

• MAROONED
FOR A NIGHT •

STRANDED
WITH A
GRUMPY
COWBOY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

HOPE FORD

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CONTENTS

1. [Maddie](#)
 2. [Rhett](#)
 3. [Maddie](#)
 4. [Rhett](#)
 5. [Maddie](#)
 6. [Rhett](#)
 7. [Maddie](#)
 8. [Rhett](#)
 9. [Maddie](#)
 10. [Rhett](#)
 11. [Maddie](#)
 12. [Rhett](#)
 13. [Maddie](#)
- [Epilogue](#)

[Marooned for A Night](#)

[Also by Hope Ford](#)

[JOIN ME!](#)

[Be a Hottie!](#)

[About the Author](#)

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CHAPTER 1

MADDIE

JUST WALK OUT THERE. You're an adult. You help run a successful ranch. You're smart. You're beautiful. You're all the things.

It doesn't matter that Rhett is here to see your brother and will most likely ignore you. This is your home.

Once I'm done with my little pep talk, I pull my shoulders back and walk out the back door and make my way over to the barn. I get half the distance when I realize I forgot my hat. Luckily, I have my sunglasses. I pull them off the top of my head and put them on my face. It's not really bright out today, but I don't trust myself looking at Rhett without some kind of barrier between us. I've been able to keep my attraction to him hidden for this long. There's no reason I need him to see lust in my eyes now. With my glasses on my nose, I keep my eyes on my brother's friend. The man that has been a neighbor to us for the last ten years. The man that has been in my dreams most nights and the man that has a big part of my heart. Even if he doesn't want it.

He's in worn Wranglers, a tight black T-shirt, and a black Stetson that's hanging low on his brow. He has the same look on his face that he always does. It's like he's deep in thought or thinking of something that is bad. I would give anything to see him smile, but after all these years, I know it's a rare thing. He is the grumpiest cowboy around here, but no one calls him out on it. If anything, after everything he's been through, he deserves to act however he wants. I do wish he was just a little less grumpy, though.

As I get closer, I wave and instantly feel stupid. "Hey, Rhett."

He frowns and doesn't respond. I act as if it doesn't hurt when in fact, it eats me up. How hard would it be to just smile at me? Or heck, just a "hi" would suffice.

I turn away from him and smile at my brother. "All ready for your trip?"

He searches my eyes, and I hate the pitying look he's giving me. My brother is twelve years older than me. We're close, and I'm happy to have him, but because we're so close, he knows me well, and he knows how I feel about our next-door neighbor. I force a smile to my face. "Try and relax while you're gone."

He reaches over and ruffles my hair, and instead of resisting him, I wrap my arms around his waist and hug him. He pats me on my head. "I'll relax when I'm dead."

I pull back with a gasp and smack my hand on his chest hard. "Don't say that." Just the thought of losing my brother makes me crazy. He's the only family I have left. "I'm serious, don't joke about that, Elliott."

I try to pull away, and he stops me. "Sorry, sis. Bad joke. Okay, I will relax while I'm there, and I'll see you when I get back."

I can never stay mad at him for long, so I nod my head. "Okay, good. You should relax, you deserve it." I glance at Rhett, and he's watching my brother and me. I force my eyes back to Elliott. "Well, call if you need anything."

Walking away, Elliott stops me. "Sis."

I start walking backwards and wait for him to continue.

"You still going into town tonight?"

I can feel Rhett's eyes jerk to mine, but I keep focused on Elliott. "Yeah. It's Cammy's bachelorette party. Of course I'm going."

He gestures over to Rhett. "She's going to a bachelorette party at a bar."

I stop walking and put my hand on my hip. "I'm thirty years old, Elliott. I think it will be okay."

He takes his hat off and wipes his arm across his brow. "I wouldn't be

worried if I was in town.”

I shake my head. “What exactly do you think is going to happen, Elliott? A bunch of girls get drunk and have some fun. I think I can handle myself.”

He’s shaking his head. “It’s not you I’m worried about. Wes is back in town, and he’s been warned to stay away from you, but he’s not the sharpest tack in the box.”

I open my mouth to interrupt him, but he holds his hand up. “Forget it. I know you’re thirty, I know you can handle yourself, but I also know that I’m going to be around a thousand miles away. I just need you to be okay.”

I blow out a breath. My face is hot, and I hate that we’re having this conversation in front of Rhett. “I’m going to be fine. I promise, everything is good. I can handle Wes.”

He stuffs his hat back on his head and starts walking toward me. “You shouldn’t have to.”

I open my mouth to argue when Rhett surprises us both. “I’ll be in town tonight.”

My brother stops mid-stride, and both he and I look over at Rhett. “What?” I ask because I know I didn’t hear him right. Surely, he didn’t say that he would be in town tonight.

He’s been leaning against the side of my brother’s truck, relaxed with his arms over his chest. Now he’s standing straight up with his hands on his hips. “I said I’ll be in town tonight.”

I shake my head. “No. No, Rhett. This is not happening. I do not need a babysitter.”

My brother walks over to his friend. “Thanks, brother. I appreciate it. Don’t go getting your ass thrown in jail or anything, but make sure my sister can have a little fun without worrying about that asshole.”

I walk over and stand between my brother and Rhett. “No. Absolutely not. No. I’m thirty years old. This is crazy.” I look over to Rhett. “You are not going to babysit me.”

His gaze travels down my body, and I feel it like a caress. It feels like a zap, and electricity zooms through me. I cross my arms over my chest, hiding my traitorous erect nipples. Rhett lifts his hands from his hips and crosses his arms over his chest as he stares at me. “You won’t even know I’m there.”

I bark out a laugh, but he just stares at me. “You’re serious.” I look at my brother and point at Rhett. “He’s serious right now.” I’m shaking my head and start walking. I have to put some distance between us. “I won’t know you’re there? Yeah, right, you won’t stick out at all. Don’t bother coming. I’ll be fine.”

Before he can respond, I point to Elliot. “I love you, brother. See you next week. Don’t worry about things here. I got it.”

“Love you, sis,” he calls out and then turns to his friend.

They’re talking to each other as I walk away. There’s no reason for me to stay and argue. I know Rhett, and no matter what I think about it, he’s going to do what he wants. I keep walking and stomp into my house, letting the screen door slam behind me.

I groan as I walk through the house. I pick a pillow off the couch, cover my face, and scream into it. “Ahhhhhhhh!”

When I’m out of breath and can’t scream anymore, I uncover my face and throw the pillow onto the couch. The frustration is real. For years, I wanted Rhett to see me as more than the young girl next door. I was attracted to him, but I forced myself to stay away. I told myself it would pass and that it was just a crush. I even started dating Wes to try and move on, but that blew up in my face.

As I pace back and forth, all I can think about is how Rhett will always see me as Elliott’s little sister. He will never think of me as a woman he could be interested in. I’m a favor to his best friend. He’s going to check on me and make sure I’m okay like some child that can’t even take care of herself.

I fall onto the couch and lean my head back. As I stare up at the ceiling, I make my mind up. It’s not like I have a lot of choices, but I’m not going to let this interfere with my night. I’m going to go to my friend’s bachelorette party and have a good time.

And then after tonight, I'm going to do the thing I should have done a long time ago. I'm going to completely forget about Rhett. It's time I moved on, and that's exactly what I plan to do. All I have to do is get through the night and make sure I don't stare at the grumpy cowboy any longer than necessary. He thinks I won't even know he's there. He obviously doesn't know the hold he has on me. If it's up to me, he'll never know.

CHAPTER 2

RHETT

ELLIOTT IS STARING AT ME, running his hand through the scruff of his beard. I feel like he's analyzing me or something. He's definitely looking at me a little too closely, and I turn my back to him and stare out at the ranch. "Does Matt have everything under control? You need me to help with anything at the ranch while you're gone?"

Elliott comes to stand next to me and looks out at the horizon. Thank goodness, because I'm afraid of what he would see if he was looking me in the face. I don't know what it is, but lately, being around Maddie makes me uncomfortable. I'm not sure how to explain it, but it's enough to make me uneasy. I wait for Elliott to answer me, and when he does, I see him shaking his head. "No, Matt has everything under control. He's been here for ten years... he can no doubt run the ranch without me for a week."

I shrug, and he continues, "Plus, Maddie will be here. She can handle anything that comes up."

I just nod my head. "Should you get on the road?"

He laughs. "Yeah, probably. About tonight..."

I make sure to void any expression off my face and try to look uninterested. "What about it?"

He doesn't answer, and I'm forced to turn and look at him. "What is it, Elliott? What's on your mind? You might as well spill it."

He laughs and holds his hands up. "I'm just asking. Are you sure you're up to

it?”

My forehead creases. “Up to making sure some dumbass leaves your sister alone? Yeah, I think I can handle it.”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “I wasn’t joking. You can’t do something stupid, Rhett.”

I smirk. Well, I think it’s a smirk. It probably doesn’t look anything like one because my lips aren’t accustomed to turning up. “I’m not going to do anything stupid. Why would you think that?”

He shakes his head side to side and laughs. “Oh, I don’t know. How about the fact that the last time you and I went out drinking, you got into a fight, and I had to bail you out of jail.”

I cross my arms over my chest and roll my eyes. You would think I’d have lived that down by now. “That was at least five years ago.”

He nods. “Yeah, it was, but it doesn’t change the fact that it happened. And this is my sister we’re talking about—”

I cut him off. “You surely don’t think I’d let your sister get involved.” I hold my hand up like I’m some kind of boy scout or something. “I promise you, your sister will be safe tonight.”

He lifts his shoulders in a shrug. “I have no doubt you will protect my sister, it’s just...”

His voice trails off, and I throw my hands up. “What? It’s just what?”

“You’re protective of her, and I won’t be there to keep you calm, that’s all I’m saying.”

I shrug. He’s right. I am protective of his sister. The truth is, if I get the chance to lay out Wes, jail time would be worth it. “It’s going to be fine. I got this.”

He turns his head to the side and glares at me. “What?” I ask him.

“Don’t hurt my sister, Rhett.”

He’s stalking around to the other side of his truck, and I follow behind him.

“Hurt her? What the hell is that supposed to mean? I would never hurt her.”

He takes his hat off, tosses it into the passenger seat, and climbs into his truck. When he shuts the door, he leans out the window. “You wouldn’t hurt her intentionally.”

My mouth drops. What the fuck is he even talking about? “I wouldn’t hurt her... period.”

He tilts his head and looks at me. “Rhett, don’t be dense. My sister has been in love with you since you bought the land next to us. I’m just saying, don’t hurt her.”

He puts the truck into gear, and I grab the door. I physically can’t hold him where he’s at, but there’s no way he’s dropping a bombshell like that and then leaving. If I have to block his truck with my whole damn body, I’ll do it. “What the fuck are you talking about? She doesn’t... she isn’t...”

I’m speechless as I stare back at him. His eyebrows raise in surprise. “Wait. Are you saying you had no idea? You didn’t know...?”

His voice trails off, and I shake my head. “No fuckin’ way. She doesn’t... she was engaged.”

He looks up at the house and then back at me. “Shit, I really thought you knew. I just thought it was something we didn’t talk about, you know.” He shakes his head, and his eyes fill with regret. “Forget I even said anything. I can’t believe you didn’t know. How in the world did you miss that? Oh well, look, all I’m asking is for you to look after my sister while I’m gone. Wes—”

I cut him off. I hate Maddie’s ex-fiancé, and I will take great pride in dealing with him. “Wes will not come anywhere near her.”

He blows out a breath. “Okay, fine. I have to go before I miss my flight. See you, Rhett.”

I take a few steps backward. “See you, brother.”

He waves his hand out the truck window as he drives away. As soon as he’s out of sight, I’m staring up to the main house. I’ve been in the house a bunch of times, but I’ve never been in there without Elliott being home.

