you guys get it? I don’t want to be part of that family anymore.”

“What?” Mason finally cut in. “What’s wrong with being part of our family?”

Carter sighed. “Out of everyone, I thought you would understand the most. You and your need to work out at Abrams’ place. You knew how much that extra income meant. It’s the difference between starting out fresh and being stuck at home with eleven brothers and sisters.”

“That’s different, and you know it,” Mason snapped. “I never even considered leaving home. I wouldn’t have taken



the money and run away with it.”

“I guess that’s the one difference between the two of us. And Abrams didn’t seem to care what my intentions were either. Apparently, you’re the only one who doesn’t view money as the one thing to open doors.”

Mason’s whole body tensed. His blood ran cold and hot all at once. “What are you talking about?”

“Abrams. He gave me some money to get me started.”

“He *what?*” Mason shot a look at Henry, then charged at the door, but Carter didn’t budge. “How could you *do* that—ask my *employer* for money? Do you know how *unprofessional* that is?”

“Well, it’s done. And he’s not your employer anymore, anyway—though you’re an idiot for walking away from that gig. You put so much into it. Why walk away? You had *everything*. You had the girl, the job, and the future you wanted.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I know that you’re making a big mistake. And I know that I’m doing what’s right for me. I’m not going home with you guys, and there’s nothing you can say to change that. In fact, if you try to bring anyone else with you to drag me home, then I’m going to move so far away you’ll never find me.”

Mason and Henry exchanged glances. Then Henry nodded. “Fine. But we reserve the right to check in on you. You’re family, no matter what. And you can always come home.”

Mason wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw some emotion filter through Carter’s expression. His little brother nodded and then slowly shut the door on the both of them. Turning to Henry, Mason sighed, “Well, that didn’t turn out the way I wanted it to.”

“He’s right, though.”

“About what?” They both started back to the parking lot.

“That job. The girl. We all noticed the change, and we all thought she would be the one for you. Actually, we figured

you'd come home one day and announce you were getting married and moving out to the Abrams' place. But then you never did."

"It's only been a couple weeks," Mason said. "And I don't know if I want any of it anymore. Money can be the cause of trouble. Just look at what it did to Carter."

"Don't use that excuse. You were happy, and that was with the promise of something more. You're just bitter because it didn't turn out the way you wanted it to. Maybe you should call up Abrams and see if he would take you back."

"I don't think so."

"Just consider it. I know the rest of us are getting tired of you moping around. We already have to worry about Carter. Give us one less person to worry about."



## *Harley*

Harley trailed her fingers along the bookshelf in her father's study. Her fingernails clicked against each spine as she dragged them along. The variety wasn't anything like the books that Mason or her uncle enjoyed, but that was to be expected.

Her father was a renowned lawyer and most of the literature he owned was legal books. She missed seeing the weird titles and cover art for the made-up and imaginary worlds that could steal a man like Mason from reality. A smile tugged at her lips. Maybe she'd use some of her money to build a couple free little libraries around town. She could donate books to the schools.

There were so many ways to show the town of Copper Creek love, and she couldn't wait to get started.

The door to the study opened, and she turned around. Her mother didn't move into the room. Her sharp eyes swept over Harley's outfit—a pair of nice jeans and a modest button-up blouse. The only tattoo that could be seen with this outfit was the small one on her wrist.

Harley folded her arms. If her mother was going to put her down because she looked like she belonged in a barn, then she'd be just as fast to remind her of where she'd spent the majority of her summer. "Hello, Mother."

"Harriet."

Harley flinched. Still, her mother refused to use the name she preferred. At this point, it was a matter of respect. What kind of mother refused to call her daughter by the name she wanted?

"I almost didn't believe it when your father said you got on a plane with Anthony. I thought for sure we'd have to send reinforcements to get you on a plane, kicking and screaming."

She lifted her arms out to the sides and dropped them. "Well, I'm here. Sorry to be such a disappointment."

Her mother released an exaggerated groan. “Will you stop making me out to be the bad guy? I just want what’s best for you. Is that a crime?”

“It is when you dangle my inheritance over my head like a literal carrot you have no intention of giving me. What would Grandpa say to that backward kind of behavior?”

