

STRONG ENOUGH



KELLY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ELLIOTT

STRONG
ENOUGH

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*Available on audiobook

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For more information on Kelly and her books, please visit her website www.kellyelliottauthor.com.

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Prologue

DIRK

Senior year of high school

Merit Eden.

She was beautiful. Dark hair and violet eyes that felt as if they looked deep inside you. She was short, but not too short, and Lord she had a body. One I had dreamt about more than once.

She was the girl who lived next door to me. The girl I'd known my entire life.

She was also my best friend. Well, besides Brock. I guess you could say Merit was the female version of Brock Shaw. She hadn't really hung around with Brock and me, and I liked that. I liked that we had a different type of friendship. She had been mine, only mine, as selfish as that sounded.

Merit was the girl I had grown up with and treated like my sister until she'd started to invade my dreams, and not in a sisterly way, sometime around middle school. I tried like hell to ignore those feelings deep inside when she would smile or touch me. It was crazy to think I could ever want or expect more than a friendship from Merit. Not when I had feelings for Kaci. But when I was with Merit, I seemed to forget all about Kaci and the damn games she played with Brock and me.

Merit made everything seem so easy when we hung out together. I never had to try to be anything that I wasn't when I was with her. With Kaci, that was all I ever did. With Kaci, it was an endless competition with Brock for attention. Merit, on the other hand, always lit up when she saw me. She always made me the center point in the room when we were together.

This last year of high school, though, I had fought like hell to ignore that strange feeling I got when I was around her. I pushed her away and focused on Kaci, even though I knew that was a losing battle. Still, the idea of giving in to my

feelings for Merit was something I could never—would never—allow myself to do.

That was, until now. At eighteen, I was tired of fighting this attraction. But was it worth risking our friendship? Merit was my safe place. The one person I could tell everything to and she wouldn't judge me. The one person I would do anything for. The problem was, she knew that.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” Merit asked while she chewed on her lower lip nervously. My eyes drifted down, and I had a sudden urge to haul her into my arms and kiss her. Touch her in ways I had only ever allowed myself to dream of. Truth be told, I'd had plenty of dirty dreams about Merit. The things she would do to me in those dreams would have me waking up with my cock in my hand and her name on my lips. Once awake, though, I forced myself to think of Kaci. Not Merit. It felt wrong to think of Merit like that. At least until this moment.

“I'm staring at you because you asked me to have sex with you, Merit.”

She nodded. “I trust you, Dirk. I...I love you, but not in that way,” she quickly said, even though her eyes disagreed. How had I never seen this look in her eyes before? This want, need ... fucking hell. This desire.

My heart pounded in my chest at her words. “Then, in what way, because if you say like a brother, I'm not even sure how to respond to you asking me to take your virginity.”

Merit shook her head and tried to hide the tears building in her eyes and the way her chin wobbled. She swallowed hard, possibly thinking that this might have all been a mistake.

“Talk to me, Bugs.”

“You told me last weekend at Libby's party that you wanted me. You...you touched me and kissed me. I thought you wanted me as much as I...”

Her voice trailed off, and I hated the hurt I saw in her eyes.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I had done all of that. Touched her, told her I wanted her. Hell, if someone hadn't knocked on the bathroom door, I probably would have been an asshole and taken her right there—that's how badly I had wanted her. She had been driving me mad all night.

When Merit showed up to the party in a tight little black dress, her hair pulled up in a ponytail so the arch of her neck was tempting me, and the smallest amount of makeup on to make her violet eyes pop even more, I nearly choked on my own tongue. She was beautiful, and I couldn't keep my eyes off of her. Not to mention all the other guys at the party couldn't either. I hated the way they stared at her and talked about how hot she was and the things they wanted to do to her. I wanted to pound their faces in.

Then I'd heard a few guys discussing who would be the one to take Merit's V-card. And that was enough to push me over the edge. It wasn't like she went around preaching she was a virgin, but Merit wasn't the type to really date, either. When she did, it never seemed to last long. Probably because I'd threatened to beat the ass of any guy in our school who dared to touch her or hurt her in anyway.

So when she'd walked up to me, I was already buzzing from drinking and worked up from all the guys' talking about Merit.

“What's wrong, Dirk? You look upset. Anything I can help with?” She smiled at me. Her smile always seemed to be my undoing. If she ever needed me to do anything, all she had to do was flash that grin and I was putty in her hands.

For one crazy moment, I let my guard down and took her by the hand and walked her up to the bathroom. I needed to taste her, touch her. Feel what it was like to hold her. For just one night, I didn't want to think of Merit Eden as my best friend. I wanted to think of her as the woman I secretly wanted more than anything, more than anyone. More than Kaci. I had kissed her and I would have taken her right then like the heartless prick I was, had someone not knocked on the door and pulled me back to my senses.

And now, a week later, she stood in front of me, asking me to make love to her. In her daddy's barn. "We're going to be graduating soon, Dirk. You'll be going on the circuit full time, and I'll be leaving for college. I don't trust many of the boys we go to school with, only you, and I don't want to be a virgin when I get to college."

I sighed and closed my eyes, attempting to gain some much-needed strength before I looked at her again. Knowing I needed to do the right thing, instead of all the wrong things my body wanted with her. "There's nothing wrong with saving yourself for the guy you love, Merit."

She swallowed hard and nodded. The look of defeat nearly had me dropping to my knees. "Were you simply drunk last weekend? Saying things that didn't matter? Did you not mean what you said, about wanting me?"

I cursed and pushed my fingers through my hair. "Goddammit, Merit. You know I want you. Was it not obvious in the way I was touching you?"

With an innocent smile, she looked down and kicked at nothing on the floor of the barn loft. "Other guys have touched me like that before."

Rage ran through my entire body, and I had to keep myself from demanding she tell me the name of every guy who'd dared to touch her. They wouldn't have another chance at her again—or with *anyone* if I had anything to say about it.

"What?" I asked, not recognizing my own voice.

She glanced up at me. "I mean, I'm not exactly innocent, Dirk."

My eyes narrowed, and I tried to understand the jealousy that appeared out of nowhere. "I'll kick the ass of anyone who touches you. You know that, Merit."

Merit laughed and shook her head. "That's probably why I'm still a virgin. Or it's because...it's because I've always wanted it to be you, Dirk. But if last week was some drunken mistake—"

“No!” I said too quickly. “I mean, it wasn’t a mistake. I... I...do want you.”

She smiled, and I felt my chest squeeze. “Does that mean you’ll do it?” she asked.

The idea of giving myself to Merit like that scared the shit out of me. Hell, it was just sex. I’d screwed plenty of girls already, and I was only eighteen.

I thought about Kaci, the one girl I swore I was in love with from the moment I first saw her so many years ago. Brock and I had made a vow not to make any moves on her. She was one of us, after all. The girl who acted like a boy but was far-freaking from it. She fished with us, hunted, knocked back the whiskey, and made us both crazy for her. We were the three musketeers, or so everyone said.

Then Brock broke our vow and asked her to prom, and she said yes. Everything changed after that. Brock and I started fighting over every little thing. My best friend was beginning to be the one guy I couldn’t stand to be around.

At times, I thought maybe Kaci enjoyed toying with us both. Seeing the two of us fight over her. We finally told her she had to pick between us. She picked Brock—even though I would have given up bull riding to stay in Hamilton to be with her. But had my desire for Kaci only been because I knew she was forbidden? A challenge? She had picked Brock over me, and even though it pissed me off, had I been pissed for the right reasons? Wasting so much time on something that was never going to be mine to begin with?

Shit, I was thinking of freaking Kaci while Merit stood here and asked me to take her virginity. I was a prick. I didn’t deserve this gift she wanted to give to me. And moreover, I was terrified of how it would change things. It was hard enough to force down my feelings for Merit, but I did it because I adored her friendship.

My eyes met Merit’s, and a strange feeling hit me in the middle of my chest. A feeling that I couldn’t identify. What in the hell was wrong with me? I reached up and rubbed the ache away, staring down at her while I was at war with myself.

She smiled once more...and I knew I couldn't say no to her. The idea of another guy being with her for the first time damn near made me insane.

Before I had a chance to change my mind, I said, "Yes. I'll make love to you, Merit."

Her eyes shone so bright, I swear she could light up the entire loft.

"I hope I'm not bad at it," she said with a nervous chuckle.

God, this was why I wanted her. Her innocence was so freaking sexy. She wasn't like other girls, who flaunted their bodies and tried to play with your head. She was as real as real could get.

I walked over to her and cupped her face in my hands and grinned. "You won't be. Nothing about this moment could be bad because it's you and me."

My mouth pressed to hers in our second kiss. Technically, it was our third kiss. The first kiss was shared behind my barn, next to the chicken coop when we were ten, so many, many years ago, and it had been awkward for both of us, especially when our mothers found us out there.

Kissing Merit again, something inside of me ignited, but I pushed it away as fast as it came. I couldn't let myself think of this as anything other than me being here for Merit. A favor. Something a friend was doing for another friend. I would ignore the burning desire to be her first and only. To claim her as mine.

Looking back, if I had only known an hour later she would tell me she hated me and never wanted to talk to me again, I would have never agreed to make love to her. I had ruined my friendship with Merit by saying one word.

One. Fucking. Word.

Chapter One

DIRK

Eleven years later - Tacoma, Washington

The feel of my body moving in and out of hers was like I'd died and gone to heaven. God, I was going to come, and we had only just started. The feel of her pulling me in deeper as she whispered my name nearly drove me mad. I wanted to crawl inside of her and stay there forever.

"You feel so good," I whispered as she arched her body into me and silently begged for more.

My face was buried in her neck, and the smell of shea butter engulfed me. I loved that smell.

"Merit," I said as I drew back and looked into those eyes that stole the very breath from my lungs. "I love you."

I bolted up in bed and gasped for air. The sweat felt like it poured off of me as I glanced around the hotel room, my heart pounding in my chest.

"What in the fuck?" I mumbled as I attempted to calm my racing heart.

I glanced to my left and saw the girl I had met in the bar last night sprawled out on the bed, her blonde hair covering her face. The sheet was pulled down and barely covered her ass. Shit, I had fallen asleep in the blonde's bed. That was something I never did. I really must have had a lot to drink last night.

With a sigh, I swung my body around and sat there as I tried to steady not only my heart, but my breathing as well.

Another fucking dream about Merit. I scrubbed my hands over my face and sighed. I'd been having them for the last five months. Ever since I saw her at the New Year's Eve party at the Shaw's house. God help me.

I shook my head and stood. One quick look around the hotel room showed my clothes had been stripped off my body

with haste. The moment the blonde approached me at the hotel bar and started flirting, I knew I had drunk too much. I knew where it would lead, yet I did it anyway. Because even though my body was in Tacoma, my thoughts were back in Hamilton, Montana, and I needed something to drown out those rampant images of my hometown and the female I couldn't get off my mind. My thoughts weren't even on Striker, the bull I had drawn and would be riding the next day, when they should have been on that very thing.

I hadn't slept with a woman in weeks. Hell, it might have been months. I had needed the release, yet sitting here, looking at the blonde in the bed, I still felt like utter shit.

Quickly, I gathered up my clothes and headed into the bathroom. I shut the door and looked down in the trash at the used condom.

"What in the hell are you doing, Dirk?" I mumbled as I focused on my reflection in the mirror.

I splashed water on my face, pissed, and then got dressed. As I made my way back out into the room, I heard her moving around on the bed.

"You're leaving?" she asked.

"Yes."

With a humorless laugh, she said, "Well, I guess when you said you were only interested in a fuck, you weren't lying."

I placed my cowboy hat on my head and exhaled. "Listen, I'm sorry. I was pretty drunk last night and—"

"Don't. You told me at the bar what you wanted. I wanted it too. Don't be sorry. Besides, I think you were the best sex I've ever had."

I smiled. "I'm sure that's not true."

An awkward silence filled the room before I jerked my thumb over my shoulder. "So, yeah, I'm going to go ahead and take off."

As I turned to leave, she called out, "Hey, cowboy."

I turned to look back at her.

“Whoever she is, I hope things work out. You’re a nice guy, despite the fact that you’re bugging out in the middle of the night.”

With a frown, I let out a confused laugh. “There isn’t anyone, so I’m not sure—”

She brought her hand up and shook her head. “Trust me, there’s someone. You simply haven’t let your guard down enough to see it.”

She got out of bed and walked across the room butt-ass naked. She winked at me and then closed the bathroom door.

That was my cue to get the hell out of dodge. As I made my way to the elevator, I thought about what she had said. Why in the hell would she think there was someone in my life? What did I do to give that impression?

I pulled out my phone and checked my email. I needed a distraction because I didn’t want to even think about what I’d said to Merit in my dream.

I rubbed the back of my neck and let out a frustrated groan. Then one of the unread emails in my inbox caught my eye. It was from an old friend of mine from high school, Philip Wilcox. He’d left Montana and moved to New York City for a while after he graduated college. He’d been on the NYPD before eventually moving back to Montana. He worked for the state, or maybe the Feds, no one really knew. What I *did* know is if I ever needed anything, he was the guy to help.

I stared at the subject line of the email. A part of me felt guilty for having Phil dig up anything on Merit. But something about her behavior on New Year’s Eve didn’t seem right to me at all. We hadn’t seen or spoken to one another in eleven years. She had attempted to be civil with me, but it was clear she had wanted to be as far from me as she could that night. Then the way she left right before midnight after getting a phone call... Something felt off, and I had sat on it for all these months before I finally gave in to the temptation to ask Phil for help.

Subject: M.E. Update

I hit his number and heard the phone ring.

“Hey, you do know what time it is, right?”

“No, what time is it?” I asked.

He laughed. “Let me guess, you just crawled out of some woman’s bed and are now heading to your own hotel room.”

“You would be correct.”

I glanced down at my watch. It was four in the morning.

“Damn, Phil, I didn’t realize it was this late. I can call you back later.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I’d be getting up soon to head to the gym anyway, so this gives me a head start.”

I got off the elevator and walked the short distance to my room. Once inside, I started to shed my clothes. I needed to get the smell of cheap perfume off of me.

“What did you find out?” I asked.

“She wasn’t fired from her job, she resigned. From what I could find out, no one knows why she stepped down. From all accounts, she had seemed happy working there and had never once mentioned moving back to Montana. Her boss wouldn’t talk to me, but her assistant did.”

I nodded. Then I asked the one question I had no right asking at all. “Dating anyone?”

“Not for the last eight months or so. It looks like she’s been in a few short-term relationships, nothing long term. Well, this last guy, I guess, was long term. They dated off and on for the last two years. Right before the new year, when she moved back home, they broke up. He’s already engaged to some model in New York City.”

“Who was he?” I asked.

Phil laughed. “Chris Warren. An actor, if you can believe that.”

That caught my attention. “Merit was dating an actor?”

“He’s British and more popular over in the UK than here in the States. That might account for the on-again and off-again part of their relationship. When I asked Merit’s old receptionist, who was more than eager to answer my questions, she stated she thought it was more of a friends-with-benefits type of relationship, but she wasn’t certain. Merit wasn’t in the habit of talking about her personal life much at all. She told me she got the feeling Merit might have had feelings for someone else, and that’s why things with the actor didn’t work out.”

I nodded and turned on the shower. I’d think about that last bit of information later. “And the farm?”

“Yeah, I’m thinking I might have found the reason she headed back home. It’s near foreclosed on, Dirk. Or, at least, it was.”

My heart dropped. That farm meant the world to the Edens. It had been in the family for generations. How in the hell had it been losing money?

“They were behind on the equity loan her father, Roger, took out a few years back when he purchased some new farm equipment. I also found out Michael’s been taking trips to Vegas...and lady luck has not been on his side. One of his good friends let it slip to me that he’s made a few trips there over the last year. He hasn’t been back since the New Year, though.”

I ran my hand over my unshaven face. Merit’s brother Michael was not the type of guy to gamble.

“There’s something else. Merit’s dad is hitting the bottle hard and has been since last year. He was admitted into an addiction recovery place in Missoula earlier this year. Michael maybe turned to gambling to try and bring in some extra cash to get the bills caught up. At least that’s what I’m guessing. Once the loan was brought up to date, he stopped going to Vegas.”

“Roger’s in rehab? Michael’s gambling? They aren’t the type of men to do anything like that,” I stated.

“Yeah, well, it’s been a while since you’ve actually been home long enough to notice anything about them both. People change, Dirk. Hard times make people do crazy shit.”

“I guess so,” I mumbled as I sat down on the edge of the bed, completely naked now. “Let me see if I’ve got this straight. The farm is in financial trouble, and most likely Lori asked Merit to come back.”

“Appears so. Merit’s got a smart head on her shoulders, and like I said, since she’s been back, the equity loan has gone down and they’re caught up on payments.”

“She probably dumped her own money into it, if I know Merit. She couldn’t possibly make that much as a civil engineer. Not enough to live in New York City and put that sort of money away in savings.”

He remained silent.

“Phil? What do you know?”

“Dude, it just feels weird investigating Merit. She’s a friend of ours. I like her, and I don’t want her business getting out for the gossips to hear.”

A feeling of jealousy ripped through me. I’d known in high school that Phil had a thing for Merit, but he’d been too afraid she’d turn him down. Or too afraid I’d kick his ass if he ever tried anything with her.

I tried to keep the edge of anger out of my voice as I asked, “You really think I’m going to gossip about Merit?”

“You two didn’t exactly leave high school on good terms,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“There wasn’t...*isn’t*...anything I wouldn’t do to protect her. She was like a sis—”

I abruptly stopped talking. Phil knew what had happened that night. Hell, everyone did, even though we had both pretended like nothing happened. Once it got out, the rumor mill took it and ran with it. I could only guess who had been the person to say something. Merit’s father, since he had stumbled on us that day. Since everyone knew, I couldn’t

really describe Merit as being like a sister when I'd had sex with her in the loft of her family's barn.

“Just tell me how she paid the fucking loan down, Phil.”

He sighed. “She took an early withdrawal on her retirement and emptied out her savings.”

Nausea hit me, and I slowly shook my head. “How much?”

“She withdrew the max amount she could from her retirement, and thirty thousand from her savings.”

I brought my hand to the back of my neck to rub away the instant ache. The line remained silent for a few moments while I thought. “Is there a way for us to put what she withdrew into her savings account at the bank here in town without her knowing who put it there?”

More silence.

“Phil?”

“Um, I'm sure I can find someone to do that for you and keep it under wraps.”

“Good, find out if you can. I'll email you tomorrow with my accountant's name and number. Once you find out if we can put the money back, then call him and work it out.” I knew if Merit ever found out she'd be pissed, but I couldn't stand the thought of her giving up her savings like that. Not when I could easily help her.

“Dirk, what if she finds out it was you? She won't be happy.”

“Make it so she doesn't find out, Phil. I'll pay you double if you can make that happen.”

“Consider it done, and I don't want extra money.”

“I'm going to try and get an hour or two of sleep. I'll talk to you soon.”

“Sounds good, Dirk. Talk soon.”

I hit End and made my way to the shower. After a few minutes in the hot water, I washed up, stumbled to the bed,

and fell asleep. It didn't take long for me to drift off into another dream.

Another dream about Merit.

Chapter Two

MERIT

Hamilton, Montana

My eyes burned as I stared at the computer screen, trying to figure out how to magically make money appear. My family's farm had almost been taken away from us last winter, but my mother had called me just in time to save it. I'd withdrawn every dime I could get my hands on to pay off a loan my father had taken out against the ranch. It didn't help that my brother had tried to gamble to win money for the farm and lost. More than once.

"Shit," I mumbled as I dropped the pencil onto the table and forced myself not to cry.

"Merit?"

The sound of my mother's voice made me sit up straighter. "Hey, Mom."

She sat down next to me and placed her hand over mine. "Why don't you go out tonight?"

With a humorless laugh, I asked, "You want me to go out by myself?"

She looked away and then back to me. "You still have friends here, Merit. But, I know it's not New York."

I sighed internally. It was hard enough for my mother to deal with things without me adding to her guilt of asking me to come home. "I don't miss New York, Mom. Not at all. I hadn't really realized how much I missed home until I moved back. I don't regret coming home. I love the farm."

Her eyes met mine. "And Chris?"

I rolled my eyes. "God, Chris and I were nothing. He was fun, and that's all. We were never serious. Besides, he told me he's engaged now. Some model he met on New Year's Eve."

She nodded. "What about Timberlynn Holden?"

With a frown, I asked, “What about her?”

“She’s new-ish in town. Maybe she’d like to go out with you. She probably needs some more friends, too.”

I laughed again. “Please don’t even start thinking about setting me up with friends. I’m fine. If I wanted to meet up with people, I would.”

Mom frowned, but luckily she let the subject go. “How do the books look?”

Ugh. I was going to kill my brother when I saw him. I didn’t tell my mom the truth. No sense in two of us worrying about this.

“Better. A lot better,” I said. “We’re caught up on everything now. Michael needs to be removed from the checking accounts, though.”

That made my mother’s eyes go wide. “What? Why in the world would you say that?”

“Because he withdrew money yesterday and then took off for...I’m sure you can guess.”

She brought her hand up to her mouth. “Vegas?”

I nodded. “I thought he had stopped after I paid the loan off, but I guess not. Until we address it with him, he’s not going to stop, and we’ll be in the same situation within a few months at this rate.”

My mother stood and paced across the small room. “We need to tell him how the loan was paid down. If he knew you used all your money, he wouldn’t be doing this.”

I didn’t want to tell my brother that I’d withdrawn every cent in my savings account and took an early withdrawal on my retirement to pay down the loan my father had taken out against the farm a few years back. I didn’t want to hear him talk shit about me coming in and saving the day, so I’d never said a word. But now that he was back to pulling money out and spending it, I needed to say something. I wasn’t positive he went to Vegas, but I knew he’d left town for two days and was due back any moment.

With a frustrated sigh, I looked out the window. “How’s Dad?”

Mom forced a smile. “He’s good. His color is back and his eyes look white for the first time in months.”

I smiled and turned back to face her as I leaned against the window. “Is he still angry with me?”

“No, I don’t think so, sweetheart.”

When I had gotten the letter from my mother telling me that she was worried we were about to lose the farm, I had resigned from my job as a civil engineer and headed back to Montana.

It took me a couple of weeks to figure out my brother didn’t have a gambling problem and was merely desperate. It took me four months before I realized my father needed serious help. He hid the alcohol addiction fairly well, until he started to slip up more and more. I planned an intervention a month ago and insisted he enter a rehab facility to help him fight his addiction. He needed counseling, as well, to deal with the guilt he was carrying—not about the farm and the financial situation we’d found ourselves in, but the guilt over cheating on my mother.

Of course, my mother didn’t find out about the cheating until Dad entered the alcohol addiction center and he told her. She’d wept for days after, and I had never hated my father like I did all those nights hearing my mother cry.

“I don’t regret for a moment doing it, Mom. It was the right thing to do, for him and for you.”

She nodded. “I know, but it still doesn’t make it easier to swallow knowing it was you who saved the farm,” she whispered softly.

According to my father, his cheating wasn’t anything planned. One business trip, one beautiful woman who had a thing for older men. Daddy was handsome, just like my brother—an older version of Michael. Brown hair and coffee-colored eyes. Even with him being fifty-two, he still had a fit body. All the farm work would do that for you.

Women flocked to my brother, so it wasn't hard to imagine women still being attracted to my father. My mother had always teased him and called him a silver fox.

Unfortunately, the temptation of a young thirty-two-year-old was something my father apparently couldn't pass up. He had been in Dallas, Texas, at a farmers' association conference for a week. He apparently met her on the third night and spent the next three days fucking her brains out in his hotel room.

When he came back home, my mother said she knew right away something was off. At first he was overly loving toward her. They had always had an amazing relationship, but my mother said he couldn't seem to leave her side after that trip. Telling her how much he loved her, how beautiful she was, how he didn't deserve her. Then, he did a complete turnaround and started to push her away and began drinking. He would get so drunk he was unable to work the farm.

That meant Michael had to pick up the slack, and he didn't have any idea how to do the books. Things didn't get paid, they fell behind, and soon Michael was getting notices of unpaid bills. Threats to take away part or all of the farm caused him to panic, and he turned to the tables in Vegas in an attempt to win some money. He said he felt like he was out of options. He couldn't figure out another way to get money without taking out more loans.

I blew out a breath and looked into my mother's eyes. "What's going to happen when Daddy comes home?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure, Merit. I don't know if I can forgive him."

Tears threatened to spill from my eyes, but I held them back. The idea of my parents divorcing was not something I wanted to think about. I couldn't blame my mother, though. If I were in her shoes, I wasn't sure I'd be able to forgive him, either.

"How are your therapy sessions going?" I asked.

She smiled. "Good. They're going good."

There was the sound of a truck outside and I glanced back out the window.

Michael.

“Excuse me, Mom, your son is home, and I’m going to rip his balls off and shove them down his throat.”

“Merit Grace Eden!” my mother called out after me.

I ignored her and made my way out of the house and over to where my brother’s truck was parked. “I’m taking you off of the bank accounts.”

Michael froze and turned to face me. “Excuse me?”

“The bank accounts. I’m taking your name off. You’re not going to start gambling away the farm money or *my* money anymore!”

Anger rose in his eyes. “Your money? What the fuck are you even talking about, Merit?”

I planned on being calm when I spoke to my brother. But an intense anger was building in the middle of my chest, and I had no idea why. After the last few months, I was starting to think maybe I was the one who needed to go to therapy. The anger I felt was becoming unbearable.

“I’m talking about you withdrawing money again! I figured you were on your way to Vegas with the large amount you took out. I’m done, Michael. I put every last dime I had in my savings—along with the max withdrawal from my retirement—to pay off that loan Dad took out. I will *not* sit by and let you pull money out of the account to gamble it away.”

His eyes widened in shock. “That’s how the loan got paid down?”

I rolled my eyes. “What in the hell did you think happened? The loan fairy came and sprinkled fairy dust over the farm and money just started growing?”

With a confused expression on his face, he replied, “I thought maybe the bank had lowered it. That you somehow had it refinanced or something like that. I had no idea.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “Are you really that damn naïve, Michael?” I spat out.

“Fuck you, Merit! I’ve been doing my best to keep this farm afloat while you’ve been hiding in New York City all these years.”

“Hiding?” I asked, feeling my stomach drop.

“Yes, hiding. Everyone knows you left Hamilton because Dirk Littlewood broke your heart somehow. It’s never been a secret. And now...now you sweep in with your fancy job and big savings and save the day. Now you want to take everything away from me after I worked my ass off for years on this farm?”

I pushed my nausea down. “No, I only want to take away your access to the money if you’re gambling it away.”

He glared at me and then pulled out a piece of paper. He thrust it at me, and I took it.

After a quick glance, I felt my cheeks go hot. *How had I forgotten about this?*

I looked up at my brother and knew I was about to eat crow.

He sighed. “The money was for the tractor you and I agreed on buying. Remember? I drove to Missoula to get it.”

I swallowed hard. “Michael, I had totally forgotten. I’m so sorry.”

My brother took off his cowboy hat, scrubbed his hand down his face, and cursed. “Damn it, Merit. This whole situation is putting all of us on edge. I need you to know I haven’t gambled since you’ve been back. And I’ll try and figure out a way to make it up to you for using all your money to get everything caught up. I didn’t mean what I said about you coming in to save the farm.”

I shook my head. “No, Michael. Part of this *is* my fault for staying away from home and making everyone feel like they couldn’t reach out to me for help. It took the farm almost going to the bank before Mom said anything.”

His brows furrowed. “None of this is your fault. None of it. Dad was the one who chose to cheat on Mom and then drown away his guilt in a bottle of whiskey every day, leaving me and her to run this place.”

I wrapped my arms around my body, trying not to shake from the chill that ran down my spine. “I still can’t believe he cheated. I want so desperately not to hate him, Mike.”

He nodded. “I know. I feel the same way, sis. The only thing we can do is be there for Mom right now. She’s all that matters. And the farm. I honestly could care less if the bastard never comes home.”

“You don’t mean that,” I said softly.

He turned and stared out over the fields. I followed his gaze, and we stood there in silence for a few moments.

“At least the you-pick-it season was a good one this spring. We pulled in a good amount of money with it,” I said.

“Yeah, you did a really good job marketing it. I think it’s been the best season in a long time,” Michael stated with a smile.

I nodded. “Yeah, it seemed like there were a lot of people coming by. I think the pumpkin and Christmas season will be good as well, if we market it the same way.”

Michael’s gaze dropped down to mine. “You used to love picking the berries...what changed?”

With a forced smile, I replied, “It’s called growing up.”

He laughed. “I guess so. I just remember you and Dirk loved spring on the farm.”

My heart dropped slightly at the mention of Dirk’s name.

Dirk Littlewood had been my best friend growing up. Well, my guy best friend. Kaci Morrow had been one of my female best friends, along with Libby Hastings. Kaci was always hanging out with Brock Shaw and Dirk. She had the two of them boys wrapped around her finger, and she knew it. They both fawned over her, fought over her, loved her. Hung on every word she spoke. The way Dirk looked at Kaci when

she walked into a room was what every girl in our high school wished for. To have Dirk Littlewood look at them like he wanted them. Myself included.

There were times I hated Kaci for the way she strung both of them along. She'd enjoyed every minute of it, too. Even bragged that she knew how to make them both fall all over themselves with little hints of what she could do to them...and for them.

Whereas Dirk thought of me as a sister, I had been secretly in love with him for as long as I could remember. Mom had always allowed me and Dirk the first walk-through in the strawberry field before she opened it to the public. She had worked long and hard on growing that field. It had been our thing for as long as I could remember. I had known senior year would be our last chance to pick strawberries together. I had planned on telling Dirk my true feelings for him that day. He was leaving to go on the PBR circuit full time, and I was heading off to college. I had been so nervous, yet so excited to finally get it off of my chest.

When he'd shown up with Kaci that morning and asked if I cared if she helped pick berries, I didn't dare let him see the disappointment on my face. What I had thought was something only the two of us shared, he obviously didn't care as much about. The entire time he focused on Kaci. Joked with her, flirted with her, and acted like she was the greatest thing since apple pie. I had been a third wheel. Neither of them even realized when I turned and left to head back to the barn.

That, I think, hurt the most. It wasn't until they'd both walked up with their baskets full of berries that they had noticed I'd left.

I never could understand why Dirk fawned all over her. Brock had already asked her to prom, and Kaci had made it clear Brock was her pick.

“Hey, are you okay?”

My brother's voice pulled me out of my thoughts. “Yeah. I'm tired, that's all.”

He took my hand in his and squeezed. “Merit, I swear to you, I’m not gambling. And now that I know you’ve dropped every penny you had back into the farm, I won’t even make a purchase without us talking about it. Or, at least, reminding you that we talked about it,” he added with a wink.

I smiled. “I’m sorry I lashed out at you. I’m just mentally exhausted.”

“I’m sorry I told you to fuck off.”

We both laughed.

“I do have some good news, though,” I said.

He lifted his brows. “Yeah? What is it?”

“My loft sold and closed yesterday. The money was wired to my account this morning. I’ve been looking for a little house to buy, something of my own.”

Michael smiled. “I’m sure living with Mom and Dad for the last six months nearly drove you mad.”

I rolled my eyes. “Mom is treating me like a child! She even asked me if I wanted her to make me a PB&J! I haven’t eaten one of those since I was like six!”

He threw his head back and let out a roar of laughter before he placed his cowboy hat back on. “She means well,” he finally said.

I nodded. “I know she does. But I’ve been looking, and I found a place. Off of Harmony Way.”

“Closer into town?” he asked, a slight frown on his face.

“Yeah. I’m still close enough to the farm, and I figured maybe we could take that old tack room and convert it into an office for me. I figured you’d get Dad’s office in the house.”

“Wait, Merit, you’re staying in Hamilton? I thought you always said you would never live here.”

Smiling, I looked up at my little brother and exhaled. “I forgot how much I love it here. The mountains, the peacefulness. I don’t miss New York at all. Not one bit.”

“Have you told Mom?”

“No, I haven’t officially told her I was staying full time. I will, though.”

“And this is a good house you want to buy?”

“Yeah. When I got the contract on my condo for forty thousand over asking, I knew I’d be making a good profit off it. I bought in a neighborhood that was up and coming, and now everyone wants to be there. And houses here in Hamilton are far less than they are in New York, obviously.”