I should just leave. I should leave well enough alone and go back over to my small piece of land next door, but the temptation is too strong. I know I heard Elliott right, but I'm not sure I believe it. Before I can talk myself out of it, I start walking to the house. I pound on the screen door and open it. "Maddie," I call out.

She peeks around the wall at the end of the hallway before she comes into view. She looks surprised as she comes walking toward me. I take her in from head to toe. Her hair is in a ponytail that swings side to side as she walks to me. She's beautiful in her tight jeans and tucked-in T-shirt. I would be lying if I said I wasn't attracted to her. "Hey, Rhett. What's up? Does Elliott need something?"

I'm watching her closely. Her cheeks are a ruddy pink, and her breath is hitched. How have I missed that? "No, he's gone."

She stumbles a little on her feet, and I reach out for her, wrapping my hands around her waist. She grunts as she falls, and I pull her against my chest. I hold her a little too long before I help her get steady on her feet and let go. My hands go to my sides, and I keep watching her.

Her cheeks are bright pink, her breathing has picked up, and she's crossed her arms over her breasts. She takes a few steps backward. "Thanks, uh, I'm such a klutz. So uh, did you need something?"

I clear my throat. "Where is the party tonight?"

Her eyes widen. "Rhett, really, you don't have to go."

I grunt, "I want to."

She laughs. "I don't believe that for a minute. You are definitely not the type to hang out at bars."

I shrug. "I'm going, but I need to know where I'm going."

She throws her hand up. "Do you have any idea how embarrassing this is? I'm thirty years old, and my brother thinks I need a babysitter."

I walk over to the counter and grip the side of it. "No, he doesn't. He's just worried about you... we both are."

Her eyes flare to mine. “You’re worried about me?”

I gulp. There’s no way I would ever lie to her. “Yes, I am. I don’t trust Wes, and I’m not willing to just stand by and leave you unprotected—”

She holds her hands up. “He’s never hit me.”

I don’t even recognize my voice. “I’d kill him if he did.”

Her eyes widen. “He’s just an ass. I can handle him.”

I plant my feet and match her stance, crossing my arms over my chest. “You don’t have to. You go tonight and have a good time. I’ll be somewhere in the corner, and I’ll stay out of your way.”

She tilts her head to the side. “You know, this could all be for nothing. Wes may not even be there.”

I shrug. “So I get a night out, no big deal.”

She’s not buying it. “And you want a night out?”

A night out where I get to watch you laugh and have a good time? Absolutely. I think it, but I don’t say it. Instead, I tell her, “Yes, I could use one.”

She looks at me with pity, and I know what she’s thinking. It’s been ten years since my wife died, but I still get the same look of pity from people. Instead of dwelling on it, I ask, “What time do you want me to pick you up?”

She gasps. “You’re not driving me.”

I shrug. “Why not? We’re going to the same place.”

She shakes her head, and I know what she’s doing. She’s thinking I’m going to give in and just let things go, but I’m not. There’s no way I’m going to just stay at home and wonder if she’s okay or not. I give her the look. The one that tells her I’m not backing down... not on this.

She finally gives in. “Okay... I have to be at the Main Street Lounge at eight.”

I nod, ignoring the fact I’m usually about to go to bed about that time. “Okay, I’ll pick you up at seven-thirty.”

I turn on my heel and almost make it out the door before Maddie calls my name. “Rhett.”

I stop and turn. “Yeah?”

She’s followed me and is standing right next to me. She reaches out, putting her hand on my arm. I look down at where she’s touching me, and she jerks her hand back. She bites her lip, and it takes everything in me not to reach out and soothe her puffy lip with my thumb. She’s watching me, and all I can do is stare back at her. “Yeah, Maddie... what were you going to say?”

The sound of her name on my lips has her eyes widening even more, and she sucks in a breath. “I, uh, was going to say, uh, thank you. I mean, I know you’re doing this for Elliott, but I just wanted to say thank you.” The more she rambles, the pinker her cheeks get. “Uh, it’s nice to know that I have someone... I mean besides Elliott... that you have my back.”

Don’t touch her. Don’t touch her. I’m telling myself that, over and over, but it doesn’t stop me. I reach out and cup her chin in my hand. “I’m doing this for you, Maddie, and I’ll always have your back.”

She’s frozen in place, staring back at me. I need to move before I do something that I shouldn’t. I clear my throat, release my hold on her, and start backing out of the door. “I’ll see you tonight.”

I may have acted like I was doing a favor for Elliott, but the truth is, I’m doing it for Maddie. There’s no way I’d be able to stay at home, knowing she’s out and the dumbass Wes could be pestering her. No, I’ll go... just to make sure Maddie’s okay. Then I’ll make sure she’s home safe, and I’ll stay away for a while. Because no matter if I’m attracted to her or not, nothing can come of it.

CHAPTER 3

MADDIE

I HAVE my hands clenched together in my lap, and I try to focus on what Cammy and the girls are saying, but I can't stop looking over at the corner of the bar. It's obvious that Rhett has tried to be inconspicuous. When we walked in, he left me with my friends and made his way over to the bar and sat down. He's bare-headed since he's put his hat in the chair next to him, and I keep looking his way. He positioned himself so he's facing me, and it's caused me to be on edge all night.

There's a jab in my side, and I turn to my friend Emily while I dramatically rub at my side. "Dang, what was that for?"

She gestures by pointing straight at Rhett. "Better question, what's up with Mr. Grumpy?"

I successfully avoid looking over at the hot cowboy that brought me here. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Emily laughs, and the fact she's been drinking causes her laugh to be even louder and more obnoxious. "You don't know what I'm talking about? Your brother's best friend—the man who brought you here tonight — and has been sitting at the bar with his eyes glued to you the whole time. What's up?" She gasps and asks loudly, "Oh my God, did you hook up with him?" She's nodding her head. "You did it! You did the deed! It's about time."

I reach over and cover her mouth with my hand. Luckily, all the girls are laughing and being loud so no one is paying attention to Emily and me. Well, except for Rhett. One glance tells me he's watching.

I lean into my friend. “Look, it’s not like that. You know Elliott went out of town, and he was worried about Wes stirring up trouble. He didn’t take it well when I ended the engagement, so Rhett said he’d come tonight to make sure I was okay.”

Her forehead creases, and she tilts her head. “So hold up. You’re telling me Rhett is here to what? Look out for you?”

I purse my lips together. I wish I could give her another reason. Something like he couldn’t stand the idea of being away from me or he’d confessed his love for me, but none of those are true. He’s here because he’s my brother’s best friend.

I blow out a breath. “Look, can we forget about it? Let’s go dance.”

I know I have to get Emily off topic or else she will get everyone else involved to get their opinions. But I know her, and she loves to dance.

She lets out a squeal, grabs my hand, and pulls me toward the dance floor.

Luckily, it’s a line dance and I find myself getting lost in the movement. Another squeal from Emily has me looking up at the entrance of the bar. It looks like the groom-to-be and his friends have shown up. Emily practically runs off the dance floor to her husband, leaving me to my own devices. I watch as the men hover around my friend’s table and try not to be bothered by it.

I know I’m better off alone than I was with Wes. I chance a glance where Rhett was sitting earlier, but the spot is empty now. After looking around, I see him at the edge of the dance floor. His arms are crossed over his chest. His hat is back on his head, and even though I can’t see his eyes, I know he has a grim expression on his face. He’s not happy to be here, that much is obvious.

Well, that’s tough. It was his idea to come, and I refuse to let him ruin my night.

The music switches up, and when a slow song comes on, I start off the dance floor only to stop when I come toe to toe with a cowboy. He has his hand held out. “Care to dance?”

Honestly, I don't want to dance with him. He must see it in my eyes because he just shrugs his shoulders. "Come on, just one dance. My friends all said you'd tell me no."

"Friends?"

He nods and points over to the table where my friends are all at. He must be a groomsman or family with the groom or something. I nod. "Okay, sure."

I put my hand in his, and he walks a few steps before stopping and then sliding his hands to my waist. "This okay?" he asks.

I nod and rest my hands on his shoulders. This is good. I can dance with this guy so Rhett doesn't know I'm eating my heart out for him. We sway back and forth on the dance floor and are talking about Cammy and Grant's wedding coming up when I feel the cowboy stiffen. "You have a boyfriend?"

I shake my head. Shoot. I really don't want to lead this guy on, but I'm not going to lie to him either. "Nope, no boyfriend. I recently ended an engagement, so I'm not really looking for anything—"

He cuts me off. "How'd the ex-fiancé take it?"

I scrunch my nose up. "Not good. Why are you asking—"

Again, he cuts me off but this time with a strangled laugh, and even though we're barely moving as is, he slows down even more. "Well, I'm pretty sure he wants you back if the way he's staring at me means anything. He's looking at me like I'm a coyote messing with his herd."

I ignore the fact that he just referred to me as if I'm a cow. Instead, I freeze up because he has to be talking about my ex, Wes. "Where?" I ask as I try to look around.

My dance partner grunts and stops moving altogether. "Fuck. I should have known when the guys were all laughing, daring me to ask you to dance there was something up. Look, I don't want to die tonight."

I pull out of his arms. "What are you talking about?"

Before he can answer, I feel hands at my waist. "Everything okay here, Maddie?"

I had fully expected to find Wes standing behind me, but it's Rhett instead. I turn around and look up at him in surprise and a little bit of relief. "Rhett?"

He's glaring at the cowboy, and the man starts walking backward with his hands up. "I'm outta here. Thanks for the dance."

He disappears through the crowd, and I put my hand on my hip, glaring up at Rhett. "What are you doing?"

He shrugs. "I wasn't sure if you knew the guy, so I wanted to make sure you were okay."

I stomp my foot and shake my head. "Uh, yeah, I'm fine." I suck in a breath and try to calm myself as he leans down.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

I'm looking down, and he puts his hand on my chin and raises it so he can look in my eyes. "Maddie, talk to me. What just happened?"

I let out a breath. "Nothing. I... he said... I just thought you were Wes. I thought it was Wes coming up behind me."

Someone jostles into me, and Rhett pulls me closer to his chest. "Dance with me," he says gruffly.

I don't know what else to do, so I put my hands at his waist and feel his body move as he sways back and forth. His voice is almost lethal. "You're afraid of him."

Before I can deny it, he grunts. "Don't lie to me. It was fear in your eyes, Maddie."

I lean my head back to look up at him. "I wasn't. I mean, I never had any reason to... but he said some things when I broke off the engagement and so yeah, I'm a little worried about what will happen when we see each other again."

His hand goes to the side of my neck, and he holds me. His grip is firm but doesn't hurt me. "He's not going to mess with you, Maddie."

I shrug. "You don't know that."

He leans down until we're eye to eye. "He will not mess with you, Maddie. As long as there is breath in me, Wes will not touch you."

My eyes widen, and all I can do is stare back at him. He's completely serious, and the way he's looking at me, there's no way I can doubt him.

Emotion wells inside me, and in order to hide my feelings, I press closer to him, hiding my cheek against his chest.

His arms encircle me, and I let my hands slide around to his back. After a few minutes, it starts to hit me. I'm dancing with Rhett Granger. He has his arms around me, and the way he's holding me makes me feel special.

He must feel me tense because he asks, "You okay?"

I don't want to make any sudden movements. His chin is resting on my head, so I quietly tell him, "Yeah, I'm good."

We dance, and I know it sounds crazy, but our bodies fit together perfectly. I probably shouldn't, but I press my body against his, wanting to be as close as I can. Who knows how long this will last, and I refuse to waste a second of it.

CHAPTER 4

RHETT

I BITE on to my lip to hold back the groan. It's either that or I'm going to moan, and there will be no doubt to anyone around us what I think about having Maddie in my arms. I thought I could do this. The plan was to stay in my seat and mind my own business. I was just going to keep an eye out for her ex and intervene if I needed to.