Blaire pressed her thin lips together with all the judgment she had left. Thankfully, she didn’t seem to have the desire to make another snide comment. Instead, she wandered through the room like she’d done in several years past, humming to herself. When she reached the window, she turned to face Harley again. “After you’re married, I’ll stay out of your life. You’ll get your inheritance, and you won’t have to step foot on this property again.”

“You’re joking, right? You actually think I will believe you after everything you’ve done up until this point?” Harley kept her distance from her mother, refusing to be baited into an argument and yet finding it incredibly difficult to keep her cool.

“I’m being serious.”

“Why?” Harley demanded. “What is it about Anthony that makes all of this okay?”

“It’s not about Anthony, not really. It’s about you being alone and in charge of all that money without anyone to rein you in.”

Harley laughed. “So that’s it? This isn’t even about marrying a Yale man. It’s not about marrying someone who has wealth. This is all about having someone who will babysit me.”

“I didn’t say *babysit*.” Blaire sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “That money is a lot of responsibility. Very few people have the ability to manage it on their own. You needed a sounding board.”

Her heart sank to her stomach. She wanted so badly to push her mother into a corner and demand to know if she would have accepted someone like Mason as her suitor. But

something told her that she knew the answer already. Her mother was only trying to make herself look good. She would never accept that someone like Mason was capable of being a babysitter.

Blaire would have taken one look at Mason and turned her nose up at him. There wasn't a single doubt in Harley's mind.

"Are you even listening to me?" Her mother's voice broke into her thoughts. "I was saying we've invited Anthony and his parents over for dinner on Friday night so we can go over the wedding plans."

"Mom, you can't do that."

"I most definitely can, and I will. They are our friends, and I'm allowed to invite them over any time I'd like."

"No," Harley groaned, "you don't get to plan this wedding like you're trying to live vicariously through me. We're not going to have some huge lavish event. Anthony and I have already discussed what we want, and we'll be doing the planning all on our own."

"You... don't want a big wedding?" Blaire placed a hand over her heart as if the act of uttering that question was appalling to her. "What on earth will you be doing instead?"

"We want something small—simple. He's been married before. He doesn't need some big party."

Her mother frowned. "But you haven't been married, and this is my chance to host all our friends from your father's country club."

"I *knew* it!"

Blaire froze and stared wide-eyed at Harley. "What?"

"This isn't about anything more than you making a spectacle of me and what I've turned into. You're trying to show off that you were a good mother who raised someone you could be proud of."

"That's not—"

“Whatever, Mother. I’m done having this conversation with you. If you want to invite Anthony’s family over, go for it. But you picked wrong if you thought he’d be willing to roll over and do your bidding for you. Anthony is a good man who will put his wife before anyone else. He’s not going to do something just because you tell him to. Good luck getting any of them to go over my head. What the bride wants, the bride gets.” With that, Harley spun on her heel and marched from the room so fast that the curtains draped at the window beside her rustled.

She had been dreading that conversation, and now that it was over, she was surprised that, for the first time, she didn’t feel nearly as drained as she’d thought she would. It took only five minutes and she could breathe normally again. For whatever reason, she didn’t feel like her mother had crushed her spirit.

This feeling was exhilarating. She’d stood up to her mother, and she’d come away free and clear.

Harley wanted to celebrate. She wanted to call someone and tell them all about her big win. No, she didn’t want to call just anyone. She wanted to call Mason.

She slowed in the middle of the hallway that had led from her father’s study to the rest of the house. All around her were pictures of their family—most of them were from when she was a child. There weren’t any more recent. And in every single one of them, she looked absolutely miserable.

This was the family she’d been raised in. She hadn’t realized she could be as happy as she’d been while staying with her uncle.



HARLEY STOOD BY THE DOOR, waiting for Anthony and his family to arrive. She’d tried calling him, but he’d been too busy, so she couldn’t give him an update regarding her conversation with her mother.

When one car pulled up to the front of the house, Harley pulled open the front door and hurried out to meet them. Anthony climbed out of the car with a hefty folder in his hand. The other door opened. She glanced over and saw a man she didn't recognize.

"That's my lawyer, Harley. His name is Mr. Huntsman," Anthony said by way of introduction.

"Oh," she said softly, giving the man a shy smile. "It's so nice to meet you." She turned to Anthony. "Are your folks on their way?"

Anthony shook his head. "I've asked them to stay home tonight. This dinner is just for you, me, your folks, and Mr. Huntsman." He placed a kiss on her cheek, then his hand at her lower back.