I was so excited about this new house in Hamilton. It was on twenty acres and had four bedrooms and three bathrooms. It was huge compared to my condo. Plus, the price tag is nice since the couple who owned the house were divorcing and looking to dump the house as quickly as possible. It also helped I was paying cash.

“Mom’s gonna freak you’re moving out.”

“Mom will have to get over it. Besides, I was asked out the other day, and what if I want to bring a guy home? That would be awkward.”

He snarled his lip. “Don’t say shit like that to me, sis. Please.”

With a chuckle, I nodded. “Fine, I won’t.”

“Who asked you out?”

“Channing Harrell. We’re going to the street dance tomorrow night.”

“The fire chief, huh?”

I smiled and wiggled my brows, which made Michael laugh then roll his eyes. “He’s a nice guy,” he said.

“Seems like it. Sucks he has blond hair, though.”

“Okay, seriously, go find a girlfriend to talk to about this stuff, will you?” he said as he turned and started toward the barn.

“You don’t want to help me pick out a dress?” I called out with a giggle. He replied by shooting me the middle finger.

“I’m taking that as a no, then!” I shouted to him.

That earned me double middle fingers. *God, I love my brother.*

Chapter Three

DIRK

Guthrie, Oklahoma, PBR circuit

I hit hard at the rope tied around my hand and made sure it was secure and where I wanted it on the bull. My heart pumped in overdrive, like it normally did when I was about to ride.

Billy Marshal, another rider, pushed the bull away from the wall so I could get my leg down all the way. Then, he shouted, “Remember, he’s gonna turn away from you, so be ready!”

I nodded. “I know.”

“He likes to spin and then quickly change direction on ya.”

I knew that, too, and gave him another nod. Hell, I missed Brock being out on the circuit with me. He didn’t tell me shit I already knew. Simply told me to ride good.

After I got settled in, I gave the nod and they opened the gate. This was my last ride before the break, and I needed it to be a damn good one.

The bull did exactly as I thought it would. It turned away from me. Which meant it turned in the opposite direction of my riding hand. I was ready for it.

Then, it damn near stopped on a dime and quickly went the other way. I laughed as I held on and adjusted my body, anticipating the bull’s every move. When I heard the eight-second buzzer, I got my hand free and let him sling me off.

I stumbled on the landing and felt something pop in my ankle.

“Fuck,” I mumbled as I hopped on it, trying my best to shake it off. The crowd went wild, and I lifted my hat and smiled. I needed a solid score to win this one. When it came up on the screen, I nearly jumped for joy, but the throbbing in my ankle had me waving my hat and fist pumping instead.

“Another win! How does it feel?” Kim, the CBS reporter, asked as I stepped out of the arena. It was a packed crowd tonight, so the cheers were almost deafening. With a quick glance back out toward the arena, I smiled as I saw most of the crowd up on their feet cheering.

“You know it feels good, really good. Hornet’s Yellow is a tough bull, and he’s thrown a lot of cowboys, so to be able to ride him the full eight was nice.”

She smiled. “And what’s the plan after tonight?”

“That’s an easy one. I’m going to take advantage of this break and head on back to Montana for a couple of weeks. See my family and friends and relax a bit.”

“When you landed it looked like you might have twisted your ankle?” Kim asked.

“Nah, I rolled it a bit, but I’m fine. I’ve ridden with a lot worse wrong with me.”

Kim laughed and then looked into the camera. “You heard it here, folks, your current world champion is still sitting at number one and is healthy going into the break!”

The camera turned off, and Kim put the mic down. “How’s Brock and Lincoln?” she asked.

I smiled. Kim had interviewed Brock at least a thousand times as well over the years. Not only was Brock my best friend, but we had grown up together bull riding. We both entered the PBR at the same time, and neither of us had looked back. Brock retired after his wife, Lincoln, got pregnant with their daughter Morgan.

Brock had previously married Kaci, the girl we’d both fallen in love with in high school, and they had a son, Blayze. Sadly, Kaci had died in childbirth and never knew Blayze. Brock suffered with guilt for a lot of years until Lincoln came into his life. She was exactly what he needed.

I snapped out of my little walk down memory lane and answered Kim. “They’re doing great. You know they had another baby?”

“I heard she was pregnant again! Boy or girl?”

“They had a little boy, Hunter Mason Shaw. He was born on May seventeenth.”

Kim smiled and tapped her belly. “I’ve got one cooking in the oven again!”

“Congratulations,” I replied.

“Thanks. You better go; they’re waiting on you for the buckle.”

I glanced over my shoulder and saw they were indeed waiting on me. Turning back to Kim, I gave her a nod. “See ya around.”

“See ya, Dirk.”

As I made my way over to get my buckle, I couldn’t shake the weird feeling that came over me. I had been chasing this dream for as long as I could remember. Being number one. The best in the world. I was on my way to a third championship, but there was something in my life that was missing. I felt...off, and I had no idea what it was making me feel this way.

Once all the celebrating was done, I headed back to the hotel in the chauffeured car that Wrangler, one of my sponsors, had arranged for me. I was exhausted and ready to crawl into bed so I could catch an early-morning flight back to Montana. Plus, I was anxious to see my folks, as well as Hunter, Morgan, and Blayze, and the rest of the Shaw clan.

“Mr. Littlewood, we’re here,” the driver said.

I opened my eyes and looked around. Crap, I was for sure tired if I fell asleep on the drive over to the hotel.

“Thanks, Pete.”

“No problem. What time should I pick you up tomorrow morning?”

“Um, I have an early flight. Don’t worry about picking me up. I’ll grab an Uber to the airport.”

“Are you sure? I don’t mind.”

With a smile, I opened the door and said, “I’m sure. Have a good one!”

“You as well, Mr. Littlewood.”

After I shut the car door, I headed into the hotel. The doorman held open the door for me, and I gave him a polite smile and a hello. The bar was off to the right, and normally I’d make my way in, check everything out and, if I was lucky, end up in someone’s bed. But that hadn’t happened since I was with the blonde back in Tacoma two weeks ago.

Shit. What the hell was wrong with me? Maybe I was burnt out on sex. Was that actually a thing?

I shuddered at the thought and then laughed as I pressed the Up button on the elevator. As I stood there, I couldn’t help but notice someone walk up next to me. With a quick glance, I saw a pretty blonde standing there. She had on a tight-as-hell pink dress with her cleavage on full display.

Say something to her, Dirk. Flirt. Make a comment about anything. Do something. Speak, goddammit.

I wasn’t even sure why it mattered that I had zero interest in this woman, or that I had no desire to come on to her. Something about that scared me, though. It was unsettling that for so many years I thought nothing about needing to be buried inside a woman to forget everything else. Suddenly, that seemed like the very last thing I wanted to do.

She glanced my way and smiled. I smiled back and tipped my cowboy hat at her.

It wasn’t like I didn’t know I was good-looking. As arrogant as that was, I knew it to be true. I worked out every day, ate mostly healthy, and prayed like hell a bull didn’t step on my face. Getting women had never been a problem for me. I liked women. No, I loved them. The only problem was, I used sex like therapy sessions. I thought if I slept with enough women it would make me forget about the one I’d lost.

And it wasn’t Kaci I was talking about, either. It was Merit.

Merit Eden. The woman whose name was on my lips when I dreamed.

The elevator doors opened, and the blonde and I both stepped in. I pushed my floor, and she pushed hers. We were two floors apart.

“It was a nice day out today, wasn’t it?” she asked.

Normally I would take the bait and things would progress quickly and I’d have her in her hotel bed within the next five minutes. But all I did was nod and give her a quick reply. “Yes, it was.”

She looked away, and we stood there in silence until the door opened and she walked out. She gave me a quick glance over her shoulder, and I simply smiled and said, “Enjoy your evening.”

The doors shut before I could see the look on her face.

I took off my cowboy hat and sighed. “Holy shit. It’s true. I’m broken. Something is wrong with me,” I mumbled. The doors to the elevator opened, and I stumbled out and down the hall to my room.

Once inside, I shut the door, tossed my hat onto the table and pulled out my phone.

I pulled up Brock’s number and stared at it. Brock had been my best friend for as long as I could remember. He was one of four brothers in the Shaw family, and they had always made me feel like I was a part of them. The last few years, I’d seen Brock and his other brothers all fall in love and settle down. Brock and Lincoln had three kids. Ty and his wife, Kaylee, were expecting their first child, and Tanner and his new bride, Timberlynn, would probably be popping out a baby soon as well.

Beck Shaw, the second to youngest of the brothers, had died while on a mission in the Marine Corps a number of years ago. That one about broke us all, me included.

Those boys were my family, and even through all of our ups and downs, I loved seeing them so happy. Yet, it had begun to get harder and harder for me to head home. It felt like

a part of me was missing something every time I saw them. Seeing Brock so damn happy in his life back home in Hamilton, I couldn't deny at times I wished I had that life as well. Although I'd never admit that to any of them.

I brushed off my thoughts and hit his number.

He picked up after the first ring. "Hey, congratulations on the win! Lincoln and I watched it while Hunter and Morgan napped."

"Thanks, it was a damn good weekend."

"Then why do you sound like your dog just died?" Brock asked.

I let out a frustrated sigh. I never could hide things from him. "Brock, I don't know what's wrong with me. I've been out of sorts."

"It doesn't look like it. That ride was spot on. Damn, Dirk, I don't think you can get much better than first place," he said with a laugh.

"It's not my riding, man. I've been having these dreams that are messing with my damn mind."

I was met with a moment of silence before he asked, "Okay, what kind of dreams?"

"I'm not on speaker, am I?"

"No, let me head on out to the back porch, though."

I heard a door open and close as Brock made his way out. I stood and started to pace across my hotel room.

"All right, I'm alone now," Brock said. "What type of dreams are you having?"

"This is going to sound insane."

He gave me a laugh. "Try me."

I jerked my hand through my hair and blew out a breath and went for it. Ripped the Band-Aid right off. "I've been dreaming about Merit. Like, vivid dreams of us together and, dude, I say...I say..."

My voice trailed off as I closed my eyes and let the dream come back. I'd had the same damn dream for months now. Sometimes I would go weeks without having it, then it would show back up again out of the blue and sucker punch me just as hard as it did all the other times.

“What do you say?”

“It's insane what I say. I don't know why I say it. It's something I would never say! I mean, I'm sure someday I'll say it to some woman. Eventually. But...the dream is so real.”

“You sound like you're about to freak out.”

“I *am* freaking out! I wake up sweating, and I can't fucking breathe!”

He laughed. “Dude, calm down. Just tell me what you say.”

“I tell her...I tell her I love her.”

There was silence on the other end of the line. Dead. Fucking. Silence.

“Brock?”

“I'm here, I'm processing this bit of...information.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “Right? How in the hell do you think I feel? This is Merit we're talking about. Merit Eden! The girl who was like a sister to me growing up.”

“The girl you slept with and took her virginity. And then you threatened every guy in high school with their lives if they touched her. That same girl?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, that girl.”

“Do you think it has something to do with what happened between the two of you?” Brock prompted. I never told Brock what truly happened. He knew we slept together, he knew the rumors, but I never denied them or admitted they were true.

“I don't want to talk about that night, Brock,” I said coldly.

He sighed softly. “Dirk, I think you need to talk about it. Whatever happened that night ruined your friendship with

Merit. Don't think I didn't notice how she left on New Year's Eve after you took her to my dad's office. She looked angry."

"She was angry with me because I wanted to try and talk about what happened between us that night in the barn. She didn't want to. She got a call and left."

"And where did you go after she left?" Brock asked.

I cleared my throat. "I...I left too."

"Did you leave with her? Did something happen between you guys that night?"

I laughed. "No, hell no. She made it pretty clear she wasn't thrilled to see me. Although, I might have followed her home before going home myself."

"Why did you follow her home?"

I sat back down on the bed and blew out another breath. "Dude, I don't know. I wanted to see where she was going. Maybe I wanted to make sure she got home okay. I'm not really sure why I followed her."

He chuckled. The bastard actually chuckled. "When did you become a stalker, dude? Maybe you wanted to see if she was meeting up with anyone."

I let out a scoff. "Please. I don't care if she's seeing anyone."

The moment the words left my mouth, I knew they were a lie. I did care. Fuck, I cared more than I wanted to admit. Over the years, it had almost driven me mad wondering who she was with, living in the fast-paced world of New York City. If she'd fallen in love with someone. If it hadn't been for my mother drip-feeding me news on Merit, I'd have most likely lost my damn mind. Or tracked her down in New York myself.

So, to keep my sanity in check, I slept with any willing woman out on the circuit and tried to convince myself that settling down wasn't in the cards for me. But I think all the years of living in denial were finally catching up to me.

"Let's get back to the dream," Brock said. "So you tell Merit you love her. Is it a friendly 'I love you?'"

“No! I’m making love to her, and then I look into her eyes and she looks up at me all dreamy and I say it then.”

“Wow. Okay, so it wasn’t just in passing. You were saying it while doing the deed. Jesus, bro. I wasn’t sure you knew how to say those words anymore.” He chuckled as he added, “And I never knew you to make love. To any woman.”

“Very funny, and I don’t. I fuck. I like to fuck, and that’s it. There’s never anything behind it. It’s an act, nothing more. A means to an end.” I blew out a breath and kept pacing around my hotel room. “But with this dream, I wake up in a damn panic afterwards. And I think it’s messing with my mind and my libido, because a hot blonde just flirted with me on the elevator, and I simply told her to have a good night. I came back to my hotel room to pack and go to sleep. Pack. And. Go. To. Sleep! When the hell have I ever turned down sex?”

“You’ve turned them down before, Dirk. Maybe you’re tired. Or all the meaningless sex is getting old.”

“Bite your damn tongue. Sex will never get old,” I stated.

“Fine,” he said with a slight laugh. “Then maybe sex with different nameless women you have no connection with is getting old.”

I rubbed the back of my neck and whispered, “Why Merit?” More to myself than to him.

“Why *not* Merit? You guys used to be close. Hell, everyone knew Merit liked you, and more than just as a brother. I think you might have felt a little more for her yourself, but Kaci was always in the picture.”

“Yeah, Kaci was always there, it seemed,” I mumbled. The history Brock and I shared with Kaci was complicated. There were times I wish she had never been in the picture, but then Brock wouldn’t have Blayze. Regardless of the hell he’d been put through by losing his wife, he loved that kid with his entire soul.

I closed my eyes and tried to keep the memory away, but it jumped back into my head. The look on Merit’s face when I’d brought Kaci berry picking our senior year. That was always

something that Merit and I had done together. It was our thing. First one out to pick the berries. That last year, though, I brought Kaci in my sad attempt to win her back from Brock, even though she had already picked him over me. Merit left that day and I hadn't even noticed—I was so focused on trying to keep Kaci's attention. Stupid fucking idiot.

Brock's voice brought me back to the present. "Dirk, if Kaci hadn't been in the picture, how would you have felt about Merit?"

I swallowed hard. It was something I never allowed myself to think about...then or now. "I'm not sure it would have made a difference," I lied.

"Bullshit. Dirk, you and I both know that whatever happened between you two that night damn near destroyed you."

"It destroyed me because I lost one of my best friends."

"Why, though? Why have you never talked about it? And what could have happened to make Merit cut you completely out of her life?" he asked. "The two of you were so close."

"Because I made the stupid mistake of taking her virginity when I knew I shouldn't have."

Brock sighed. "I'm not buying that reason, Dirk. You didn't sleep with Merit simply as a favor. If you don't want to admit to that then it's okay, but you wanted her in more than a friendship kind of way. I wasn't the only one who noticed how you looked at her. You may have tried to deny your feelings for her because you were in love with Kaci, but I also know you wouldn't have been careless with Merit's feelings, either. So you agreed to sleep with her for a reason."

"Christ Almighty, Brock. Of course I wanted her, but I hurt her in the process because I didn't have the guts to tell her no. I was greedy and didn't walk away and let someone who deserved to take that gift from her have it. I fucking wanted it. I wanted *her*."

"Were you careful? You didn't..."

“No, I was careful and wore a condom. I’ve never not worn one.”

I could hear him exhale. “Did you make it good for her?”

I closed my eyes and cursed to myself. “I think so. I made sure she orgasmed, I went slow. If I’m being honest, it was probably one of the best nights of my life. It felt so amazing... and then I ruined the moment.”

“Why? Tell me what happened, man.”

My throat bobbed as I forced myself to swallow and speak. What I was about to admit to him was the whole reason why I’d never told him what had happened. At the time, it made sense not to tell. Then, as the years went by, I never needed a reason to tell anyone. I never talked about Merit again.

“Dirk?” he prompted.

I pulled in a deep breath and slowly let it out. “I called her Kaci. After I came, I was so overcome with an emotion I’d never felt before, and truth be told, still haven’t to this day. I was so caught up in the moment with Merit, with being with her, I don’t know *why* I said Kaci’s name. I mean, I wasn’t even thinking of Kaci. Sex felt so different with Merit than it had with any other girl, and I just assumed it was because it was...well, it was Merit. I didn’t want to stop. I remember wishing we could stay up in that barn forever.

“Wow, Dirk. I don’t even know what to say right now.”

I exhaled. “Merit said my name, and it felt like a bolt of lightning hit me in the chest. The way she looked at me in that moment, I knew she was in love with me. I felt conflicted and scared. Happy but confused as fuck. I meant to say Merit’s name, I really did, but instead I whispered Kaci’s. I’ll never forget the look Merit gave me. Her eyes instantly filled with tears. She pushed me off her. She looked so hurt, and it fucking destroyed me to know I was the one who hurt her like that.”

“Oh no. What happened then, after you called her Kaci?”

“Well, she went from looking upset to downright pissed off. I’d never seen her so angry. She quickly got dressed, and

when I tried to tell her I was sorry, she screamed at me. Like, *screamed*. She kept saying how stupid she was to think I would ever really want her. Then she asked me if I had been thinking of Kaci while I was with her. God, it felt like a punch to the stomach that she would think that.”

“Did you tell her no?”

“Of course I told her no, but she broke down into tears and kept repeating how stupid she was. That I would never think of her that way. I felt like such a dick. When I tried to pull her into my arms, she pushed me away and said she hated me. She said she never wanted to talk to me again. That’s when her daddy showed up and figured out what was going on. He asked me to leave, but I begged Merit to let me explain. She kept shaking her head and crying. I didn’t know what to do. I figured her dad would beat the shit out of me, but he didn’t really say anything. He asked me to leave again, and when I finally realized Merit wouldn’t talk to me, I left.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about what happened?”

“You were with Kaci at the time, Brock. Do you really think I wanted to tell you I called another girl your girlfriend’s name while having sex? Especially knowing it was Merit I had been with?”

“I guess you have a fair point. And Merit hasn’t talked to you since?”

I dropped back onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling. “No. I tried so many times to talk to her. In school, going to her house, showing up when I knew she would be at the farm working. She’d look at me, and I’d see that same hurt in her eyes each time. It got to the point where I couldn’t take seeing it, so I stopped trying. After graduation, I left for the PBR and she left for college. New Year’s Eve was the first time I’ve seen her since we graduated—when Tanner asked me to show her the plans for the ranch in your dad’s office. Yeah, that was awkward as hell.”

“She still wouldn’t talk to you about it, after all these years?”

“No. I tried to get her to talk about it, and she plastered on a fake smile and said it was water under the bridge and that there wasn’t anything to talk about.”

Brock was silent for a moment or two before he spoke. “I guess I can see why she was so angry. It sounds to me like Merit might have been feeling a lot more than friendship toward you, Dirk. I mean, a part of me understands her asking you to take her virginity, but another part thinks she was hoping for more from you, and offering up her virginity on a silver platter was her way of showing you that. And maybe you wanted more from her, too, but you didn’t want to admit it. I mean, Kaci pretty much had us both inside out by then.”

“I do...*did* have feelings for Merit. I never acted on them because of how much I cared about her. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt her. She was my best friend besides you and Kaci. We had a bond that I can’t explain. Everything was different with her, and I lost that because I thought with my dick instead of my head.”

I raked my hand through my hair as reality hit me. “Fuck, that was the whole damn reason I turned all my focus on Kaci, because I couldn’t act on my feelings for Merit.”

This time it was Brock who cleared his throat. “I think you thought with your heart when you decided to be with her. That much was obvious. You were too afraid to admit it then, and you still are.”

I scoffed. “If that’s the case, Brock, why did I call her another woman’s name after making love to her and taking her virginity?”

He was silent for a moment. “Maybe you realized your feelings were something more, something deeper, and subconsciously you knew if you called her Kaci, it would push her away.”

I pulled my brows in tight and shook my head. “Did you really just go all therapy on my ass?”

Brock laughed. “All I’m saying is, from what you described to me it sounds like you got spooked. You said she

looked at you and you could see the love on her face, in her eyes. All those years you thought it was Kaci you wanted... maybe it was never Kaci at all.”

“I was ready to walk away from bull riding for Kaci, Brock. I mean, before I got together with Merit. Before y’all got together.”

“Maybe you were, but if it came right down to it, if Kaci had picked you would you have been happy with her? Knowing you had feelings for another woman that you tried to ignore? We’ll never know, Dirk.”

I brought my hand to the back of my neck and rubbed out the tension that had gathered there. “I’m heading back home tomorrow.”

“You’re not staying out and hitting the smaller rodeos? You may be number one right now, but number two and three could always catch up.”

“I’ll fly out to a few of them. I need a break. I’ve been going and blowing for the last year and I’m exhausted. Besides, I want to spend some time with my folks.”

“Then I guess we’ll see you when you get back to Hamilton. Lincoln will be happy. Now I don’t have to ask you to fly in for Hunter’s christening. You’ll already be in town for it.”

I nodded with a smile, even though he couldn’t see it. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“Good, because I was hoping you’d be his godfather.”

Tears pooled in my eyes, and I quickly wiped them away. What in the hell was wrong with me? I was crying now? Quickly, I cleared my throat. “It would be an honor, Brock. Thank you.”

“Get home safe, and maybe you’ll even be able to talk to Merit this time.”

“Yeah. Maybe,” I said.

“We’ll see you soon.”

“See you soon.”

Chapter Four

MERIT

My mother stood behind me and smiled. “I am so happy you’re going out!”

I had to force myself not to roll my eyes. Even though I was looking forward to getting out and seeing some people I knew, I wasn’t so sure about my actual date. Channing was a nice guy, but something told me his heart might be with someone else. And I usually went with my gut on things like that, since I’d had enough experience in the area.

“Don’t get all excited, Mom. It’s a casual date, that’s all.”

With a frown, she asked, “What in the world does that even mean? A casual date?”

Laughing, I replied, “It means we’re going to be in a very public place with a group of people. It’s not a one-on-one date. I think Channing asked me because he felt sorry for me sitting at home all the time.”

She scoffed. “Nonsense! You are a stunningly beautiful woman, and any man would be honored to go out with you.”

I brought my hands to my hips. “You have to say that, you’re my mother.”

Her frown turned into a smile. “I’ve heard nice things about Channing.”

With a sigh, I turned to face her. “Mom, I’m not looking to get into anything serious. I simply want to get back out in the world again. The last six months I’ve been so wrapped up in the farm, I’ve forgotten how to live.”

Sadness filled her eyes, and I knew she was feeling regret for asking me to come back to Hamilton.

I took her hands in mine. “But like I said, I am so happy to be home. I don’t miss New York, and I’m happy here with you.”

“Will you tell me why you stayed away for so long? And I know it wasn’t simply because you had an amazing job,” she said.

“That’s a story for another day, Mom, and not worth talking about.”

She tilted her head and looked at me. “I know it has something to do with Dirk. You two were such good friends, I hate that something came between the two of you.”

I turned and looked back into the mirror. It wasn’t something that came between us, more like *someone*.

I hadn’t even come home for Kaci’s funeral, knowing Dirk would be there. I couldn’t take seeing him again and watching him grieve. Even though Kaci had ended up marrying Brock Shaw, a part of me knew Dirk had given her his heart long ago. It had to be the reason he was still single and hadn’t settled down yet. He was still in love with her.

Even now my eyes felt as if they would burst with tears, so I closed them, took in a few deep breaths, and then opened them once more. I hated that my heart still belonged to a man who didn’t want it. Who didn’t even deserve to have it. I hated *him* for making me still feel this way.

“I should probably get going. I’m meeting Channing there,” I said, pushing away my thoughts of Dirk.

Mom shook her head. “Do the men not come and pick up the women anymore?”

“They do, Mom. Just not in this case. Remember, casual.”

I grabbed my purse and sweater and made my way out of my bedroom and through the house.

“Have fun, sweetheart.”

“I will. What are you going to do?” I asked her with a wink.

She shrugged. “Stella asked if I wanted to join her and a few other women from her knitting club. They’re thinking of going out tonight. Girls’ night out.”

I smiled. “You should go!”

“They mentioned going to the street dance. I don’t want you to think I’m checking up on you.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “Mom, I’m not going to think that. Go, have fun!”

Her cheeks turned pink as she blushed. “I think I *will* go. It’s been forever since I went out with my friends.”

“Go, Mom. You’ll have fun.”

With a quick nod, she replied, “I will.”

The entire drive into Hamilton, I cursed myself out for making my mother feel bad. I hated what my father did to her. What he did to all of us. His betrayal and selfishness cut so deep to the bone, and I couldn’t even begin to understand how my mother felt. Men were assholes. Every single one of them, and I hated that I felt that way, too. I truly did want to meet someone, fall madly in love, and have kids someday. But the prospects were pretty slim.

With a sigh, I shook my head. “How can you do all those things with your life, Merit, when you’re hung up on the biggest asshole of them all?”

An older gentleman waved a lighted baton for me to pull into a parking area. Once I was parked and got out of the car, I looked at the mountains in the distance. They were covered with snow that looked pink from the sun lowering in the sky. Goodness, I would never tire of this view. How I had missed it while in New York. The mountains had been one of the main things I’d missed, besides my family and the farm, of course. After I pulled my gaze from the landscape off in the distance, I started walking toward the street dance. I texted Channing.

Me: I’m here. Where should we meet?

I kept walking, and when he didn’t text back, I worried that maybe he had forgotten. Or worse yet, had changed his mind. Then, my phone buzzed.

Channing: Over by the chicken on a stick booth!

“Gross,” I mumbled as I weaved my way through the people. Where in the hell was the chicken-on-a-stick booth?

“Merit!”

The voice was familiar, and I turned to see Timberlynn Holden—no, it was Shaw now, I corrected myself. She stood there with a huge smile on her face.

“Hey, Timberlynn. Congratulations are in order. I heard you and Ty were recently married.”

She beamed, and I could practically feel the happiness oozing off of her. “Yes! We got married a week ago, on May twenty-fifth! We’re going to take a honeymoon probably this fall. I’d like to go to France, maybe Italy.”

“That would be amazing.”

“Lincoln had her baby, did you hear?”

I smiled. “I did, congratulations. It’s a boy, right?”

“Yes, Hunter Mason Shaw. He’s almost three weeks old! He was born right before we got married. It’s been a busy month in the Shaw household,” she said, grinning.

“I bet he’s handsome,” I said with a grin.

Timberlynn smiled even wider.

“Hey, if it isn’t Merit Eden!” Ty Shaw said as he walked up with his pregnant wife, Kaylee. Ty was the oldest of the Shaw brothers, followed by Brock, Beck, who had died in the Marines, and then Tanner. He was the youngest and had married Timberlynn.

“Hey, Ty. How are you?” I asked as Ty leaned down and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

“I’m doing good. Merit, do you know my wife, Kaylee?”

I smiled. “I do. We’ve met a few times.”

“You never came back to knitting class,” Kaylee said, a twinkle in her eyes.

“Well, it’s been really busy on the family farm trying to get everything ready for the you-pick-it season.”

Ty nodded. “I heard the strawberries are doing really well, though.”

“They are, I’m happy to say. The elderberries are coming along, and we should have them open for you-pick this summer.”

“Oh, Blayze and Morgan would love that! When will they be ready?” Timberlynn asked.

“Mid-August, I’d say.”

Kaylee frowned. “I’ll most likely have a newborn then.”

My gaze dropped to her stomach, and I smiled. I’d heard rumors about Dirk and Kaylee’s relationship, or lack thereof. When I met Libby for lunch a few months back, she had cleared up most of it. Apparently, they were nothing more than friends. Dirk thought very highly of Kaylee. Ty and Kaylee both seemed over-the-moon happy, and seeing them together, it showed.

“Well, the season would run through about mid-September,” I said, “so maybe you’ll get a chance to get some.”

A wide smile grew over Kaylee’s face. “Perfect!”

“You hiding from all of us, little Merit Eden?”

I chuckled as Brock Shaw walked up. A little girl sat on his shoulders, and a boy around six or seven stood next to him and Lincoln. That had to be Blayze, Brock’s son from his marriage with Kaci. It had hit Brock pretty hard when Kaci died during childbirth, so I was happy to see he had finally found true love. Not that he hadn’t been in love with Kaci, but everyone had known Kaci would never be truly happy with Dirk *or* Brock.

Kaci had had her own set of issues that she never seemed to be able to work out. It was really rather sad, if I was being honest. She’d occupied so much of her time trying to rein in two men she’d never truly loved.

“Hey, Brock,” I said, lifting up onto my toes as he leaned down and kissed me on the cheek.

He then looked lovingly at his wife. “Lincoln, have you met Merit?”

“I have! It’s so nice to see you again, Merit. Are you here with someone?” Lincoln asked as she glanced around.

“Yes. Well, I’m meeting Channing Harrell here. It’s sort of a date.”

Ty grunted. “Oh, man, that jerk?”

I was positive my eyes were as wide as saucers at Ty’s comment.

Kaylee hit him on the chest and laughed. “Ignore him, Merit. He’s still bitter that I went out with Channing once.”

“You did?” I asked, my interest piqued. “Well, I see things didn’t work out between the two of you.”

Kaylee laughed. “No, they didn’t.”

“He told me to meet him by the chicken-on-a-stick booth. I should probably go track him down,” I said as I glanced around.

“You won’t have to look far, he’s right there,” Brock said as he pointed behind me.

I turned to see Channing talking to a woman who appeared to be about the same age as me. Then I realized who it was. “Is that Lauren, his girlfriend from high school?” I asked.

Timberlynn, Kaylee, and Lincoln all moved closer and stood next to me.

“Yep,” Kaylee said, popping her P. “I think he’s still hung up on her.”

I felt my entire body sag as I exhaled in defeat. Not that I was really interested in Channing or saw this relationship going anywhere, but a few dates out would have been nice.

“You don’t know that for sure, Kaylee,” Lincoln stated.

“It’s been hinted at. A lot.” Kaylee looked at me. “There’s a reason I like going to knitting, and it’s not to make those scarves. I get to listen to all the gossip. Apparently, Lauren

moved back to Hamilton after being dumped by a doctor she was dating—the man she dumped Channing for. And if you like to believe gossips like the vile Lucy Mae, she’s come back to town to try and win Channing back.”

Lucy Mae. Lord, I hadn’t heard that name in forever. She was the high school gossip and troublemaker when I was in school. She even had a thing for Brock and was one of Kaci’s friends.

“Ugh, Lucy Mae is still gossiping?” I asked.

All three Shaw women replied at the same time with, “Yep.”

We all laughed.

About that time, Channing glanced in my direction and saw me. He smiled, and I couldn’t help but notice Lauren didn’t seem too pleased.

“Well, it looks like Lauren is shooting you daggers,” Kaylee said with a chuckle.

With a slight frown, I replied, “It certainly does appear so, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, the ones that say he’s my man so back the fu—”

“Kaylee!” Lincoln shouted. “Little ears!”

I sighed as I looked back at Channing and Lauren. “Should I not go over there?”

Kaylee all but pushed me. “Hell no, go! I’m dying to hear how the women in knitting class will spin this Tuesday night.”

I rolled my eyes and looked back at Kaylee. “Gee, thanks.”

She winked. “Better yet, let’s all exchange numbers so we can get into a group chat later tonight.”

“You really are bored, aren’t you?” Lincoln asked as she stared at Kaylee.

“You have no idea,” Kaylee stated.

“Well, I think it’s fine. Just because she’s back in town doesn’t mean anything. Besides, did you see the way he

smiled when he saw you?” Timberlynn said.

I pulled my cell phone out of my back pocket. “What’s your number?” I asked Kaylee. Once I sent her my number, she fired it off to Lincoln and Timberlynn.