I didn't think about how I would feel, seeing her across the room, laughing and having a good time. I wasn't prepared when she moved to the dance floor and I could no longer see her from my seat. I told myself that I moved closer to the dance floor because I wanted to make sure she was safe. And yeah, I want her safe, but that's only part of it. I'm drawn to her. The way she lights up, I had no choice but to follow her.

I stood on the sideline, content to watch her dance with her friend. As soon as the lights lowered and the tempo of the music slowed, I tensed up. I thought I would breathe easier when she started to walk off the dance floor, but I let my guard down too soon. I should have known that some man would ask her to dance. He'd be a fool not to.

But I don't have to like it.

I stayed rooted to my spot for as long as I could, but it wasn't long before I was making my way through the couples and cutting in. Now here I am with Maddie in my arms, and I'm wishing that the night didn't have to end.

It kills me to know she's scared of her ex, and I wasn't lying when I told her he wouldn't touch her. There's no way he's getting near her. The thought of

him touching her makes me feel lethal.

“You okay?”

Her hand has slid to my chest, and she’s tilted her head back to look up at me. She’s just a few inches away, and I could easily lean down and press my lips to hers. I want to do it. Heck, I want to throw her over my shoulder and carry her out of here, but I can’t do anything that I want. “Yeah, I’m good.”

She pats her hand on my chest. “I think I’m ready to go home.”

My hands tighten on her waist because I don’t want to let her go. “Are you sure? I can make my way back over to the bar, and you can go back to your friends.”

She shakes her head. “No, I think I’m ready.”

Reluctantly, I let her go and take a step back.

She turns on her heel, and I follow behind her. She goes to tell her friends bye, and I wait by the door. When she gets close to me, I help her put her jacket on. We’re both quiet as we walk out of the bar. The quiet sound of the night is welcoming, and we walk side by side toward my truck.

I hear Wes before I see him. “Well, well, well. What have we got here?”

Maddie stops mid-stride, and I grab her hand, pulling her against me. Wes is here with two of his buddies, and the three of them are standing in front of us, blocking our path.

“I suggest you move, Wes.”

He ignores me and looks at Maddie instead. “Is this why you broke it off? I knew there was something going on between you two.”

I pull Maddie behind me. “You have a problem, you talk to me. Not her.”

He frowns. “What happened? She give you a few acres so you’re throwing her a bone?”

I take a big step toward Wes and stop when I bump into his chest. I can feel Maddie’s hand on my back, and I know she means to calm me, but it makes me even more tense that she’s so close to me knowing one of the other two

guys could do something stupid at any moment. Because I can't stop myself, I reach for the front of Wes' shirt and pull him in close with my face in his. At least the men that are with him don't come to his rescue. If anything, they move away. I tighten my hold on the man. "Here's how this is going to go down, Wes. First, you're going to shut your mouth. You even mention Maddie's name and you won't like the consequences. Second, you're going to stay away from her. You see her and you go the other way. If I find out you've called her, approached her, or hell, even thought about her, I will end you."

He's pissed, that much is obvious. He doesn't like being called out, especially in front of his buddies. I grip his shirt tightly and repeat while enunciating each word. "Do. You. Got. It?"

With his jaw pulled tight, he answers, "Yeah, I got it."

I release him and reach back. Maddie instantly puts her hand in mine. With one last glare at Wes, I walk over to my truck, with Maddie pulled into my side. She's quiet the whole distance, and I want to ask her if she's okay, but my first thought is to get her to safety. If Wes and his buddies decide to grow some balls in the next few seconds, I need to know she's safe.

I open the door to the truck and help her in before closing it and making my way around to the driver's side. The men have disappeared inside the bar, so I breathe a little easier as I get in and start the truck. I should pull out, but I don't. I sit with my hands gripping the steering wheel. "Maddie, when something like that happens, I need to know you're safe. I was outnumbered, and you should have gone to the truck or even back inside the bar."

She gasps and looks as if I've sprouted two heads. "I wouldn't just leave you. It's my fault—"

I cut her off. "No, don't say it. None of this is your fault."

She bites onto her lip and nods. Fuck, is she about to cry? "Thank you, Rhett. I know this isn't exactly how you wanted to spend your night, but I appreciate you coming and well, everything."

I tighten my hands around the wheel because I'm itching to reach for her. "Don't thank me."

I know I sound like an ass, but I can't help it. If I drop my guard even a little bit, it's hard to tell what I may do. I put the truck into gear, but before pulling out, I tell Maddie, "Put your seatbelt on."

She pulls at the belt over her shoulder with a huff. "I'm not a child, Rhett. I feel like I have to keep telling you that. And I would have put my seatbelt on, but pardon me if I'm a little stunned by everything." She keeps yanking on the unforgiving belt, but it's not budging.

I put the truck in park and climb out. The whole walk around to the passenger side, I'm telling myself to help Maddie with the seatbelt and that's it. *Don't touch her.*

She's still struggling with it when I open the door, and instead of reaching for the seatbelt, I reach for her. "Maddie, baby, stop."

Her eyes lift, and she's looking at me through her long lashes. It's obvious seeing Wes has bothered her, and here I am giving her shit. She's apologizing again. "Shoot, I'm sorry, Rhett. I'm a mess, and—"

I cut her off and cup her face in my hands. "You're not a mess, Maddie. You're perfect, and you shouldn't apologize to anyone... especially not to me. I'm here because I wanted to be. I wanted to be here tonight."

She blinks up at me, and I know I'm going to kiss her. How could I not? I'm literally holding her face in my hands. How could I not kiss her?

I'm searching her eyes, and desire is reflected back at me. She wants this... I know she does, but I also know that I shouldn't give in. Nothing can come of this. I'm about to release her when she grasps the front of my shirt. "No."

I tense up. "No? No, don't kiss you?"

She pulls me toward her. "No, don't stop. Please, kiss me, Rhett."

I can't resist. Before I can talk myself out of it, I press my lips to hers. I've thought about what it would be like to kiss her at least a thousand times, but none of those come close to reality. Her lips are soft against mine, and when she opens her mouth, allowing me entrance, I slide my tongue against hers and lose all sense of responsibility.

I turn her in her seat and pull her to the edge. I fit my hips between her legs, and she instantly hooks her ankles around my hips. My cock is hard, pressing against the zipper of my jeans, but damn, the pain is good. It's the only thing that is going to bring me to my senses.

Maddie tilts her head to the side, giving me better access. Her hands are sliding across my chest, and it's as if she can't get enough. Her hands are everywhere, and when I feel her fingers against the bare skin of my belly, I suck in a breath and break the kiss.

Panting, I press my forehead to hers. There's a weight on my chest, and I feel like I can't breathe. Kissing Maddie is like nothing I've felt before, and I wasn't prepared for it.

I pull back, and she's looking at me wide-eyed. "I'm sorry, Maddie... I shouldn't have—"

She reaches up and touches her fingers to her lips. "Don't apologize... I wanted you to kiss me."

I huff out a breath and take a step back. "Get in," I tell her gruffly.

She turns in her seat, and when she reaches for the seatbelt, I grab it and pull it across her chest and insert it into the slot next to her hip. She's holding her breath the whole time, and I swear the air between us is electric.

Without saying another word, I shut the door and walk around to the driver's side.

She sits quietly beside me the whole way, and I know I've fucked up. We're almost to her ranch before she starts to talk. "Do you regret kissing me, Rhett?"

I can't look at her because if I do, I'll confess all the times I've thought about kissing her. "No, I don't regret it... but it can't happen again."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "Because of Margie?"

When she mentions my wife who died ten years ago, I wait for some kind of pang in my chest, maybe guilt or something, but it never comes. "No, this doesn't have anything to do with Margie."

She turns in her seat, and thank goodness I'm pulling into her driveway. I know I can't refuse her for long. I can feel her staring at me, but I keep my eyes on the road. "What is it then? Why can't this happen again?"

I lean up in my seat and look out at the road in front of me. I might as well tell her. She won't give up until I do. "Where should I start? Because you're my best friend's little sister."

She cuts in. "I'm an adult and have been for a long time."

I ignore her and continue. "Because you're twelve years younger than me."

"Age is just a number."

I cut her off and start to ramble all the reasons I've convinced myself of why this is not possible. "Because you have your whole life in front of you, because you deserve more than some broke cowboy, because people like your stupid ex will think I'm trying to take your land from you, because you deserve better than me."

I stop in front of her house and slam the gear into park. I'm huffing like I'm out of breath, but more than anything, I'm pissed off. I want Maddie. Hell, I'd give anything to be with Maddie, but that's not in the cards for me. It can never happen.

I hear the click of her seatbelt and drag my eyes off the dash and look at her. She's up on her knees coming toward me. Fuck me, I should get out. Hell, I should walk away and not look back, but I can't. She doesn't stop until she's straddling my lap, and when she sits down, fitting her body to mine, I inhale sharply. This is too much.

Her hands grip my shoulders, and she presses her breasts against my chest. I look like a crazy person, with my hands held up in the air, refusing to touch her. At this point, I'm wondering if I am crazy.

"Rhett." She says my name huskily, and all I can think is I would love to hear her say it when I'm impaling her on my cock.

My voice is strangled when I say her name. "Maddie."

Her thumb is tracing the vein in my neck that is vibrating under her touch.

I'm losing all control here, and if I don't rein it in soon, I can't be blamed for what I might do.

"Maddie, baby, we can't. I can't."

CHAPTER 5

MADDIE

THIS IS NOT ME. I'm not the type to climb onto a man's lap. Hell, I'm not a forward person at all, but hearing Rhett say that he wants me and then list all the asinine reasons of why he can't have me has pushed me to the limit. How this man thinks I could do better than him is beyond me. There's no other man better than him.

I grab his hands and hold them between us. While looking into his eyes, I ask him, "Do you have any idea how many times I've thought about these hands? How many times I've dreamed about you touching me with them?"

He grunts, but he doesn't pull away. I lower our hands and move them to my hips. I can't help myself; when his fingers dig into my waist, I scoot closer. The bulge in his jeans presses against me, and I throw my head back and twist my lower half on top of him.

He holds me tighter, and I'm not sure if it's to stop me or bring me closer. The conflict on his face is obvious, and I know he's struggling with this, but I also know I'll regret it if I don't tell him how I feel.

While grinding on his lap, I lean into his chest. I trace my finger over his jaw. "Did you know that when you come over, I want to be close to you? Sometimes, I just stand next to you and listen to you talk all while imagining you holding my hand, touching me, kissing me."

His voice is pained. "Maddie."

I lean in and kiss along his jaw and suckle his earlobe. His hips jerk, and the

way it hits my core has me about to explode. “I’m not asking for anything from you, Rhett. I know you could never want a future with me, but just give me one night. Just one night and maybe I can get you out of my system.”

I’m rotating my hips, but there’s no way I can stop. It feels too good to stop. “Please, Rhett. I need... Damn, I don’t know what I need.”

He lets out a strained breath. “I know what you need...”

I grip his shoulders. “And you’ll give it to me?”

He’s staring at me with a dazed look on his face, but I can’t ask him about it because he’s pulling at the skirt that has ridden up my thighs. When his rough hands touch my bare skin, I jerk. He soothes me by wrapping one hand around my neck and pulling me to him. “Kiss me.”

I lean forward readily and kiss him as if my life depends on it. His other hand is sliding up my thigh, and when he pulls my panties to the side, I groan into his mouth. He doesn’t make me wait long. His finger slides through my swollen slit, and when he brushes across my engorged clit, I dig my fingernails into his shoulders. Already this is better than I ever imagined.

He lavishes my core with attention, all while sliding his tongue along mine. I feel him everywhere, but it’s not enough. I want more. I want all of him.

“Please...” I beg him, and that one word pulls him out of his senses. He jerks back and looks at me with wild eyes.

“Fuck,” he says.

Before I can stop him, he has the truck door open, and he’s getting out with me still in his lap. He holds on to me, and I wrap my legs around his waist. “Rhett?”