Harley glanced over her shoulder toward Anthony's lawyer. "I didn't realize we'd be doing this so soon," she whispered. Her feet shuffled against the concrete. "Because my folks can call our lawyer—"

"That won't be necessary. We have all the documents drawn up."

"I'm sure they're going to want their own representation \_\_\_"

"It will be fine." He smiled warmly at her. "Trust me. Now, how about you take me to the dining room."

She stopped, spun around, and placed her hands on his chest. "Wait."

"What?"

"I want to make sure you want to do this. If we're going to go through with this, once they sign the papers, there's no backing down."

Anthony smiled. He nodded, not questioning her. It was one of the things she admired about him. "I'm sure," he replied.

Harley smiled despite herself. She stepped to the side to allow Anthony to enter the house with his lawyer close behind



them. He took her hand in his, and together they entered the lion's den.



“THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE. I refuse to sign it.”

Harley couldn't move. Her eyes remained locked on the paperwork in front of her parents as her mother continued to sputter without dignity. Anthony had thrown a wrench in her mother's plans from the moment he pulled the documents from their folder.

“I assure you, this is the one thing I will not budge on. Harley is to receive her inheritance free and clear before we agree to move forward in our relationship.” Anthony was nonplussed. “She's reached the age of maturity most need to in order to get their trusts released, and frankly, I find it unacceptable to hold it hostage. The money doesn't belong to either of you anyway.”

Harley's eyes flitted to Anthony. She couldn't believe he was doing this. If she got her inheritance before they were married, she wouldn't have any reason to tie the knot with him. He'd be out a wife, a mother for his daughter, and any access to her inheritance.

“Why are you doing this? Is it so you can have access to the money as well?” Blaire asked.

“On the contrary, you'll see that if she receives it before the wedding, then the prenuptial agreement will make it easier to split our assets in a way that makes more sense.” Anthony had everything figured out.

Harley's dad looked at his wife. “Blaire, just sign it. We've held onto it longer than we should have. Clearly, Harriet has turned out better than we thought possible after her visit with your uncle. Even if she doesn't marry Anthony, I think it's safe to say she's not going to spend it all on something frivolous.”

Harley glanced at her father, surprised by his perspective. He reached for a pen and signed the document before Blaire

had a chance to stop him. When all eyes turned to her, she huffed.

“I don’t think this is a good idea, but I can see that I’m outnumbered.” She snatched the pen from her husband’s hand and signed the paper. That was the last barrier that would prevent Harley from having her funds released to her bank account. The weight on her chest lifted. She was free. There wasn’t anything else she had to do.

“Now, let’s discuss the wedding,” Blaire continued.

Anthony pushed away from the table, much to the surprise of her parents. “On the contrary, I don’t think we have anything further to discuss. Harley, it was lovely to get to meet you. I know you will do great things with that money, and I can’t wait to see it.”

“I beg your pardon!” Blaire shot to her feet. “You can’t just—”

“With all due respect, Mrs. Pembroke, I agreed to this wedding under the assumption that it was what Harley was willing to do. I thought she was open to marriage because she wasn’t in love with anyone else. I do not fault her for that misunderstanding. I blame you for not knowing your daughter well enough.”

“Harriet is my daughter, and I know—”

“*Harley* is what she prefers to be called. And she is far more generous than you will ever know. She’s compassionate, and she’s interested in making a difference. I refuse to let you or myself stand in her way. I hope you can forgive us for breaking off our engagement.” He turned to Harley and reached for her hand, pulling her to her feet. “I wish you every happiness—wherever that might be.” He winked. “And if you need a flight anywhere, you can borrow my plane anytime.” Anthony lifted her hand to his lips, and he brushed a kiss to her chilled hand. “Goodbye, Harley.”

She watched him leave with his lawyer in tow. Her mother gave Harley one flabbergasted look before she took off after them.

Left alone with her father, Harley expected a lecture. Instead, he chuckled. “Looks like you got to outsmart her one last time.”

“There was too much riding on this to not try...” she whispered.

“Really?” he murmured with curiosity.

“Really.” She glanced at her father, joy starting to build in her heart.

“Well, what are you going to do with this new chance?”

A smile tugged at her lips. “I’m moving to Colorado.”