“Have fun!” the three of them said as I made my way over to Channing. I smiled and waved goodbye to Brock, Ty, and now Tanner, who had just walked up. I had instantly liked all three Shaw women when I first met them and secretly hoped that maybe we could all be friends. I had to admit, I was a tad bit jealous of Kaylee’s friendship with Dirk, though.

When I got to Channing, he was beaming. “Hey! You found it.”

With a lighthearted laugh, I nodded. “I did. I had to stop and ask for directions, though.”

Channing leaned down and kissed me on the cheek. “Merit, you remember Lauren from high school?”

I nodded. “I do. It’s Lauren Price, right?”

She forced a smile. “It is, but I’m sorry, I don’t remember you.”

I lifted my brows slightly and felt Channing tense next to me. “No worries, it was a long time ago,” I said, waving her rudeness off with my hand.

Lauren looked me up and down. “Wait. I remember you now! You were on the cheerleading team. Friends with Kaci, and you had a thing for Dirk Littlewood.”

I forced my smile to stay in place. “It was good seeing you again, Lauren. If you’ll excuse us.” I turned to face Channing. “I hear a favorite song of mine. Should we dance?”

“Yes! Let’s,” Channing said as he placed his hand on the small of my back and guided me onto the makeshift dance floor in the middle of Main Street.

I could practically feel Lauren’s eyes boring into me. I was beginning to think Kaylee had it right after all.

Channing pulled me into his arms as we took off dancing to Kelsea Ballerini's "Love Me Like You Mean It." He was a good dancer, and I quickly found myself having fun. It felt good to not have any stress or worries weighing me down for once. And Channing was a lot of fun to talk to as well. It was a refreshing change from Chris.

Oh, I had enjoyed dating Chris Warren. Life with him was never dull, and I got a few trips to England out of it to boot. The sex was good, but he was married to his job—which was fine by me. He had been a good friend, but both of us never saw it going past our friends-with-benefits arrangement. Once I knew I'd be leaving New York for Montana, we officially broke it off and wished one another well. I did miss him and his humor at times, though.

"I need something to drink!" I said, laughing. "We've been dancing nonstop."

Channing winked, and I felt a bit of disappointment that I hadn't felt anything by the intimate gesture. Something. Anything. What was wrong with me that a man as handsome as Channing couldn't elicit any feelings?

As we walked toward one of the booths set up for drinks, I had a feeling I was being watched. I took a quick glance around and didn't see anyone, so I ignored it. It wasn't lost on me that Lauren had stared at us while Channing and I were dancing, so it was probably her gaze I felt now—although I didn't see her anywhere.

"How do you like being back in Hamilton?" Channing asked as we walked along the booths. Hamilton held an annual street fair and dance in early June. It was always on a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday and included booths with food and crafts. As a kid, I had loved to walk along Main Street with my friends. It was usually me, Dirk, Brock, Kaci, Libby, and a few other friends of ours. Channing hadn't been in our little group, but of course we all knew each other, with it being a small town and all.

"I'm glad to be back."

“You don’t miss the excitement of New York?” he asked, looking skeptical at my answer.

With a half shrug, I replied, “I missed it some when I first moved back, but now I’m getting settled in, and it feels good to be home. I enjoy breathing in clean air.”

He laughed. “I heard you were buying a house.”

I stopped walking and faced him. “How did you hear about that?”

With a smirk, he replied, “Hamilton may have gotten a bit bigger, but the gossip mill still runs strong.”

I frowned, and he laughed harder. “Don’t get all worked up about it. Ken, the guy who owns it now, is a firefighter. I already know about the divorce with Lindsey and how they’re in a rush to sell. He happened to mention they had a cash buyer and said your name.”

I relaxed my body a bit. “Oh, I see. Well, yes, I *am* buying a house.”

He nodded, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that he wanted to ask me something else. But when he glanced up, he faltered a bit in his steps. I followed his gaze and saw Lauren walking our way.

“Hey, Lauren,” Channing said as we stopped.

“I was wondering if you might want to take a spin with me?” she asked.

Okay, wow. Was it just me, or was that rude as hell? The guy was on a date, and his ex asked him to dance with her. I couldn’t wait to hear how Channing was going to break it to her that he’d have to pass.

“I’d love to dance.”

I snapped my head to the side, and I was positive my jaw hit the ground as I stared at him. When I looked back at Lauren, she smiled, and I knew she was internally fist pumping. “Unless you mind, Merit. I mean, are you guys on a date or something?”

“Yes,” I said. “We *are* on a date, but no, I don’t mind.”

It was in that moment that Channing realized what a dick move he’d made, and he quickly attempted to backpedal. By that point, I was officially turned off.

“Shit. Um, Merit, I’m sorry.” He turned back to Lauren. “I think I should pass on the dance.”

Her entire body sagged, and I swore her eyes glassed over with unshed tears. *Good Lord, is this really happening to me? Why is there always another woman in the picture? Why?*

“Channing, honestly, I’m danced out. Why don’t the two of you dance?”

A slight smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Are you sure?”

With a nod and a smile that said please go before your ex breaks down into tears, I replied, “I’m positive.”

And without a second thought, Channing took Lauren by the hand and they walked back over toward where everyone was dancing.

I took a quick look around and saw a small, empty table. I made my way over and sat down. Truthfully, it felt good to get off my feet. I hadn’t worn these boots in so long, and my feet were killing me. I had a perfect view of the stage that had been set up farther down Main Street. I smiled as I watched Channing and Lauren dance. It was obvious they both still had feelings for one another.

As I glanced around at the folks walking by, I said hi to some I knew and smiled politely at others I didn’t. One song turned to five, and I realized Channing and Lauren would most likely not be coming back to find me. With a sigh, I stood and started walking down along the booths again.

“Merit!”

I turned to see Kaylee waving me down. The entire Shaw family, minus Ty Senior and Stella, were seated around a group of tables. Lincoln was holding a baby in her arms, while

Brock carried his daughter Morgan on his shoulders once again. The only person missing was Blayze.

“Where’s your date?” Kaylee asked, a bemused smile on her face.

I rolled my eyes and jerked my head back toward the dance floor. Kaylee looked and frowned, which caused me to look. Lauren and Channing were nowhere to be found. When I focused back on Kaylee, I could tell she already knew the answer.

“Seems like an old flame has been rekindled,” I said. Even I could hear the sound of disappointment in my voice.

Kaylee gave me a sympathetic smile. “I hate to say I was right, but I figured that was bound to happen the moment she came back to town. I’m sorry.”

I let out a humorless laugh. “Don’t be. It was an excuse to get myself out of the house and back into the real world. I’ve been so buried in books and marketing plans and trying to figure out how to get my family’s farm out of the red, that I forgot I was only twenty-eight and still had a life ahead of me.”

She nodded. “Do you want a beer or anything?”

I shook my head. “No, thank you.”

I cleared my throat and turned to look at Lincoln. “Lincoln, you look amazing for just having had a baby a few weeks ago.”

Lincoln blushed. “Thank you. I’m afraid it’s from chasing Morgan and Blayze around.”

“Where is Blayze?” I asked.

Lincoln started to answer, but Kaylee spoke up before she could. “His uncle took him to play a few games. He should be back soon.”

“Sit down, Merit,” Timberlynn said as she beamed up at me with a smile.

When I sat, she and Kaylee exchanged a knowing look, and I couldn't help but wonder what the exchange was all about. Lincoln then shot Kaylee a look that I also couldn't read. What the heck was this all about?

"How is the farm doing, Merit?" Ty asked.

"We're doing good. Michael and I have been busy trying to get things back up and running after my father...well...after he let a good portion of things go."

They all nodded, but no one said anything. It wasn't a secret that my father was in rehab. His drunken episodes had been seen a few times around town. As far as I knew, no one had found out about the cheating. *Yet*. I wouldn't be surprised if most folks knew that my father had stopped paying off the loan. If they did, no one said anything to any of us.

"I loved the advertising you did for the strawberries and the you-pick-it," Lincoln said. "I've been waiting for Hunter to get a bit older before Brock and I take Morgan and Blayze. I'm not ready to leave him yet."

I gave her an understanding look. "I don't blame you. He's a tiny little thing."

"Stella would kick your ass if she heard you say that you weren't ready to leave him with her," Kaylee said.

Lincoln grinned. "You just wait until you have your little one—you won't be in any rush to leave them behind with anyone else."

Kaylee rubbed her stomach and exchanged a loving glance with Ty. For a moment, I felt a painful longing. What would it be like to have a man look at me like that? With nothing but love written entirely all over his face.

"What about you, Timberlynn and Tanner?" I asked as I motioned toward Kaylee's swollen belly. "Any plans for a baby?"

Timberlynn blushed, and Tanner wore a wide smile.

"Not yet," Timberlynn said as she looked at him. His expression was similar to his brother's. You could see the love

radiating off of the two of them. For a moment, I felt so out of place among all these lovebirds.

“New love!” I said with a laugh. “You should see the way you two look at each other. It’s adorable!”

This time, they both blushed.

A voice I instantly recognized came from behind me. “Adorable isn’t the word I would use.”

A chill ran down my spine, but an unfamiliar heat pooled in my lower stomach at the same time. A part of me, one I attempted to keep buried felt as if it had just woken up from a long winter nap and was ready to come out and play in the spring sun.

Dirk.

I hadn’t spoken to him since New Year’s Eve. Oh, I’d seen him once or twice since that night, though I tried like hell to ignore the way it made me feel. We saw each other when he came home for the birth of Hunter, and of course, Timberlynn and Tanner’s wedding. Plus, I had seen him in town a few times. But I had always gone out of my way to avoid him.

What was he doing here? He was just home a couple of weeks ago!

I turned to see him standing there, and I wanted to curse my damn body for reacting like she did. I took a quick inventory with my eyes. Good Lord, the man was handsome. There should really be some sort of warning that alerted a woman when he was near. Tall, dark, and built like a man who grew up working on a ranch. And those green eyes of his. They reminded me of the meadow down by the creek that ran across our farm. In the spring, the grass that grew there was the most stunning shade of dark green. Anytime I saw that field, I thought of Dirk. Especially in the spring. This past spring, I found myself avoiding it altogether.

“You’re just jealous,” Kaylee said with a wink.

“Hardly,” Dirk said as he leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. I instantly felt pain race through me. I looked away and stared out over the dancing crowd.

“Stop kissing my wife, you asshole,” Ty stated.

Dirk laughed, and I tried to ignore how much I had missed hearing that sound.

“I’m Blayze. Who are you?”

My gaze drifted down to a little boy who stood in front of me. Dark brown hair, almost black, and blue eyes. Blayze was the picture of his father, Brock. Goodness, if any child looked like a mini version of their parent, it was this one.

“I’m Merit. We’ve met before, but you were a little bitty baby,” I said with a smile.

Blayze stood taller and stuck out his chest. “I’m not a little boy anymore; I’ll be seven in September.”

I widened my eyes. “Well, I say, you are a very handsome young man.”

Blayze gave me a big smile. “I think you’re something pretty, Miss Merit.”

I snapped my gaze back up to Brock. “A little Shaw in the making.”

“You have no idea,” he mumbled.

Blayze cleared his throat and reached for my hand. “Miss Merit, do you have a boyfriend?”

“Oh no,” Lincoln said. “Blayze, do we need to have that talk again?”

“No, ma’am,” Blayze said as he looked back at me. “Do ya? Have a boyfriend?”

I laughed and then gave him a fake pout. “I do not.”

“Great!” Blayze shouted.

“Blayze Shaw!” Lincoln stated in a quiet voice. I guessed that she was trying not to wake the sleeping baby in her arms.

Blayze looked back at Lincoln and shrugged. “I’m not gonna call dibs on her, Momma...ain’t no one else interested in her, though.”

I felt my mouth drop open as I blinked rapidly a few times. “Out of the mouths of babes,” I whispered as Kaylee, Ty, Tanner, and Timberlynn all tried not to laugh.

Dirk stepped forward. “Now hold on a minute, Blayze. I was getting ready to ask Miss Merit to dance.”

“Uncle Dirk, no! I was getting ready to ask her to dance!” Blayze stated as he removed his little cowboy hat and readjusted it on his head. He looked ready to fight. It was the cutest thing I’d ever seen. And it was just my luck that only a seven-year-old was interested in me.

I looked at Lincoln, who motioned toward Dirk, clearly trying to tell me to dance with him. I shook my head. There was no way I’d dance with Dirk.

“I’m probably safer if I take my chance with the kid,” I said, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Dirk laughed, and then took my hand and pulled me up. “Come on, Merit. Let’s show everyone the proper way to dance.”

“Um...” My mind instantly went foggy from his touch. I couldn’t think of any words to say. More importantly, I couldn’t make my mouth tell him no. And my body, well, she had other things on her mind as well. Betraying bitch. Did she not remember he called me another woman’s name while we were skin to skin in my parents’ hay loft all those years ago?

“Have fun!” Kaylee called out as I looked back over my shoulder at the entire Shaw clan. They all wore cheeky grins on their faces.

Then I saw Kaylee hand Blayze what looked to be money and pat him on top of his head. Holy shit, the Shaw family were conniving.

“I think that was a setup,” I said, as Dirk led us to the dance floor.

“What?” he asked as he looked back at the group.

“Kaylee just handed Blayze money! Did she pay him to flirt with me?”

Dirk frowned. “Why, that little bastard. *I* paid him twenty bucks to flirt with you.”

I felt my eyes go wide. “You did what?”

He looked down at me and winked. My knees felt weak, and my heart began to race in my chest. Dirk Littlewood certainly had a way of making me feel discombobulated—still, after eleven years.

“You wouldn’t talk to me, Merit. I knew if I asked you to dance, you’d say no. So if I had Blayze flirt with you, Lincoln would be all for us dancing together to give Blayze the idea I was interested in you. He’s a little girl crazy.”

I stared at him, confused. “You only wanted to talk to me?”

“Yes, you wouldn’t talk to me on New Year’s Eve, and every time you see me in town since then, you avoid me like the damn plague.”

I hated how hurt I felt by his admission. Of course, I shouldn’t have been surprised. Dirk wouldn’t be interested in anything but making himself feel better about that night.

“There’s nothing to talk about, so if you don’t want to dance, we can simply walk away from one another.”

He frowned, then pulled me into his arms. “We’re dancing, Merit. Then we’re going to go somewhere and talk.”

I felt my throat bob as I swallowed hard. “Go somewhere? I can’t, I’m on a date.”

He laughed as he spun me around and then guided us across the makeshift dance floor. “With Channing? The guy who left you for his ex?”

“Excuse me, I told him he could dance with her.”

“And that was what, an hour ago? Has he come back for you?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “How do you know how long ago it was?”

He shrugged, then pushed me out and spun me again. Dancing with Dirk had always been so easy. We had practically grown up teaching each other how to dance. He was the first boy I ever two-stepped with, and I was positive I was the first girl he'd ever danced with, period.

“I was watching you,” he admitted.

I huffed. “Stalker much? That explains why I had a creepy feeling someone was watching me.”

He winked. Again. And my heart jumped...again. Damn him.

The song changed, and a slower one started. Dirk smirked and drew my body closer to his. The scent of his cologne filled my senses, and I found myself inhaling the smell of leather and the outdoors. I nearly sighed and melted into him, but I didn't. I wasn't that easily swooned. Or was I?

We remained silent as Dirk took us slowly around the dance floor. “I missed this,” he whispered against the top of my head.

I closed my eyes and tried not to let the feel of his body against mine make me lose my strength. It was something I could easily do when it came to him. No matter how much I said I hated him, I didn't hate being in his arms or feeling him hold me against his body. And that made my chest ache with a pain I thought I had moved on from.

“I missed you, Merit.”

I shook my head and tried to pull away, but he only held me closer.

“You're going to let me talk to you, goddammit. I'm not letting you push me away any longer, Merit.”

My hand fisted in his t-shirt before I realized what I was doing. I quickly let go and focused on anything other than the feel of his touch. Because my goodness, it made me so lightheaded. “Dirk, there isn't anything—”

“There is, and you know it. I've waited too damn long to explain about that night.”

I drew back and looked up into those vibrant green eyes. I shook the trance away and found the words to speak. “Explain what? You called me another woman’s name while we had sex. It was clear to me then—as it is now—why you did it.”

He frowned, and we slowed down almost to a stop. “Is it?” His voice was dripping with either sarcasm or anger. It could go either way.

“Yes,” I said with a forced laugh. “You obviously wished it was Kaci you were with, not me.”

Dirk slowly shook his head, then he grabbed my hand and pulled me through the crowd of dancers.

“Dirk! What in the world are you doing?” I snapped as he navigated us through the press of people.

“We’re leaving,” he called back at me.

“Leaving?” I shouted.

If people weren’t already staring, I would have dug my heels into the ground and refused to move. The last thing I needed was for any more rumors to go around about me or Dirk. Or worse yet, the two of us behaving like children.

I relented and allowed Dirk to guide us through the crowd. I glanced back over my shoulder in an attempt to look for Channing. Where in the hell had he disappeared to, that jerk?

“He left with Lauren, if you’re looking for your *date*.”

With a frown, I blew out a breath and jerked my hand away from Dirk’s when we got far enough away from the crowd. “Do not manhandle me, Dirk,”

He laughed. “If you really didn’t want to come with me, you wouldn’t have. Don’t forget, Merit, it was me who taught you how to take a guy down if you were being forced to do something you didn’t want to do.”

Anger started to boil inside of me as I followed him down one of the side streets. “Where are we going?”

“Somewhere private to talk.”

My entire body seemed to freeze. Dirk stopped and turned back to look at me. “What’s wrong?”

There was no way I could be alone with him. The last time we were alone was on New Year’s Eve when Tanner had asked Dirk to show me the ranch plot in his father’s office, and it had taken all of my control not to touch him.

I had spent so many years ignoring my feelings for Dirk. Then, the night I willingly gave him my body...and my heart...everything had changed. No matter how much I wanted to hate him, he still made me feel weak in the knees. He still made me want him. His smile still made my heart feel like it jumped in my chest, and his touch could easily have me begging him for more.

I shook my head to push all those thoughts away. No. No. No. I wasn’t going to let him have that sort of effect on me. I wouldn’t—or rather, I couldn’t.

Chewing on my lip, I fought the urge to run. I lifted my chin and said, “Just say what you want to say, Dirk. Here.”

He looked around the empty street. “Here?”

“Yes,” I said with a mock laugh. “It’s not like you’ve got a lot to talk about. It’s really rather simple.”

“Simple, huh?” he asked, his brow quirked up.

“Yes. You fucked me while thinking you were with another woman. How many times since then have you called one of your little random hook-ups Kaci? Of course, I’m sure they don’t care *what* you call them, as long as you stick your cock into them, am I right?”

Something moved across his face, and I couldn’t read the emotion, but then his eyes darkened for a moment and I felt my breath stall in my throat.

He started toward me, and I felt myself take a few steps back until I hit something hard. I pressed my back against the building behind me, as flat as I could.

“First of all, I didn’t *fuck* you, Merit. We made love.”

I smirked. “Do you even know the difference, Dirk?”

His eyes widened as he searched my face before meeting my gaze once more. “Yes, I do know the difference. I’ve only made love to someone once.”

A sick feeling swept over me at the thought of Dirk being so intimate with another woman, enough to say he’d made love to them. How foolish of me to think that for all these years, he hadn’t met someone he cared about.

I forced myself to look away from his intense stare.

“Did you hear me?”

I looked back at him and desperately tried to breathe evenly.

“I’ve only ever once made love to a woman, and I fucked it up. It was *you*, Merit. Only you. I wasn’t thinking of her when I was inside you.” His eyes closed. “God, the feeling of being inside you was...is...” His head dropped down, and I could feel his hot breath as he tried to keep his breathing still.

My own breath caught in my throat, and I willed myself not to think of the moments before Dirk had ripped my heart out. How amazing it had felt with him inside me. Everyone used to talk about how terrible their first time was, but I’d had the opposite experience. Yes, it hurt like a bitch when he’d first pushed in, but God, the way he moved inside me—it made the pain all but disappear.

I closed my eyes tightly to block out the memory.

“I’m so sorry, Merit. I don’t know why I said her name. I swear on the lives of everyone I love, I was not thinking about her. It was you...only you.”

I snapped my eyes open and placed my hands on his chest as our gaze met once again. I swallowed hard and pushed lightly against him. I blinked rapidly to keep my tears at bay. I had vowed not to cry over that night anymore. “If it had only been me in your mind...or your heart...you wouldn’t have said her name. You made me think you wanted me and me alone, Dirk. I was *so* stupid to think I could make you forget about her.”

He slowly shook his head.

“You were in love with her even after she picked Brock. I never could compete with her,” I said as a mix between a sob and a laugh slipped free. “She had probably already slept with you anyway.”

The moment I felt the tear slip free, I heard him suck in a breath. I pushed as hard as I could, and Dirk stepped back. I quickly wiped the tears away and looked up at him.

“No, Merit. I never slept with Kaci.”

Our eyes locked once more. I had always wondered if they'd slept together. Kaci would drop hints about how she knew she could easily get Dirk to sleep with her because of the way he looked at her. That he wanted her desperately. More than Brock did. A part of me knew she said it to hurt me, but I wouldn't admit it at the time. I had never told Kaci how I felt about Dirk, but I was pretty sure she knew. Then, when Kaci found out Dirk and I had been together, which I never could figure out how she found out, she'd said the most hurtful thing ever.

“You know he was only with you to take your V-card. That's all. Men like to brag about that sort of thing. And we all know Dirk likes to win...at everything.”

Then she proceeded to tell the entire school Dirk had taken my virginity.

That had been the end of our friendship. I had lost both of my best friends because of one night, and then I was totally alone.

Finding my voice, I said, “You do know it was Kaci who told everyone what happened between us?”

He brought his hand to the back of his neck and rubbed it while a deep frown grew between his brows. Had he known his precious little Kaci was the one behind the rumors? Had he even cared? The way he was looking at me now I couldn't tell, and I was so tired of trying not to care when it came to Dirk.

Chapter Five

DIRK

I stared at Merit as her words sank in.

She let out a humorless laugh. “That’s right, your perfect little Kaci betrayed my trust and told everyone on the cheerleading squad. That is, after she informed me that the only reason you were even with me was to take my virginity like some kind of prize.”

“That wasn’t true.”

“Well, all signs sort of led me to believe that it *was* true, Dirk.”

I sighed in frustration. “What do you want me to say, Merit? I’ve already told you I don’t know why I fucking said her name. I wasn’t thinking of her. I *hate* that her fucking name came out of my mouth. Do you have any idea how many times I wished I could go back in time? That I could do things...differently?”

“This is pointless, Dirk. What does it even matter anymore? Why do you even care?” she asked.

I grabbed her arms and squeezed lightly, wanting to shake sense into her. Why couldn’t she see why I cared? How it had eaten me up for years that I had hurt her like that?

“I fucking care because I hurt you, Merit. You’re the last person on this Earth I would ever want to hurt. I will admit, I thought about her before we made love. But the minute I touched you, I didn’t think about her again. Only you. I only thought about *you*.”

Merit tried to push me away, but I pressed her back against the building again.

“No, listen to me. I need for you to hear this. I was confused about all these feelings I had for Kacie *and* for you. I wanted you, Merit. That weekend at Libby’s party, when I finally broke down and took you into the bathroom, I wanted

to tell you how I felt about you, but I didn't want to lose our friendship. You meant *everything* to me, Merit. You were my best friend."

"So was Kaci," she whispered.

I shook my head. "The feelings I had for you were different. And yes, I thought about her before I agreed to make love to you, but it was more of realization kind of thing."

She looked away and tightly closed her eyes.

"I swear, though, when I was with you, Merit, it was only you. Please believe me."

She opened her eyes and stared off at nothing. "Have you ever called another woman her name?"

"No, never."

Merit's throat bobbed with a swallow. "Well, I guess I'm the lucky one, then."

"Merit, please stop."

She twisted and stepped away from me.

"You explained yourself, Dirk. Now maybe we can put this behind us."

"I miss you, Merit. Can we not be friends again?"

Her chin trembled slightly, and she pressed her lips together tightly for a few moments before she answered me. "No, we can't."

I closed my eyes. "Do you want me to get on my damn knees and beg for your forgiveness?"

"No," she whispered as I looked down at her once more. "All I ever wanted from you was *you*, and when I finally had you all to myself, I realized that I never really had you at all." She shook her head. "That was a very naïve way of thinking. I should have known it was too good to be true. For you to want me like I wanted you."

Tears flowed down her beautiful face, and I fought the urge to reach up and wipe them away.

“Merit, I didn’t mean to hurt you,” I said, my voice sounding strange to my own ears.

She nodded and wiped her tears away again. “Well, I was the stupid one.”

“Damn it, no, you weren’t. Merit, I...I couldn’t promise you anything then. I was lost and confused, and if I could go back and have that moment over again, I...I...”

“You what? Wouldn’t have had sex with me?”

Before I could tell her that I’d never regret what we shared, a car horn honked and Merit jumped.

“Merit! Oh my goodness, it really is you! You’re back in town! *And look*, you’re with Dirk.”

I wanted to groan internally when I saw Lucy Mae. I knew damn well this had not been the first time Lucy Mae had seen Merit.

With a roll of her eyes, Merit turned to Lucy Mae. “Hey, Lucy Mae. I guess you forgot that you saw me in the grocery store last week.”

The other woman had the nerve to frown as if trying to remember. “Did we? My gosh, I don’t even remember.” Her eyes swung to me. “And what exactly are the two of you doing out here all alone?”

I shot her a dirty look. “Whatever we’re doing is none of your business, Lucy Mae, so why don’t you keep on driving.”

Her mouth dropped open in surprise. “Well, someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed. And here I was going to say how nice it was to see you back in town. Have you two...made up?”

“Lucy Mae, did you need something, or are you simply looking for gossip?” Merit asked.

This time the woman laughed. “Fine, enjoy the rest of your evening, you two.”

I watched as Lucy Mae drove off. When she turned the corner, I reached for Merit’s hand and quickly said what I

meant to before Lucy Mae interrupted. “Merit, I will never regret what happened between us.”

Her eyes searched my face, and for some reason, I wanted to hear her say the same words. When she didn’t, I couldn’t understand the feeling in my chest. It burned, and my throat felt tight. Did I want something more than friendship back? Did I want more? Why did my heart suddenly feel like it was torn in two?

She finally broke the silence. “It’s getting late, and I need to get back to my car.”

With a nod, I asked, “Did you want a ride? It’s dark.”

“No, it’s right around the corner.” She started to walk backwards and away from me. “Tell your parents I said hello.”

“I will.”

And with that, she turned and quickly walked away.



“You know, if you hit that thing any harder, it’s going to fall out of the ceiling.”

I stopped hitting the punching bag and turned to face Brock. He was leaning against the doorjamb with a smile on his face.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, reaching for a towel to wipe off the sweat running down my face.

“Thought maybe my best friend wanted to head out for a beer tonight.”

I lifted a brow and stared at him. “What’s the real reason you’re here?”

He laughed. “Fine, Lincoln said she was going to kill me if I didn’t leave her be for a bit. Apparently, I’ve been home entirely too much since Hunter was born. Plus, she, Kaylee, and Timberlynn are planning the lunch for tomorrow after the christening.”

“No wonder you wanted out of the house,” I said with a chuckle.

“What do you say to that beer?”

I nodded. “It’s been awhile since we hit the Blue Moose alone. Give me a minute to shower and get dressed?”

“I’ll go bug your momma for a taste of the apple pie she just made.”

I laughed as I quickly made my way out of the workout room and headed to my own room. I could stay in the guesthouse, or even buy a place in town, but I enjoyed staying with my folks when I wasn’t on the road. My father liked tinkering on his old truck with me, and my mother loved baking for both of us—even though that meant I was working out twice as much to counteract all the sweets my mother fed me. But every damn bite was worth it.

Twenty minutes later, I headed down to the kitchen and came to a stop when I heard her voice.

Merit.

It had been a week since I’d seen her at the street dance.

“Kimberley, you’re going to spoil us if you keep making pies like this!” Merit said.

“Nonsense. I remembered how much you loved blueberry pie, and when I saw the fresh blueberries at the market, I had to get them and make it for you.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. I knew my mother, and she was playing a dangerous game.

“Brock, is the family excited about the christening tomorrow?” my mother asked.

“We are, and I hope you and Brad are still planning to come to the lunch after?”

“Of course, we are! You did invite the Edens, as well, correct?”

Brock laughed. “Of course, we did. Merit, you able to come?”

“Yes. We wouldn’t miss it for the world. I’ve already let Lincoln know it will be me and Mom only. My mother is over-the-moon excited to see Hunter, as well as Blayze and Morgan.”

“Speaking of being over the moon—Dirk is excited about being Hunter’s godfather.”

“How long will Dirk be in town for?” Merit asked, a slight nervous edge to her voice.

Knowing that I had an effect on her made me smile.

“He’s going to be in town for at least another week, I believe,” my mother answered.

“Oh,” Merit whispered. I couldn’t tell if I heard disappointment in her voice or not.

“I do wish the two of you would make up already. You were such good friends,” my mother said with a wistfulness in her voice.

Brock cleared his throat, and I figured that was my cue to get the hell in there.

“Sorry it took me so long,” I said as I walked into the kitchen.

Merit jerked her body around and gave me a quick once-over before she plastered on a fake smile.

“Hey, Merit, I didn’t know you were here,” I said as I reached down and popped a blueberry into my mouth. I could feel Brock’s eyes on me, as well as my mother’s.

“Your mom called and said she made a blueberry pie for us, so I came to get it.” She faced my mother again. “Kimberley, will you let me pay you for the pie?”

“Pay me! Why, I should put you over my knee and spank you for even suggesting such a thing.”

I groaned internally as an image of Merit over my knee with my hand slapping her perfect ass appeared in my head.

“Whatever you’re thinking, stop,” Brock whispered as he walked by me.

“Shut up, dude.” Shaking the image away, I shot him a dirty look, which only made him laugh.

“Where are you boys off to?” my mother asked.

“The Blue Moose for a few beers.”

With a huge smile on her face, my mother said, “You should invite Merit!”

“What? No!” Merit said—or rather, shouted.

My mother frowned. “Why not? The two of you used to be thick as thieves.”

“That was a long time ago, Mom,” I stated matter-of-factly.

Merit’s lavender eyes jerked over to meet my gaze. Then she looked back at my mother and smiled. “I’m afraid I’m going to be getting everything ready for the closing tomorrow, so I don’t have time to go out.”

“Closing?” I asked.

Merit gave me a polite nod. “Yes, I’m purchasing a house.”

“A house? Wow, so you’re not heading back to New York City?” Brock asked.

Merit shook her head and avoided looking at me. “No, I’m here to stay for good.”

“Lincoln, Kaylee, and Timberlynn will be glad to hear that,” Brock said.

A wide smile erupted across Merit’s face, and I felt a weird sensation in my chest.

I stared at her for a bit too long, and she must have sensed it because her eyes met mine before she quickly looked back at my mother.

“That makes me so happy. I cannot wait to see all the wonderful things you do with the farm, Merit!” my mother gushed.

“Thank you, Kimberley, I’m excited, as well. But I need to get going. Thank you for the pie. Tell Brad I said hello. Brock, Dirk, it was good seeing you both.”

“You, too,” Brock said as he lifted his hand and waved goodbye.

Merit gave Brock a smile, but when she looked at me, it faded ever so slightly. I hated that she didn’t smile at me like she used to.

Brock turned to me. “You ready to go?”

“Yeah, I need a drink...or six.”

Chapter Six

MERIT

My hands shook as I stared down at the paper I had printed out. It had to be some sort of mistake. A huge error on the bank's side.

"Merit, sweetheart, what's the matter?" my mother asked. "You're white as a ghost."

I lifted my eyes from the paper and looked at my mother. "I think there's a mistake in my savings account at the bank, that's all."

"Oh no...will it affect the closing?"

"I'm not sure, they haven't mentioned it yet." I pulled out my phone and dialed Libby's number.

"Hey, what's going on?" Libby said on the other end of the line.

I walked out onto the back porch and down the steps, away from my mother's ears. I knew Libby's husband was the bank manager, so if anyone could help me out, it would be her. "Libby, I need to ask you to do me a huge favor."

"If I'm able to, I will."

Libby was on a bit of a guilt trip ever since I'd told her Timberlynn had slipped and told me on New Year's Eve that she had filled them in on my past with Dirk.

"I think the bank made some sort of error. I've had a large amount of money deposited into my savings."

The line was silent...too silent.