He walks along the walkway, up the steps, and to the front door. He opens it, and when he walks in, he kicks the door shut behind us and goes straight to the living room before dropping me to the couch. I’m about to reach for him when he drops to his knees and pushes me backwards. “I need to taste you, Maddie.”

My legs fall open, and he doesn’t waste any time. I take off my jacket in a

hurry and toss it to the floor. He hikes my skirt up and pulls my panties down. I struggle to help him, and when the heel of my boot digs into his back, it doesn't even faze him. He's a man on a mission, and nothing is going to come between him and what he wants.

His shoulders fit between my thighs, and he buries his face in my honeyed core. The first time his tongue swipes across my clit, I release a guttural groan and about come off the couch. He crosses one arm over my waist to hold me down, and then he's relentless as he laps at me. He suckles me until I'm writhing, and I come as he pummels his finger in and out of me. "Oh fuuuuckkk," I grunt as the orgasm shoots through my body. I have my hands in his hair, and I'm holding tightly to him as the ecstasy rolls through my body.

He's nibbling at my thigh, and he moves, sliding his body up mine until we're face to face.

He cups my jaw and kisses me. Tasting my own arousal on his tongue ignites something inside me. I pull away from him breathless and tug at his shirt. "You have too many clothes on."

He covers my hand with his and stops me. My eyes jerk to his. "Rhett, let me."

But before I even get the words out, I know he's not going to. He grabs both of my hands and lowers to his haunches. I feel so exposed, and I sit up, trying to put my legs together. "Rhett..."

He picks up my underwear and tries to help me put them on, but I grab them from him and toss them onto the couch. "Rhett, talk to me."

He cringes before standing up and putting distance between us. He grabs his hat off the couch and holds it in front of him. "I'm sorry, Maddie. I shouldn't have touched you. I know I shouldn't have, but I couldn't resist."

I shove him in the chest. "What? You couldn't resist me and now you can?"

He lets me push him and does nothing to defend himself. As I talk, my voice gets louder. "Talk to me, Rhett. I'm giving myself to you. You can have me, and now you don't want me."

He shakes his head. "I always want you, Maddie. Don't ever think I don't. But you don't understand."

Frustrated, I go toe to toe with him and lean my head back so I can look up at him. "Then explain it to me. Explain it to me so I understand."

"I can't. You deserve more than me. I don't have anything to offer you and ___"

I cut him off. "I only want you. Nothing else, just you."

He's shaking his head in denial. "No, I'm sorry. I have to go."

He walks by me, making sure he doesn't touch me, and all I can do is watch him leave. He stops next to the door and jams his hat on his head. "There's a big snowstorm coming tomorrow, Maddie. Stay close to the ranch."

I cross my arms over my chest and lift my chin up. Every fiber of my being wants to call out to him and beg him to stay, but I don't have it in me. Rejection from Rhett is too much for me right now.

As soon as he closes the door, though, my feet start to move. I should have a little more pride, but I still follow Rhett out the door and down the steps, pulling my skirt down along the way. "Rhett."

He doesn't stop. He gets into the truck and slams the door shut. I'm freezing, rubbing my hands up and down my arms. He opens the truck and comes to stand next to me. "Get back inside before you freeze to death."

I stand my ground. "No, not until you talk to me."

He puts his hands at my waist. "Get back inside."

I'm shivering, but I don't give in. "No."

He wraps his arms around me and holds me against his body. His breath is hot against my cheek. "You're going to get sick out here without a coat or anything. Get back inside."

"Rhett? Will you answer me one thing?"

His chest lifts as he inhales. "Fine. I'll answer one question and then you're going back inside."

He tucks me against his side and walks with me back up to the front porch. Then he turns me so I'm looking up at him. "Ask me."

I have a hundred things I want to ask, but I just ask the most important question. I can feel my cheeks flame, but I ask anyway. "Do you want me?"

He leans his head down and presses his forehead to mine. There is torment on his face. "I want you more than I want my next breath, Maddie. I wish things were different, I wish I could say damn it to hell with all the reasoning of why me and you are a bad idea, but I can't. I won't do that to you. So yes, I want you..."

I smile up at him. "Okay, that's all I need to know."

I turn and put my hand on the doorknob. My mind is going a hundred miles a minute, and I'm already planning what I need to do when Rhett stops me. "Don't forget the snowstorm tomorrow. Stay close to the ranch. If you need anything, just call me."

I nod and lean against the opened door. "Okay."

His forehead creases like he can't believe I'm agreeing with him. "Okay?"

I nod. "Okay, snowstorm... close to the ranch. Got it."

When he walks down the steps, I watch him go, but the whole time I'm planning and plotting my next move. There's no way Rhett is going to tell me he wants me and then just go back to the way things were. There's no way, because if I have any chance with Rhett, I'm going to fight for it. I'll do whatever I have to do to prove to him we're meant to be together.

CHAPTER 6

RHETT

I RUN my hand through my hair and then put my hat back on my head. The snow has already started, and I'm going on very little sleep. I tossed and turned most of the night because the regret wasn't sitting with me well. I shouldn't have walked away from her. I shouldn't have. Now I've spent the whole day getting ready for the snowstorm, and I'm on edge because I haven't seen Maddie in hours. Her truck is still sitting in the driveway, but something is not right.

My phone rings, and when I see Elliott's name, guilt hits me hard and fast. Even though I want to ignore it, I know I can't. He could need me... hell, Maddie could need me. I answer the phone. "Hey."

"Hey brother, what's up?"

I lean against the side of the barn. "Aren't you supposed to be living it up in Vegas? You shouldn't be calling home—"

He interrupts me. "How did last night go?"

I freak out for just a minute, and then I realize he's asking about me taking Maddie to the bar, not about what I did to her after. "Fine. We ran into Wes —"

He cuts me off. "Is he still breathing?"

I grunt because even now I'm mad about Wes. "Yes, he's breathing. For now anyway."

Elliott laughs. “Well, you’re not in jail at least. Madds told me you defended her.”

I try to keep my voice calm and level. “You talked to Maddie?”

I can hear what sounds like slot machines in the background. “Yeah, she was going up to check the north pasture and then she was going to stay at the old hunting cabin.”

I push myself off the barn and practically yell into the phone. “She what?”

He laughs. “Chill out, Rhett. Geez. She’ll be fine. She’s lived on that ranch her whole life. She’ll be fine.”

“The storm...” I start.

He interrupts me. “It’s Montana, Rhett. She can handle a snowstorm.”

“What the fuck...”

I’m already on the move when he asks me, “What’s your deal? You know Maddie. She’s stronger than most men, and she can handle herself. What’s up with you?”

I get into my truck and tear down the driveway. “What the fuck, Elliott? Yesterday, you were worried about her and today you let her go out into a fuckin’ snowstorm on her own. What’s up with you?”

“She’s fine. I keep the cabin stocked. There’s a generator and firewood. She’d be fine there for weeks if need be.”

“Weeks?” I scream into the phone. The dude has lost his shit if he thinks I’m going to let her stay in the fuckin’ cabin for weeks. “I’m taking your snowmobile.”

“Okay.” He’s way too calm. “So you’re going to check on her?”

I park my truck next to Elliott and Maddie’s barn. “Yeah, I’m going to check on her. Fuck, Elliott, I’m going to bring her home. I told her to stay where she was at.”

Elliott is cackling. “Well, that’s where you fucked up. You know Maddie, and she doesn’t do well with people telling her what to do. That was your

first fuck-up.”

Irritated with this whole conversation, I grunt into the phone, “Go enjoy your slots, Elliott. I’ll take care of your sister.”

He laughs. “I know you will.” Then he hangs up.

I walk into the barn. The keys to the snowmobile are hanging up, and I grab them before going back outside and around to the back of the barn. When I see the empty spot where Maddie’s snowmobile usually is, I want to fucking break something. Elliott’s snowsuit is hanging where it usually is, and I put it on before pulling out my phone again. After dialing Maddie’s number, I sit down on the recreation vehicle, and she answers on the first ring.

“Hey, Rhett,” she answers cheerily.

I grit my teeth. “I thought I told you to stay home today.”

Her voice is light and airy. “You did say that.”

I grunt and push my hat farther down my head. “So why the fuck are you not home?”

She’s not even fazed by the tone of my voice. “I had to check the north pasture.”

“In a fuckin’ snowstorm?”

She giggles. Fuckin’ giggles. “Uh, you’re a rancher. You know as well as I do work doesn’t stop because of a snowstorm.”

“I’m coming to get you, Maddie.”

She’s quiet for just a minute. “Well, you probably should hurry, Rhett. So you don’t get caught in the snow.”

“Maddie,” I start, but I don’t finish. I don’t want her to come back out in this weather. And it’s stupid for me to go up there. I know she’ll be safe, and I could just go back to my house and wait for the snow to clear and she’ll be home. But I can’t do it. I can’t. I won’t be okay until I can see her with my own two eyes. “Will you stay put? Until I get there.”

“Sure, I’ll stay here. I just got to the hunting cabin, and I’m getting

everything set up.”

I turn the snowmobile on. “Seriously, Maddie. Can I believe that you’re going to stay there until I get there or am I going to have to track you down in a snowstorm?”

Her voice drops a few decibels. “I promise I’ll be here when you get here, Rhett. I’ll be waiting for you.”

“I’m on my way,” I tell her and then click the button to hang up. I pull the recreation vehicle out and start driving toward the north pasture where the hunting cabin is. The wind is hard and cold on my face, but I press on the gas to get there faster. I know Maddie is safe, but it doesn’t make me feel any better. I won’t be okay until she’s standing right in front of me.

The whole way across the Barretts’ ranch, I’m second-guessing myself. I know I don’t have the strength to deny her. I was barely able to do it last night, and now, I know I won’t be able to tell her no.

I’m about a half a mile out when the snowmobile starts to sputter. Even with the gas pushed all the way in, it comes to a halt. I climb off the machine and start walking toward the cabin. The snow is up to my knees, and it makes the trek longer, but there’s no way I’m going to stop. I feel as if I can finally breathe again when I see the smoke coming from the chimney and the lights on in the window.

When I get to the front porch, the door swings open, and Maddie comes running out. “Oh my God, Rhett. Are you okay? Tell me you didn’t walk here. What were you thinking?”

She wraps her arms around me, pressing her body to mine. I’m covered in snow, and I try to pull back, but she’s not letting go. I pick her up and carry her over the threshold and set her on her feet before shutting the door behind us. When she pulls back, her clothes are wet and her nipples are pebbled against her shirt. I stroke my hand across my face. “Go put some clothes on.”

She giggles at my command, pushes me into a chair and then sits down on the wet floor in front of me. She grabs my boots and starts to tug them off me. I take my hat off and hang it on the hook over my head. I unzip my snowsuit and take it off, hanging it on the back of the chair. When Maddie

reaches for the button of my jeans, I wave her away. “I got it.”

She stands up and moves my boots over to the door before crossing her arms over her chest. “You have to take off all your wet clothes, Rhett.”

I move toward the fire in my jeans and T-shirt. “My clothes are dry for the most part. I stole Elliott’s snowsuit.”

Maddie comes to stand beside me. “Look, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I didn’t expect you to have to walk here. Where’s the snowmobile?”

I gesture with my head toward the direction of the ranch. “It’s about a half mile that way. It stopped.”

She moves beside me and puts her hands on my arm. “I’m so sorry, Rhett. I wasn’t thinking. I wanted you to come here. I wanted us to get stranded here together, but I wasn’t thinking... If you’d gotten hurt—”

I cut her off. “You wanted me to get stranded here?”

Guilt crosses her face. “Yeah, I wanted you here with me, Rhett, but I didn’t think... I’m sorry.”

She looks down at the raging fire in the fireplace, and it’s not going to work. I want her eyes on me. I reach out and touch my finger to her chin and lift her head up. “Maddie.”

She won’t look at me. “Yeah?”

I take a step toward her, but she still won’t look at me. “Look at me, Maddie.”