## *Mason*

Mason grunted as he lifted a bale of hay from the back of his truck and dropped it just inside the barn. Being here without Harley present was more difficult than he could have ever prepared himself for. He half-expected Harley to walk around the corner at any moment.

Footsteps approached. They were slow—not the pace that Harley used. As they got closer, they shifted into multiple sets of footsteps. Mason wandered to the doorway of the barn and found Vern and Henry heading his way.

Now that Abrams was on his feet again, he was slowly getting back to the full workload he once had. It was still hard to read him; his expressions remained guarded no matter who he was speaking to.

He stopped and gestured toward Mason and muttered something before turning and heading back to the house.

Henry waited until Vern's back was turned before a smile stole across his face, and he picked up his pace. When he reached Mason's side, he slugged his shoulder playfully. "I know you told me that he doesn't like people that much, but that right there is ridiculous. The man doesn't even know when to crack a smile at a good joke."

Mason gave his brother one of the looks he usually got when he overstepped. "Please tell me you didn't tell him one of those jokes you find hilarious. No one agrees with you."

"What? My jokes *are* hilarious! He should be so lucky to hear them." He slugged Mason again. "Hey, have you heard about the cowboy who drove his herd of sheep through town?"

"I'm not interested in hearing about some dumb joke—"

"He got arrested for making an ewe-turn." Henry threw back his head and laughed. "See? That's a good one because it's *ewe*, as in sheep."

Mason groaned. “If you have to explain it, then it’s not funny.”

“But I didn’t have to explain it. You knew what I was talking about.” Henry followed Mason around as he continued working. “Have you heard from Carter?”

“No,” Mason muttered. “You?”

“No. I don’t even think Caleb has heard from him.”

Mason paused and stared at his brother. “Has anyone told Wade or Elijah?”

Henry shook his head. “Honestly, I think they’ve been too busy to realize that Carter is missing since all his work is getting done.”

“Well, Annabel is bound to notice when she gets back from her trip with Dalton. And when she figures it out, she’s not going to keep it quiet. Do you think Caleb will keep it a secret this time?”

Henry climbed up into the bed of Mason’s truck and stared out at nothing in particular. He released a huff. “I don’t know. It didn’t take much for the kid to tell us. And you know Wade and Elijah won’t take no for an answer. Not with Caleb, not with Carter.”

Mason dropped another bale at his feet before he took it into the barn. “What do you think we should do? You heard Carter. I wouldn’t put it past him to run with what little he has.”

Henry shrugged. “It’s not our problem.”

Mason shot him a sharp look. “It’s absolutely our problem. We know where he is. We didn’t bring him home when we found him. What do you think Annabel is going to say to *that*?”

“All I’m saying is that we don’t have to let anyone know we know where he is. If Caleb gives him up, then that’s on him. We did our best. That’s all that matters.” Henry hopped down from the truck, changing the subject. “This is a pretty

nice setup. No wonder why Carter thought you should come back here. What did you say Abrams was offering you?"

"I didn't," Mason said flatly. "And it's none of your business."

Henry wandered toward the barn, and Mason grabbed the bale he'd dropped and then followed him. His brother reached out and touched some of the tools hanging on a nearby wall. "So, you're never gonna tell us what you get out of working here, huh? Not even a clue? I thought you said you cared about our family."

Mason dropped the bale with a thud. "Don't even start. Whatever I end up with, I'll be sharing. You don't have to worry about that. Speaking of futures, what is your plan?"

"What do you mean, what's my plan? I don't have to have a plan. I'm working with my family. We're getting our ranch bigger and stronger so we can take care of everyone." Henry glanced toward Mason. "That's what you should be doing."

"At some point you have to figure out if your whole life's purpose is going to be doing the work at home or if you're going to venture out to do something good."

"Good," Henry snorted, "good, like what? Running away? Working myself to death because I'm not willing to admit to myself that I'm still in love with a girl who broke my heart?"

Mason shot him a sharp look. "This has nothing to do with Harley. I'm working hard so I have something to show for it when I'm older."

"You lost the girl of your dreams. Just admit it and move on."