Then, it suddenly hit me. It was the same amount of money I had withdrawn from my retirement and my savings. It wasn't a mistake—someone put it there!

"Oh my God, it wasn't a mistake. Someone put it in there. You know, don't you?"

She grumbled something under her breath before she said, “I don’t know who it was, but I do know that *Doug* knows, and I doubt he’ll tell you.”

“Of course, he does, he’s the bank manager. Why wouldn’t he tell me, though?”

She sighed, and I heard a door creak open and then click shut. “I had to come outside, because if he heard me talking to you about this, he’d be pissed.”

“I won’t say a word about how I found out.”

“Do you swear?”

I made a cross over my heart, even though she couldn’t see it. “I so swear.”

“Okay, well, I went to have lunch with him the other day and I...well, I was hiding in his office.”

“Why were you hiding in his office?”

“Oh Lord, this is so embarrassing. I was there for a little afternoon delight.”

I felt my lip curl. “I didn’t need that visual.”

“You asked why I was hiding!”

I shook the mental image out of my head. “Sorry, get back to the story.”

“Fine. I was in his office, and he walked in, but his receptionist had followed him, so I had to hide in his private bathroom. The door was open slightly, so I could hear everything. She said he had a call and that it was important. I heard her leave, but he got on the call at the same time.”

“Okay, so do you know who he was talking to?”

“Yep. Phil Wilcox.”

I thought for a moment. “We went to high school with him. He lived in New York City for a while and was a cop there.”

“Yes, but he moved back to Montana and works for the state now, or the Feds. No one really knows. From what I gathered, he was hired to find out information about...um...

well, anyway, that part doesn't matter. He was hired to put money into your account and make sure you couldn't find out who'd deposited the money. I was only getting one side of the story. Doug said Phil's name then yours. He then went on and asked why Phil wanted to deposit money into your account, and how in the hell he was supposed to explain to *you* that he didn't know who put it there."

I rubbed my temples. "This is so weird. It's the same exact amount that I withdrew from my savings *and* my retirement."

"That's because Phil researched you. Oh shit. I didn't mean to say that."

I felt my mouth hang open. "Wait, Phil was getting information on me?"

"Oh God, Merit, you have to promise you won't say how you found out. Doug will kill me! He doesn't even know I was there that day. His stupid receptionist came back in and she dictated a bunch of crap for him, and then he left to go to a meeting. By that time, the office was cleared out, and I was well past my turned-on phase. I went home."

"Still too much information."

She giggled. "Sorry."

"Libby, do you know who hired Phil to look up information about me? I mean, you and my friend Trish back in New York are the only two people who know I took that money out. Besides my mom and brother, of course. You didn't tell anyone, did you?"

"No! I would never betray your trust like that. Hell, I'm still trying to make up for gossiping about you on New Year's Eve."

I sighed. "Then who?"

"If you think about it for a hot minute, Merit, who has that kind of money, and who would be the type of guy to want to give it back to you? The type of guy who once upon a time would do *anything* for you."

It only took two seconds for the answer to pop into my head.

“Dirk Littlewood.”

“Bingo. That’s my guess, mind you. I’m not a hundred percent sure.” She paused. “What are you going to do now?”

I smiled, but it wasn’t a happy one. It was the kind of smile a person wore before they killed someone. “I’m going to go get myself a beer at the Blue Moose.”

“Um, okay, well, drink one for me!”

“Will do, and thanks, Libby. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone you were my source.”

“Good, I really do love my husband and enjoy being married. And I have a baby to think of.”

I laughed. “Talk soon, okay?”

“Good luck!”

After I hit End, I rushed back into the house and ran up the stairs to my bedroom. It was time to get to the bottom of why more than one-hundred-thousand dollars just showed up in my savings account.



I sat in my car and pulled in a deep, cleansing breath as I said over and over again, “Do not hit him over the head with a beer bottle, and all will be good.”

Opening the door, I slipped out of my car and marched my way over to the front entrance of the Blue Moose. I clenched my hands into fists numerous times before I reached for the door and yanked it open. I needed to keep calm and not make a scene. No matter how much I wanted to throat punch Dirk, I wouldn’t.

A few people turned to see who was coming in. I couldn’t help but notice a few guys looking a little longer than they should as I walked farther into the bar. I had changed quickly,

throwing on a dress and my cowboy boots, rather than the sweatpants and t-shirt I had been wearing when Dirk last saw me.

I walked up to the bar and looked out over the dance floor.

“It’s about damn time you came in here, Merit Eden!”

Turning, I looked at the bartender on the other side of the bar and smiled brightly. Betty Jane wore a huge smile on her face as she stared at me.

“Betty Jane, it’s so good to see you!” I said, sliding onto a stool.

“Lord Almighty, sweetie, are you on the hunt for a man tonight?” she asked with a wink as she poured me a beer and slid it in front of me.

“Something like that. I need a shot. Anything strong, please.”

“You’ve got it,” Betty Jane said before she turned and walked away. Not a minute later, she set two shot glasses in front of me.

“If one shot is good, two is better,” she stated like that was common knowledge.

I nodded and drank one of them down. I had to force myself not to cough. “Holy shit, Betty Jane.”

“Sorry, darlin’, you asked for something strong.”

“You’d be right about that. Do you happen to know if Dirk and Brock came in?”

Her brows lifted some. “Yes. They’re both here and sitting over there in the back corner. Are you here to join them?”

I laughed, picked up the other shot and downed it. Then, I took a long pull from the beer as Betty Jane stared at me in disbelief. “Nope. I’m here to kill Dirk.”

She nodded as if my answer was the most normal response ever. “Well, you might want one more shot, then. Liquid courage and all.”

I nodded. “Two more. Bring me two more.”

And like magic, two more shots of strong whiskey were placed in front of me. By the time I got the fourth shot down, I felt pretty damn good. I quickly finished off the beer and smiled.

“That should do it!” I declared as I slid off the stool. “How much?”

She shook her head and held up her hand. “It’s on the house.”

“Thank you!” I said, thinking I might have said that a little too loudly. I made my way to the back corner of the bar. As I walked through the crowd of people, I realized it had been a very long time since I’d had any sort of alcohol. And maybe downing four shots, plus a beer, wasn’t such a great idea. My slight buzz was growing ever so quickly.

When I finally made it to the table, I couldn’t help but slow my steps. God, why did he have to be so insanely good-looking? And such a manwhore! There was a blonde standing there, attempting to flirt with him. I had to smile, though, when he didn’t seem the least bit interested. Then, as if he knew I was there, his gaze moved from her to me, and I instantly saw his eyes widen as they swept over my body.

“Okay, don’t act like you’ve got a buzz,” I mumbled to myself as I walked up and stood next to the blonde. Holy hell, was she even old enough to be in this place?

“Merit, you decided to join us!” Brock said, a wide smile on his face. I could feel the blonde staring at me. The only thing I could see, though, was Dirk, and the way he was looking at me. Even in the darkened bar, I could tell those normally bright green eyes were dark with something that I swore was desire.

Impossible. The girl next to me had on a tight little black dress and high-heeled shoes. I looked like a peasant next to her wearing a simple blue dress that fell to my knees, and my favorite pair of cowboy boots. I *will* say that the dress did

show off my curves just a tad. But the blonde next to me barely had her boobs held in place by her dress.

Then, Dirk turned to the blonde. "If you'll excuse us, my date just got here."

My mouth dropped open, and I went to say something, but Dirk stood, pulled me to him and kissed me on the lips. "I'm glad you made it, Bugs."

I swayed slightly from the kiss and the childhood nickname he had given me. Dirk grabbed me by my waist, making my knees slightly weak. Damn jerk of a man. It was the alcohol that was making me unbalanced and unable to speak, that's all. Nothing else.

Dirk moved his mouth to my ear and whispered, "I see my kiss still makes you sway."

Frowning, I pushed him away. "Slow your roll, cowboy. It's the four shots and beer I drank when I walked in, not you."

Dirk drew his brows in. "Why did you drink four shots?"

I sighed. "Because I needed something to calm me down, so I didn't kill you."

"Not to be a killjoy here, but I don't get a night out very often, so I would really appreciate it if you didn't kill him until after our bro date," Brock said.

With a roll of my eyes, I slid into the booth.

"Something to drink?" a waitress asked with a smile.

"Yes," I said at the same time Dirk answered, "No."

I jerked my head to the left to glare at Dirk. "Excuse me?" I asked.

He leaned in and said, "Don't you think you might have had enough to drink, Merit?"

I was positive my jaw nearly hit the table. "You're not the boss of me, Dirk Littlewood." With a smile on my face, I turned back to the waitress. "I'll have a Bud Light, please. And a shot, of anything. Betty Jane will know."

The waitress nodded, then looked at Brock and Dirk and asked if they wanted anything else. They both shook their heads.

I turned to Brock. "I'm sorry to interrupt your...bro date." I frowned and shook my head at that. "But I only need about ten minutes, and then I will let you both get back to your night out."

The corners of Brock's mouth twitched. "I had forgotten what a spitfire you can be, Merit."

My smile grew bigger. "You haven't seen anything yet, Brock. I'd tell you that you might want to leave us alone for what I'm about to say, but Dirk deserves an audience for the verbal lashing I'm about to give him."

When I looked back at Dirk, my smile dropped instantly. "How dare you. You have some nerve, mister," I said.

He looked confused. "You're gonna have to be more specific, Merit. What did I do now?"

"Hey, Dirk. Glad to see you're back in town. Do you want to, um...get together later?"

The sound of a woman's voice caused me to turn and look up. Another blonde stood at the table dressed in practically nothing. She oozed sex. My gaze skimmed the woman and I nearly laughed when I saw the packet of a condom peeking out from her front pocket. I lifted my head to see her smiling at Dirk.

"I'm sorry, not interested," Dirk stated.

When she pouted, I nearly wanted to puke right there on the spot. Of course, that could have been the four shots of whiskey coming back up, too.

"Aw, but we had so much fun the last time we hooked up."

"Oh. My. God!" I said as I looked at Dirk, back to the blonde, then to Brock. "Is this really happening right before my eyes?"

Brock nodded and took a sip of his beer. A smirk on his face said he wasn't going anywhere at all anytime soon. This

was one of those shows that he'd have paid good money to sit and watch.

I looked back at the blonde. "How do you know he's not with me? I mean, what gives you the nerve to strut your ass over here, condom in your pocket, and proposition him right in front of me?"

She shrugged, none of my words fazing her at all. "Dirk, sweetheart, I'm down for another threesome if you are."

"Oh hell," Dirk said as he closed his eyes.

"Threesome! Christ on a cracker, Dirk, is she serious?" I nearly shouted as Brock coughed and said something to the blonde that made her walk away. I didn't hear what he said because my heart was pounding in my chest, and I felt like I was going to hurl.

"Merit—" Dirk started.

"You had a threesome with her?" I held up my hand. "No, wait, please don't answer that." I shook my head and then stared at him. "I guess all the rumors about you are true."

He frowned. "Wait...let me explain. I didn't realize there were going to be two women. I only—"

I placed my hand over his mouth to make him stop talking. "I don't give a shit who—or how many at a time—you fuck, Dirk."

He flinched, and I dropped my hand.

"The only reason I'm here right now is because I want to know why in the hell you put money into my savings."

A shocked look moved across his face. "What?"

"Do not play dumb with me, Dirk. I know you better than anyone, and when you're trying to avoid lying you always say *what* to stall for time. There is no *what* this time. Answer. Me."

The waitress walked over with my beer and shot. "Here ya go. And here's the shot you ordered earlier, Dirk."

I watched as she slid the shot toward Dirk. He looked like he really wanted it, so I grabbed it and downed it. Then I nearly coughed up a lung. So, I figured the best thing to do was down the other shot for good measure.

“Jesus, what did I just drink?” I asked while I gasped for air. I could hear Brock chuckle from my other side.

“Why did you drink that, Merit?” Dirk asked.

“Don’t change the subject. How did you know about the money? How in the world were you able to deposit that into my account?”

“What money?” Brock asked.

“Nothing, Brock. It’s nothing—clearly she’s had too much to drink,” Dirk stated.

“Oh no. You don’t get to do that.” I turned to look at Brock. “My father is in rehab for a drinking problem. He’s pretty much drank himself to death and, in the process, took out a loan against the farm. He stopped making payments on it for some reason he has yet to explain, and we almost lost it. I had to withdraw money from my swavings.” I closed my eyes and took in a deep breath. “My sa...savings and retirement to get the loan caught up. Then, suddenly, like poof! The same exact amount I withdrew shopped up in my savings account.”

“Shopped?” Brock asked.

“Showed,” I corrected. Hell, the shots were getting to me. I took a sip of beer like that was going to make things better.

Brock leaned forward and looked at Dirk. “How did you know about the money?”

Dirk moaned. “Brock, now is not the time.”

I laughed. “Phil Wilcox. Does that ring a bell?”

Brock pulled his brows in slightly as he tried to place the name. “The guy we went to high school with? I heard he moved to New York City and was a cop.”

“He works for the Montana State Police now,” Dirk stated. “Or the Feds. Hell, something high up.”

I felt my eyes sting with tears that threatened to fall. I saw a glass of water and quickly downed it, realizing I shouldn't have drunk so much. "Why did you have him investigate me, Dirk?"

"What!" Brock said, "You had Phil investigate Merit?"

Dirk closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. "I only wanted to find out why you came back to Montana."

My stomach churned, and I had to fight to keep myself from getting sick. Why had I come tonight again? Right. Dirk. Money. My account. Right? Yes, yes! To hear him admit that he'd hired Phil made my head swim. Why had Dirk taken the time to find out all this information on me?

"Why did you care?" I managed to finally ask, my voice sounding weaker than I wanted it to.

He looked away and out toward the dance floor.

"Dirk, why? You need to explain to me why you dug into my life. Why you felt the need to put more than one-hundred-thousand dollars into my bank account."

All he did was shake his head as he refused to look at me.

I looked at Brock, who simply shrugged. "He didn't tell me anything, Merit. This is all news to me, I swear."

My head started to spin. I reached for the water and took another long drink, then placed it back on the table. "What all did Phil tell you?" I asked.

Dirk remained silent.

I felt a tear slip free, and I quickly brushed it away. Then, I laughed like a crazy, freaking fool. Dirk turned and looked at me, his face pulled in tight with a concerned expression.

"You know," I said, laughing once more. There wasn't a bit of humor in it, or at least I didn't feel like anything was funny as I spoke. "I swore I would never allow myself to let you make me cry or hurt me again. This is exactly why I stayed away from home." My voice sounded slightly slower than normal.

Jabbing my finger into his chest, I kept speaking. “You—*you* are the reason why I left Montana and never wanted to come back. But I’m not doing this anymore. You don’t get to destroy me, throw money around like it’s glitter, then come sweeping back into my life to fix what you broke.”

Dirk jumped like I had slapped him.

“I broke you?” he asked.

I pushed him. “Move, I’m weaving. No, I’m leave... *leaving.*” Christ, I had to concentrate on my words.

Dirk held his ground and didn’t move. “Wait, Merit.”

“Get the hell out of my way, Dirk, or I swear to God I’ll start screaming.”

Dirk slid out of the booth, and I followed. I pulled out a twenty from my back pocket and threw it onto the table. I turned to face him and the room spun. I had drunk too much. Shit.

“I’ve been taking care of myself for the last ten years, and I do not need you to butt into my life and play hero. I’ll find out how I can withdraw the money and give it back to you.”

“I’m not taking it back, Merit,” he stated as he crossed his arms over his chest. My lower stomach pulled with lust, and I quickly pushed it away.

Brock slid out of the other side of the booth. “I don’t think this is the place to have this conversation. Why don’t the two of you go and talk somewhere quiet.”

“No need, Brock, I’m weaving.” I shook my head. “Fuck, I’m weaving. Fuuuck I. Am. L-eaving.”

As I turned to walk away, the entire room spun, and I stumbled.

Oh, shit. I shouldn’t have had that last shot.

“Damn it,” Dirk said as he quickly grabbed me. “I’ve got you, it’s okay.”

“I don’t need you to—”

I clamped my mouth shut and felt the color drain from my face.

“I know that face. She’s about to be sick, Brock.”

Before I knew what was happening, Dirk swept me up into his arms like I weighed nothing and quickly started making his way across the dance floor. I closed my eyes—one, because I was embarrassed as all get out; and two, the movement made the nausea a million times worse.

“Hold on, Bugs, we’re almost there.”

Ugh. Dirk using my pet name he used to call me when we were younger made me want to bury my face into his neck and cry.

The moment he pushed open the door and I felt the cool evening air, I was instantly better.

Dirk set me down, and I took in a deep breath and prayed to the heavens above that I didn’t throw up in front of him.

Unfortunately, my prayer was just a moment too late. I puked. Everywhere.

Chapter Seven

DIRK

Merit leaned over and moaned. “Oh God, I’m going to die.”

I chuckled and rubbed my hand softly over her back. “You’re not going to die, Bugs.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and took in a few deep breaths.

“How is she?” Brock asked as he handed me a cold wet cloth he must have asked Betty Jane for.

“She’d be better if she threw up some more.”

“Shut up. Don’t say that,” Merit groaned. “I hate throwing up, and you know it.”

I couldn’t help but smile. I did know that, and there had been plenty of times I’d held Merit’s hair back after she drank one too many beers. The woman couldn’t hold her liquor to save her life.

Merit slowly stood and looked from me to Brock and then back to me. “I didn’t mean to ruin your night. I’m sorry.”

This time I laughed. “Yes, you did mean to ruin it.”

“For you, maybe, not for Brock.”

Brock smiled. “You didn’t ruin it.”

She groaned. “I feel like I have whiskey running through my veins.”

Brock chuckled. “Well, six shots is a lot...for you.”

She rolled her eyes. “I, um...I should have Betty Jane call me a cab.”

“No, I’ll give you a ride home,” I stated. “We still have some talking to do.”

Merit rolled her eyes. “Fine, but only because it will kill my mother if I go home even slightly buzzed.”

“I’d probably get some food and coffee in her,” Brock suggested. “You need me to hang around? What about her car?”

Another groan slipped from Merit’s lips.

“Don’t worry, I’ll give Michael a call to come and get it.”

Merit was now sitting on the ground, her head between her legs.

Brock curled his lip. “You sure you want her to get into your truck? Dude, you know how she gets when she drinks.”

I nodded. “That was when she was seventeen. Besides, I don’t think she’s drunk, just buzzed.”

Brock gave her another look and then pulled me back some. “You sure you want to talk to her tonight? She was pretty pissed, and if she *is* slightly drunk she might not remember talking to you tomorrow.”

“I’m not drunk,” Merit called out. “And stop talking like I’m not here!”

We both turned to see her standing up.

“I felt sick, that’s all. I’m f-fine.” She hiccupped, and it was the cutest fucking thing I’d ever heard.

Brock walked up to her and went to kiss her on the cheek, then checked himself. She had just thrown up. “Maybe I’ll forgo the friendly kiss. If I haven’t said it yet, I’m glad you’re back, Merit.”

When she gifted him with a brilliant smile, I felt my hands clench into fists. Then I quickly opened them. Why in the hell was I jealous of Brock simply saying something nice?

“Thank you, Brock. Sorry about tonight.”

“Don’t even worry about it.”

Brock turned back to me and reached his hand out to shake mine. “Take care of her and don’t fight. At least not in public.”

I nodded and let out a humorless laugh. “No promises.”

He rolled his eyes and headed over to where his truck was parked next to mine.

When I focused back on Merit, she was staring at me. She quickly looked away and then swayed. I reached out to steady her, and she pulled back from me. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine. Come on, let's get some coffee into you."

I reached for her hand and was surprised when she didn't pull away again. Once we got to my truck, I opened the door and helped her in. She immediately put her head back against the seat and took in a few deep breaths.

I jogged around to the driver's side, opened the door, and climbed in. The night air was cool and crisp, and I realized in that moment how much I had missed Hamilton. Summer here was one of my favorite times of the year. The full moon was coming up over the mountains and illuminating the snow that still covered some of the peaks. It was almost like a light on the mountains that reflected down into the valley.

"Damn, it's beautiful here," I said.

"Mmm, it is."

I glanced to my right to see Merit staring out the windshield at where I had just been looking.

"I'd always forget how pretty it is here until I came home to visit. It was always so hard to leave," she said softly.

Her words felt like lead on my chest. I was the reason she left. She'd said so herself inside the Blue Moose.

"Let's go get you some food and coffee," I said.

"Ugh, don't even mention food." She dropped her head back and closed her eyes again. "And stop driving so fast!"

I smiled. "Bugs, I haven't even backed up yet."

"Oh God...maybe I am drunk, then."

Thirty minutes later, and after a quick stop for a toothbrush, we were sitting in a booth at Nap's Grill, and Merit had a giant hamburger and fries in front of her. Not to mention the coffee she was slowly sipping.

“Feel any better, Bugs?”

She shrugged. “I’m buzzing and sorta wish I could throw up some more to get all this whiskey out of my system.”

I couldn’t help but smile.

She took a bite of her burger and then looked at me for a moment.

“What?” I asked.

“Why are you calling me Bugs again?”

I felt a frown form instantly on my face. “What?”

“You’ve called me that nickname a few times now.”

With a shrug, I replied, “It’s your nickname.”

She shook her head. “It was my nickname back in high school. That was a long time ago.”

“Do you not like me calling you that?”

Her eyes locked on mine, and I swore I saw the same heat as I did that night in the barn. Then she looked down at the burger she’d only taken a few bites of and pushed it away. “It took me by surprise, that’s all.”

“Are you feeling sick?” I asked as I motioned to the burger.

“I’m not hungry.”

With a grin, I said, “You always used to get hungry anytime you drank.”

She slowly lifted her gaze to mine again. “Well, a lot of things have changed since high school. Like you having threesomes.”

My eyes went wide, and I quickly looked around the restaurant before I focused back on her. “I did not have a threesome with her.”

One of her brows lifted, and she stared at me.

“Listen, I’m not going to sit here and tell you I haven’t fucked a lot of women, because I have.”

She swallowed hard and dropped her gaze again. This time she picked up the coffee and took a sip before staring into it.

“She wanted a threesome, I didn’t. It ended up being three women who all fucked around with each other.”

Her head jerked up, and she steadied herself when she started to sway once again. “Oh my Lord! You watched them?”

I felt my entire body go stiff at the horror in her voice.

“No. When the other two women came in, I got dressed and left. Obviously I wasn’t needed.”

“Oh,” she said, barely above a whisper.

“They didn’t mean anything. None of them.”

Merit looked up at me and plastered on a fake smile. “You don’t owe me any explanations, and I’m sorry if I pried. Of course, I guess I could hire Phil if I really wanted to find out about all your dirty little secrets. I think I’ll pass, though.”

I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck. “Merit, I don’t really have an explanation as to why I hired Phil. I guess I wanted to know what brought you back to Montana and if I had anything to do with it. I was also curious about what you’ve been up to.”

“What else did you find out about me?”

It was my turn to look down at the coffee mug I was cradling in my hands. “Does it matter?”

She laughed. “Yes.”

“I asked him to find out if you’d been dating anyone.”

I heard the intake of air, and I stole a quick look to see she was staring at me with a disbelieving expression on her face.

“What did Phil tell you?” she asked as she set her coffee cup down and leaned back in the booth. I could tell she was trying not to throw the coffee in my face.

“Nothing much.”

“Dirk!” she said more firmly before she hiccupped again.

“That you dated some British actor dude for a few years off and on.”

Her mouth dropped open—and then she slid out of the booth.

“Fuck,” I whispered as I pulled out my wallet and threw a few twenty dollar bills down on the table and followed her out of the restaurant.

“Where are you going, Merit?” I asked as she started to walk away from where my truck was parked.

“Anywhere you’re not,” she replied, stomping off.

I walked up next to her, gently took her by the elbow, and turned her to walk back toward my truck. My entire body came to life anytime I touched this woman, and I was beginning to remember all of those times I’d tried to ignore this feeling when I was around her.

“You’re not walking out here alone. Get into the truck. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Not tonight,” she stated.

“Yes, tonight. You were the one who showed up at the Blue Moose demanding answers. Well, now you’re going to get them.”

Jerking open the truck door, I tried to help her up, but she knocked my hand out of the way.

“I’m fine now.”

I took a step back and lifted my hands in surrender. Merit steadied herself and climbed into the truck. I knew she wasn’t full-on drunk, but she was for sure still buzzing. One cup of coffee and a few bites of a burger didn’t do shit.

Once I got back into the truck, I went to the only place I could think of. I put the truck into drive and started toward the spot on Bitterroot River where we all used to go and drink beer on the tailgate of my truck or Brock’s.

Merit had quickly fallen asleep, and I couldn’t help but glance over at her every time I stopped at a light or a stop sign.

Jesus, she was so damn beautiful. And a mad Merit... Hell, a mad Merit was even more stunning. Those violet eyes of hers seemed to turn dark purple, and they made my cock as hard as a damn rock.

I pushed aside all thoughts of my cock and how beautiful Merit was and gripped the steering wheel harder. Once I turned down the old familiar dirt road, I felt my grip ease some. We would park, I'd explain everything to her, and then if she still wanted to give the money back to me, well...I'd figure out some way for her to keep it.

Once I put the truck into Park, I turned off the engine and unbuckled my seat belt. I stared out at the river for a few minutes, trying to figure out exactly why I had asked Phil to look into Merit's personal life. Or why I felt like I needed to put the money she had borrowed back into her account.

I looked over at the sleeping beauty, and a bolt of awareness hit me.

Merit wasn't like any other woman I'd ever known. She was the only woman I'd ever felt a connection to. I hadn't even felt it with Kaci, even though I swore up and down I was in love with her. My feelings for Merit had always been so... different.

She stirred and opened her eyes. When her gaze locked on mine, she smiled and sighed. And my cock instantly started to grow too big for my jeans.

"Hey," I said softly as she lifted her head and looked around.

"Where are we?"

"That spot on Bitterroot River we used to always come to and drink at."

Another smile moved over her face before it vanished.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Why did you bring me here?"

I shrugged. "It was the only place I could think of since we're both living with our folks."

She nodded and looked back out over the dark water of the river.

“Are you okay?”

She shivered with her entire body.

“Bugs, are you cold?”

She turned to look at me once more. The moonlight filled the cab of my truck, and caused her violet eyes to somewhat sparkle.

“No, I’m not cold.”

I nodded. “Good. I, um, I guess I wanted to explain to you why I said her name that night, but I’ve been trying to come up with a good reason, and I can’t for the life of me think of one.” I looked directly at her and tried like hell to ignore the way my heart pounded in my chest.

With a hard swallow, I let out a breath and decided for once in my life to listen to what my damn heart was telling me to say.

“The night we were together was the best fucking night of my life, and I hate that my stupid ass slipped up and ruined our friendship, because you mean the world to me. You always have and you always will.”

She opened her mouth and then closed it at least two times before she finally pressed her lips together firmly. It was almost as if she was willing herself not to speak.

“Anyway, it felt like something was wrong on New Year’s Eve. You looked worried and stressed, and it bothered me for a few months. So, eventually, I called Phil and asked him to look into the reason why you left—and yes, I asked him to find out if you were dating anyone.”

“Why?” she asked, barely above a whisper.

I shrugged. “Curious, I guess.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw her unbuckle her seatbelt. I turned to look at her, and I felt the energy in the

truck change. Merit's gaze drifted down to my mouth and then back up to my eyes.

"I'm not drunk," she stated.

I laughed. "Why did you say that?"

She shook her head and looked out the window, a slight frown between her brows. Then she turned her attention back on me. "I need you to know I'm not drunk, Dirk. I know exactly what I'm saying, what I'm doing, and what I want."

"Okay," I replied. "What do you want?"

When she dug her teeth into her lower lip, I had to fight the urge to moan. Holy hell, this woman was sexy as sin.

"You."

It was almost a whisper, but in that moment it sounded like she'd shouted the one simple word at me.

I jerked my gaze up from her mouth to look her in the eyes. "What?"

She climbed onto my lap as I sat there, stunned. The moment I felt her sit on my cock—which was now well on his way to coming up—I forgot how to fucking talk.

"Is this okay?" she asked, her breaths coming so quick it sounded like she just ran a marathon.

"Merit, you've been drinking."

She shook her head and let those beautiful eyes stare into mine. "I'm not drunk, Dirk. If you want me to move—"

I brought my hand to the back of her neck and pulled her mouth to mine, cutting off what she was about to say.

She opened to me right away, and I moaned when I felt her tongue start to move with mine. I cupped my other hand around her ass, and I lifted my hips as I pulled her closer to me.

"Oh God," she gasped, dropping her head back. I kissed down her neck.

Everything in me screamed to stop. This wasn't the solution to our problems, and I knew if we had sex, it would only add to them. But as much as my brain told me to stop, my body refused to listen.

Then, when Merit opened her mouth and spoke her next words, I lost all power to think.

Chapter Eight

MERIT

The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. “I want to feel you inside me, Dirk. Deep inside of me. Now.”

Dirk let out a low growl and grabbed my ass as he pushed into me while I shamelessly rocked against him. It wasn't going to take much for me to come; all he had to do was touch me, and I knew I would explode.

“Jesus, Merit.”

With my head dropped back and his mouth placing kisses over my neck, I reached down and pulled the dress off of me and tossed it to the passenger side of the truck. I had no idea who in the hell this wanton woman was, but I liked her. I liked the feel of being on Dirk, making him moan and sigh as our bodies rocked against one another. I knew the moment this was over reality would set in. For now, I didn't want to think about what I was giving to Dirk, or how this closeness would affect me emotionally. I only wanted this moment.

“Touch me,” I demanded as I looked into his green eyes. They were so bright it caused me to lose my breath for a moment. “Dirk, please, I'm begging you to touch me.”

He wasted no time in ripping the lace thong I was wearing right off. I lifted up slightly so he could feel how much I wanted him.

“Fuck,” I gasped as he slipped his fingers inside me and pushed against my clit. “Oh my God!” I cried out, moving myself against his fingers.

It had been so long since I'd been with a man. Last fall. And sex with Chris had never been this passionate. Never in a million years would I have told him to touch me or acted like this. But with Dirk, another part of me was begging to come out.

“That's it, baby, come on my fingers.”

His dirty words brought me right to the edge of desire. I was balanced there, one part of me not wanting the ecstasy to end, the other part needing to come so badly I felt like I could scream.

“Fucking hell, you’re so goddamn beautiful. Come for me so I can bury my cock inside you.”

That was my undoing. I came so hard, I swore I saw stars as I squeezed my eyes shut. “Dirk, oh God. Yes! I’m coming!”

Before I even knew what was happening, I felt him there. At my entrance. So hot and hard and bigger than I had remembered. But obviously a decade had passed and he’d grown into a man, not the teenage boy I’d left behind.

“If you want me, Merit, I’m yours to take.”

I locked eyes with him as he guided himself inside me and I slowly sank down on him.

“Shit, you’re so big!” I said and he pulled my mouth to his.

I had to pause for a moment to adjust before I sank completely down onto him.

Dirk ripped his mouth from mine, and I leaned my forehead against his. Our breathing was ragged and fast and we hadn’t even started yet.

“Fuck me, Merit. Use me however you need to, baby.”

I smiled and lifted slowly off him before I slid back down. Both of us moaned in delight as I moved slowly a few more times.

“Christ Almighty, no.”

“No?” I asked with a wide smile.

“I’m telling my damn cock no because he wants to come.”

I slowly shook my head. “It would be a bummer if you ended this when we’ve only just begun.”

He dropped his head back against the seat and moaned. I reached down and lowered his seat some. With my hands on his chest, I took what I wanted—and I loved every single

moment of it. I felt in control. And the way he looked as I moved on top of him made me want him even more.

“That’s it. Oh fuck, God, you feel so good!” Dirk cried out as he placed his hands on my hips and helped guide me up and down on him. The pace wasn’t as slow as before, and I could feel my next orgasm growing. I needed more, and I could see it in his eyes that he wanted more as well.

“Fuck me, Dirk. Please.”

His grip on my waist tightened, and he moved so fast and hard it didn’t take long for my body to react. I could feel my sex clench around his cock, and my entire body shook as my orgasm started to build. I tried like hell to keep it at bay, not wanting the moment to end. Then Dirk spoke, and I lost the battle.

“God, you’re gripping me so tight. I can’t hold off... Merit...baby, please.”