She closes her eyes, and I lean in. “Baby.”

She opens her eyes and stares at me. I wrap my hand around her neck. “I shouldn’t have—”

She cuts me off and grabs the front of my shirt in her hands. “No, no more shouldn’ts, no more regrets, no more pushing me away.”

I reach for her and pull her against my body. My cock is hard and pressed into her belly. “I can’t push you away, not anymore. One night, Maddy. You give me one night, and then we forget this happened. We both know nothing

can come of us.”

I wait for her to argue with me, and I’m a little disappointed that she doesn’t. Instead, she repeats my words back to me. “One night.”

CHAPTER 7

MADDIE

I KNOW I'm lying as I mutter the two words to him. The truth is, at this point, I'll tell him whatever he wants to hear if it means he won't run away from me again.

I go on my tiptoes to kiss him, but before I can, his stomach rumbles.

I lower back down. "When did you eat last?"

He shrugs his shoulders, and I swat at him. "Rhett, are you kidding me? I'm sure you've been up since the ass crack of dawn—"

He cuts me off. "The ass crack of dawn? Really?"

I shrug and walk away from him into the little kitchen. Luckily, I came prepared. I point at the table in the corner. "Sit."

I blush when he sees the small table already set with bowls and silverware on top of the napkins. I grab his bowl first and fill it with the chili that's simmering on the stove. After I set it in front of him, I open the stove and pull out the cornbread that I left in there to warm.

When I set it on the table, I push Rhett into his seat.

"You really did plan this?"

Thankfully, my back is turned, and he can't see my embarrassment. "Yeah, I told you I did." I wait until I'm sitting next to him before I ask him, "Are you mad at me?"

He opens his mouth to answer, but I start to ramble. “Trust me, I hadn’t thought it all through. If something had happened to you, I don’t know what I would do.”

He reaches across the table and wraps his big hand around mine. “I’m fine.”

All I can do is stare at him. “But what if—”

He shakes his head. “No, no what ifs. I’m fine, and I’m here now.”

I shake my head and point toward the bowl in front of him. “Eat.”

He eats the chili as if it’s the best thing he’s ever tasted. I barely touch it because I don’t have an appetite. I know I got him here, and I know we’re stranded.

“What are you thinking?” He’s pointing at me. “Right now, why are you frowning?”

I sit back in my seat. “Maybe this was a bad idea.”

He drops his spoon in the now empty bowl and picks up a napkin to wipe his face. He scoots his chair out and turns to face me. “Okay. Why do you think that?”

I lift my shoulders and avoid his gaze. Damn, this is so embarrassing.

He grabs my chin and pulls me toward him until my knees are between his legs. He reaches for my chin and lifts it and searches my eyes. “Talk to me. Why is this a bad idea?”

I wince just thinking about it. “Because I forced you here. I knew you’d come when you found out about me staying in the cabin. And now you’re stranded here with me. Basically, it’s like I’m forcing you to sleep with me.” I start to stutter. “I mean, we don’t have to sleep together... there’s one bed... but I mean, you don’t have to have sex with me.”

I pull my chin from his hold and try to get away from him. The embarrassment is just too much to handle at this point. The more I struggle, the harder he holds on to me. When I finally stop trying to get away, I find myself in his lap. He nuzzles his face into my neck. “First of all, nothing is going to happen that you don’t want to happen.”

I open my mouth, but he stops me. “Second, this between you and me was going to happen. Tonight, tomorrow, next week, there’s a limit to how strong I can be.” He cups my cheek and looks at me. “Yeah, this is still a bad idea.”

“But—” I start.

He smiles and shakes his head. “But I don’t want to fight it. For one night, I want to know what it’s like to have you in my arms. I want to lay in that small bed with you snuggled into my side and wake up with you lying next to me. Whatever happens between those times is a bonus, Maddie. But make no mistake, I want this. Whatever you’re offering me tonight, I want it.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and lean into him. “Me too. I want you, Rhett, and I’m tired of waiting.”

He picks me up from his lap and sets me down in the chair. I sit stunned and watch him clean up the dishes. “I can get those later.”

He shakes his head. “I can do it now. And then I’m going to take a shower.”

“A shower?”

He nods. “Yep. I worked all day, and once I get in that bed, I don’t plan on getting out of it until the snow melts.”

I bite my lip because whether he means to or not, his words excite me. I sit awkwardly until he finishes washing the dishes and putting away the leftovers. I’m not one for sitting around, so this feels weird to me. I get up from my chair. “Okay, I’ll just…”

He turns and tosses the dish towel on the counter. “Shower with me.”

I stumble on my own two feet, but he catches me, smiling. I shake my head because surely I didn’t hear him right. “Shower with you?”

He nods, and while holding me, he starts walking me backward toward the bathroom. “Yes, I want you to shower with me.”

Of course I want to shower with him, but insecurity settles in. The closer we get to the bathroom, the more I second-guess it. “So, uh, are we showering in the dark?”

He shakes his head. “In the dark? How am I supposed to see you in the dark?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Exactly. That’s the point.”

He stops next to the shower and puts his hands on my shoulders. “You don’t want me to see you?”

I scrunch my nose up. “More like, are you sure you want to see me? I’m a rancher, Rhett.”

His eyebrows raise, and he looks at me with surprise. “I know what you are, Maddie, I’m just trying to figure out what you being a rancher has to do with anything.”

I jut my chin at him. “I don’t diet. I eat when I’m hungry, and I’m not shaped like most women you would probably find attractive.”

He’s trying not to laugh. His eyes are sparkling, and it’s obvious that he’s trying not to smile. I want to get on him about it, but the fact he’s smiling stuns me a little.

His hands trail down my arms, and he grabs both my hands. “I find you very attractive, Maddie.” He leans in and whispers in my ear, “I tasted your cunt last night, baby. I’m completely fuckin’ hooked.” He kisses my ear and down my neck before whispering into my ear, “Let me see you.”

I suck in a deep breath and try to give myself another pep talk. I can do this. He saw part of my body last night, and he seemed fine with it. I might as well show it all to him. As far as pep talks go, this one is pretty weak, but I take heart and put myself into action. I reach for the hem of my T-shirt and raise it a little. When I get to my midriff, I pause. “You sure about this?”

His hands are fisted at his sides, and he’s completely focused on me. “Yes, I’m more than sure.”

I nod, take a deep breath, and let it out before pulling the shirt up my body and dropping it to the floor. His eyes widen as his gaze travels down my body. He doesn’t even try to hide his appreciation. He’s openly staring at me as if he’s trying to commit it all to memory. The glazed look in his eyes pushes me on, and I reach behind me to unhook my bra. I let the straps fall

off my shoulders, and with a strangled breath, I pull the bra from my breasts and let it fall to where my shirt is lying.

He sucks in a breath. “Fuck me.”

He moves toward me and then stops. “I need to touch you.”

The way he says it, I know it’s true. I just smile at him and grab the button of my jeans. As I undo them and pull them down my hips, Rhett’s eyes watch my every move. I step out of them before putting my fingers in each side of my panties at my hips. I make quick work out of pulling them down my hips and stepping out of them before walking into the shower. “Come here.”

Rhett pulls me out of the shower, and he holds me to him with my ass cupped in his hands. I rest my chin on his chest. “I thought we were showering.”

He reaches behind me and turns the shower on. “Oh, we’re showering, but I need to heat the water up first.”

I put my hands to his waist. “You’re a little overdressed for a shower, aren’t you?”

He grabs the hem of his shirt and pulls it over his head. Then his hands find their way back to my ass. He squeezes me, and I lean my lower body against him. I knew that Rhett was built. I’ve seen him without a shirt before, but it’s different when I can feel the hardness of his chest under my hands. I run my fingers across his shoulders, over his nipples and down the hard plane of his stomach. When I get to his jeans, I mutter, “Still too many clothes.”

He tilts his head to the side. “Well, you going to do something about it?”

I raise my eyebrows and grab the button of his jeans. I undo it, pull the zipper down over the bulge in his jeans, and then have to put in a little effort to get them down his thighs and legs. He steps out of them, and I can’t drag my eyes off the tent his manhood has made in his underwear. He threads his hands through my hair and gives the strands a little tug. “You done?”

My mouth is watering. I trace my finger down his happy trail and run my hand along the hem of his underwear. “I’m not even close to being done. I don’t know if I’ll ever be.”

I stop and realize what I just said. This is supposed to be one night, and the last thing I want to do is freak him out, like I'm expecting more from him. I start to backtrack "I mean—"

He tugs on my hair. "I know what you meant."

He pulls his underwear down and then steps with me into the shower. His body is pressed against me, and I tremble even though the water is warm. He cups my face. "You okay?"

I nod. "I'm good."

CHAPTER 8

RHETT

THIS WAS A BAD IDEA.

Yes, showering with Maddie is one of the things I've dreamed about but never thought I would experience. Of course I want to pack everything into one night, but this was a bad idea. I'm already so hard I could explode. There's no way I can handle her touching me right now.

She moves closer to me, and I grab her wrists and hold them away from me. She freezes, and I see the exact moment when she understands why I'm holding her away from me, but I still grit out my reasoning. "I'll literally blow if you touch me right now."

She smirks. "Isn't that the point?"

I stiffly shake my head. "No, it's not."

Her eyes are wide, and she looks at me with innocence. "Really? You don't want to come right now?"

Before I can answer her, she's dropping softly to her knees in front of me and her hand is wrapped around my cock. My hips have a mind of their own, and I plunge them forward into her tight grip. I grunt her name. "Maddie."

Her lips curve up, and she leans forward as she kisses the tip of my dick. I lean forward to block the spray of the water from hitting her in the face. "Fuck, Maddie. You don't have to..."

I cut myself off when words become too much. She has her mouth wrapped

around my manhood, and she's sucking me down her throat. My hand tangles in her hair, and I have to force myself to lighten my hold on her.

Over and over, she sucks on me until I'm hitting the back of her throat. She's relentless, moaning around my length, and I won't be able to hold back. I try to move away, but her hand wraps around me and grips my ass, holding me to her. "Maddie, baby, I'm going to come."

Her lips turn up for just an instant and then she increases the pressure of her grip on me. I have no choice. I warn her before it happens, but she doesn't move. My whole body starts to jerk, and I'm coming until I can barely stand on my shaky legs. When she pops off me, she swallows my seed and then smiles up at me. I pull her up from her knees and wrap my arms around her. All I can do is stand here and try to get myself together.

She's resting her head on my chest, and the water is hitting her on the back. When I finally get my breath, I huskily tell her, "Let me wash your hair."

She chuckles. "I can wash my own hair."

I lean back so I can see her face. "I want to do it."

For the rest of the shower, I wash every inch of her body. By the time I get to the apex of her thighs, she's writhing in my arms.

She grunts in disapproval when I turn the water off, open the door, and grab a towel. As I dry her off, I'm shaking my head at her. "Don't worry. You'll get yours."

She grabs a towel and reaches for me. I do my best to stand still as she takes her time drying me. I cup her face in my hands. "Are you cold?"

She shakes her head.

I pick her naked body up, and she squeals. We're into the small bedroom before she says, "Why'd you ask me if I was cold?"

"I didn't want to, but I would have lent you a shirt." I lean my head down and kiss her breast. "I like you better like this."

I set her on her feet, and I can no longer resist. I run my hands up and down her body, and it takes no time at all for my cock to be hard again.

She leans her belly into my erection. “I thought most men couldn’t... you know... so soon after.”

I’m sucking her breast into my mouth, and after one last swirl of my tongue around her pebbled nipple, I start to lick up her chest. “You do this to me, Maddie. Any time I’m around you, this is what happens.”

Her smile gets even bigger, and she smacks me on the chest. “I’m done with waiting, Rhett. I’m ready. I’ve been ready, and we’re doing this.”