He shook his head. "I am moving on. I'm working again. I can come here and not immediately succumb to feeling depressed because of my memories of her." Mason heaved a sigh. "I'm actually making something of myself. Did I love her? Of course, I did. Do I spend every day wishing things were different and I could just go tell her what she means to me? Sure. But there comes a time when you have to realize that life goes on. We can't be stuck in a rut forever. I'm going

to reach for something great. When are you going to do the same?” Mason glanced up at Henry, finding him staring at a spot behind him. Slowly, he turned around.

“Hi, Mason,” Harley said casually.

“Whelp, that’s my cue. I’m heading out. See you at dinner, Mason.” Henry slipped past Mason and through the door. “Welcome back, Harley.”

She glanced at him until he disappeared from view. “One of your brothers, right?” she asked as she faced Mason again.

He nodded. “That’s Henry. He’s fifth.”

“And you were...”

“Seventh.”

Harley nodded, then glanced around. She looked different somehow. Her clothes were more modest, her makeup was natural. Even the way she did her hair made her look as though she was a completely different person. Gone was the unnatural color, replaced by a pretty blonde that actually suited her well. He recalled her telling him she was lighter haired.

She held her hands tightly together in front of her, dragging her eyes back to his. “How are you doing?”

He couldn’t find the words. If he could, he would tell her how much he missed her. How sorry he was for the way things were left. He’d tell her he wanted to be with her no matter the cost.

But he couldn’t afford to put his heart on the line like that. He didn’t even know what she was doing here. For all he knew, she was here to pick up something she’d forgotten. Or she’d come back to visit her uncle.

Harley smiled warmly and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“You are?”

She laughed. “Of course I am. Actually, I came to find you.”



He didn't dare hope. Was he dreaming? That's the only thing that made sense. He was dreaming, and when he woke up, he'd find himself alone.

Harley took a step toward him. "I wanted to tell you that I received my inheritance, and I've already been working really hard to create funds for those who need it here."

"You... what?"

Her smile widened. "I'm working with Shane, and the schools, and even the grocery store. I want to make sure that people around here know they will get some help if they come upon hard times. It's a lot harder than I thought it would be, mostly because I had to hire someone who can verify that the person requesting financial assistance actually needs it. But mostly, the people who qualify are kids—like you were when your parents..." Her voice trailed off and she flushed visibly. "Anyway, that's not the only reason I came back."

"That sounds like a pretty big deal," he said under his breath.

She nodded. "It is, but it's not the biggest reason." Harley took a step toward him. "I came back for you."

His heart stopped. Right along with that, his body went numb. He couldn't have heard her correctly. "What?"

Harley rolled her eyes. "I'm here for you, Mason. Ever since I left, all I could think about was how I made the biggest mistake of my life. I fell in love with you. I should have never left." Her shoulders lifted and dropped as she stood there waiting for him to respond.

In two long strides, Mason moved toward her. He scooped her into his arms and spun her around. His lips found hers, capturing her, claiming her as his own. This was all he'd wanted to hear her say. This was all he'd ever needed.

Harley's arms wrapped around him, and she kissed him back. They had a lot to work through and trust to rebuild, but he didn't care. She was back, and she wanted to be with him.

She pulled back with a sharp laugh. "I take it that you're willing to forgive me? You're willing to take me back?"

Mason placed her on her feet and framed her face with both of his hands. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you since you left. You don’t know how many times I had to convince myself that it wouldn’t bode well if I chased after you.”

“You could have chased after me,” Harley whispered.

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t dare make demands of the great Harley Pembroke. You are the strongest woman I know. Each and every decision you make has to come from your heart. I understand that better than anything.”

She tilted her head. “But there’s something you don’t understand.”

“What’s that?” He pressed his forehead to hers.

“You make me want to be better simply by being you. I’ve never felt like you’ve forced me to fall in line or improve myself. Somehow, you manage to make me *want* to be that person. Twenty years under my mother’s roof, and even she couldn’t manage it.” She ducked her head and hid an embarrassed smile. “It’s probably not a very good personality trait, but that’s how it is.”

Mason tilted her face upward. “I just want you to be happy. I would love you no matter what. You’re amazing, and I have no problem reminding you of that fact every single day.”

Her eyes brimmed with emotion. “That’s all I’ve ever needed.”

“That, and macaroni and cheese made with sausage.”

She tossed her head back. “Yes, we can’t forget that.”

Mason pulled her close, kissing her deeply. In that kiss, he promised her the world. Together with her by his side, they could make a real difference in the world. And they’d never feel alone again.