And just like that, I tumbled right off the ledge into the most intense orgasm I had ever felt in my entire life. “Dirk! Yes. Yes! Oh God, yes!”

“Merit, I’m coming...oh God, you feel so fucking good!”

He lifted up and pulled me down on top of him, moving fast and hard inside me as we both came at the same time.

I didn’t want to think about how I had let my guard down. The only thing I could feel was our mouths seared in a kiss so intense, it felt as if Dirk was pulling the very soul from my body and taking it for himself. And maybe he was. Because once again, I had given myself over to this man—but this time, I was the one in control. I knew what I wanted, and I took it.

When Dirk stopped moving, I tried to ignore how it felt to be against his body. To have him inside of me. Lord, it felt like heaven. My body was flying in a euphoria I had never experienced before. And before reality sank in, I wanted to enjoy it a moment longer. If I allowed myself to stay in his arms for too long foolish thinking would occur, and I could not allow my heart to have even the slightest hope that this was

real. It was sex, that was all. I had wanted him, and for once I felt like I had the power.

His fingers moved lightly over my back as we both attempted to steady our breathing. His touch was causing my belly to flip and flop and my heart to beat out of control. My breathing might have been returning to normal, but my feelings for this man only grew more. And that was of my own damn doing.

Then, a moment of absolute clarity hit me.

We had just had unprotected sex, and I had no idea how many women this man had actually slept with. A rush of panic ran through my body.

“How many times have you done this?”

He paused for a moment. “I’m sorry?”

My voice was gripped by absolute fear. “We didn’t use a condom.”

His entire body froze.

“I’m...I’m on the pill,” I managed to say without my voice sounding as worried as I felt. It was okay. I was on the pill. *I’m on the pill. Birth control is very effective. But what if...*

No...I didn’t even want to think of that.

The tension drifted away from his body slightly. “Um... never. I mean, I’ve never had unprotected sex before, and I’m sorry I...I was caught up in the moment and I...”

I moved and climbed off of him, leaving him dazed and confused.

“Do you have a napkin or tissue I can wipe myself off with?” I asked as I went on autopilot. I needed to block out my feelings for Dirk. I needed to forget about how amazing he felt inside of me. How hearing him call out my name—*my name*—when he came was a dream come true.

Dirk reached into the backseat of his truck and grabbed a box of Kleenex. When he handed it to me, he cleared his throat. “We should talk.”

My eyes met his, and I focused myself to keep my expression, along with my voice, void of any emotion. With a shrug, I replied, “There’s nothing to talk about. I wanted a do-over and I got one.”

The moment the harsh words were out of my mouth I regretted them, but I could not let Dirk see how affected I was from what just happened.

I hadn’t planned on climbing on top of him or having sex. When he looked at me, and the moon cast such a beautiful light on his handsome face, I’d wanted to be with him. To know what it would feel like to have him inside of me again.

So yes, maybe I did want a do-over, but I’d just made it seem like I planned it. I was confused, happy, sad, angry, all of it mixed together in one giant heap of fucked-up messiness.

Even though it was dark out, the full moon was almost like a nightlight, illuminating Dirk’s face. He stared at me with a befuddled expression. “A do-over?”

I slipped my dress back on and let out a long, slow breath. “Yes. Needless to say, I’m glad you said the right name this time.”

The feel of Dirk’s eyes on me made my heart beat rapidly in my chest. “So, that was just a fuck for you?”

His words felt sharper than I thought they would. I prayed he wouldn’t hear the tremble in my voice as I turned to him and asked, “Wasn’t it for you?”

I saw the moment the intense hurt flashed across his face. But I also knew who Dirk Littlewood was now. A guy who most likely had women in and out of his bed like a revolving door at a hotel. There was no way I would allow myself to be hurt by him again. I’d had a moment of weakness. A moment where I’d wanted him more than I’d wanted my next breath, and I took him.

A blank expression came over his face. “Absolutely. I’m glad we’re on the same page, that it meant nothing. Let me ask you something—was the no-condom thing also planned?”

I felt my chest tighten and tears sting at the back of my eyes. Either he truly hadn't been affected at all by what we'd just shared, or he was a damn good actor. He was looking at me with no expression on his face, but I'd seen the hurt in his eyes...and I'd never be able to forget it.

This was what you wanted, Merit.

Words wouldn't come. This *wasn't* what I had wanted. I wanted to open my mouth and tell Dirk it had meant something—hell, more than something—and that it hadn't been planned. That the raw desire I had for him was very real and not at all put to rest. That I was still just as much in love with him as ever.

I quickly turned my head and stared out the passenger window as I answered him. “No. If you think I'm the type of woman who does that, then you never knew me at all, Dirk. I was caught up in the moment, just as much as you were.”

“I don't think you're that type of woman, Bugs.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and quickly wiped a tear away, praying he wouldn't notice.

I cleared my clogged throat and forced the words out. “After my closing tomorrow, we have the christening to go to. If we have time, I'd like for you to meet me at the bank after the christening. Then we can wire transfer the money you deposited into my account back into yours.”

He started the truck and slowly began to back out.

With a voice barely above a whisper, he said, “If that's what you want.”

I nodded and pressed my lips together tightly in an attempt to keep my voice calm. Of course I wanted to give him his money back, but ending this night like we were felt so wrong. “It is. I appreciate you trying to help, but I don't need to be saved.”

“Yes, you've made that pretty damn clear.”

Silence filled the truck as Dirk drove me back to the farm. He pulled up to the front of my folks' house and came to a

stop. When he didn't put the truck into Park, I knew I had made the worst mistake of my life by lying to him earlier. By pretending that being with him had meant nothing more than just sex.

I glanced over and saw my car parked there.

"I called Michael and asked him to get it for you."

Without saying a word, I opened the truck door, only to have Dirk reach for my hand. An instant rush of energy zipped through my body, and I prayed he didn't hear my swift intake of air. It took everything I had not to turn and throw myself into his arms. But I would never let him see that side of me ever again. Not when I knew he would never want the same things I wanted. That he would never truly want *me*.

"Merit, wait."

I stilled but didn't dare look at him. With my eyes squeezed shut, I remained silent.

Then he let go of my hand without saying a word.

I jumped out and quickly made my way to the front door. Once I opened it, I stepped inside and swiftly shut it without so much as a backward glance.

When I could no longer hear his truck, I covered my mouth with my hand and slid down to the floor, crying like I had never cried before.



My mind drifted in and out of the conversation around me, and I toyed with my food while Kaylee, Lincoln, and Timberlynn all spoke. They talked about the christening, a Fourth of July party Stella was hosting in a few weeks, and a reception for Timberlynn and Tanner since they'd had a small wedding.

"Merit? Are you okay?"

Lincoln's sweet voice pulled me from my thoughts.

I forced a smile. “Sorry, I was thinking about my to-do list on the farm.”

Kaylee rolled her eyes. “Boring. *All* of this talk has been boring. What I really want to know about is what happened between you and Dirk two weeks ago.”

I felt my mouth drop open as I stared at her. “What do you mean, what happened? Nothing happened! Why would you even think anything happened?”

Lincoln and Timberlynn both laughed, and Lincoln said, “Don’t even bother trying. If there is one thing you should know about Kaylee, it’s that she’s up on all the gossip, all the time. She has a way of finding out things without people even knowing they’re filling her in on something.”

Timberlynn nodded. “It’s crazy insane how she knows things.”

Kaylee shrugged and rubbed her swollen belly. “What can I say? It’s both a blessing and a curse, this gift of mine. Now, you were seen by multiple people being carried out of the Blue Moose. And my source says you had at least four shots of whiskey. Brock came home early, according to a casual conversation with Lincoln, and your brother picked up your car because you left with Dirk.”

I stared at her in stunned silence.

“Now, I happen to have noticed that Dirk hasn’t been himself the last two weeks, which tells me his mind is on something rather heavy. Or on *someone*,” Kaylee mused as she gave me a smirk.

“He’s been out of town a few days, Kaylee,” Lincoln stated. “Maybe he’s worried about taking more time off from the smaller rodeos and keeping his ranking up.”

Kaylee glanced at Lincoln. “Yes, that is true, but he came to dinner last night, and when he and I were out walking, he seemed off.”

“Out walking?” I asked, trying not to let that little bit of jealousy sneak in.

“Yes,” was all she said, wearing a somewhat odd expression on her face. Almost as if she was attempting to gauge my immediate reaction to her statement.

I could tell Kaylee was madly in love with Ty, and for goodness sake, she was pregnant. So why did the thought of her with Dirk make me clench my jaw so tightly together? I nodded and forced a smile. “Are you two pretty close, then?”

Kaylee popped a French fry into her mouth. “He’s my male version of Lincoln. No offense, Timberlynn. But you’re my cousin, so that trumps them all.”

Timberlynn lifted her drink. “Thank you for clearing that up for me.”

Kaylee clinked her water against Timberlynn’s beer.

A part of me was angry with myself for being jealous of Kaylee and Dirk’s friendship. He used to be *my* best friend, and it seemed I had been replaced by a beautiful blonde. Again. Even with the knowledge that Kaylee was happily married, I couldn’t help but wonder if Dirk’s feelings toward her were truly platonic, or if maybe he felt something deep down inside for her. It felt like Kaci all over again.

“Well? Your silence has us all curious now,” Lincoln said as she wiggled her brows.

“Dirk is not the type of guy I’m looking to settle down with,” I stated, avoiding the question in a roundabout way.

Kaylee lifted a brow. “Settle down with? Hell, I was only looking for some juicy tidbits, like if y’all had sex in the backseat of his truck or something.”

Of course I had picked that moment to swallow a bite of my chicken salad sandwich. I started to choke, and Timberlynn jumped up and slapped me on the back as a wide grin spread over Kaylee’s face. Obviously it was Timberlynn who jumped to my rescue, seeing as she used to be a nurse but now owned her own business as a horse trainer who took in rescued horses.

“I’m good...I’m alright,” I managed to say between hacking up a lung and waving off Timberlynn’s help.

I glanced over to see Kaylee still smiling like the Cheshire cat. “Why are you smiling at me like that?” I managed to get out after my coughing fit ended.

“I think you did have a bit of fun with Dirk,” Kaylee said. “And that’s why he’s so messed up right now, and you seem to be off in another world, as well.”

That caught my attention. “Messed up?” I asked with a fake laugh.

“I’ve got to agree with Kaylee; he *has* been acting off since he came home from his last ride. Even Brock said Dirk’s head is somewhere else,” Lincoln stated.

Kaylee nodded. “A guy like Dirk isn’t going to handle it well when he realizes that he’s found the one. Of course it will mess with his mind.”

“Oh Lord,” Timberlynn said as she glared at her cousin. “You need to stay out of this, Kaylee.”

Lincoln gave Kaylee a sharp look. “I’m going to side with Timberlynn on this one.”

My gaze bounced between all three women. “What do you mean, *the one*?”

Kaylee perked up, as if she had been waiting for this moment all through lunch. “It’s so very clear Dirk has a thing for you. Anytime your name is mentioned, or he sees you, he acts like he’s lost the ability to think clearly.”

I stared at her—then lost it laughing. It was insane to think Dirk had those feelings for me. Yes, we had been the best of friends a long time ago. And yes, maybe at one point in my life, I had opened up my heart to the hope that Dirk might see us as more than friends. But he’d made it clear where his feelings for me stood a long time ago.

“Dirk? Dirk Littlewood?” I laughed again and then shook my head as I sighed. “The man has probably slept with at least five women since *we* slept together two weeks ago.”

All three women gasped, and I instantly wanted to sew my mouth shut.

Kaylee sat up straighter, her mouth damn near on the table. “Oh my God! Oh. My. Gawd! Holy shit! You totally slept with him! Y’all really slept together?” She turned to Lincoln and Timberlynn. “I really didn’t think that method of prying would work! But it did! Need to add that to my gossip arsenal.”

“Wait, you slept with him?” Lincoln asked, while Timberlynn wore a huge smile on her face as if she had known it all along.

“I thought you knew!” I whisper-shouted as I quickly glanced around the diner.

Kaylee giggled and shook her head. “No! The only thing I knew was that you left with him and your brother came and picked up your car.”

I shook my head in confusion. “But you knew we had sex in his truck.”

The three of them all gasped again, then fell into a fit of giggles.

Once Kaylee got her wits about her, she looked at me and winked. “G-damn. You like the bad boys, don’t you, Merit?”

I felt my cheeks flush, and I was suddenly too embarrassed to even utter a word.

Kaylee waved off my embarrassment with her hand. “Girl, let me tell you, if Dirk is anything like the Shaw brothers—and I feel like I can speak for my sisters-in-law here,” she said, glancing at Lincoln and Timberlynn before focusing back on me. “We know how easy it is to get caught up in them and get down and dirty in a truck.”

“Or tractor,” Lincoln stated.

The three of us looked at Lincoln with shocked expressions.

She smirked and then winked. “Don’t knock it ‘til you try it. I’m pretty sure that’s where Hunter was conceived.”

Timberlynn giggled as Kaylee gagged.

“On a tractor? I thought a *truck* was uncomfortable,” I mused.

Kaylee turned back to me. “What I’m saying is, it’s okay to want a bit of a bad boy, and Dirk is, by all accounts, a *very bad boy*.”

I scoffed. “Being a manwhore doesn’t make him a bad boy,” I stated. Even I could hear the bitterness—or maybe that was jealousy—in my own voice. “I need to find a nice guy. Someone like Channing.” I winced. “Or maybe he’s not the best example, since he’s hung up on his ex. Roy, the guy who works at the feed store!”

They all snarled their lips.

“What? He’s a sweet guy, and I happen to know he goes to church every Sunday and leads some worship group.”

Kaylee shrugged. “All I’m saying is, good boys may go to heaven, but it’s the bad boys who bring the almighty heaven to *you*.”

Dirk talking dirty to me in this truck came racing back, and I felt my body temperature rise and my core throb at the memory. I reached for my glass of water and took a long drink as I chanced a look at Kaylee. She winked at me, then popped another fry into her mouth.

“So, can we be sisters-in-law even though we’re cousins?” Timberlynn asked as we all turned and stared at her.

Chapter Nine

DIRK

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Ty asked as I pulled the flank strap tight onto the bull. The flank strap was what encouraged the bull to extend his hind legs to buck without hurting him at all. It simply agitated the fuck out of him, hence the bucking. Ty had gotten into breeding bulls, specifically for the PBR, and the bull I was climbing onto, Dark Night, had only had training using dummy weights up until this point.

“Do you want to see how he performs or not?” I asked as I climbed over the bull and got settled. Brock pulled on the rope to tighten it as I slid my hand over the rosin to heat it up and coat my glove, then wrapped the rope around my hand to secure it. I gave it a few quick hits to make sure it was securely in place and glanced over at Tanner who was at the ready to open the gate. Chance, Tanner’s old roping partner, stood off to the side with his old high school girlfriend, now fiancée, by his side.

“Dirk, what if you get hurt?” Brock asked.

“What the fuck? You do remember I do this for a living, right?”

Brock shrugged.

“When did the two of you become such pussies? I’m not going to get hurt. We don’t even know if he’ll buck.”

The bull chose that moment to start getting pissed in the chute.

“Right, he’s not going to buck,” Ty grumbled.

I adjusted myself once more, then nodded so that Tanner could open the gate.

Dark Night took off into one of the highest jumps I’d ever experienced.

“Don’t get down the well!” I heard Brock yell out as Dark Night started to spin in one direction. I dug my spur into him,

and he stopped almost on a dime and went the other way.

“Cover him!” Tanner shouted.

A horn went off, indicating I had indeed covered the bull. Eight seconds had passed, and I jumped off of Dark Night. I stumbled slightly but managed to get my footing.

With a huge smile on his face, Brock jumped down and helped Tanner and Chance guide the bull back into the chutes.

“Damn, I guess that’s why you’re number one right now,” Ty said with a hard slap on my back.

My blood was pumping as I took off the helmet, and Ty handed me my Stetson cowboy hat.

“He was fun. He’s going to be a damn good bull if he jumps like that every time. Surprised the shit out of me.”

Ty smiled. “Sweet Thing is his daddy.”

I rolled my eyes. “Well, no wonder. That bull is a beast. I’ve never been able to cover that damn bull.”

“Not many can. Almost makes me want to climb onto one,” Brock said as he walked up next to me.

“You could always come out of retirement, give me a run for my money,” I said with a wink.

Brock shook his head and laughed. “I said almost. I enjoy not having anything broken or sprained on my body.”

“Like I said...you’ve turned into a pussy.”

“What are y’all doing?”

We all turned to see Timberlynn heading our way on one of the horses she’d been training.

“Look at that. It’s like he’s been under saddle for a while now, not just a week,” Tanner said as he climbed over the arena fence and walked up to his wife.

I smiled when Timberlynn leaned down, and they exchanged a kiss.

“They’re cute together,” I said without thinking.

“Um, who’s the pussy now?” Ty said as he pushed me slightly and started to walk out of the small arena he used for training the bulls.

Brock chuckled next to me. “You still steadfast on staying single?”

An image of Merit popped into my head, and I quickly pushed it away. “There’s no reason for me not to. At least for the time being. I’m sure one day I’ll settle down.”

Brock prompted, “Merit, maybe?”

I let out a mock laugh. “Merit?”

“Dirk, I see the way you look at her. I also know something happened between you both a couple weeks back. You’re back to acting exactly like you did after that first night you slept with her in high school.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “I don’t want to talk about Merit, Brock.”

He frowned. “Aww, shit, you slept with her? Dude, she’d been drinking that night.”

I glared at Brock and took a few steps closer to him. I could feel the anger bubbling up inside of me. “Don’t you dare assume anything, Brock. Just. Don’t.”

He nodded and looked over at Tanner and Timberlynn, then focused back on me. “For what it’s worth—and you can simply ignore what I’m about to say—I’ve always seen it. The way the two of you looked at each other. You might have thought you’d given your heart to Kaci, and hell, you did for a while. But I think Merit Eden has always been the one you’ve been afraid to give your heart to, because she’s the one who truly has the power to bring you to your damn knees. You told me once to listen to my heart. Maybe it’s time you practiced what you preach, Dirk.”

I stood there and watched him walk away. Turning, I walked out of the arena and to my truck. It was time for me to get the hell out of Hamilton and away from Merit.



A month passed, and the heat of mid-July felt good. Especially since I'd been feeling like a damn zombie the last few weeks. I was itching to climb up onto another bull and had thrown myself into the smaller rodeos, even though I'd told my folks I would be home and not traveling much until the Unleash the Beast tour started back up.

My father had made it known to me the other day how disappointed he was that I wasn't staying true to my word and spending more time with them. It had nearly broke me in two. But I needed to get the hell out of Hamilton and away from all thoughts of Merit. She was consuming my thoughts when I was back home. It was bad enough she had full control over my damn dreams. And that I didn't even have the desire to sleep with anyone else since the night we'd shared. My dick was getting raw from me jacking off to visions of Merit riding me in the truck. The way she came undone when I talked dirty to her. The way she—

Fuck. Stop thinking about her!

Doug Manning, another bull rider, walked up next to me and sighed. "I love riding in Cheyenne."

I nodded. This weekend we were in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Tulsa was the next stop on the tour, but not until the first week of August. My body was tired, and I knew I needed a break. My father had been asking me to come back and work on his latest project in the garage, and I felt guilty for running. It seemed running was the only thing I was good at, second to bull riding.

"You hitting Big Sky?"

"I don't know. I may ride and then head on home for a few weeks before Tulsa."

I saw him nod. "You've been riding hard, dude. You okay?"

Turning to look at him, I frowned. "Why wouldn't I be okay?"

He shrugged. “Don’t seem like yourself, is all. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you turn away a pretty little cowgirl like you did last night.”

I smiled, but it was forced. “I wasn’t in the mood. Besides, I’m fucking tired.”

He laughed. “Tell me about it. My body is screaming for a break.”

All I did was nod.

“Good luck tonight, Dirk,” he said as he clapped me on the back. “Hey, give a shout out to my baby sister. She thinks she’s gonna marry you someday.”

This time, I laughed. “Good thing she’s only fourteen, and you don’t have to worry about that, dude.”

He waved his hand at me and kept walking.

Three hours later, I was standing in the back pens waiting for my round to ride and talking to Doug again. I glanced over to my right to see Loyd Webster heading my way. He worked for Wrangler, one of my major sponsors. Every now and then he would come out to the smaller events to check up on things.

I smiled, and when he didn’t return the smile, I instantly knew something was wrong.

He stepped in front of me, glancing at Doug then back to me. “Er, Dirk, is there any way we can speak?”

My pulse raced, and I glanced around him to look at the shoot full of bulls. “Loyd, I’m up in four bulls, can it wait?”

Nervously, he glanced between Doug and me again. He slowly shook his head. “Dirk, I don’t know how to tell you this, but Brock called me.”

In an instant, the air in my lungs rushed out. “Is he okay? Lincoln, the kids?”

He lifted his hands. “They’re fine. Dirk...it’s your father. There’s been an accident. I’ve got the helicopter waiting to take you home.”

The entire arena felt like it was closing in on me. “What happened?”

Doug put his hand on my shoulder. “Dirk, go, and ask questions on the helicopter.”

I nodded, suddenly feeling empty, like a part of me was gone. I followed Loyd, running once I got to the hallway to grab my bag and phone. I rushed out to the helicopter landing pad and ducked my head as I climbed up, Loyd following behind me. My heart was drumming in my ears, and I sat down and pulled my phone out of the bag.

Ten missed calls from my mother. Fifteen calls from Brock.

“Can you patch me through to Brock?” I asked into the mic that I wore around my head. Loyd nodded and then turned to the pilot.

Five minutes later, I heard Brock’s voice. “Dirk, are you on your way home?”

“Yes, what the hell is going on?”

Brock cleared his throat. “Your dad was out on the tractor this morning and had a heart attack. By the time anyone figured out what happened...”

I closed my eyes, feeling sick to my stomach. “Please don’t tell me this, Brock. Please don’t tell me he died.”

“He’s not dead, but he’s in a coma and weak. They’re not sure if he’ll make it through the night.”

I dropped my head back against the headrest and let my tears fall freely as I pulled the headphones off and tossed them to the side. I vaguely heard Loyd speak to Brock and give him an ETA of when we would be in Hamilton.

My father’s voice rushed to me. “*Son, you have nothing to prove. Come home, take a break. You promised your mother.*”

“Don’t die, Dad. Please, don’t die,” I whispered as I scrubbed my hands down my face and cried like I had never cried before.

Chapter Ten

MERIT

Earlier that day...

“What do you mean, you’re late?” Timberlynn asked as she stared at me.

Timberlynn and I had grown close over the last month and had bonded due to our mutual love of horses. She was in the process of training a gelding under saddle for me that I had bought for myself after I’d purchased my house.

I wrung my hands together as we stood in the barn at Timberlynn and Tanner’s place. They both lived on a piece of land that Tanner bought from his folks. It was beautiful, with a log home that sat at the edge of Crystal Lake, and was surrounded by the most stunning views of the mountains I had ever seen. When you stood on the deck and looked out over the lake, the mirror image of the mountains and blue sky took your breath away. It was seriously like heaven on Earth.

“My period—I’m *late*.”

“How late?” she asked as she ran a hand over the back of Milo, my gelding.

“A little over a week.”

Timberlynn chewed on her lip. “Test?”

I shook my head. “I’m too scared.”

“Have you told Dirk?”

I laughed, sounding nearly hysterical. “Tell Dirk? No! I mean, why would I tell Dirk?”

She tilted her head and stared at me for a moment. “Let’s see...one reason would be that he obviously helped make the baby.”

I shook my head again. “I don’t even know if I’m pregnant. I’m late. That’s all. Could be stress, or something.”

“Is this normal? To be late?”

I swallowed hard. “No. I’m on the pill, so I’m very spot on with my periods.”

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “Why don’t we go and get a test? You might be worried over nothing.”

I wanted to believe her, but there was a feeling deep inside of me that knew I was, in fact, pregnant with Dirk’s baby. My breasts were tender, and I almost always felt nauseous and tired. Lord, I was so tired.

I nodded. “Right, I need to find out.”

“Let me get Milo settled in, and then I’ll follow you to your place.”

An hour later, we were at my house, which was closer to town than the Shaw ranch.

I felt my hands shake as I held the stick. “Please don’t be pregnant. Please, please, please.”

A light knock on the door had me looking up. “Yeah?”

“Merit, pee on the thing already. If you’re pregnant, it’s not going to be the end of the world!” Timberlynn said with such innocence in her voice.

How could I tell her I wasn’t really ready to be a single parent? That with everything going on with my father, the farm, my unstable emotional self, there was no way I could bring a child into the world. And then there was Dirk. He would feel trapped and think I’d want him to stop bull riding and stay in Montana. I knew, of course, he wouldn’t.

That would mean he’d hardly ever see the baby. He wouldn’t be a part of his or her life like they would need a father to be.

With a groan, I closed my eyes and said another prayer. “Please, please, please, don’t be pregnant.”

I peed on the stick and then placed it on the small bit of toilet paper I had put on the bathroom sink. Then I flushed, washed my hands, and walked out of the bathroom. Timberlynn looked at me, her eyes dancing with excitement. I

was glad one of us was feeling some other emotion besides dread.

“Well?” she asked.

“I haven’t looked at it, and I don’t know if I’m ready to look at it. Like if I don’t look at it, I can live in my state of denial for a bit longer.”

I headed down the hall to the kitchen. Timberlynn didn’t follow me, so I knew she had stayed back. I poured two glasses of cold tea and then searched for something to eat. I was starving and realized I hadn’t even eaten since last night. I had been in my house for a little over a month, and I still hadn’t stocked up with all the things I needed in my pantry.

Timberlynn walked into the kitchen and sat at the island. She picked up the tea and drank it. I couldn’t read her face at all.

“I know what you’re thinking: how could I not want a baby.”

She gave me a warm smile. “I’m not thinking that at all.”

I wrapped my arm around my body as I felt a sudden chill sweep over me.

“If you *are* pregnant, tell me why you don’t want to tell Dirk.”

If I was pregnant. Timberlynn hadn’t looked at the test yet. I let out the breath I hadn’t even realized I’d been holding.

“I...wouldn’t want him to think I did it on purpose. I was the one who made the first move that night.”

“Well, he didn’t stop you. So you aren’t solely to blame.”

I shook my head and smiled slightly as I let out a humorless laugh. “No, he didn’t stop me. He was as caught up in the moment as I was. But...but I was so cold toward him afterward.”

She frowned but didn’t speak.

“I made him think that having sex with him meant nothing. That it was only a do-over from the first time we’d slept

together.”

“Why would you do that?” Timberlynn asked with a confused look on her face.

I leaned against the counter. “I’ve never talked to anyone about the night Dirk and I first slept together. We were best friends. He meant the world to me, and I’m not really sure when I actually fell in love with him, but I did, and I fell hard.” I sighed and closed my eyes. “So very hard.”

When I opened them again, Timberlynn was looking at me. She smiled and placed her chin on her hand, waiting for the rest of the story with a dreamy look in her eyes.

“Of course, to Dirk I was like a sister, I think. When he wasn’t with me, he was with Brock and Kaci.”

“Brock’s first wife,” Timberlynn said.

“Yes. They had a bit of a love triangle, those three. Kaci had Brock and Dirk wrapped around her finger and knew all she had to do was say yes to either of them, and they’d melt on the spot and do whatever she asked. Truth be told, I don’t honestly think she was ever in love with Dirk or Brock. I think she liked the idea of Brock. He was talented and already making a name for himself in bull riding. Dirk was, as well, but not to the extent of Brock. He was the future she wanted. Brock, I mean. Dirk, on the other hand, was full of passion and longed to make her happy.”

I looked down at the floor as I tried not to think of all the times Dirk had practically thrown himself at Kaci. “He would have given up bull riding, had she asked him to.”

“You said you didn’t think Kaci loved either one of them. How do you know that?”

With an exhale, I went on. “She proclaimed to be innocent, but she’d tell me about the encounters she had with other guys. Sexual encounters. Honestly, at the time, I thought she was making it all up. But a few years later I found out she hadn’t been making it up, and she had actually been cheating on Brock.”

“You never told Brock and Dirk about her...encounters?”

I laughed. “No. They wouldn’t have believed me. Anyway, our senior year it really came to blows, and Brock and Dirk told Kaci she had to choose. She picked Brock. Dirk acted like he was fine, but you could tell it was a hit to his pride. A few weeks later, one night at a party, Dirk had been drinking. He walked up to me and took me by the hand and then upstairs to a bathroom. He started to kiss me and touch me in ways he hadn’t ever done before, and I felt like I was in a dream.”

Timberlynn smiled once again.

“He said he wanted me, and of course, in my mind, I told myself it was because he couldn’t have Kaci. But the way he looked at me that night, Timberlynn—it was so different than any other time. I was still a virgin, and honestly, I wasn’t about to have my cherry popped in a bathroom at a party.”

She chuckled. “I can’t blame you on that one.”

“Nothing happened, and we ended up being interrupted or something. The next week went by and Dirk acted different. Not distant, by any means. He smiled at me a little brighter. I would catch him looking at me longer than he should. So, I took a risk and asked Dirk to take my virginity. I knew I wanted him to be my first and I was, after all, in love with the idiot.” I rolled my eyes and stared out the window for a few moments.

“Eventually, after pretty much begging him, he agreed to do it—and it was the most amazing, beautiful moment of my life.” I grinned at the memory. I looked at Timberlynn, who wore what I figured was an expression much like my own. Then my smile faded, and I shook my head as the memory of how that night ended came flooding back.

“Afterward, I was about to tell him I loved him when he called me Kaci by mistake. It felt like someone had sucked all the air out of the barn. I couldn’t breathe, and my chest hurt so bad, like someone had punched me square in it.”

Timberlynn gasped and covered her mouth with her hand.

“I knew he wasn’t a virgin, and that he’d been with other women. Had he called me Jill or Libby or something other

than Kaci, I don't know if it would have hurt as much as it did. I told him I hated him, and that I never wanted to talk to him again. Our friendship was gone after that. That's the worst part." I covered my mouth in an attempt to keep my sobs down. "Losing his friendship nearly destroyed me. I left town the day after graduation. I went to New York early, stayed with a friend of my father's, and got a job that summer before school started in the fall."

"Merit, I can't even imagine how that must have made you feel."

I shrugged and pulled in a deep breath. "So, now you see why I told him I wanted a do-over. All those feelings came rushing back to me. For years, I told myself I wasn't in love with him, but the other night in his truck I realized I was more in love with him now than ever. And then I panicked because I couldn't allow myself to be hurt by him again. So I acted like it was just sex. I said something about him not calling me by another woman's name, and that I only wanted a do-over. I made it seem like I wanted him to hurt as much as I had that first time we were together."

"And he believed you?" she asked in shock.

I rubbed my hands down my arms to take the chill away. "Yes. He easily did. So that makes me think I was the only one who felt anything, once again."

Timberlynn shook her head. "If you think that man isn't in love with you, then you are as blind as a bat!"

I frowned. "With all due respect, Timberlynn, you hardly know Dirk or me."

"I've known him for almost eight months. I know how kind and caring he is. And over this last month as you and I have grown closer, I know you're the same way. Merit, when someone brings your name up around him, Dirk gets this look in his eyes that I've never seen before. Kaylee says the same thing about him when he hears your name, and they're best friends, so she knows him even better than I do."

She stopped talking and glanced away before looking back at me. “I’m sorry. That’s got to hurt, as well.”

“It’s okay. I know they’re friends, and I’m glad Dirk has her.”

Timberlynn reached for my hand. “Nothing has ever happened between the two of them. Nothing.”

With a simple nod, I pushed off the counter, walked over to my glass of tea, and took a drink. I put it down, then sat on the stool. “Besides our troubled past, Dirk is not the type of guy who’s going to walk away from the life he’s built. He’s like Peter Pan in Neverland when it comes to bull riding. He’s living his dream, and from what I hear, he has no intention of giving up any part of that lifestyle.”

Timberlynn let out a deep breath as her shoulders slumped slightly. “Okay, so he’s not exactly the type of guy one thinks of as a family man.”

Laughing, I agreed. “No, he is not.”

“But when he’s around the kids, you can see what a great father he’d make. And I swear, sometimes I see it in his eyes.”

I frowned. “See what?”

“That longing. That need to have what Brock has.”

With a scoff, I replied, “He’s always wanted what Brock has.”