I push her with my body until the back of her knees hit the bed and she falls backward. I follow her down and hover over her. All I can do is look at her face and wonder how the hell I got so lucky. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think this would be a possibility, but here I am. She widens her knees, and I fit my body between them. My cock is hard, pressed against her core. I already hate the words that are about to come out of my mouth, but I know I have to say them. “You can still change your mind.”

In answer, she wraps her legs around my hips and pulls me closer. My cock slides along her slit, and her hips jerk while her legs pull me to her until we’re hip to hip. “Mmm,” I groan.

Her hands slide up and down my chest. “I won’t be changing my mind, Rhett.”

I lean my forehead against her chest. “Please tell me you’re on something.”

She threads her fingers through my hair, and I feel the rumble from her chest as she laughs. “I’m on something.”

I lift my head to look at her. “You mean...”

I let my voice trail off, unable to put voice to my question.

She reaches between us and wraps her hand around my girth. “I mean, I want you bare inside me, Rhett. I don’t want anything to be between us.”

I go to my knees and position myself at her entrance. She’s glistening, and it’s like her pussy is begging for attention. I move slowly inside her, and Maddie groans in frustration. “Don’t do that, Rhett. I’m not a porcelain doll, don’t treat me like one.”

“But—” I start, and she buries her heels into my ass.

I don’t fight her. I pummel into her, and I’m unable to stop the guttural groan that escapes me. “Fuck.”

Her voice has dropped an octave. “You’re such a romantic.”

I realize she’s calling me out for swearing. Every instinct in my body tells me to keep going, but I don’t. “Is that what you want? You want romance?”

We stare into each other’s eyes, and she doesn’t even try to hide the emotion on her face. “I don’t care if you’re the same grumpy cowboy I’ve come to... uh... I’m used to or if you’re spouting off cuss words... or waxing poetic. I just want you, Rhett.”

I lean up to kiss her, and my cock goes deeper. She moans, and I seal my lips to hers.

I feel connected to Maddie in a way I’ve never felt before, and I don’t want this to end. I thrust in and out of her, and even though I just came, it’s not going to take long for it to happen again.

I slow down my thrusts, but the friction is too intense. She fits me like a glove, and I’m slowly losing control. I reach between us and press my finger to her clit. She jerks as I circle the swollen nub, but I don’t relent. I know the exact moment her orgasm starts. Her cunt gets hotter and wetter, and her body locks up as the orgasm starts to shoot through her.

I pick up speed, impaling her on my cock, and the movements are erratic. Our groans fill the room, and I explode with her, painting her insides with my seed.

Breathless, I hover over her, searching her face. I’m waiting for the regret or possible freak-out, but she just looks up at me with a dazed expression.

“Maddie?”

She blinks but doesn’t say anything. “Maddie,” I repeat.

When she still doesn’t answer, I pull out and lie down on the bed next to her, pulling her against me. “Maddie, baby, talk to me. Are you okay?”

She finally nods her head. “I’m okay... I never... I mean... not with someone else.” She throws her hand over her head. “You, uh, really know what you’re doing.”

My chest expands. I wanted this to be good for her. At least I gave her that.

I kiss her forehead and chuckle. “I’m going to clean you up, then you need to rest.”

She sits up as I start to climb out of the bed. “Rest? I don’t need to rest.”

I get to the door of the bathroom before I turn around. “Yeah, you do. I have you one night, Maddie. I’m going to take full advantage of this, and that means I’m going to have you again. And then probably again after that.” I suck in a breath. “You okay with that?”

Her face lights up. “I’m more than okay with that.”

I nod, satisfied with her answer. “I’ll be right back.”

CHAPTER 9

MADDIE

THE SOUND of the cabin door shutting jolts me awake. I pull the sheet over my naked body and call out, “Rhett?”

I realize how dumb that is after the fact. I mean, who else would be out here in the middle of a snowstorm? He walks into the bedroom and starts to undress. The moonlight shining through the window puts him in the spotlight. I try not to stare, but it’s pointless. “Uh, did you go outside like that?”

He sits down on the edge of the bed to take the rest of his clothes off. “No, I had the coveralls on. I brought in some more wood.”

He lies down next to me but doesn’t touch me.

I don’t think I want the answer to the question I’m about to ask, but I ask anyway. “Is it still snowing?”

He grunts, and I wonder if he’s upset about it too. “No, it stopped. But we probably won’t be able to get out of here for another day or two.”

I turn to my side, facing him. “Are you mad at me?”

He turns to face me but isn’t smiling. “Why would I be mad at you?”

I shrug my shoulders. “Because I got you stranded here.”

He puts his hand out, and I suck in a breath, anticipating his touch, but he pulls back and tucks it against his chest. “No, I’m not mad about that. And it’s not your fault. I didn’t have to come.”

I blow out a breath and roll to my back to stare at the ceiling. I should be exhausted. He wasn't lying. I think we've only been sleeping for an hour since the last time he woke me up with his mouth between my thighs.

He must hear my sigh because he asks, "What is it? What are you thinking?"

I don't answer him, and he asks again. "Spill it, Maddie. What's going on in that pretty head of yours?"

"I guess this is over."

"Oh," he states simply.

When he doesn't say anything else, I figure I might as well ask. I'll regret it if not. "I mean, that's what we said, right? One night." I mutter the last two words. Why did I ever agree to something like that knowing I wanted more than one night?

"We'll be here for another day or two, Maddie, and I'll be honest. I can't see myself staying here with you and not touching you."

I roll to the side and try to search out his face in the darkness. "Is that true?"

He grimaces. "Yes. Right now, it's killing me not to have my hands on you."

I lean toward him, and I can't keep the frustration out of my voice. "Well, then why haven't you?"

He repeats my question. "Why haven't I touched you? Because I'm cold. I just came in from outside and didn't want to touch you with cold hands."

I practically dive across the bed. I'm half lying on top of him, my leg fitted between the two of his. "Why didn't you say anything? I can help keep you warm."

He grips my ass firmly in his hand and squeezes. "I love this ass, Maddie."

I wiggle against him and sigh as I wrap my body around his. "I could stay like this for... another day or two." I almost said forever, but I know that would freak him out.

He brings his hand up from my ass and rubs my back. "Me too."

I'm drawing shapes on his chest with my fingertip. "Rhett?"

"Yeah?" he asks tiredly.

"Can I ask you a question?"

He tenses for just a second but then relaxes. "Sure, you can ask me anything."

I lean my cheek against his chest. "You never talk about Margie. Do you still..."

"Love her?" he asks.

I clench my eyes. It shouldn't bother me, but it does. "No, I mean, I know you'll always love her. I just mean, geez, I don't know what I'm even asking."

He's quiet for so long I'm about to apologize for even bringing it up, but he starts to talk, and I'm hooked on every word he says. He and Margie were married for five years. She died right before he inherited the ranch next to ours. He's lived a quiet life, and I have always wondered what she was like.

"I've never really talked about this."

"You don't—"

He cuts me off. "I want to tell you."

I hold him tighter. "Okay."

He feathers his fingers through my hair. "We were married for five years. We had been having problems. She didn't like ranch life. Her family came from money, but I thought we were in love and nothing else mattered. She was happy... for awhile. At least she said she was. Then she started going to town all the time. I didn't think anything of it. She was a social person, and I understood her need to see and interact with people. She seemed happier, so I didn't complain." He blows out a breath, and I don't think he realizes it, but his whole body is tense under me. "I know you probably heard she died in a car accident. And she did, but she was not the only one in the car. She was driving her boyfriend—"

I gasp and raise my head up to look at him. "Boyfriend?"

He nods. “Yeah, boyfriend. She had been seeing the guy for a few months, I guess.”

“But the newspaper never said anything about someone else being in the car with her.”

He sighs. “Like I said, her family had money. They were able to sweep it under the rug. They paid off quite a few people to keep it under wraps.”

I reach up and cup his cheek. “Oh Rhett, I’m so sorry. I had no idea. Elliott never told me.”

He shakes his head as his eyes find mine in the darkness. “Elliott doesn’t know. I never told anyone.”

My heart aches for him. “I’m sorry.”

He keeps running his hands across my hair. “I’m fine. It’s just not something I’ve ever wanted to talk about, I guess. It doesn’t paint me in a good light or anything.”

I raise up this time and sit next to him. “Wait. This has nothing to do with you.” I shake my head. “I mean, what she did... that’s on her, and I don’t mean to speak ill of the dead, but that was her choice. That wasn’t your fault.”

His eyes keep going to my chest. “Fuck, Maddie. I can’t keep talking to you like this. Not with your boobs right there in my face, tempting me.”

I would like nothing else but to get lost in each other's arms, but I feel like this is a pretty important conversation. I jerk at the sheet and pull it up to cover my body. “No, listen, her cheating is not on you.”

He’s staring at me, no smile, no nothing. He tilts his head. “She was unhappy with me.”

I grab his shoulder. “Well, she should have talked to you about it. She shouldn’t have cheated on you. None of this is on you, Rhett.”

He just keeps watching me. I’m about to argue with him some more until he says, “Come here.”

My eyes widen. “What do you mean come here?”

He turns and leans on his arm. “I mean, come here. I want to kiss you.”

I can’t refuse him. I know he’s a man of few words and doesn’t want to talk about things. Maybe I should convince him otherwise, but I can’t refuse him. I lean over and press my lips to his before pulling away. “There you go. There’s your kiss.”

He snatches me up and pulls me on top of him. “That wasn’t a kiss.”

I nod my head. “Oh, you want a kiss-kiss?”

He grunts, and I laugh. “I’m starting to understand your grunts, you know.”

He threads his legs with mine, and I can feel his hard manhood pressed against my belly. “So that grunt should have told you that I want more than a kiss. Come up here and ride me.”

I gasp with a laugh. “I am not getting—”

He grabs my leg and pulls me over him until his erection is positioned right at my entrance. “I know you can ride, Maddie. Ride me.”

My hands splay across his chest, and I raise up as he fits his erection inside me. As I sink down on his length, I can feel the stretch, but it feels so good. The groan leaves my mouth, and I lean forward, pressing my sensitive clit against his pelvis.

His fingers dig into the skin at my hips. “Thatta girl.”

I never realized how much I wanted his approval, but those two words are everything to me. As I ride him, all I can do is wish the snow would last a little longer. If only I could figure out a way to turn two of the best days of my life into forever.

CHAPTER 10

RHETT

“FIRE IS OUT, CHIMNEY IS CLEANED.”

Maddie comes out of the kitchen. “Everything is packed away in here.”

“So... Matt said he made a clearing for us to make it back to the ranch.”

She nods. “Okay.”

I shrug. “I guess he thought he was helping us out.”

She folds the blanket on the back of the couch. “Yeah, that was nice of him.”

This doesn't feel right. Not at all.

“Okay, so I guess we should go.”

She nods, and with her head down, she walks toward the front door. I watch as she puts on her coveralls and snowboots. She opens the door and walks out without a backward glance.

When I get outside, she's standing next to the snowmobile. I hand her the hat she left inside and watch her begrudgingly take it and pull it over her head. “I can walk,” I offer. She's acting like she's ready to get rid of me, and I'm not going to push myself on her.

She gets on and slides her ass to the back of the seat. “Don't be ridiculous. We can ride together, Rhett.”

I climb on the front and start the engine. “Ready?” I call out to her.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

I turn in my seat. “Hold on to me, Maddie.”

I expect her to put her arms around my waist. I’m actually anticipating it, but when she grips the back of my coveralls, I freeze.

“I’m not moving until you hold on, Maddie.”

She grips me tighter, but I shake my head. *What the fuck?* “Maddie. Put your arms around my waist.”

She huffs and puts her arms around my waist. “Hold on,” I grunt.

The whole way to the ranch, I replay the morning in my mind. We have hardly talked at all, and as we get closer to home, my heart is starting to race. Every part of me wants this to continue to see where it goes. My mind is made up, and as soon as we get to her ranch, I’m going to talk to her about it. Maybe feel her out and see what she thinks.