# EPILOGUE

## *Harley*

Harley and Mason had officially been dating for a few months and she still didn't feel like she belonged. Mason's family was so large, and they were so close that it was hard to find a way to get them to accept her.

It probably didn't help her case that she'd been the one to leave. She wasn't sure what Mason had told his family about her, but she got the feeling she would need to prove herself before they welcomed her into their fold.

They were all seated around mismatched tables in the backyard. Harley still couldn't remember all their names—except for the women. It was nice to have some female friends, and Brielle was the only one who made sure she felt included in their get-togethers.

Mason reached for her hand, smiling at her as the rest of the family shouted over one another. Carter was the brother who was still missing, and it turned out everyone chose to avoid that topic altogether.

Harley could pick out Henry. He was the one who could make anyone laugh. His jokes left a lot to be desired, but she supposed that with the lack of a father figure, he took over the dad-humor that had been missing from the family.

Coming from a family where she was an only child, she could sit back and watch everyone interact with each other with great interest. One day, all these people could be part of her family.

Her heart fluttered and her focus shifted to Mason. Ever since they started dating, everything felt like it had fallen into place. She had found herself. She knew who she wanted to be and where she wanted to go.

Most of all, she knew who she wanted to be with.

“So, Mason, when are you going to finally pull the trigger and make an honest woman out of Harley?” Henry said out of the blue.

Everyone at the table stopped eating, chatting, and otherwise doing whatever it was they were doing to look in her direction.

Henry chuckled. “You know we’re all thinking it. I was just the one who was willing to say something.”

Mason squeezed Harley’s hand. “That’s between me and \_\_\_”

“I’d like to know, too,” Harley spoke up, earning several chuckles from the group. Maybe they weren’t as judgmental as she thought. She smiled, her gaze returning to Mason. “I mean, there’s not much more I could do. I moved back here to be with you, didn’t I?”

Mason’s mouth dropped open. “You want to... you’d be willing to...”

Harley leaned into him. “There’s no one I would rather spend the rest of my life with than you. What do you say? Want to get hitched?”

“I—well, yeah—of course I do. I just didn’t think—”

She framed his face with her hands and pulled him in for a breath-stealing kiss. When she pulled back, the group cheered. “We should probably discuss one thing, though.”

“What’s that?” Mason murmured.

“I think it’s going to be better if we move out to my uncle’s place—especially seeing how he wants you to take over the whole farm.”

“He what?” Henry shot out of his seat. “You’ve been holding out on me!”

“Have not.” Mason laughed. “I’ve been working there, but there was no guarantee Abrams wanted me to take over the whole thing when he retired after the way I screwed up before. There’s been talk. That’s all.”

“Talk,” Henry muttered with disbelief. “I’d say that is more than enough proof of where everything is going to go. Congratulations, man! No one deserves it more than you.” He turned to the rest of their family. “I’m right, and you all know

it. Out of everyone, Mason deserves to be happy—to start a family and everything.”

There were several nods of agreement, but Harley could hear something in Henry’s voice no matter how hard he was trying to hide it. There was a twinge of disappointment—longing, maybe. He didn’t want to be alone.

“And what about you?” Harley asked.

“What about me?” Henry brushed her off. “I don’t need anything.”

She glanced around at the Keagans. No one seemed to notice what she had. Perhaps she was reading too much into it. Henry very well could be as happy as he wanted to be.

He flashed her a smile and nodded to the house. “I’m going to get a refill. You guys start planning that wedding because I fully intend on taking Mason’s room for my own. Maybe I’ll turn it into a workout space.” He chuckled as someone tossed a balled-up napkin in his direction.

Harley leaned into Mason. “Wedding planning sounds nice.”

“Yeah? Got any ideas?”

She shook her head. “I can’t think of anything I want. All I need is you.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself,” Mason agreed.



HELLO READERS! I hope you loved Mason and Harley’s love story. Henry’s love story is up next!

As of March 2024, I don’t have it up for preorder yet, BUT it will be available as an early release on my website [nataliedeanbooks.com](http://nataliedeanbooks.com) in mid-late April 2024. Did I mention there’ll be a discounted price there? Yep! So be on the lookout for that.

Then it will be available on Amazon by May 2024. Can't wait to catch you up on the rest of the Keagan family!