The words were bitter and angry, and I regretted it the moment I said them. I shook my head and closed my eyes once more. “I’m sorry I said that.”

Timberlynn squeezed my hand again, and I looked at her. “Would you be happier if the test was negative?” she asked.

The idea of having a piece of Dirk that no one else had, at least for the time being, sent a wave of excitement through me. I’d finally have a part of him that was my own. All my own, not to be shared with another woman. But it came at the cost of being a single mother.

“I would never not want a child that was mine. I would, of course, rather it didn’t happen this way. But if it did, I would love the baby enough for both of us.”

She smiled, then placed the tissue with the test wrapped up in it on the island. “I know what it says. When you’re ready, I’m here for you. And Kaylee and Lincoln will also be here for you no matter the outcome.”

I slowly drew in a deep breath and reached for the tissue. I exhaled and pulled the test out. A rush of happiness swept over me, and I covered my mouth as tears streamed down my face.

Timberlynn stood and walked around the island to pull me into her arms. “You’re going to be an amazing mother, Merit.”

I closed my eyes tightly and silently cried in the middle of my kitchen.

“Congratulations,” Timberlynn said as she pushed me back at arm’s length and then smiled. “It’s going to be okay. Dirk is going to be over the moon.”

I felt my eyes widen in horror. “You can’t tell anyone. Not yet. Please.”

Timberlynn nodded. “I won’t betray your trust. I promise.” She winked and squeezed my arms reassuringly. “It’s all going to be okay. You’ll see.”

I wanted desperately to believe her words were true, but something told me nothing was ever going to be the same again.

Timberlynn’s phone rang right then and she smiled as she answered. “Hey, Tanner. No, I’m over at Merit’s house.”

Her smile faded, and she covered her hand with her mouth as she gasped. “What? Is he okay? Oh my God. Have you called my father? Okay, good. We’ll be there as fast as we can.”

My heart dropped down to my stomach. Who was hurt?

Timberlynn ended the call and looked at me. “Dirk’s father had a heart attack and was in an accident. He’s in a coma, and

they don't think he's going to make it through the night.”

“What?” I cried out.

“Tanner said your mother was the one who found him.”

“What? How? Oh my God!”

Timberlynn rushed through my house with me on her heels. I grabbed my purse and keys.

“She's at the hospital with Dirk's mom,” she said.

We rushed out of the house and to my car while Timberlynn called her father. “Dad, Tanner just called me. It happened three hours ago!”

I exchanged a worried look with Timberlynn.

“Okay. Right, I know he is. I'm on my way with Merit right now. What about Dirk?”

A wave of nausea hit me, and I slammed on the brakes. Once the car came to a stop, I jumped out and threw up.

Timberlynn came rushing around the car and started to rub my back. “Shhh, it's okay, Merit. It's okay. Take a few deep breaths, it'll pass.”

I nodded as I dry heaved on the side of the road.

“She's fine, Daddy. We'll be there soon.”

Timberlynn must have ended the call, because now I felt both of her hands—one on my back, the other holding back the hair that had fallen out of my ponytail.

“Come on, stand up straight and walk around a little.”

I nodded and did as she said. “I'm so sorry. I'm okay now.”

Timberlynn gave me a firm look. “I'm driving, get in the passenger seat and don't argue with me.”

Doing as she said, I headed to the passenger side of my car. My phone buzzed in the console, and I picked it up. It was a text from my mother.

Mom: Sweetheart, call me as soon as you can. I love you, Mom.

Me: I'm on the way to the hospital with Timberlynn...be there soon.

The overwhelming urge to call Dirk hit me in the middle of my chest, but I pushed it aside. I'd go and see how his dad was, and then I would leave before Dirk got to the hospital. The last thing he needed was me around.

Chapter Eleven

DIRK

Later that evening, when I finally got to the hospital, the entire Shaw family was there. Lori, Merit's mother, was there, as well. She was the one who'd found my father when she was out riding and saw the tractor turned over in the open pasture.

After speaking with the doctor, I was told I could go see my father. I walked down the hallway, not knowing what I was going to see when I walked into his room. I felt like a shell of a man. Nothing but fear and worry lay heavy on my heart. I was consumed by guilt for not being there for him. That I had been off chasing after a stupid dream and hiding from my own fucking feelings.

I glanced up and saw her standing at the nurses' station.

Merit.

She was here. Of course she was here. My folks loved Merit like their own daughter, and I knew how much she cared for both my mother and father.

I stopped walking and stared at her. She looked so scared and worried as she nodded her head at something the nurse was saying. When she turned and started to walk down the hallway, she was staring at the floor and didn't notice me yet. Then, as if she could feel me, she lifted her head and our eyes met. Tears filled her eyes, and she pressed her lips tightly together. For a moment, I thought she was going to run to me, but she stopped walking instead.

"Merit," I whispered as I walked right toward her, damn near in a sprint. I needed her. Needed to feel her in my arms, to hold her close to me. I needed the warmth of her body to chase away the coldness I felt.

She stood still, not moving an inch, obviously unsure what my intentions were. I walked up and pulled her into my arms. Merit instantly wrapped her arms around me and held on tightly.

A sob slipped free from her lips as I held her tighter. “Dirk,” she said softly. “I was just about to leave.”

A sudden sense of fear hit me, and I damn near begged her to stay. “Don’t leave! Please don’t leave me yet, Bugs.”

She tightened her hold on me and whispered, “I’ll stay as long as you need me. I’m not going anywhere.”

I wasn’t even sure how long I held Merit in my arms before she withdrew some and looked up at me. “He’s in surgery right now.”

“Surgery?” I asked, confused. I glanced over Merit’s shoulder and saw Timberlynn standing there. My pulse started to race at the somber expression on her face.

“Timber, did you see him?”

She nodded. “My father’s been in to see him, as well, and he’s called a friend of his who’s one of the top specialists in the country on brain injuries. But, Dirk, they had to take your dad into surgery; he has internal bleeding and swelling on the brain. And there’s still the issue of the heart attack he had.”

My knees felt like they might buckle out from under me. Merit clearly noticed, because she wrapped her arm around my waist. “Why don’t we go back to the waiting room, Dirk?” she said as she motioned for me to turn around and head to where my mother was waiting with Brock and Lori.

The only thing I could do was nod and follow both of them back to the waiting room.

My mother stood. “What’s wrong?”

Timberlynn spoke as I went and dropped into a chair. “My father went in to check on Brad and noticed he was suffering from some dizziness and loss of coordination as well as some memory loss. They just took Brad in for emergency surgery—he has internal bleeding and swelling on the brain that they need to take care of.”

I closed my eyes tightly. Someone took my hand and squeezed it, and I didn’t even have to open my eyes to know it was Merit.

“Oh God, no!” my mother called out as I quickly released Merit’s hand and moved to my mother and drew her to me. She quickly composed herself and stepped away as she stood taller. I knew she was attempting to be strong.

“Kimberley, let’s take a walk outside, shall we?” Lori said, taking my mom’s hand.

“Dirk, do you need anything? I know you just flew in.”

Brock’s voice caused me to swing my gaze to him. I shook my head. “No, I’m fine. I just want to see my dad.”

He nodded.

“What about something to eat?” Merit asked. Her eyes filled with concern as she reached for my hand once more. “You don’t need your mother worrying about you, as well, Dirk.”

I nodded in agreement. “If someone wants to go get something, I could probably try to eat.”

Brock and Merit exchanged a glance, and he looked down at my hand clasping tightly in hers. “I’ll go. Merit, are you hungry?”

“No.”

“Yes, you need eat something,” Timberlynn said, giving a pointed look in Merit’s direction.

The two women had a conversation with their eyes, neither one uttering a word.

“Timberlynn’s right, I should eat something,” Merit finally agreed.

“Okay, I’ll run and get burgers. I don’t think you can eat in here, so I’ll text Merit when I get back with the food,” Brock stated. “Timberlynn?”

She shook her head. “Tanner left to grab me something, but thank you.”

He nodded. “I’ll text you, Merit.”

She nodded back. “Sounds good.”

“I’m going to go hang out by the nurses’ station and see if there is anything else I can find out,” Timberlynn said as she leaned down and kissed me on the cheek. “It’s going to be okay.”

I felt so numb that all I could do was nod. Timberlynn squeezed Merit’s shoulder and then turned and walked away, leaving Merit and me alone.

We sat in silence as I stared out the window and watched the trees sway from side to side. Merit still had my hand in hers, staring out the same window. Her thumb moved lazily over my skin, and it felt so calming. The last time I saw her was the night we had sex in my truck, when we’d exchanged heated words with one another. I couldn’t help but wonder if she meant what she’d said, that it had meant nothing, that she hadn’t felt anything.

I frowned and pushed the thoughts away. That was the last thing I needed to think about. I needed to focus on my father now and be there for my mother. I pulled my hand gently from hers and stood. She didn’t protest or even utter a single word.

I stood next to the window and looked out. I felt her approach my side. When she gently placed her hand on my arm, my heart jumped in my chest.

“Brock texted, the food is here.”

“You go ahead and eat. I’ll wait here in case the doctors come back out.”

“I… I don’t want to leave you alone if you need me here.”

I closed my eyes, wanting desperately to tell her to just leave. That I *didn’t* need her here. But the truth was that I needed her more than I wanted to admit. I fucking needed to feel her next to me. And it wouldn’t be fair to Merit to ask her to leave. She loved my father, and it would be cruel to ask her to leave simply because of my fucked-up feelings.

“Dirk?”

I spun around at the sound of Timberlynn’s voice.

“I just spoke with my father—he was in surgery with your dad, observing. He stepped outside to update me and said it’s going to be a bit longer. I wanted to let y’all know it looks like it’ll be another hour or so.”

Nodding, I turned to Merit. It was the first time I noticed how tired she looked. “I guess we can go eat, then.”

She gave me a soft smile and nodded before she turned and walked over to the elevator.

“Call me if anything changes,” I said to Timberlynn.

“I will,” she replied with a sympathetic expression. “Your mom is with Stella and Lori in my father’s office. They’re trying to get her to eat something.”

I could feel my brows pull in some. My mother. God, my poor mother. “Okay, thank you.”

As I stepped into the elevator with Merit, I glanced over at her. She was twisting her fingers together nervously as she stared down at the floor. When the doors dinged open, she paused before getting out.

“Everything okay?” I asked. “Well, besides the obvious.”

She looked at me, opened her mouth, and then shut it quickly. “Yes—no. I mean. I’m fine. Are *you* okay?”

I reached for her hand and tried to give her a reassuring smile. Something in my gut was telling me things were off with Merit, and it had nothing to do with the last time we saw each other or the reasons why we were at the hospital right now. I gave her a simple nod, and she walked out of the elevator.

Merit guided us through the lobby and to the back doors of the hospital that led out to a courtyard. Brock sat there with Ty, Kaylee, and Lincoln. Kaylee turned and saw me. She covered her mouth with her hand and rushed forward in my direction. I dropped Merit’s hand and braced for Kaylee to barrel into me, pregnant stomach and all. “Oh, Dirk! I’m so glad you made it back home safely. He’s going to be okay.”

I smiled and gently hugged her, then pulled back and gave her a quick once-over. “You look beautiful, Kaylee.”

She hugged me tightly. “Liar.”

I caught a glimpse of Merit standing there watching us. When my eyes met hers, I couldn’t read her expression. She quickly looked away and headed over to where everyone else sat. But for the briefest moment, I swore I saw hurt in her eyes.

“Come on and eat,” Kaylee said as she took my hand in hers and guided me over to the table. Brock handed me a bag, and I sat down next to Lincoln. Kaylee sat on the opposite side of me, next to Ty. I couldn’t help but notice that Merit’s gaze bounced between me and Kaylee before she sat at the table next to ours. Alone. I felt like the biggest dick for not even thinking of her when I sat. I went to stand and move over to the other table when Lincoln spoke.

“Merit, pull a chair up and eat over here,” Lincoln stated as she slid her chair over to make room for Merit.

“No, it’s okay, I’m fine, and I don’t mind the extra space,” Merit said, a smile on her face that didn’t reach her eyes at all.

I felt a strange pain in my chest at the sadness in her voice. I watched as she slowly unwrapped her burger and took a bite, not once looking back over toward us. I kept my eyes locked on her as she seemed to drift away, lost in thought. *Why in the hell was I sitting here? Get up and move next to her.*

Kaylee nudged my shoulder. “Eat something, please.”

I swallowed hard, suddenly feeling sick to my stomach and not wanting to eat at all. Somehow, I managed to take the wrapper off the burger and eat more than half of it. Brock and Ty spoke some, with Kaylee and Lincoln adding to the conversation here and there. I couldn’t focus on anything they said, only stared across the table at Merit. She seemed to be forcing herself to eat, and not once did she look my way. I hated that she felt she needed to distance herself.

Kaylee reached for my hand and squeezed it softly as she smiled. I nodded and squeezed back. It was in that very

moment that Merit looked over and her eyes fell to my hand in Kaylee's. I pulled it away and started to wrap up my half-eaten burger.

"I want to be back up there when he gets out of surgery," I said as I stood.

"Leave all of that. I'll get it, Dirk," Lincoln said.

With a smile, I replied, "Thanks, Lincoln. And thank you, Brock, for the food."

Merit looked over at me and smiled the sweetest smile. God, how it made all the worry vanish, if only for a moment. Then she stood and walked over to me. "If you'd rather I stay here so that Kaylee can go up with you, that's totally fine."

I frowned and went to answer her when Kaylee walked over to us. "How many people are allowed in the waiting room?" She clearly had not heard Merit.

I honestly had no idea, since I had only gotten to the hospital a little while ago. I looked to Merit for an answer since she'd been up in the ICU when I'd arrived.

"It's only immediate family," Merit stated in a voice that was barely above a whisper. She looked exhausted. "But because of Timberlynn's dad, Frank, they're being a bit more relaxed for now."

Kaylee nodded and gave Merit, and then me, a smile.

I cleared my throat and spoke to Kaylee. "Merit and I are going to go back up. If you guys want to head home, you can, or maybe wait down here."

"We're not going home," Kaylee stated. "Dirk, we want to be here for you and your mother. We'll wait down here at least until he gets out of surgery. Call us if you need anything."

I leaned down and kissed her on the top of her head before reaching for Merit's hand and lacing my fingers through hers. If Kaylee noticed, she hid it well, but I knew deep down it thrilled her beyond all get out. Kaylee never missed an opportunity to bring up Merit or tell me how amazing Merit

was in her eyes. I, on the other hand, couldn't help but notice how my chest tightened at any contact with Merit.

“Ready?” I asked her while trying to keep my voice steady.

All she could do was nod.

The ride up in the elevator was silent, with Merit gently rubbing her thumb over my hand. I wasn't sure if she was aware she was doing it, but I didn't mind. It calmed a bit of the worry I had going on.

When we walked into the waiting room of the ICU, my mother was there with Merit's mom, Lori. “Any news?” I asked.

My mother looked up and gave me a weak smile. “He's out of surgery and in recovery.”

I let out the breath I hadn't even realized I was holding in. “Good. That's good,” I replied as I rubbed the back of my neck to ease the tension that hadn't let up one damn bit since I'd gotten to the hospital.

My mother glanced down to where my hand was connected to Merit's. Merit immediately dropped my hand and went to sit next to my mother.

“Kimberley, do you need anything? A change of clothes or anything from the house?” Merit asked.

With a light tap against Merit's hand, my mother smiled warmly. “You are so precious, but I'm good. Stella ran back to the ranch to pack me a small bag. I'm sure I'll be staying up here with Brad.”

My stomach dropped. What kind of recovery would my father have? How long would he be in the hospital? What would life be like for him after this?

“Um, Mom, what happened?” I asked as all three female gazes swung over to me.

“Oh Lord, I'm so sorry, sweetheart.” My mother stood and came over to sit next to me. “Lori was riding by and saw your daddy's tractor turned over and in the ditch. When she got there, he was awake, though barely.”

My gaze drifted over to Merit's mother, Lori.

With a nod, Lori picked up the story. "He was awake and said the accident had just happened."

"He was awake and talking?" I asked.

"Yes, he was. He was very weak and could hardly talk, but he told me he thought he'd had a heart attack and lost control of the tractor. Then he closed his eyes as I called 911, and he didn't wake back up again, at least not that I know of."

"I just can't believe he had a heart attack," I said. "He's in such good health. He runs every day."

My mother wiped a tear from her eye and turned to look out the window.

"Mom, was something wrong with Dad that you didn't tell me about?"

She shook her head but didn't look at me. "No. Not that I'm aware of anyway. I do know he'd been going to the doctor a bit more, but he said it was because his back was hurting him."

"His back?" I asked. Fuck! I should have been here helping him with the ranch instead of bull riding. Why hadn't I just walked away after the first win? Why had I kept going?

"Don't do that," Merit said.

I jerked my eyes over to hers. "What?" I asked.

"I know what you're doing, Dirk. I also know if your father didn't feel like he could handle working the ranch, he would have told you."

Mom nodded. "Oh, sweetheart, Merit is right. Don't feel guilty. Your daddy hired a few young boys from town to come and help out on the ranch. He tweaked his back helping a little one mutton busting. It wasn't even anything ranch related."

My father had raised goats for kids to mutton bust on. It was something he loved doing, and he adored being around the little kids. He'd casually mention how he couldn't wait until the day he could do the same with his own grandchild.

I closed my eyes and took in a few deep breaths. I let out a breath, and then let my gaze wander to the windows once more. It didn't matter how or when my father had hurt himself: I knew deep in my heart I should have been home.

When would I ever stop running?

Chapter Twelve

DIRK

The sounds of the machines hooked up to my father made it nearly impossible to sleep, and I was exhausted. I'd been back in Hamilton for almost ten hours now and had finally convinced my mother to let me stay in the room and watch over Dad while she rested for a bit.

I'd told Merit to head home a few hours ago. She'd looked exhausted and so pale. Timberlynn had hovered around Merit like a momma bear, as well, and kept insisting she go home and eat a proper meal and get some sleep. When Merit finally agreed to go, I had to hide my disappointment. It was nice knowing she was here to lean on when I needed her.

I dropped my head back down onto the side of the hospital bed, and I grabbed my father's hand in mine and fought to hold back the tears that threatened to spill free. I drew in a deep breath, then lifted my head and stared at my dad.

"So, I was thinking of taking some time off. Maybe you and I could work on that old Chevy you're trying to rebuild. Maybe even paint the barn. You've been talking about wanting to paint that barn for a while now."

The sounds of machine beeps and clicks, along with the steady rhythm of the breathing machine, were my only answer.

"Merit's been here, but that shouldn't surprise you. She loves you like a father, you know. I haven't actually been very truthful with her, Dad. Or with myself, for that matter. I need you to wake up and tell me what to do, Dad. I think...I think I might be in love with her."

My father's finger twitched, and I jumped in surprise.

"Dad, I'm here! Dad? Can you hear me?"

This time his hand squeezed mine gently, and I wanted to cry out with joy.

“I’m so sorry, Dad. I’m here, and I’m not going to be leaving. Don’t worry about anything. You’re gonna get out of here, and we’re going to start working on that car. You hear me, Dad?”

He moved his hand slightly, and I reached over and hit the call button. Not even thirty seconds later a nurse walked in.

“Is everything okay?”

“He squeezed my hand!” I cried. “Twice.”

She smiled. “Let me notify the doctor on call. Actually, I think Doctor Holden is still here—let me go page him.”

I looked back down at my father and smiled. For the first time in hours, I felt a bit of hope.

“Mom’s here, too, Dad. Once the doctor comes in, I’ll go get her. I had to beg her to go get a bit of sleep. She’s in the waiting room, though.”

The slightest bit of pressure on my hand told me he understood.

“Christ, Dad, you scared us. I love you, Dad. I love you so much.”

This time his grip tightened, and I could tell he was trying to open his eyes. Tears flowed down my face as I smiled.

“No, just relax. You don’t need to do anything. I know you love us, too, Dad. I know.”

The door opened, and the nurse walked back in. “Doctor Holden is still here and on his way.”

“I think he understood me. I told him my mom was here, and he squeezed my hand.”

She grinned, then started to take his vitals, writing some notes down in his chart. Less than five minutes later, Frank walked into the room.

The nurse started to fill him in on my father’s vitals and repeated what I’d told her.

“Let me go get my mother,” I said as I gently squeezed Dad’s hands. “I’ll be right back, Dad. I’m going to go get Mom.”

Frank nodded and started to listen to my father’s heartbeat.

I had to force myself not to run down the damn hall to the waiting room. When I stepped into the room, I came to an abrupt stop.

Sitting on the small bench was Merit, my mother curled up next to her. My breath caught in my throat at the sight of them both. I looked at my poor mother, who I knew was exhausted, and then to Merit. Had she even left? Her head was leaning back against the wall, and her hand was resting protectively on my mom’s arm, as if warding off any bad will that wanted to come her way. The two of them together made my chest squeeze, and I longed to pull them both into my arms.

Quickly, I walked over and bent down, pushing back a piece of hair that had fallen out of my mother’s ponytail.

“Mom?” I whispered softly. “Mom, wake up.”

She slowly opened her eyes, and I made sure I had a smile on my face. She sat up quickly, which in turn woke up Merit who rubbed at her eyes.

“What is it?” Mom asked.

“I was talking to Dad, and he squeezed my hand.”

She brought her hands up to her mouth. “Oh, that is wonderful! Did he wake up?”

My smile faded some. “No, but he for sure knew I was talking to him.

“Code Red, room six two. Code Red.”

Suddenly, everyone started to move about quickly. A nurse rushed by, and I stood. When I walked around the corner, I saw there were a few nurses running in and out of my father’s room.

“What’s happening? Dirk, what’s going on?” my mother asked, her voice filled with fear and uncertainty.

“I’m not sure,” I said as I quickly made my way back toward my father’s room.

A nurse stepped in front of me. “Mr. Littlewood, I’m going to need to ask you to stay in the waiting room.”

I looked over her head. “What’s going on with my father? Is he okay?”

“Please, sir, I need you to return to the waiting room.”

Without taking my eyes off the door to his room, I demanded, “Tell me what is happening, dammit!”

“Sir! You are in the way. I need you to please go back out to the waiting room.”

The door flew open, and a nurse ran out. I saw Frank over my father, pumping his chest as a nurse handed him something. The door started to close, and I heard him shout, “Clear!”

The door shut fully, and I looked down at the nurse. “Please, tell me what’s happening and I’ll go back.” By now, my mother was next to me, along with Merit.

The nurse let out a slow breath. “He’s had another heart attack.”

Everything seemed to move in slow motion. The nurse sounded like she was talking into a can, and my mother let out a small scream of “No!” I heard Merit telling my mother to come with her, and I felt the nurse taking my arm gently and guiding me to the waiting room. I didn’t even remember walking the steps it took to get there, but suddenly I was dropping down into a chair and staring at the retreating nurse.

I looked over at Merit. She was on the phone talking to someone. My mother had her face buried in her hands and was chanting something about God not taking him.

I caught a glimpse of the night sky through the large window, and I saw a thunderstorm building in the distance. Lightning lit up the sky. I focused on it and nothing else until I felt someone touch my arm. I looked up, and it was Merit.

“She needs you, Dirk.”

Suddenly, I heard my mother's soft cries, and I quickly stood. Merit took my hand, the same hand my father had just squeezed. She did the same and then nodded.

Without another thought, I went to my mother. I sat down and placed my arm around her. She turned and buried her face into my chest and sobbed.

I gently rubbed her back and whispered, "Shhh, he's going to be okay. He will. He has to be."

It felt like an eternity before I heard Frank clear his throat. My mother and I both looked up and then stood.

"Frank, how is he?" I asked, hearing the fear in my voice.

When his gaze bounced from my mom to me and then back to her, I knew. Deep down in my heart, I had known already.

"Kimberley, I'm so sorry, we tried everything...but we lost him."

My mother let out a strangled sob, and nearly fell to the floor as I grabbed her and held her up. I met Frank's eyes.

"It was a massive heart attack, and there was nothing I could do. I tried, but..." His voice trailed off, and I nodded slightly.

"I'm so very sorry, Dirk, Kimberley. So very sorry."

My mother's cries grew louder, and I sat back down with her. She started to rock and call out my father's name. I wasn't sure what to do, so I closed my eyes and fought the urge to scream out. I wanted to hit something. I wanted to yell and tell the world how unfair this was. He had squeezed my hand, goddammit! He had...he had tried to talk to me.

I had the urge to let my mother go and bury my own face in my hands and scream. I tried to get a grip on my emotions. My mother needed me. My mother needed me, and I could not...I would not break down.

I held onto my mother while she cried until she finally pulled away from me, hunching in on herself. A hand softly touched my shoulder, and I looked up to see Merit standing

there. I stood and pulled her into my arms. She buried her face into my chest as I buried mine into her soft chestnut curls. She hugged me with all her might for a few moments before she let go and stepped back. I didn't want to let her go, but I did. Merit looked over at my mother and bent down in front of her, gently placing her hand on my mother's knee.

"Oh Merit. Merit!" my mother said as she allowed Merit to wrap her arms around her. "He's my everything. He can't be gone. No! Please, tell me he isn't gone!"

I clenched my fists a few times as I stared down at the two of them. Merit glanced back up at me and softly said, "I'm so sorry."

I sat down next to my mother, and Merit let her go. My mother turned back to me, and I held her. I pressed my mouth into her hair and kissed her head as she whispered my father's name over and over.



The breeze softly blew the leaves of the large oak tree, gifting me with a calming sound as I stood and stared down at my father's casket. It was so quiet except for the sound of the wind whispering through the trees.

He was gone. There had been so many things I wanted to tell him. So many things I wanted to do with him, and now I couldn't. I'd never be able to talk to him ever again.

A single tear slipped free, and I let it roll down my face. I had let myself fall apart in the waiting room of the ICU, but since then I had been there for my mother. She was trying to be strong, but I heard her crying at night, and it ripped my heart open even more. I'd walked into her room the other night and found her clutching my father's pillow. She was crying so hard she could hardly breathe.

That was the last time I saw her cry. She hadn't even shed a tear today at the funeral. I wasn't sure if she simply had no more tears left to cry, or if she had somehow found the

strength to hold it in. I, on the other hand, felt like a damn ticking time bomb. I had no idea when my own strength would fail and I'd lose control. I could feel it coming, though. I knew that much.

“Dirk?”

I stood up straighter and dragged in a breath before pushing it out.

“I’ll be right there, Brock.”

He walked up next to me and stood in silence for a minute or two before he finally spoke. “They need us to leave so they can bury the casket.”

“Us?” I asked as I pulled my gaze away from the casket and focused on Brock.

“Yeah, it’s just me and you now. Everyone’s gone back to the ranch for the memorial.”

I looked over my shoulder to see the only vehicle still there was Brock’s truck.

“Oh.”

It was all I could say.

Brock placed his hand on my shoulder and gave it a hard squeeze.

The last few days had been a whirlwind. My mother had thrown herself into planning the funeral with the help of Lori and Stella. Merit had been at the house each night, making sure there was food and trying her best to help with the plans. I’d avoided her like the plague, though I was not entirely sure why. As much as I’d needed her to be with me at the hospital, now I just couldn’t be around *anyone*. She didn’t push back and gave me the distance I needed, which I was grateful for. When night fell, I found myself sleeping in Brock and Lincoln’s spare bedroom. Too afraid to face whatever it was at my folks’ house that had me running away each night.

But now it was all over. We’d be going back to the ranch, and he wouldn’t be there.

“How do I go back home with him not there? I’m not sure I can.”

“You can, and you will. It’s not going to be easy, but you’ll do it for your mom and for you. You can’t hide at my place forever, Dirk. Life has to move on.”

I closed my eyes tightly and nodded.

“Come on, let’s go.”

I turned and walked to Brock’s truck. It felt like I was running on some sort of invisible battery. I had hardly slept, hardly eaten, and found myself getting up at night and pouring myself a glass of my father’s favorite whiskey that Brock happened to favor, as well. My thoughts bounced from my mother to Merit. Mostly they stayed on my father, though.

I had told him I loved Merit. Had he heard me? Did he have any idea how much I needed him? I was so fucking foolish for leaving, chasing a dream that didn’t mean anything in the grand scheme of things.

The drive back to the Shaw ranch was filled with silence until we drove through the gate.

“Is everything okay with you and Merit? Your mom mentioned something about you hardly speaking to her at all since...”

I shrugged. “There isn’t anything to talk about.”

“Dirk, you know how much she loved your father. She’s hurting, as well, and I know she only wants to be there for you, but you’re pushing her away.”

“Yeah, well, if it wasn’t for her, I would have still been home and maybe he wouldn’t have been on the tractor that day.”

I felt Brock’s eyes on me, and I stared out the passenger window. I regretted the words the moment they slipped out. What the hell was wrong with me? I knew none of what I’d just said was true. It hadn’t been Merit’s fault I’d run as fast as I could to avoid her. Merit hadn’t been the one to force me back out onto the circuit when I’d promised my folks I’d take

some time off. But fuck, I was angry, and I wasn't even sure who it was directed at.

"You want to tell me how it's Merit's fault?" Brock asked, anger evident in his own voice.

I sighed and took off my hat and placed it on my lap. I scrubbed my hand over my stubbled face. I hadn't shaved in more than two days, and it felt rough on my palms. "It's not her fault. I didn't mean that."

"You'd destroy her completely if she ever heard you say that."

With another sigh, I replied, "Don't worry, I would never say those words to her."

"Good, because in case you hadn't noticed, this has taken a toll on Merit, as well. Her own father is in rehab, and according to Timberlynn, her parents might be getting a divorce. Her losing *your* father has been devastating to her, too."

That caused me to jerk my head around and look at him. "What do you mean, her folks might be divorcing?"

He shrugged. "Tanner told me. Timberlynn and Merit have grown close over the last month, and Merit opened up to her about her father's drinking problem. She didn't tell Timberlynn why, but Timberlynn thinks Roger might have cheated on Lori. That's why he started drinking so heavily, the guilt of it all."

I felt my eyes grow wide with shock. "Damn, I didn't know that."

"Well, Merit doesn't really talk about it, Timberlynn said. Lincoln mentioned the few times they've all gotten together for lunch or to hang out that Merit is pretty tight lipped when it comes to her father. And that over the last month, Merit seems to have fallen into a depression."

"Depression?" I asked, knowing it had been about a month or so since we were together.

Brock looked at me. “I don’t know, but I can tell she’s not herself. I mean, it’s been awhile since I’ve really been around Merit, but I’d like to think I still know her pretty well, and she is for sure carrying a burden.”

“Well, she has Michael, so I doubt he’ll let her take the brunt of it all.”

He gave a half shrug. “Yeah, probably not.”

Brock pulled up and parked. There was a plethora of cars parked all down the driveway and into a side field that looked like a temporary parking lot.

“You okay?” Brock asked.

“I will be as soon as I get a drink in my hand.”

He placed his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “I’m here for you, Dirk. Any hour of the day, anytime. You know that, right?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and gave him a nod. “I know. Thanks.”

With a few deep breaths, I opened the truck door and climbed out. I could feel my heart pound in my chest and in my ears as we walked into the house. Each room was filled with people my folks knew. It looked like damn near all of Hamilton had come to the celebration of life we were having in honor of my father.

Smiling, I shook hands or gave someone a hug or kiss as I made my way through the house and toward the informal living room where I knew Ty Senior kept the good whiskey. The kind he and my father would knock back whenever they were together.

When I finally got away from a majority of the folks, I slipped into the living room. Sitting there was Kaylee with Timberlynn, Merit, and Tanner.

Merit lit up when our eyes met, and she smiled. I gave her a tight smile and tried to ignore how the pressure in my chest eased up and I was able to breathe a little better at the mere sight of her.

“Dirk,” Kaylee said as she stood and made her way over to me. I smiled when I saw her waddling over. She was due next month, and I swore she was carrying two boys in that stomach of hers and not just one.

“Hey,” I said as I leaned down and kissed her cheek. “You look...”

“Big?” she joked.

I laughed. “I just saw you two days ago, and I swear you’ve gotten bigger.”

She grinned. “Ty thinks so, too. Of course, he’s so proud to have a strong, growing son.”

“I’m sure he is.”

Kaylee was a good friend, and someone I knew I could always count on. I had zero romantic feelings toward her, and even though Ty would constantly tell me to stop flirting with his wife, he knew our friendship was strictly platonic. In a strange way, I always wondered if I’d become so close with her simply because I was longing for my friendship with Merit. But my feelings toward Merit were a complete one eighty from my feelings for Kaylee.