I pull up close to her house, to save her from having to tread through the snow. When I help her off, she stops next to me. I cross my arms over my chest to stop from reaching for her. “I’ll be sure to thank Matt for watching my ranch while I was gone.”

She shrugs without looking at me. “He didn’t mind, I’m sure. You’ve helped him with things a thousand times. That’s what neighbors do, Rhett.”

She doesn’t seem happy with me right now. It’s like a switch has been turned off from the moment she woke up this morning. I held her in my arms most of the night, and I let myself imagine what it would be like if I had her in my arms every night.

I nod my head. “Right. So I’m going to go up and grab the other snowmobile in a few days, once the snow clears a little. I’ll bring it back to the ranch.”

She waves her hand and purses her lips. “Sure, no problem. It’s not like the cows are going to bother it or anything.”

I clap my hand on my hip. “Okay... well, I guess I better go. I’m going to put this in the barn.” I point at the snowmobile we rode here.

She shrugs. "I can get it."

I give her a pointed look. "It's okay, I can do it."

She still isn't looking at me, and it's gutting me. "Okay, well, I guess I'll go."

She smiles and finally meets my eyes. "Okay. Thanks, Rhett. I'll see you around."

Before I can answer her, she's turning on her heel and walking up the front steps. When she closes the front door, I stomp across the yard, and after a little work, I get my truck doors open. I start it up, turn on the heat and the defrost, and then get back out. I make my way back to the snowmobile and move it around to the spot at the back of the barn. I remove Elliott's snow gear and hang it up, and the whole time, I'm fuming. Maddie acted like nothing happened between us, as if the last two days meant nothing to her.

I'm almost to my truck before I take a turn toward the house. I stomp up to the front porch and pound on the door.

When Maddie opens it, her cheeks are flushed, and she's breathless. She's back to looking at my chin instead of my eyes. "Look at me," I say with anger in my voice.

"What?"

I reach for her to tip her chin but pull away before I touch her. I don't trust myself. "I said, look at me."

She leans her head back to look at me, and I don't miss the defiance in her eyes. "What? What do you want, Rhett?"

I don't want this to be over. I want to hold you and not let you go. I want to hold your hand, touch you, taste you. I want to do everything with you. But of course I don't say any of that out loud.

She waves her hand in my face. "Rhett. What is it?"

I stutter over the words. "I want you."

She rears back, and her eyes widen in surprise. "You want me?"

I nod.

She puts a hand on her hip. “What does that mean, exactly? You want me.”

I regret the words as they’re coming out, but like a fool, I finish them. “One more night, Maddie. Let me have you... for one more night.”

Her gaze drops before I can read her expression, and she leans against the door. “No.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “No?”

She shakes her head. “I can’t, Rhett. I think it’s best if...”

I swear it’s like someone has taken a sledge hammer to my chest. My hand comes up, and I rub it over my heart as she finishes. “I think we need a clean break. You said you wanted one night, and it turned into two. I just think... if we’re going to end it, we need to do it now.”

All I can do is stare at her. I want to beg her to be mine. I want to tell her I know I’m not the man she needs but I promise I can work on it. But of course I don’t say it. I take a step back. “Okay, yeah, sure. I understand.”

I walk away before I lose my mind and start to beg her to be mine. She’s not interested. She made that clear.

I go straight to my truck and get in. I sit with my hands wrapped around the steering wheel. My knuckles turn white, and I have to force myself to loosen my grip. I was a fool to think something could come of Maddie and me. I should never have touched her. I was obsessed before, but now, after having her, there’s no way I’ll be able to forget her. There’s no such a thing as moving on from Maddie. The feel of her pressed against my body, the way she made me smile when I haven’t smiled in what feels like forever, and the way we fit as if we were made for each other. Yeah, having Maddie by my side would be like all my dreams came true. But it’s not going to happen. Our time is over.

CHAPTER 11

MADDIE

I PUSH my foot on the porch, and the swing starts to rock. “Tell me everything. I want to hear all about it.”

My brother is back from Vegas, and after checking out the ranch, he joined me on the porch. “It was good. The conference was great. I learned about some new ways to improve the health of our soil and—”

I roll my hand in front of me. “Blah, blah, blah. Did you rest? Hang out by the pool? Go to the bar?”

He laughs and shakes his head. “Yes, I rested a little.”

I rest my hands in my lap. “Good, you deserve it.”

He lifts his mug and drinks some of his coffee before setting it on the table beside him. “So what about here? Anything I need to know about?”

“Nope, everything was fine.”

He laughs out loud. “Oh yeah? I figured I’d come back and shit would have hit the fan. Needless to say, Rhett had a meltdown when he found out you went to the cabin in the north pasture in a snowstorm.”

I try to play it off. “Yeah, your friend is a little bossy.”

He leans forward, and I start to fidget under his stare. I reach for my tumbler and take a drink from the straw before setting it down. “I actually was hoping we could talk about something.”

He tenses. “Okay, what about?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I was thinking I might like to travel a little bit.” I hold my hand up. “I’m not leaving you empty-handed. You know most of the work I do, I can do from anywhere. As long as I have Internet or Wi-Fi, I can do the website and send the guys the orders. And I’ve thought about it. I won’t be here, breathing down your neck about everything.”

I realize I’m rambling and stop suddenly. Elliott is shaking his head. “Where is this even coming from? You love the ranch. You’ve said yourself that you never want to leave.” His forehead creases, and he leans forward. “What happened while I was gone?”

I stand up and walk to the other side of the porch to look out at the ranch. “This is my home, Elliott. I’m not going to be gone forever. I just want a break. You went to Vegas. I think—”

He stands up. “I went to Vegas for a cattleman’s conference. I was gone a week, and now I’m home... You need a vacation? Take one. But you’re acting like you’re going to be gone for a while.”

I lift my shoulders. “It’s just a few months.”

He comes to stand next to me. “A few months! You’re going to leave for a few months?”

I’m fighting to keep myself together, and this conversation with Elliott is not helping. I try to keep the sadness off my face when I turn to look at him. “Look, bub, just give me some time. I’m dealing with a few things, and I just need some time. That’s all.”

“What are you dealing with? Talk to me and I’ll fix it.”

I smile, but I know it’s a sad smile. “You know, ever since Mom and Dad died, you’ve taken it upon yourself to take care of me. You’ve fought battles for me, you’ve listened to me, heck, you made me realize how stupid I was being about Wes. But you don’t have to fix everything. You’re still the best big brother.”

He stomps his foot, and I can’t help but laugh. He scowls. “Tell me what the problem is and I’ll fix it. If you’re running away from home, I have a right to

know why so I can fix it.”

Because I know I’m about to lose it, I put my arms around his waist and hug him tightly. “You can’t fix this, bub. I appreciate that you want to, but it’s not fixable.”

I pull back and hold my hand to my head. “I feel a migraine coming on. I’m going to go in and lie down for a bit.”

I get two steps before he reaches for me and wraps his hand around my arm. “Does Rhett have anything to do with this, Maddie?”

I cover his hand with my own and force a smile to my face. “This is a me problem, Elliott. No one else.” I pat his hand and then go into the house.

I wait until I’m in my bedroom with the door shut behind me before I break down. I’ve been a mess since the day Rhett asked me for one more night. Looking back, I regret telling him no. I did it to try and protect myself. I already knew that I was going to be a mess, but I wasn’t prepared for this complete feeling of hopelessness. My mind has gone crazy with what ifs. Like what if he meets someone? Can I really just go on like it doesn’t hurt me when I know it will rip out my heart? And then what if he gets married or has kids? How can I survive it?

The tears come stronger, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t get them to stop. When my phone dings, I ignore it and try to pull myself together. It’s probably Cammy or one of my other friends. The need to talk to someone is strong, and I grab my phone and open the messaging app. I wasn’t prepared to see Rhett’s name.

“Hey, Maddie.”

I scoot to the end of the bed and read it again.

“Hey, Rhett.” I type it out and then hit delete until I’m starting with a new slate and then start typing again. “Hey,” I respond back to him.

My eyes are glued to the phone, and when the bubbles pop up, letting me know he’s typing something, I hold my breath until his text appears.

“I’m going to bring the snowmobile over tomorrow.”

I run my hand over my face. He usually texts Elliott about these things. As a matter of fact, I can't remember the last time he texted me about anything. I grit my teeth and start typing. "Okay. Elliott's home. I'll let him know."

As soon as I hit send, I turn my phone off and set it on the nightstand. I've buried myself in work this week, and I know some of the plants will call in the evening, but I can't handle anything right now. Not while my heart is literally breaking in two.

CHAPTER 12

RHETT

SHE NEVER RESPONDED to my text, asking if we could talk.

As I pull onto their ranch, I park the snowmobile beside the other one and make my way into the barn. Matt is working in one of the stalls, and I lean over the ledge. “Hey Matt.” I really want to ask him about Maddie, but I ask, “Elliott around?”

The man straightens. “Yeah, he got home yesterday. I think he’s up at the house. He told me if I saw you to send you up there.”

Fuck. I grit my teeth. “Okay. Thanks again for checking on my ranch while I was up in the north pasture.”

He nods. “Sure. No problem.”

I walk out of the barn and take my time walking to the main house. I’m preparing myself to see Maddie again. There’s no way I’m going to be able to hide my feelings for her, and I’ve decided I’m not going to try. I knock on the door and then push it open. “Elliott,” I call out.

“I’m in the office.”

I come in and stomp the snow off my feet before making my way to the office—the place where Maddie spends most of her time during the day. I knock on the open door. “Hey.”

I search the room, but there’s no sign of Maddie. Disappointment settles in just as Elliott raises from his chair. “Come on in.”

I walk into the office, and instead of the congenial look I usually get from him, he's frowning. I widen my stance and cross my arms over my chest. If he wants to hit me, I won't stop him. I'm sure I deserve it.

He's glowering at me, and I nod my head. "Go ahead, give it to me."

He puts his hands on his hips. "What the fuck did you do to my sister?"

I take a deep breath, and my heart starts to race. "I know. I don't blame you for being pissed at me. Cuss me out, hit me, do whatever you got to do."

He comes around the desk and stops in front of me. "I'll ask you again, Rhett. What the fuck did you do to my sister?"

Fuck, how do I even begin? "I know. You have every right to be mad at me. I'm telling you... Let me have it. Nothing you can do will hurt near as bad as losing Maddie."

He pauses, and then it seems he deflates a little. "So you admit it? You're the reason that my sister is leaving?"

I jerk my head up. "Leaving? What the fuck are you talking about? Where is she going?"

Elliott starts to pace back and forth across the office. "All I know is I got home yesterday, checked on my ranch, and then my sister drops the bombshell that she wants to travel for a few months. That she wants to leave the only home she's ever known."

I hate the words even as I say them. "She's young. She should see the world."

He scoffs. "Do you know my sister at all? She hates to travel. She has always said she'd never leave here." He crosses his arms over his chest. "So you can understand why I'm upset that I get home and all of a sudden she's talking about leaving."

"She deserves to be—"

Elliott walks to me and shoves me in the shoulder. "She deserves to be loved. That's what she deserved, and I was stupid enough to think that you and her would fall in love, and you would keep her close to home. What the hell did you do? She's heartbroken, Rhett."

Knowing Maddie is sad guts me. “What do you mean, she’s heartbroken?”

“She’s fuckin’ sad, you asshole. I told you how she felt about you and what? You decide to take advantage of that?”

Guilt rushes me, but I’m shaking my head. “It wasn’t like that.” I run my hand through my hair and decide to just lay it all on the line. “I love her, Elliott. I love your sister.”

He stumbles and then sits on the edge of his desk. With his hands resting on his knees, he asks, “You love her?”

I run my hand through the scruff of my beard. “I do. I love her.”

He shakes his head like he doesn’t understand me. “Did you tell her that?”