When I let my gaze wander back over to Merit, my smile faded slightly. She looked so tired, and her eyes seemed so sad as they bounced back and forth between me and Kaylee. When they landed on me, there was a look on her face I’d seen before. I fought to remember exactly when—and when the realization hit me, I nearly stumbled back.

That day in the strawberry field. When I’d walked up with Kaci and didn’t notice when Merit had walked away and left us alone in the fields.

“Do you want something to eat?” Kaylee asked. “There’s enough food in the kitchen to feed a small army.”

I looked back down at her. “I’ll eat in a bit; I’m not hungry right now.”

“We were just talking about setting up a betting pool on when the baby will come and how much he’ll weigh.”

I brought my hand to Kaylee's stomach and leaned down to talk to the baby. "You better let your uncle Dirk win." Then I rubbed it and laughed. "Damn, your stomach is so hard."

"I know! You should feel when I have one of the Braxton Hicks contractions. Lord, some of them are strong. I'm actually surprised Ty talked me into getting out of yoga pants and his t-shirt. It's about the only thing I'm comfortable in."

With a wink at her, I said, "You are the most beautiful pregnant woman I've ever laid eyes on."

Kaylee rolled her eyes as I saw Merit stand abruptly and rush out of the room.

"Merit! Merit!" Timberlynn called out as she got up and quickly went after Merit, who had practically run past me. Before Timberlynn left the room, she sent me a seething glare.

"Is she okay?" Kaylee asked, concern in her voice as she looked back at Lincoln.

"I'm sure she is," Lincoln said, handing Hunter to Ty. "I'm going to go check just to be sure."

"I'll come," Kaylee stated.

Lincoln held up her hand and abruptly said, "No!"

Kaylee stilled with a confused expression on her face.

Lincoln gave her a soft smile. "You stay here and make sure Dirk gets some food."

Kaylee nodded and looked back at the door. Concern was etched on her face. When Lincoln left the room, she sighed.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

With a shake of her head, she gave me a smile that was meant to say everything was okay, but I had the feeling something had just happened that went totally over my head.

Chapter Thirteen

MERIT

I managed to hold back the tears until I was out of the house and well on my way down the path to the barn.

“Merit!” Timberlynn called out as I slowed my pace and looked over my shoulder.

I shook my head and lifted my hand. “Not now, Timberlynn.”

The back door opened, and I saw Lincoln step out. Great, just what I didn’t want. An audience for my mental breakdown.

“Will you please stop?” Timberlynn begged as I finally stopped and turned to face her.

Quickly, I swiped away the tears. “I’m fine, I wanted some air. It was beginning to get hot in there.”

Timberlynn stopped in front of me and gave me a look that said she knew I was handing her a line of bullshit.

“Merit, sweetie, is everything okay?” Lincoln asked, coming to a stop next to Timberlynn.

“No. Yes! I mean, yes, I was hot with all the people in the house. Feeling a bit claustrophobic.”

Lincoln nodded, then reached for my hand. “You *know* there’s nothing there between the two of them. They’re only friends.”

Tears pooled in my eyes, and I silently berated myself for letting my emotions—and my hormones—take hold of me. I knew there was nothing there.

I jerked my head in a clumsy nod. “It doesn’t matter. I mean, I know they’re friends, but I don’t care what Dirk does.”

Timberlynn looked like she wanted to scream out the word “*liar*.” Lincoln’s brows pulled in slightly and then she tilted

her head as she looked at me.

I brought my hand to my stomach, trying to hold back the urge to be sick.

“Do you need to throw up?” Timberlynn asked as she rubbed my back.

I shook my head no.

“Oh my God. Oh, Merit. You’re pregnant, aren’t you?” Lincoln asked.

My eyes widened in horror and I shook my head too quickly, which caused me to get a bit dizzy and stumble slightly. Timberlynn reached out and steadied me.

When everything stopped spinning, I met Lincoln’s questioning gaze. “*Please*, do not tell anyone. Only Timberlynn knows.”

Lincoln’s mouth dropped open, and she looked between the two of us. “What! How long have you known?”

Timberlynn answered. “She found out the day of the accident.”

“Does Dirk know?” Lincoln asked.

“No, and I don’t want him to,” I stated.

Lincoln frowned. “Okay, I get why you don’t want to tell him now, but maybe knowing might—”

I held up my hand. “No. I’m not telling Dirk.”

“Like, ever?” Lincoln asked, confused.

I buried my face in my hands and screamed. When I dropped my hands, both women had taken a few steps away.

“I’m sorry, I just...I feel so lost and alone right now,” I said as a few sobs slipped free between my words.

Timberlynn quickly rushed back up to me and took both of my hands. “You’re not alone, Merit. That I can promise you.”

Lincoln stepped up next to her and nodded.

I slowly let out a breath and looked at Lincoln. “I will tell him, just not yet. I need to process this all first and figure out what I’m going to do.”

“What do you mean, what you’re going to do?” Lincoln asked.

A small laugh slipped free. “Well, being a single mother wasn’t exactly part of my plan.”

“Single mother?” she asked, even more confused than before.

I stared at her in disbelief as I felt most tears slip free. “Lincoln, surely you don’t think Dirk is going to find out and then want to get married and play house. Especially with me.”

Lincoln covered her mouth with her hand and closed her eyes. “What he said to Kaylee. Oh, sweetie, that had to hurt, but you know he doesn’t know. He would never have said that if he knew you were carrying *his* child.”

“I agree with Lincoln,” Timberlynn said. “I know that hurt, but he doesn’t know, Merit.”

I closed my eyes in an effort to keep my crazy emotions at bay. I drew in a deep breath and looked at the two of them. “I know. But even if he did know, I don’t think he would utter those same words to me anyway.”

Both women gasped. “Why would you say that?” Lincoln asked.

I shrugged. “Well, considering he hasn’t said a single word to me since his father died, or hardly even looked at me, I’m pretty sure his feelings for me are nonexistent. The moment he finds out about the baby, he’ll feel pressured to be there for me. I don’t want that. I don’t want him to feel obligated about anything. And I know his father passing away has been hard on him. He’s going to think I did it on purpose and I...I honestly can’t deal with that.”

“Nonexistent?” Lincoln practically shouted. “Anyone who’s in the same room as the two of you sees the way that man looks at you.”

Timberlynn smiled softly. “It’s true; he gives you such a loving look.”

I dropped Timberlynn’s hands and took a few steps back. “You’re wrong. Dirk has never, nor will he ever, have those types of feelings for me. Besides, I’m pretty sure his tastes swing to the side of blondes.”

They both stared at me. I knew I was acting like a damn child, a hormonal, petulant child, and I needed to close my mouth. I closed my eyes instead and exhaled. “I’m sorry, I’m behaving badly.”

“What did you mean, he’ll think you did it on purpose?”

Keeping my eyes closed, I slowly nodded. I was so tired. The last thing I wanted to do was explain. “Lincoln, I’ll fill you in later. I don’t think right now is a good time.”

I snapped my eyes back open to look at the two women who had quickly become such amazing friends. “If you don’t mind, I would really like to be alone for a bit.”

Timberlynn nodded and Lincoln said, “Of course. Merit, please, if you need anything or want to talk to anyone, we’re here for you.”

I smiled. “Thank you, Lincoln. I’m fine, honestly.”

They both exchanged a worried look before turning and heading back to the house.

“Lincoln? Please don’t tell anyone. Not Brock, and *especially* not Kaylee. She’s so close with Dirk that I’m worried she might tell him, thinking she’s helping the situation in some way.”

A look passed over her face that I couldn’t read, but then it softened and she nodded. “She would never betray your trust, but I won’t tell her.”

I felt the breath I had been holding in rush out. “Thank you.”

Spinning on my heels, I headed off to the barn and didn’t return to the house until two hours later. I walked into the back entrance and made my way through the house. There were still

a large number of people there, but I knew there was one place I could go where no one would be. Ty Senior's office.

I opened the door and closed it behind me before I leaned back against it. I really needed to leave and go home. For the last few hours, I'd tried to get the image of Dirk touching Kaylee's stomach, kissing her cheek, and looking at her like he adored her out of my head. When he looked at me, all I saw was a blank expression. Nothing but a void. I was such a stupid fool to have even still hoped he would still care for me. A fool, like always.

Pushing off the door, I wiped away the damn tears I thought I were under control.

"Looks like you could use a drink."

I jumped and let out a small scream before bringing my hand up to cover my mouth. Sitting in the chair next to the window was Dirk. He held a nearly empty bottle of whiskey in his hand and motioned for me to sit across from him.

"Dirk, what on Earth are you doing in here?"

He smiled, and my knees went weak. God, that smile of his was like kryptonite. For a moment, I couldn't help but wonder how many women had fallen prey to it.

He held up the bottle. "I'm enjoying a drink."

I frowned and walked over, sitting in the chair across from him. With a quick glance at the nearly empty whiskey bottle, I replied, "It looks to me like you're getting drunk."

He shrugged. "Call it whatever you want. Grab a glass."

I shook my head as a rush of panic hit me. For a moment, I felt like I was in my father's office, staring at the shell of a man he had become. "No, thank you."

He lifted his brows. "No? You're missing out."

When I looked into Dirk's eyes, I didn't recognize the man I was hopelessly in love with. "Dirk, this is only a temporary fix. It won't help your pain any."

A humorless laugh burst from his mouth. “It sure as hell helps, Bugs.”

I looked down at my hands and quickly said a prayer that Dirk didn’t follow the same path my father had, and for God to give me the words to help his hurting heart.

He took in a deep breath and exhaled. The smell of the whiskey on his breath nearly knocked me over. “Why are you in here, Bugs?”

I smiled and shook my head. “You and that nickname.”

His eyes lit up for a moment, and I felt my stomach flip. I hadn’t been able to make him smile like that in a long time. It was nice to know I still could. At least when he was drunk, anyway.

“I like that nickname.”

“I’m not afraid of bugs anymore, Dirk.”

“No?”

I slowly shook my head. “No.”

He smiled. “What are you afraid of now?”

My breath caught in my throat.

You.

Losing you again.

“Not mattering to anyone, I guess,” I replied with a shrug. It was an honest answer.

He leaned forward and stared at me. His mouth opened then shut again as he sat back in his chair. God, how I wished I could have known what he was about to say.

A light rap on the office door had me swinging around to see a woman walk in.

“Got my glass of wine!” She froze when she saw me. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know anyone was in here with you, Dirk.”

I turned back and glared at Dirk. He was staring at the woman with a completely blank expression. He must have been so drunk he’d forgotten he came in here with a woman.

“I’ll just, um...head on back out,” she stated. She quickly opened the office door once more and then shut it softly behind her.

I stood and started for the door.

“Merit.”

When I didn’t stop, he called out my name louder.

“Merit, stop!”

“It’s fine, Dirk. If booze and a stranger is what you need to help you get through this day, then who am I to stand in the way or judge you.”

I reached for the doorknob.

“Will you stop for a second, please?”

I paused at the door when I heard the pleading in his voice. I took in a few deep breaths, willing myself to simply open it and leave. But instead I just stood there, feeling like that same young girl who would have given anything to have this man realize how much she loved him.

“I wasn’t going to fuck anyone.”

His words felt like a slap for some reason, and I flinched before I said, “You’re a grown man, Dirk. I’ll send her back in.”

“She’s my goddamn cousin, Merit. If I was going to fuck someone, I’d want it to be *you*.”

My mouth fell open, and I turned to look at him. “Excuse me?”

He shook his head and cursed. “I didn’t mean it like that.” His words were slow and mumbled. Lord, how much of that whiskey had he drank?

“I think you need to stop drinking. Why don’t you let me take you home?”

He shook his head. “I don’t want to go home. Not without my dad there.”

The sadness in his voice killed me. The mixture of emotions I was feeling about drove me mad. His words from moments ago played in my head on repeat.

“If I was going to fuck someone, I’d want it to be you.”

My stomach flipped slightly at the idea of being with Dirk again. The next words out of my mouth came before I even had a chance to think. “Do you want to come to my house?”

Oh Lord, Merit. Why?

“I have a guest bedroom,” I quickly added.

Dirk dropped his head back against the chair, and I brought my hand to my mouth when I saw the tears roll down his cheeks.

Walking over toward him, I pulled my phone out of my dress pocket and hit a number.

“Hey, where are you? I haven’t seen you in at least an hour and a half, if not more,” Michael said.

“I’m in Ty Senior’s office. Michael, I need help.”

“What’s wrong?” His voice sounded panicked.

“It’s Dirk. I need you to help me get him out of here and to my house. Can you pull my car up to the side of the house? The keys are in there. There’s a door that leads out from this end of the hall on the west side near the kitchen.”

“Yeah, I remember it, is he okay?”

“He’s pretty much finished off an entire bottle of whiskey.”

“Aww, hell. I’ll be as quick as I can. Does anyone else know he’s drunk off his ass?”

“A cousin I’ve never met before, but I doubt she really knows how drunk he is.”

He sighed. “I’m on my way.”

I hit End, then sent a text to Brock.

Me: Are you able to meet me in your dad’s office? Dirk is pretty hammered.

It only took a moment for Brock to reply.

Brock: On my way.

I made my way over to Dirk and stopped in front of him. He looked up at me, and our eyes met as I reached for the bottle.

“You want a drink?”

With a nod, I replied, “Yes, but let’s have it at my house, okay?”

A brilliant smile erupted over his beautiful face, and once again my breath caught in my throat. He really was the most handsome man I’d ever laid eyes on. That dark brown hair was all a mess, clearly from him raking his fingers through it. At some point he must have ditched his black cowboy hat. His green eyes, so rare in their color, I couldn’t help but think of the meadow down by the creek when I looked at him.

I shook away my wandering thoughts and took the bottle and set it on a side table.

“You’re so beautiful, Merit. The most beautiful... beautifulist woman ever.”

I laughed. “I don’t think that’s a word, Dirk.”

“Where did Sarah go?”

I frowned. “Sarah?”

“My cousin. I haven’t seen her in years.”

“She went to go get a glass of wine,” I replied.

He nodded. “That’s right.”

I was pissed that his cousin would allow him to get so shit-faced.

“Can you stand up?” I asked.

“Of course, I can. I’ve been a hell of a lot drunker before, Bugs.”

With a sigh, I put his arm around my shoulders and guided him up. “Stop calling me Bugs, Dirk.”

“It’s cute! I like it.”

“It was cute when I was little, not now that I’m almost thirty.”

He placed his finger on my chin and lifted my face until our eyes locked again. “I’ve missed you...*Bugs!*”

I rolled my eyes and then laughed.

“Where are we going?” Dirk asked.

“My house, remember?”

“Oh! That’s right. I need to say goodbye to Kaylee.”

My body stiffened, and I forced myself to be rid of the jealousy I had over their friendship. It was childish, and I hated myself for feeling it in the first place.

“We can’t go looking for her right now, Dirk. We need to get you out of here.”

“Why?”

The door to the office opened and Brock walked in. He took one look at Dirk and then flicked his gaze at me. “Where are you taking him?”

“He doesn’t want to go home, and he can’t stay here. I was going to let him pass out in my guest bedroom.”

Brock nodded.

“Michael should have brought my car around to the side of the house. Can you help me get him to it?”

“Let me take him,” Brock said as he walked up and grabbed his best friend.

“Brock! My man! Your dad has some damn good whiskey. I owe him a bottle.”

Brock laughed. “I’m sure he won’t care, Dirk.”

“Yeah, probably not. Are we going out?”

“Not tonight, buddy,” Brock replied, guiding him out the door and down the hall.

I glanced back over my shoulder to see if anyone was coming. The last thing I wanted anyone to know was that Dirk had gotten smashed at his father's celebration of life.

"Dude, come on. It's been forever. Let's just go out. I need to get laid."

I stumbled and quickly recovered when I noticed Brock glance back at me. I tried like hell to act like I hadn't heard Dirk, but I knew Brock could tell it bothered me.

"Not tonight, buddy," Brock stated once more.

"It's been so long since I've had sex."

Okay, that caught my attention, and I hurried my steps as I moved around Brock and opened the side door to the house. I prayed that Michael was there. For a moment, I wondered if I should just take him to a hotel. Or maybe suggest he go to Brock's house.

As if on cue, Michael pulled up and parked. He jumped out of the car and rushed over to help Brock carry Dirk.

"He's dead fucking weight, the asshole," Brock said with a grunt.

"Sorry it took me so long. I had to find the person who parked behind your car, Merit."

"No worries," I said as I opened the passenger door and Brock guided Dirk in. Dirk sat down, leaned his head back against the headrest, and closed his eyes.

"Do you need help once you get to your house?" Michael asked.

I looked at Brock, tempted to ask if I could take Dirk to his house, but in the end I shook my head. "No, I'm sure he can get out and walk when he realizes he has to."

"Or he'll pass out and sleep it off in your car," Brock stated with a smile. "I don't blame him; he needed to forget for a bit. This is so hard for him."

I nodded, as did Michael.

"If anyone deserves to get lit, it's him," Michael agreed.

Brock faced me. “Are you sure you don’t need help once you get to your house?”

“I’m sure.”

It was then Brock really looked at me. “Are you okay, Merit? I know how close you were to Brad.”

My eyes filled with tears, and all I could do was give him a nod. If I spoke, I’d cry.

He leaned down and kissed my cheek. “Call me if you need anything, okay?”

“I will, Brock. Thank you.”

Turning, I hugged my brother. He held me a moment longer than usual and then whispered in my ear, “I love you so much, Merit.”

I squeezed him back. “I love you, too, Mike.”

Death had a funny way of making you realize how limited your time on Earth was. It caused you to stop and appreciate things more, cherish those you love, and be thankful for the time you’ve been granted.

“Like Brock said, if you need anything, call, okay?” Michael said, giving me a kiss on the cheek like Brock had. “And please get some sleep. You look so tired.”

“Will do!” I said as I tried to sound like I had my shit under control, when I was far from having *anything* under control, especially my emotions. My brother would be so pissed if he knew I was pregnant. Even more pissed knowing the father was Dirk.

They both walked back to the house and entered the side door. I turned and looked at Dirk. Good Lord, had he fallen asleep?

I leaned into my car and pulled the seat belt down and over him. When it clicked, he opened his eyes. “Merit” he whispered, sending a chill over my entire body.

“Dirk,” I replied as I started to pull away from him. He grabbed me, and I stilled.

“We could totally break your car in like we did my truck.”

I shot him a smirk. “You want to have sex in my car outside of Stella and Ty Senior’s house?”

“I’m game if you are,” he replied with a wink and a grin that dripped with sex.

Okay, maybe he wasn’t as drunk as I thought he was. My insides clenched, and I quickly pulled myself out of his hold and out of the car. I shut the door and took in a few deep breaths before I slipped into the driver’s seat.

“Maybe taking you back to my house is a bad idea,” I said as I looked over at him.

“I don’t want to go home. I can’t go home,” he stated.

“How about a hotel?”

He laughed. “Are you that afraid to be alone with me, Bugs?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Dirk.”

He pointed forward, like a character from a movie who’d just conquered the enemy. “Then onward to your house!”

I shook my head and turned around. I wasn’t even off of the Shaw ranch before Dirk started to snore.

Chapter Fourteen

MERIT

“Okay, so maybe I should have had Michael follow me home,” I groaned as I helped Dirk climb the steps of my front porch.

Dirk stumbled and tripped, and I yanked him up before he could fall. How I was able to get him halfway up the steps was beyond me.

“Dirk, can you hold yourself up a bit more? You’re going to make us both fall, you drunk fool.”

“I’m not drunk!” he said, pulling away from me. He somehow managed to race up the final steps and stop at my door. He swayed as I unlocked it and then guided him in.

After I turned on a few lights, I got him to the sofa in the living room where he promptly face-planted.

“Dirk?”

His snores were my only answer.

“Well, looks like you’re sleeping on the sofa tonight.”

I walked over to the oversized chair that was my new favorite piece of furniture, and pulled the throw blanket off the back of it. I dropped it onto the table as I took off Dirk’s dress shoes. He rolled over, and I couldn’t help but smile. He looked so handsome when he was sleeping. His face was void of all the stress the last week had put on him. There wasn’t an ounce of sadness there, and that made my heart ache in both a good and bad way.

“Why did you leave him, Brad? Why?”

I felt a tear slip free, and I wiped it away quickly. I scanned his clothes and decided it wouldn’t kill him to sleep in them. I grabbed the blanket and covered him up and then sat on the coffee table and stared at him.

His brown hair had been cut short recently, and his face was unshaven. My fingers itched to touch the stubble. I

thought about the small scar on his chin and leaned in closer to see if I could spot it. Dirk had cut it climbing down the tree my father had built our treehouse in. He'd been rushing down to help me because I'd fallen and broken my arm. I was crying so hard. I still remembered how my heart felt like it stopped when he slipped and fell himself. He didn't break anything, but he'd cut his chin open. I'd stopped crying the moment I saw the blood on his face. My ten-year-old self had been so worried. Dirk had cupped my face in his hands and made me look at him. I had been fixated on his bloody chin.

“Look at me, Bugs! Are you okay?”

I'd tried to talk, but when I looked into those green eyes, I was lost. He'd wiped my tears away with his thumbs, and I'd believed with all my heart that Dirk Littlewood would never hurt me.

“Stupid little girl,” I whispered as I leaned over and lightly traced where the scar was. “Oh, Dirk. Why couldn't you see me instead of her?”

Quickly, I yanked my hand away and stood. I wrapped my arms around my suddenly too-cold body and whispered, “Good night, Dirk.”

Then I bolted up the steps to my room like a coward.



I woke the next morning to the smell of coffee and bacon. With a moan, I rolled over and saw it was six thirty. I slowly sat up in bed, and it took a few seconds for everything to sink in.

Dirk was here.

“Oh God,” I said as panic hit me like a bolt of lightning.

Slipping out of the covers, I padded my way to my bathroom. After going to the restroom, brushing my teeth, and pulling my hair up in a ponytail, I walked back into the bedroom. I took out a pair of yoga pants and the first t-shirt I

found in my drawer. After I got dressed, I slipped on my running shoes and headed downstairs.

I slowed when I heard Dirk talking on the phone.

“I’m fine, and I’m sorry I left like that, Mom.”

Sadness filled my chest.

“I’m at Merit’s. Yeah, I know she loved Dad, too. The thought of her being alone seemed wrong.”

I frowned. He was lying to his mother about getting drunk last night. Had that thought about me even crossed his mind? I doubted it, but I didn’t blame him for not thinking of me. He had enough on his mind with his own father’s death to worry about how I was handling it.

“I’m probably going to be leaving here soon. I’ll call you on my way home.”

The sound of something sizzling made my stomach growl. I pressed my hand over it, willing it to hush. Then I remembered I had a child growing in there, and I really needed to eat.

I pushed off the wall I had pressed myself against and walked into the kitchen.

“Sleeping Beauty just woke up, so I’m going to let you go.” He smiled. “Mom says hi, Merit.”

“Tell her I say good morning,” I replied with a smile that I hoped seemed meaningful.

“She says good morning,” he said into the phone.

Dirk’s eyes moved over my body before they met mine. I turned and looked at the stove.

Cooked bacon sat off to the side, and he was frying up some eggs. My stomach growled again, and I looked at him sheepishly to see if he’d heard it. The smile on his face said he had.

“I’ll see you soon, Mom. I love you, too.”

My heart jumped a little at his words. I didn't want to admit to myself how much I longed to hear him utter those words to me.

No. No. No. Merit, snap out of it.

Suddenly, I remembered his words to Brock last night about wanting to get laid. Then, his words about wanting it to be me. Had he even meant that? Or was he simply looking for sex?

When Dirk slid his phone into his back pocket, he leaned against the counter and gave me the sexiest smile I'd ever seen. Goodness, did the man practice that smile in the mirror every day?

"How are you even up and moving with the amount of whiskey you had last night?" I asked.

He shrugged, then pointed to the coffee machine I hadn't touched since I'd moved in. I wasn't a big fan of coffee but would drink it on occasion, though the last few weeks the idea of it made me nauseous. The fact that I hadn't had any morning sickness over the last few days actually surprised me. Of course, it could have been all the stress. I needed to make an appointment with a doctor, and soon.

"Coffee?"

"No, thank you, I don't really drink it."

He laughed. "Then why do you have a coffeepot with fresh ground coffee in the pantry?"

"For Michael and my mother for when they come over. I used to drink it every now and then before the ba—"

I cut off quickly.

"Before the what?" he asked, taking a sip of his own coffee.

I gave a halfhearted shrug. "I'm not a fan of it anymore, that's all."

He nodded, then turned and flipped the eggs. "Want to make some toast for us?" I stared at him for a moment before

he looked at me. “What?”

Feeling unsure of what to think about Dirk in my kitchen, I turned and grabbed a package of whole wheat bread and pulled out two slices for him.

“Don’t tell me you don’t like bread anymore.”

With a smile, I got out a pack of English muffins.

“Muffins are my jam now. I keep the bread for Michael.”

He laughed, and I loved how it filled the kitchen. For one stupid, crazy moment, I dreamed of what life with him would be like. Us in our kitchen making breakfast with maybe one or two little kids running around at our feet. Dirk laughing and telling them to behave while I pulled homemade blueberry muffins out of the oven.

I sighed. That’s all it would ever be, a dream.

I shook off the silly notion. This was Dirk. He wasn’t the type of man who made those kinds of promises or had any desire to live that kind of life. He was happy doing what he did, and that was bull riding and picking up women.

After I placed the muffins in the toaster next to his bread, I made my way to the refrigerator and pulled out the orange juice. I searched for two glasses and poured us each some. After a few moments of silence, I asked, “You seriously don’t have a hangover?”

“I might have a slight headache. I haven’t drunk that much in a long time,” he replied as he took the glass of orange juice I offered him.

After taking a sip, I turned and opened the refrigerator once more and took out the butter and grabbed the lemon curd for my English muffin. A minute later his toast popped up, followed by my muffin.

I watched him as he took the toast and muffin out and then looked at me. “Butter?”

“Yes, please.”

“What the hell is the yellow stuff?” he asked as I handed him the butter.

“Lemon curd. It’s delicious.” He curled his lip, and I laughed. “You haven’t even tried it, so why are you making that face?”

“Anything with the word ‘curd’ in it is a hard pass for me. Sorry.”

I shrugged and slid onto the barstool that was at the kitchen island. I loved how open and big my kitchen was. Such a far cry from my place in New York City. I had forgotten how nice it was to have my own space, especially after living at home with my folks for so many months.

“Well, you’re missing out,” I stated.

“I’ll take my chances.”

My pulse raced a bit faster as I watched Dirk move around the kitchen like a pro. He’d already found the plates and was putting the eggs on them as well as a few slices of bacon for each of us. He grabbed my muffins, put them on my plate, and then placed it in front of me.

With a soft chuckle, I asked, “Wow. Are you fast at everything you do?”

He took a bite of bacon, then winked before he replied, “I’m not fast at everything.”

Lord, how my lower stomach clenched at his words. I acted as if they didn’t have any effect on me whatsoever.

We ate in silence for a few minutes before I asked, “How are you doing, Dirk?”

“Fine.”

That one word held zero emotion in it, and I knew he was far from fine. Last night proved that. A small part of me thought that if I told him about the baby, it would take his mind off of his father. Give him something else to focus on. The other part of me knew that the moment I told him everything would change—just like it had that night back in high school. And honestly, I wasn’t sure where things stood

between us. Dirk didn't want a family, and he was in no way ready to be tied down. He would hate me for being the person to change his life like that, and that wasn't something I was ready to face. Besides, he needed time to mourn his father's death first.

"It's okay if you're not fine, you know."

His gaze met mine, and we stayed locked like that for a good minute. I could feel my breathing deepen slightly.

Then, he whispered, "Those eyes."

I lifted a brow. "What about them?"

He seemed almost mesmerized by my eyes. A lot of people were, though, considering they were a very rare color of violet.

"It feels like when you look at me, you're trying to look into my soul, Merit."

Butterflies swarmed in my stomach, and I had to pull in a slow, deep breath to calm myself. "And if I was, what would I see?" I softly asked.

For a moment I thought he was going to lean over and kiss me. I steeled myself for it, but it never came.

"Most likely a lot of regret."

"Regret?" I asked, raising one brow in question. "Regret about what?"

He sighed and shook his head as he stared down at his food. "Merit, I regret that night that we—"

His phone rang, and he pulled it out and glanced at the name. My breath stilled at the name that came up. *Kaylee*.

Without a second thought, he accepted the call. "Hey, good morning, darlin'."

Suddenly, my appetite was gone. Once again I was pushed to the side for someone else. I slid off the stool and dumped my food in the trashcan and then rinsed my plate and put it in the dishwasher.

What night had he been talking about? Back in high school, or when we were together in his truck? Guess it didn't matter since Kaylee calling trumped the rest of what he was going to say.

My mind raced as I heard bits and pieces of Dirk telling Kaylee what happened the night before. He drank too much, he didn't want to go home, so he crashed at my house.

"If Ty can't figure out how to put the baby crib together, I'm sure I can," he said with a lighthearted laugh.

The glass I had been holding nearly slipped from my hands. Instead of putting it in the dishwasher, I placed it in the sink and then turned to Dirk. "Let yourself out, I'm going for a run."

He frowned, and as I turned to walk away, I heard him say, "Kaylee, I need to go. I'll talk to you later, but don't worry, I'm fine. Okay. Bye."

I was almost to the front door when he called out for me. "Merit! Wait. You didn't even finish your breakfast."

"I'm full."

He walked up to me, standing between me and the door. "You can't be; you hardly ate a damn thing."

"I'm fine, Dirk, you don't need to worry about me. If you need to go help Kaylee with something, you can use my car. I'll have Michael drive me over to pick it up at your house later."

A deep frown formed between his brows. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," I lied. I inwardly cursed when I heard the crack in my voice.

He searched my face with his eyes. "You're upset about me helping Kaylee."

"I'm fine, and even if there was something wrong, I'm very capable of handling it on my own."

He nodded, and his eyes drifted down to my mouth. “I’m sure you are.”

I squared my shoulders and lifted my chin. I was furious at myself for being jealous. Of what, I had no freaking idea. But I couldn’t lie to myself and say it didn’t sting knowing Dirk and Kaylee now had what I used to have with him. Kaylee had clearly become my replacement, and I hated it. That ugly beast of jealousy gripped me tighter. It was clear that when it came to Kaylee, he put her first. He had obviously felt like it was more important to take her call than it was to tell me about whatever freaking night he was about to bring up.

Again, I had been pushed to the back.

I cleared my throat to keep it from shaking. “Let me know about the car later, will you?”

When I went to walk around him, he blocked me once more. “Why did you bring me here last night?”

Panic suddenly filled my entire body, and I found it hard to breathe. I had been asking myself that very question since we stepped into my house. Why had I brought him here? What in the world did I think would happen?

My voice trembled. “Wh-what?”

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly in a sexy-as-sin smirk. “Why did you bring me home last night, Bugs?”

“Stop calling me that!” I practically shouted.

“Fine, why did you bring me home last night, Merit?”

“You didn’t want to go back to your house. You were drunk out of your mind, Dirk. If your mother had seen you—or anyone else, for that matter—God knows what they would have thought. I mean, I’m sure they wouldn’t have blamed you, but you were hiding in Ty Senior’s office drinking with your cousin.”

He looked confused. “My cousin?”

Suddenly I felt sick and forced myself to swallow the lump in my throat. “She wasn’t your cousin, was she? Were you

honestly going to have sex with someone in Ty Senior's office? At your father's memorial?"

His eyes looked as if he was replaying last night over in his head. "What in the hell are you even talking about?"

"Ugh! You'll never change, Dirk Littlewood. Never!" I placed my hands on his chest and pushed him with all my might.

He grabbed onto my wrists and pulled me to him, then spun us around and pushed me against the front door. "Stop talking for five fucking seconds, and let me think! What was her name?"

I was positive my mouth gaped open. "What? Do you honestly think I want to talk about your...your..."

"What. Was. Her. Name, Merit?"

I clenched my jaw tight before I hissed out the name. "Sarah."

Recognition hit him—and then he laughed. "Sarah. She's my aunt's daughter. That's right, she stumbled into the office in hopes to get away as well."

"She really was your cousin?"

A slow, devilish smile spread over his face. He licked his lips in the most sensual way I'd ever seen, and I felt my knees wobble ever so slightly. "Were you jealous, Bugs?"