Now it’s my turn to pace. I start walking back and forth and then stop at the big window and look out the window at the white fence that surrounds every acre of this ranch. “No, I didn’t tell her. Maddie is… fuck, she’s everything, Elliott. I have nothing to offer her. I’m a broke cowboy. She’s young and has her whole life in front of her.”

I’m lost in thought and don’t realize Elliott has come to stand beside me until he puts his hand on the wall and is looking out the same window. “Do you remember this ranch ten years ago?”

“I’m the same age as you, Elliott. I can remember ten years ago.”

He laughs. “Yeah, okay, so you remember that when Dad died, the ranch was in shambles. We were going to lose it. We didn’t know that Dad had taken out a second mortgage and that we had that high bill for the new tractor. I was about to give up.”

I turn to look at him because I’ve never heard this story before. “And?”

He smiles as if he’s remembering a nice memory from the past. “And my sister—she was twenty at the time—did all this research and came up with the idea for us to ship our 100 percent pure Angus beef. Here we are, ten years later, and we’re in every grocery store in the nation. She’s the one that saved our family’s ranch. It was her.”

I can’t help but smile. “That sounds like Maddie. She’s something else.”

Elliott turns and gestures in the direction of the barn. “We have all this. It’s a million dollar company, and you know what my sister says to me? She misses our old life when things were simpler.”

He clasps me on the shoulder. “Look, I don’t want you to be with my sister if you don’t want to work to be the man she deserves, because you’re right. She deserves the best. But I’ll also tell you, don’t push her away because you think she deserves someone better than you. Damn, Rhett. I think I knew how you felt about her before you did, and there’s not a better man than you.”

I shake my head. “But—”

He cuts me off. “No buts. You either love her or you don’t. There’s no in between.”

“I love her.”

Elliott squeezes my shoulder. “Good, so then go bring her home.”

I jerk. “She’s gone? She left? Where the hell is she?”

“Well, she woke up this morning prepared to leave, but I convinced her to stay until she was better prepared to travel. She had a migraine last night, and she hasn’t had one of those since she was in high school.”

“Where is she?”

Elliott slowly lets out a breath. “I talked her into taking a few days off and going to the cabin.”

“The north cabin?” *Our cabin*, I think to myself.

He nods, and I start walking toward the door.

Elliott follows me out. “Take the snowmobile. There’s another snowstorm coming. I’ll take care of your herd.”

As soon as I get out the door, I take off running. I know I’ve fucked up. I shouldn’t have left here the other day until I made her talk to me. All I can do is hope I’m not too late. I’m going to tell her exactly how I feel and then just pray that she feels an inkling of the same thing.

CHAPTER 13

MADDIE

I HEAR THE MOTOR, and as it gets closer, I hear it shut off and then boots on the porch. I force a fake smile on my face. I should have known my brother would have followed me up here.

But when the door opens and Rhett is standing there, I jump to my feet. “What are you doing here?”

He stomps his boots and then starts taking them off. I’m shaking my head. “What are you doing? Don’t take your boots off. You’re not staying.”

He stands to his full height. “I’m staying. There’s a snowstorm coming.”

I swear I could cry right now. “Then what are you doing here? I can’t do this, Rhett. Please don’t do this to me.”

He walks over to me and stops. He’s so close he could reach out and touch me, but he doesn’t. “Give me five minutes.” I open my mouth, and he holds his hand up to stop me. “Give me five minutes. If you don’t like what I’m saying, I’ll leave.”

She tilts her head to the side. “You’ll leave in the middle of a snowstorm?”

He nods, his eyes trained on mine. “If that’s what you want.”

I walk over to the couch and sit down. “Five minutes.”

He comes to sit next to me. He takes both my hands in his. “I love you, Maddie.”

I pull out of his grip. “Don’t. Don’t say that.”

He lets me go, but he keeps talking. “I fucked up. I knew I wanted you. I was stupid to think I could do one night—two nights—with you and that I could just move on with my life.”

When I don’t say anything, he keeps talking. “You have this huge ranch. You’re smart and young and have your whole life in front of you. I never imagined that you would want anything to do with me.”

I roll my eyes. “Rhett, that’s crazy talk. I’ve been in love with you for years.”

His mouth drops open, and he scoots closer to me. “You love me?”

I reach up and cup his jaw. “You were here with me. Every time we made love, I told you how I felt. Maybe not with words, but in every other way.”

“I tried to tell you... I asked you for more time.”

I shake my head. “You asked me for one more night. My heart was breaking. I knew I couldn’t spend one more night with you, knowing that would be it.”

He puts his hands on each side of my face and searches my eyes. “I don’t want one night... I want forever.”

“Oh, Rhett.”

I’m waiting for him to kiss me, but he doesn’t move in. “Listen, if you want to travel, we can travel. I can make it work. I know my house is nothing like the house you live in, but I promise that I’ll work every day to give you everything you want.”

I put my arms around his neck and scoot closer to him. “You promise?”

He nods solemnly. “I promise.”

I lift my shoulder in a shrug. “First of all, I don’t want to travel. I love my life on the ranch.”

He leans in. “But your brother said—”

I interrupt him. “I told my brother I wanted to travel, but I didn’t tell him why.”

He waits for me to answer, but I'm not quick enough because he nudges me. "Why?"

I blink, remembering how much it hurt to even think about it. "Because I thought you'd find some other woman, and I wouldn't be able to stick around and see it. It would kill me to see you with someone else."

His hands go to my waist, and he picks me up and drags me onto his lap. "That's not happening. You're the only woman I want, Maddie."

I lean into his chest. "Second of all, I would love to live at your ranch. I don't think you get it. As long as I'm with you, that's all that matters. I wasn't just saying it, Rhett. I love you."

"Fuck," he groans. He rests his forehead against mine. "We're going to get snowed in again."

I pull out of his lap and stand up. Slowly, I start walking away from him, pulling off my clothes as I go. "Well, the last time, we spent most of our time stranded without clothes on. We going to do that again?"

He pounces on me, and I turn, squeal, and run to the bedroom. He picks me up and carries me to the bed. "Yep, me and you, no clothes. The only difference is I'm not bargaining for one night, Maddie. I won't take anything less than forever."

"Forever sounds good to me."

And then he kisses me until I'm breathless.

EPILOGUE

RHETT

Six Months Later

“I’M WONDERING if I should whoop your ass now or later?”

I look at my brother-in-law and just laugh. This isn’t the first time Elliott has threatened to punch me. “What for this time?”

He shakes his head. “Har, har, really? You’re looking awful smug.”

I can’t stop smiling, so I don’t fight it, and I shrug my shoulders.

But Elliott’s not done busting my balls. “First you move my sister into your house before you’re even married.”

I’m still smiling, and he grimaces. “Then you get married, and not one week later, you announce that you’re having a baby. My baby sister is having a baby.”

I puff out my chest. I probably shouldn’t do it because it looks like it angers Elliott even more, but I can’t help myself. Ever since the day I told Maddie I love her, I’ve never felt happier or more at peace.

Elliott holds his beer bottle out and gestures to Maddie, who’s across the room. She’s surrounded by her friends, and she’s laughing. My gaze is locked in on her as Elliott keeps talking. “I mean, look at her, she’s pregnant. Pregnant.”

I nod. “Yep, she is.”

He shakes his head. “Really, Rhett. You could at least act like you feel bad for everything. I mean, I roam around this big ol’ house by myself, and it’s too quiet.”

I slap him on the back. “Maybe it’s time you start to fill it.”

The face he makes is comical, and we both laugh. My gaze is drawn back to Maddie, and she catches my eyes and smiles at me. “Elliott.”

“Yeah?” he asks.

I nod toward his sister. “She’s happy, right? I don’t think I’ve ever seen her this happy.”

He doesn’t answer right away, and instead he clasps me on my shoulder until I look at him. “No, Rhett. I have never seen her this happy. Why else do you think I haven’t whooped your ass yet?” With a knowing nod, he gets up. “I’m going to go grab another drink. You want one?”

I shake my head. “I’m good.”

He disappears into the kitchen just as Maddie makes her way to me. She comes straight for me, and I pull her onto my lap.

Her arms loop around my neck, but she’s grimacing. “You do know that I’m getting too big to sit on your lap.”

“That’s never going to happen. You know I like to hold you.”

She leans in to kiss me, but she pulls back way too soon. I nod to her friends in the other room. “You having fun?”

“I am. It was a great baby shower.” She leans in and whispers into my ear, “But you know what I can’t stop thinking about?”

Damn, I know I shouldn’t ask, but I can’t stop myself. I gulp. “What? What can’t you stop thinking about?”

Her lips nibble on my earlobe before she answers. “I’m thinking about when everyone leaves, we’ll head back home, and you and I can get naked. We can pretend there’s another snowstorm and we’re stranded—”

I cut her off. “And you can ride me.”

Her eyes light up. She can say what she wants, but she likes being on top. She likes knowing she has control over me. “I’m too—”

Before she can get the rest out, I put a hand on her hip and grip her there. “You’re perfect.”

She threads her fingers through the hairs at my nape. “Yeah, on top, bottom, however you want me. I just need you, Rhett.”

I’m up out of my seat in an instant. I have my arms around Maddie, and I’m helping her to the door. “Hey everyone. We’re going to get out of here. Maddie needs to rest.”

There’s a few of them laughing. One of the men whistle, and I hear Elliott call him out. “Hey, that’s my sister.”

I rush Maddie out the door, and she’s waving at them as we leave. “Rhett, it’s our baby shower.”

I help her into my truck and pull the seatbelt across her. “Yeah, and it’s been going on for five hours. You need your rest.”

When I walk around and get in the driver’s seat, she’s blushing. “Rhett, everyone in there is going to know we left to have... you know.”

“You mean make love.” I reach over and put my hand on her swollen belly. “I think they have it figured out that we make love, Maddie.”

She doesn’t want to, but she laughs.

It only takes minutes to get home, and when we do, I help her out of the truck and then walk with her inside. Every time I walk in this door now, I’m amazed by the change. Since Maddie came here, she’s made my house our home.

Maddie calls over her shoulder. “Hey, cowboy, you coming with me?”

She’s undressing as she walks toward our bedroom. I’m on her heels instantly. “I’ll follow you anywhere.”

She turns in my arms and presses her naked belly against my manhood. “You have too many clothes on, husband.”

I start to undress and follow her down to the bed. She's openly staring at me, and I lean in and nuzzle her neck. With her belly pressed against me, I jerk when I feel the little kick against me. I scoot down, and my hand goes straight to her belly. I lightly move it across her, wanting to feel it again. Maddie touches my cheek, and my eyes go up to her. Her smile is soft, but she doesn't say anything.

“What's that look?”

She shakes her head and sucks in a breath, and her voice is soft. “Nothing.”

I kiss her belly before moving up next to her. “It's not nothing.”

She presses her hand to my chest. “I love seeing you smile, Rhett.”

I seal my lips to hers and kiss her with all the love I feel inside me. When I pull back, breathless, I tell her honestly, “You give me a lot to smile about, wife.”

She sighs with content. “I love you, Rhett.”

I thread my hands through her hair and then cup her cheek. “I love you, too, baby. Forever.”

She nods. “Forever.”

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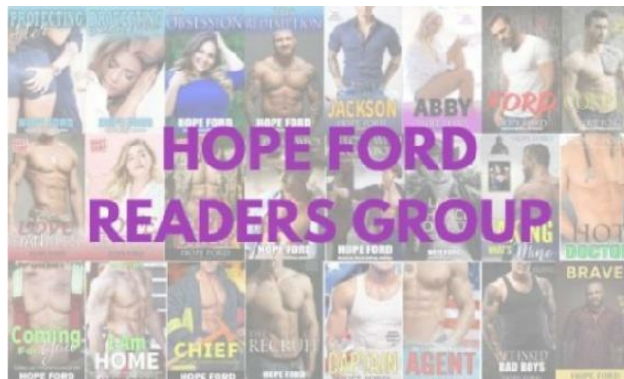
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