I growled in frustration, but it only made his eyes turn darker, and he pressed harder against my body. I could feel his erection, and my entire body buzzed with excitement. God, these damn pregnancy hormones.

"Merit," he whispered. "Were you jealous?"

"Of course not," I spat back at him a little too quickly.

He leaned in, and I felt myself still. I was afraid if I moved, I would give in to the urge to kiss him. Feel him closer, all over every part of my body. The urge to tell him I was carrying his child was so strong in that moment.

“I think you were, but you have nothing to worry about, sweetheart. You’ve got me so fucking twisted up as it is, the last thing I want to do is add another woman to the mix.”

My mind felt muddled, and I stared at him. “What?” I asked.

His hot breath landed on my face and neck, causing me to draw in a quick breath of air. “You heard me...Merit. You have me so confused.”

My name coming off this man’s lips sounded wicked. He leaned down and kissed the very edge of my mouth, and I had to resist the urge to lift my arms and wrap them around his neck.

“I think it’s sexy that you were jealous,” he whispered.

“I...I wasn’t jealous,” I stammered out. Even I thought it sounded like a lie.

“No?”

“No!” I forced out.

He let out a low, sexy laugh. “Then why are you running away from me?”

I opened my mouth to answer him, but then quickly snapped it shut.

Dirk softly placed a kiss on the other side of my mouth, and for a moment, I wanted to turn my head ever so slightly so he could kiss me on the lips and end this foreplay. But I needed to stop this before it went any further.

Suddenly, the phone call came back to mind. I placed my hands on his chest and pushed at him. “I believe Kaylee is waiting for you to put a baby crib together.”

Dirk paused and then drew his head back to look at me. He dropped his hold on my arms, and then took a few steps back, looking confused as he stared at me. “Kaylee’s just a friend.”

His voice had suddenly turned oddly cold. Memories of him defending Kaci rushed back in an instant. My body, once warmed from his touch, turned to ice.

I gave him a forced smile. “I never said otherwise.”

I turned and opened the door, but he reached out and pushed it shut again.

“You do realize she’s happily married, right?” he bit out.

Slowly, I turned and faced him. With a tilt of my head, I studied him for a brief second before I said with a sarcastic laugh, “Funny, I was going to ask you the very same question.”

Shock registered on his face, and his hand dropped away from the doorknob. I took that moment to make my escape. I yanked open the front door and slammed it behind me as I walked out of my house, my heartbeat hammering in my ears.

Without so much as a glance over my shoulder, I started my run, putting as much distance as I could between my heart and Dirk.

Chapter Fifteen

DIRK

I stared at the door as I stood there, trying to figure out what in the hell just happened. Did Merit think I had feelings for Kaylee?

My phone buzzed in my back pocket, and I pulled it out to see Brock calling. “Hey, Brock.”

“How are you feeling this morning?”

“Fine,” I lied.

He cleared his throat. “Ohhhokay. Are you still at Merit’s?”

I stilled for a moment before I turned and headed over to the sofa to put my shoes on. “How did you know I was here?”

He laughed. “I was the one who helped put your drunk ass into her car.”

I sighed. “Right. Is there any way you could come and pick me up?”

There was silence for a moment before he answered. “Sure, but where’s Merit?”

“She went for a run. Um, she said I could use her car, but I don’t want to leave her stuck.”

“Sure, I’ll be there in a bit.”

I brought my hand to the back of my neck and rubbed at my throbbing temples. “Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“Sure thing, Dirk. See you soon.”

“See ya.”

I ended the call and then stood and looked around the living room. Merit’s house was nice, and I was glad she’d bought it. The great room, breakfast area, and the kitchen were all pretty much open to each other. I glanced up and saw wood beams that ran across the living room and wondered if Merit had added those, or if they came with the house. The simple

farmhouse-style of the place screamed Merit. Or, at least, the Merit I used to know.

As I made my way toward the kitchen, I took a moment to look around. Everything was neat and in its place. The house was spotless. The kitchen looked like it had totally been remodeled, with brand-new white cabinets and a large island in the middle that had three stools. I walked over and started to clean up the mess I'd made so I didn't leave Merit with it later.

After I rinsed everything off and placed it into the dishwasher, I wiped down the black countertops. I reached for an apple from the fruit bowl that was sitting in the center and tossed it into the air before catching it. Then something caught my eye on the other side of the kitchen, and I walked over to investigate. I picked up the brochure and felt my brows pull in tightly as I read the title.

“French Travel Connection,” I whispered.

Was Merit going to France? And who in the hell was she going with? I looked down and saw another French brochure, and under that was another piece of paper with French names written on it. Under all those names was one I recognized.

Chris Warren.

I looked up and then over toward the front door. Was Merit going to Paris with her ex?

Anger like I'd never known boiled up inside of me as I put the brochures down. I took out my phone and took a picture of all the towns she'd written down. I had no idea why I did it, but I did. My phone buzzed in my hand with a text from Brock, saying he was here.

After quickly looking around, I didn't see anything to write a note to Merit with. I pulled up my texts and sent her one.

Me: Thanks for letting me crash at your place last night. I appreciate it.

The sound of a phone going off caused me to turn, and I saw Merit's cell on the stool she'd been sitting on.

“Damn it, Merit,” I said as I walked over and picked it up. I shook my head and set the phone in the middle of the island.

Then, I headed out. She had a keyless entry on her front door, so I locked it and jogged down to Brock’s truck. I opened the passenger door and slid in.

“Why are you frowning so hard?” he asked.

“She went for a run without her damn phone. What if something happens to her?”

Brock laughed. “I’m sure Merit will be fine. She lived in New York City, after all.”

“She should still have her phone,” I grumbled.

Brock put his truck in drive and started down Merit’s driveway. “Wanna tell me how you’re *actually* doing today, Dirk?”

“I’m fine. I just need to keep my mind busy.”

“Your truck is still at my folks’ place. Do you want to go and pick it up?” Brock asked as I stared out the window.

“Yeah, that’s fine. I think I’m going to head back home. I shouldn’t have left Mom alone last night. It was a selfish thing to do.”

“You can’t beat yourself up for having your own grief. Your mama knows you’re there for her if she needs you, trust me.”

All I could do was nod. A lump suddenly formed in my throat, and I turned to look back out the window.

“So, how did it go last night?” Brock asked with a touch of amusement in his voice.

“What do you mean?”

Brock laughed. “You stayed the night with Merit.”

“Nothing happened. I passed out on her sofa, and then this morning I woke up and made breakfast. Everything seemed fine, and then all of sudden she couldn’t get out of her house and away from me fast enough.”

“Really? That doesn’t really sound like Merit.”

I shrugged. “Well, she’s not exactly the eighteen-year-old girl we once knew.”

“That’s true. What do you think was wrong? Did you get in an argument or something?”

“No. That’s just it. I think she got spooked. We were starting to have a moment or something, and then Kaylee called and Merit just bolted out of her seat, dumped her breakfast, and announced she was going for a run.”

Brock remained silent, and I turned to face him. He wore a look on his face that said he wanted to say something but wasn’t sure he should.

“What? Say what you want to say, Brock.”

He turned to look at me. “Okay, I will. Why did you take the call?”

I gave him a confused look. “What do you mean, why did I take the call? Kaylee was calling, why *wouldn’t* I take the call?”

He shook his head before he focused back on the road. “You wouldn’t take it because you were having—what did you say?—a moment with Merit. I’m just saying, if that had been me and Lincoln, I would have chosen to focus on the conversation I was having with the woman standing in front of me. Cuz if I didn’t, Lincoln would have my ass.”

I stared at him as anger boiled up inside of me. “What exactly are you trying to fucking say, Brock? That I picked Kaylee over Merit?”

He didn’t answer, only shrugged his shoulder.

“That’s fucking ridiculous,” I spat out. But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Especially when Merit’s words came back to me.

“I was going to ask you the very same question.”

After a few moments of silence, I cursed under my breath. “I think Merit thinks I have feelings for Kaylee.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it, but there have been a few times when Kaylee is around that Merit acts...different. Then today, she said something about me leaving to go help Kaylee. I heard the bitterness in her voice, and I asked her if she realized that Kaylee and I were just friends. She said she was going to ask me the same question.”

Brock turned down the drive to the Shaw ranch and waited for the gate to open. “Dirk, is anything going on between you and Merit?”

“No,” I quickly said and then scrubbed my hands down my face. “Hell, I don’t know. She has this effect on me, Brock. She always has, and when we were younger, I was able to brush it aside and say I couldn’t feel that way about her because we were friends.”

“Can you no longer do that?”

I let out a long breath. “I’m not sure about anything anymore, and honestly, I don’t have the energy to think about it right now.”

Brock didn’t say anything as we drove down the drive to his folks’ house. He pulled up and parked, and I got out and stared at my truck. The idea of going back home made me feel sick, but I knew I had to for my mother.

“You want me to go over there with you?” Brock asked.

“Nah,” I said as I shook my head. “I need to be strong for Mom. I’ll be fine.”

Brock placed his hand on my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “I know I’ve said this before, but if you need me, I’m here. Anytime.”

I felt my body sag slightly before I forced myself to stand tall. “I know, and I appreciate it more than you know, Brock.”

He gave me a smile and then a slap on the back. “And Dirk, it’s okay if you have feelings for Merit.”

I frowned and shook my head. I had no idea what was going on with me and Merit right now. I wasn’t even sure I

wanted a relationship. At least until I got my head together. I felt like I was sifting through a plethora of emotions, and I couldn't take anything else on. The last thing I needed was Brock or Kaylee trying to push me right now. So, I said the first thing I could think of to get him to stop pushing as far as Merit was concerned.

“The last thing I want—or need—right now is a relationship with Merit.”

The sound of someone gasping caused me to turn—only to see Merit and Timberlynn standing there.

My eyes bounced from Timberlynn, who looked utterly stunned, to Merit, who had a blank expression on her face. A feeling of dread washed over me as I realized she had heard me.

“Merit,” I whispered, before she quickly turned and headed over toward the main stables. “What are you doing here? I thought you...you went for a run,” I called out to her.

Timberlynn's expression turned to pure evil, and if I didn't know better, I'd think that she wanted to rip my balls off and shove them down my throat.

Merit stopped and turned back to me. She looked so defeated in that moment, and it took everything I had not to walk up to her and pull her into my arms. When she started to speak, she sounded void of all emotion. “Um, Timberlynn passed by while I was running, and we drove back for me to take a look at Milo.”

“Milo?” I asked.

“A horse,” Merit replied. “If you'll excuse me.” She turned and quickly headed to the barn once again.

Timberlynn shook her head and started to walk backward toward the barn. “She's better off without you.” And with that, she headed off in the same direction as Merit.

Brock came up and stood next to me as he let out a sigh.

I motioned with my hand at the two retreating women. “This is why I don't do relationships. I'm out of here.”

“Dirk—” Brock started to say.

“I don’t need this shit right now, Brock. Not from her, not from anyone. She’s been acting strange, and honestly, I can’t deal with it right now. Not *now*.”

Brock looked as if he wanted to tell me something, but all he did was nod. “Okay. If you need anything, you’ll call, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll call.”

I climbed into my truck and took another glance in the direction where Merit had headed. Something inside my chest ached, but I ignored the feeling and drove down the driveway. I had no idea where I was going, I just knew it wasn’t home.

Chapter Sixteen

MERIT

I stared at the screen in stunned silence as I watched the strange little bean move around.

“Yep, looks like you’re about seven weeks’ pregnant, Merit,” Janice said as she smiled at the ultrasound screen. Janice and I had been high school friends, so it was a no brainer I would book an appointment with her. While I went to New York for college, she went to college at Montana State University and became an OB/GYN. Her practice was fairly new, though, as she had only recently moved back to Hamilton to open it. “Her heart rate is beating at a strong one-hundred-and-fifty beats per minute.”

“H-her?” I whispered.

“Well, it’s too early to say. I simply don’t like calling a baby *it*. So one day I use ‘her’, the next, ‘him’.”

I smiled as I looked from Janice back to the ultrasound screen.

“Let’s listen to her heart,” she said.

Suddenly the room was filled with the sound of a rapidly beating heart. Janice kept moving around as I watched my baby.

“That’s her heartbeat?” I asked, tears now streaming down my face.

Janice laughed and then typed on the screen, “Hi, Mom and Dad, here I am.”

It felt like my heart split in two when she said “Dad,” and I cried a bit more. Janice turned to look at me and frowned.

Janice looked over at the nurse and smiled. “Mindy, would you mind giving us a few moments, please?” Janice removed the wand and cleaned me up.

The nurse nodded and replied, “Of course, Doctor Lewis.”

Once the door quietly clicked shut, Janice looked at me. “No dad?”

I wiped at my tears. “I haven’t told him yet.”

“Oh, Merit. You’ll be two months’ pregnant soon, why haven’t you told him?”

I closed my eyes and let out a humorless laugh. “Let’s see. He doesn’t want to settle down. He just lost his father last week and, oh yeah, he said I was the last person he wanted to have a relationship with. I’m sure you can figure out why I’m not in a rush to tell him.”

“Dirk Littlewood?”

I opened my eyes and stared at her. “How did you know?”

“You gave it away with his father passing.”

I shook my head and dropped it back down onto the pillow. “I don’t know what to do, Janice. I’m afraid he’s going to think I did this on purpose.”

She motioned for me to sit up, and I did as I adjusted the paper cloth over me.

“Got pregnant on purpose? I hate to tell you this, but it takes two to make that happen.”

With a groan, I covered my face with my hands and then dropped them to my sides. “It’s complicated. I don’t need him to be there for us.”

“Maybe not, but he does have the right to know. To be present for things like this. Do you really want to experience this all alone?”

I felt tears spill once more. “God, I’m so emotional. What is it with all the crying?”

Janice gave me a soft smile. “It’s called being pregnant. It only gets worse the further along you get. Now, back to my question.”

I sighed. “Of course I don’t want to do this alone. I also don’t want to force him into an instant family. I mean, not that we would get married—I know that would never happen.”

“Why not? You and Dirk used to be so close.”

With a disbelieving chuckle, I said, “Have you kept up on the gossip in town? Or watched his career?”

She shook her head. “Can’t say I have. I know he’s pretty good at riding the bulls, like the Shaw brothers. I never really paid much attention to them in high school.”

“Yeah, well, he’s the current world champion, and he seems to leave a string of one-night stands in his wake.”

Her brow rose. “Ahh, now I see. Was it a one-night stand?”

I looked at her with a grimace. “I don’t know what it was, if I’m being honest.”

“Well, something happened between the two of you, or you wouldn’t be sitting here.”

I couldn’t argue with that. I simply nodded.

“Regardless, you have to tell him, Merit. He should at least decide if he wants to be a part of this child’s life.”

I sighed “I will. It’s just that I don’t know *how* to tell him.”

Janice took my hand and squeezed it. “You’ll figure it out, but do it quick. You don’t want him to resent you for keeping this a secret for too long.”

My stomach dropped at the idea of Dirk being angry with me for keeping this from him. I looked back at the picture. “Can you type just ‘hi’ and maybe an arrow pointing to her?”

“Of course I can!” Janice said as she deleted what she’d typed and then wrote in *Hi, it’s baby here!*

“Let me take a few measurements, and I’ll send the images to you, as well as print some out for you to take home.”

“Thank you,” I said as I wiped my tears away and took in a few deep breaths.

“I’ll give you a few minutes to get dressed again. You’re my last patient of the day, so do you want to go grab a bite to eat and catch up?”

I smiled. "I'd love to."

Thirty minutes later, Janice and I walked into Nap's Grill. The smell of something cooking on the grill hit me, and my stomach growled.

"Looks like someone's hungry," Janice said with a chuckle.

The hostess walked up with a bright smile on her face. "Just the two of you?"

"Yes, thank you," Janice replied.

As we walked through the restaurant and into the side area, a strange feeling came over me. I paused for a moment before I kept walking.

Janice noticed and looked back at me. "You okay? Feeling sick?"

I laughed and shook it off. "Yeah—I mean, no. I'm fine."

As we were taken over to one of the booths and I slid in, I looked around the restaurant. Sitting down and across from us was Dirk. And Kaylee.

Dirk's eyes met mine, and I felt my breath catch in my throat. It had only been a couple of days since I overheard him talking to Brock, but it seemed like a lifetime.

I quickly looked away from him and at Janice. "We should go somewhere else."

She gave me a befuddled look. "You suggested this place. Why the change of heart?"

I felt the color drain from my face, and I swallowed hard.

Her brows rose and she whispered, "He's here?"

With a nod, I went to slide back out of the booth.

"Merit!"

The sound of Kaylee calling out my name gave me pause, and I looked at the door for a moment as I thought about bolting.

I lifted my hand and waved. Kaylee pushed out of the chair and made her way over to me. More like waddled.

“Hey, it’s good seeing you. Why don’t y’all join us?” Kaylee said as she smiled and looked between me and Janice.

I glanced over at Dirk, then back to Kaylee.

“Ty is grabbing him and Dirk a couple more beers.” She turned to look at Janice and then peeked at me.

“Oh, um, this is Janice Lewis,” I said. “She’s an old friend from high school. We ran into each other.”

Janice looked at me with wide eyes before she turned her attention to Kaylee. “It’s, um, a pleasure to meet you. We’re actually talking business. Merit is helping me plan a trip out to her family’s farm for my nieces and nephews next month for elderberry picking, but thank you so much for the invite.”

A wide smile grew across Kaylee’s face. She really was the sweetest person, and I hated that I harbored jealousy toward her. It wasn’t her fault Dirk and I were no longer close like we used to be. It wasn’t her fault Dirk dropped everything for her. She was very much in love with her husband, and anyone could see that.

“Oh, they’ll have so much fun picking the berries!” Kaylee stated. Then she turned back to me. “Were you going to the restroom? I have to pee like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Ahh...” I looked at Janice, who shrugged ever so slightly. “Yes...I was.” I dropped my purse back onto the seat and gave Janice a quick glance that said I was sorry, but it looked like we were staying. “I’ll take a water if the waitress stops by.”

Janice smiled. “Got it.”

Not daring to look at Dirk, I walked next to Kaylee as we headed to the bathroom.

“So, you only have a few more weeks. Are you ready?” I asked.

She sighed. “I’m so, so ready! I’ve loved being pregnant, don’t get me wrong. It’s been the most amazing time for me and Ty. I feel like it’s made us even closer, if that’s possible.”

I forced myself to smile. “That’s nice.”

“We finally got the baby room finished, and now we’re just waiting.”

“I’m sure Ty is excited. I’m sure you both are.”

We used the restroom and then stood in front of the sinks as we washed our hands. Then I found myself saying the one thing I didn’t want to. I’d already said it once before, and I knew if I said it again it would make me seem like a jealous idiot.

“You and Dirk seem pretty close.”

Her eyes met mine in the mirror. “He’s been a good friend. That’s all we’ve ever been, though, friends. There’s never been an attraction there.”

I smiled and tried like hell to make it genuine. I knew there wasn’t anything between them. I was jealous of the friendship they shared. How in the hell was I supposed to explain that to her when I couldn’t even figure it out myself? “Well, I better get back to Janice. It was nice seeing you, Kaylee. Enjoy your lunch with Ty and Dirk.”

When I turned to leave, Kaylee reached for my arm. “Merit, you believe me, don’t you?”

“I’m sorry?” I asked.

“About Dirk. Nothing has ever happened between us. He’s like the brother I never had.”

“You don’t owe me any explanations, Kaylee. None at all.”

She smiled and then let out a little laugh. “I promised Lincoln and Timberlynn I would stay out of this, but, Merit, you have to see the way he looks at you. Surely you have to know how he feels about you.”

I shook my head and sighed. “Kaylee, I heard with my own ears, straight out of Dirk’s mouth, that he isn’t looking for a relationship with me. And our past is very...complicated.”

“Why? What happened between you?”

My eyes stung, and I cursed these damn hormones. “It’s not what happened between us, it’s who came between us.”

“Who?” she asked before she pieced it together. “Kaci?”

I gave her a wobbly smile and cleared my throat. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to go.”

I quickly spun on my heels, reached for the door, and bolted out of the bathroom like the damn coward I was.



“You know, if you move that food around just enough, you might be able to make a picture.”

I laughed and placed my fork down. “I’m sorry, Janice.”

“You don’t need to say you’re sorry. This is hard, I get it. Have you thought about talking to anyone?”

“What do you mean?” I asked as I leaned back in the booth and stared at her.

“A therapist. Merit, I may have been absent for a number of years, but I do remember how close you were to not only Dirk, but to his family. How are you handling Brad’s death?”

I blew out a breath and chanced a peek at Dirk. He was smiling at something Ty was saying, but even from this distance I could see the emptiness on his face.

“Fine. I guess,” I said as I shrugged. “I think about him not knowing this baby, and that breaks my heart. I think about how lost he must feel. And how I have my own issues with *my* father. But that’s a story for another day.”

Janice nodded. “Well, right now, as your doctor *and* your friend, I’m worried about you. Stress isn’t good during a pregnancy. I’m going to send you the name of someone I know here in town. If it all becomes too much, please call her.”

I went to speak and tell her it wasn’t necessary when she held up her hand. “You don’t have to go and talk to them if

you don't want to. I'm simply asking you to keep their number handy."

"I'll take the number, but I'm not promising anything."

The corner of her mouth rose as if she believed she had won this round. "I forgot to tell you, you'll want to take prenatal vitamins, so I'll call that in for you when I get back to the office. Start those as soon as you can."

I nodded as I bit down on my bottom lip. "Okay, will do. Any certain diet I should follow?"

She shook her head and popped the last of her French fries into her mouth. "No, not really. You seem to be in really good shape. I will ask that you go from running to walking."

I lifted a brow. "Really? Okay."

"It's okay to run since you mentioned you've been doing it for years, but I personally believe walking is better on your body. Eat lots of fruits and veggies, it'll be good for you both."

"Merit."

Dirk's voice had me nearly jumping out of my own damn skin. I looked up to see him standing there, staring down at me with a concerned expression etched on his face.

For a moment, I forgot how to talk. "D-Dirk."

It was all I could say. Panic welled up inside of me as I wondered how much of that conversation he had heard.

Dirk's eyes moved from me to Janice. "Janice...Janice Lewis, right?"

Janice raised a single brow. "I'm impressed you remembered me."

Dirk laughed. "You were on the cheerleading team with Merit and..."

His voice trailed off, and I knew he had been about to say Kaci's name.

"Kaci?" Janice supplied for him. "I sure was."

Dirk looked between the two of us, then focused back on Janice. “I heard you went to medical school.”

My pulse raced, and it felt like my throat was closing up. It was hard to breathe.

“I did. I have a practice here in town now.”

He nodded.

“Janice and I ran into each other and decided to have lunch,” I lied. Lord, that lie came off my lips way too easily. I needed to tell Dirk, and soon, because I honestly couldn’t stand lying to him. One look at Janice, and I felt even worse. She was frowning at me like a mother would, catching their child doing something naughty.

“Are you free after lunch, Merit? To talk?” Dirk asked me.

“To talk?” I asked, my voice sounding a bit off, even to me.

Janice slid out of the booth. “I was actually leaving, so please feel free to take my seat.”

I nearly shouted for Janice to sit back down. Instead, I pressed my lips closed tightly and watched as she grabbed the check.

“Lunch was on me. I’ll see you...um...soon. I’ll call you about that little matter we talked about.”

Not really knowing which matter she was referring to, I simply nodded and replied, “Okay, sounds good.”

“I didn’t mean to run you off, Janice,” Dirk said with that smile of his.

“No worries, Dirk, I need to get back to the office and catch up on some paperwork.”

As Janice started to leave, she looked back and gave me a reassuring smile and a nod.

Dirk sat down, and I frowned as the smell of alcohol came at me in a cloud. I turned and got a really good look at him.

“How much have you had to drink today?” I asked.

His head jerked back in surprise, and he laughed. “Wow. Okay, Mom.”

I looked down at my half-eaten lunch, and then out around the restaurant.

“I’m sorry, Merit. It’s been a rough few days,” Dirk said.

I met his eyes once more and I nodded. “Are you doing okay?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes, of course.”

He shook his head. “No, I’m not.”

Everything in me wanted to reach across the table and take his hand in mine, but I sat on them instead. “I’m sorry, Dirk. I called your mom this morning and asked if she needed anything. She said no.”

He nodded and then nervously looked around before he brought his attention back to me. “About the other day, when I said that to Brock—”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, cutting him off and attempting to laugh it away.

He cleared his throat. “It’s just, I’m feeling really lost right now and unsure of things. So many things.”

“What do you mean?”

My heart ached as I watched him. He looked so full of sadness, and there wasn’t anything I could do. Well, I could tell him about the baby, but I didn’t think that bit of news would bring him any joy. Only pressure him into feelings he wasn’t ready for.

“Everything has changed since...since Dad died. I don’t... I don’t really know what my future holds right now.” He rubbed the back of his neck and let out a gruff laugh. “Hell, I don’t even want to climb onto the back of a bull ever again.”

That made me sit up in surprise. “You love bull riding, Dirk.”

His eyes looked even sadder than they had a few moments ago. “Right now, my only concerns are my mother and the ranch. I need to be here for her. Focus on her and only her.”

I slowly shook my head. That was a clear-enough message. “Are you saying you’re walking away from the PBR?”

He cleared his throat once more. “For now. Just until I can get things settled at home with her and the ranch, then I’ll probably start up again. But I’m taking the rest of this year off. I spoke with my sponsors this morning, and they understood I needed the time.”

I jerked my head back slightly, shocked from his little bombshell. “I-I don’t know what to say.”

He shrugged. “Nothing to say. I did want to apologize for the other day. I was just upset.”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for. It’s not like I was under the illusion we had something going on.”

Dirk nodded and added, “No, no, we don’t have anything going on.”

His words of agreement made me flinch, and I was hit with the urge to throw up. He looked at me like he noticed my reaction, and I glanced down at my hands now in my lap. I wasn’t sure what I had expected. Him to confess his undying love for me? Maybe to tell me he needed me to help him get through all of this. He might have needed me in the hospital, but clearly he didn’t now.

If only he knew how much I needed him.

Before I lost control of the tears that were stinging the back of my eyes, I grabbed my purse and started to slide out of the booth. “Well, I should get going. I’ll see you later, Dirk.”

I felt him behind me as I made my way through the restaurant. I prayed he wasn’t going to follow me outside.

“When are you going to France?”

I stilled for a moment before I turned and looked at him. “What?”

“France, I saw the brochure. You’re going with your ex, or your current boyfriend, I don’t know what he is to you. I saw his name, so assumed you were going with him.”

My entire body shivered, and I suddenly felt cold. I reached up and ran my hand over my other arm in an attempt to warm up, even though it was mid-July and hot out. Dirk thought I was going to France with Chris? I felt my face screw up into a confused look. “I’m not seeing him and haven’t seen him in months. We don’t even talk.”

Something moved across his face. “Oh, sorry, I assumed.”

“The brochure was old. I found it and actually started to list some dream cities I’d like to go to. Chris and I had once planned on going to France, but I backed out.”

He smiled, then looked away for a moment before he turned back to me. “You should go.”

I gave a shake of my head. “Things in my life have changed; I’m not able to jet off to France and take a little tour.”

Dirk took a step closer to me, and I froze. I hadn’t realized how much I wanted to feel him so close to me. To feel his arms around me and his mouth on mine. I nearly moaned thinking about it.

“Is it money? Bugs, I told you I could help you with the farm.”

It felt like someone had thrown ice water on my body. I took a step away from him and clenched my fists tightly. I suddenly felt so damn angry, I wanted to scream. “No, it has nothing to do with money. And I already told you, I don’t need your money, Dirk.”

He nodded and shoved his hands into his pockets. “Well, then, if there’s anything I can do to help, I hope you’ll let me know.”

Tears filled my eyes, and I had to blink rapidly to keep from crying.

Dirk noticed, and he placed his hands on my shoulders and bent down to look at me. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

I shook my head and then twisted out of his embrace as I took a few steps back from him. “I’m sorry, I-I need to go.”

Turning on my heels, I quickly headed down the street. I had to force myself to walk calmly and not run as fast as I could. Because that was exactly what I wanted to do. Run as fast and as far away as I could all over again.

Chapter Seventeen

DIRK

I brought Percy to a stop when I saw my mother making her way to the barn. I had saddled up my favorite paint horse for a much-needed ride, for both of us. Now I jumped off him and made my way toward my mother.

She looked better today, after what I hoped was a good night's sleep. At least she had some color back in her face. It had been three weeks since my father had passed away, and I thought the ache in my chest would have eased by now, but it hadn't. At times it almost felt unbearable. I worked around the ranch nonstop to keep my mind busy, and by the end of each day I was so exhausted, I fell into bed and tried to sleep. Thoughts of my mother and Merit plagued me, though, and I was lucky if I got four hours of rest a night.

"Hey, you're up early," I said as I leaned down and kissed her.

"You let me sleep in, and I had a ton of things to do around this place before lunch today. Have the sheep been fed?"

I started making my way to the barn to unsaddle Percy and hose him down. "Yes, ma'am."

She raised a brow. "The goats? Chickens?"

"All have full bellies."

A smile slowly spread across her face. "Thank you, sweetheart. I should probably look at hiring some more ranch hands to help out around here."

"You don't need to do that, Mom. I'm perfectly capable of handling the chores, and we already have Steve and Josh," I said as I started to take the saddle off of Percy. It was about that time Josh rounded the corner.

"Good ride?" he asked me.

I smiled. "Yeah, I needed it."

He gave me a knowing look. Josh had been working for my father for the last five years. He knew this ranch probably better than any of us, with the exception of my father.

“Let me take care of him, Dirk.” Josh reached for the reins.

“You sure?” I asked, never wanting to take advantage of Josh or Steve. Just because I owned this ranch didn’t mean these guys were here to serve me.

He winked. “I’m sure. Spend some time with your mother.”

With a quick nod, I turned and walked over to where my mother was inspecting some of the sheep.

“Once you go back to riding, the boys and I will need some extra help. I won’t let this ranch go under—it wouldn’t be what your father wanted.”

My stomach jerked at the mention of my dad. “It won’t go under, because I’ll be here.”

Her eyes went wide as she turned to look at me. I leaned against the fence with my arms crossed, waiting for her to question me. I had decided the day after my father died that I would be taking off the rest of this year from the PBR—if not longer—and focusing on the ranch and helping my mother.

“What do you mean, Dirk?”

“I mean exactly what I said. I should have been home instead of out messing around on those bulls. My priorities weren’t straight, but they are now. I’m here, Mom. I’ll take over where Dad left off.”

Her hands went to her hips, and she gave me that look she had perfected when I was a little boy. The one that said I was about to get a serious talking to. “That is the last thing your father would have wanted you to do, son. He wanted you to follow your dreams. He never once asked you to give any of them up for the ranch.”

“That’s the problem—he never felt like he could ask. He worried I would resent him, so he never spoke up. He needed

me here. If I had been here that day instead of bull riding, he might be alive right now.”

A look of horror crossed her face, and her hand came up to her mouth. Then, after a few moments, she dropped her hand to her side. “Do not for one minute think that would have made a difference! It was an accident, sweetheart. That’s all. It wasn’t your daddy’s fault; it wasn’t your fault or mine. It was an *accident*, Dirk.”

The last thing I wanted to do was get my mother upset, and I could see this conversation would do just that. “Okay, Mom. I’m sorry I got you upset.”

She closed her eyes and drew in a few deep breaths. “Let’s talk about this later, okay?”

She didn’t need to know it was already a done deal. “Okay.”

“Lori is coming over today. We’re going to be doing some canning.”

The mention of Merit’s mother had me pushing off the fence and turning to face my mom. “Is Merit coming, too?”

She smiled, and I knew what that smile meant. Nothing would make my mother, or Lori, happier than to see me and Merit get together. I swear, the two of them started planning a wedding between us the moment we were born.

“No. Would you like for me to ask her to come over?”

The last thing I wanted to do was raise my mother’s suspicions by telling her I didn’t want to see Merit. She didn’t need to know that every time I saw Merit lately, I ached from the inside out. That my feelings for her confused me, and I wasn’t even sure how she really felt about me. It seemed like every time I saw her, her eyes grew emptier. The void there seemed to be getting larger, and I didn’t know what to do.

Ever since she’d overheard me telling Brock I didn’t want to have a relationship with her, she had avoided me like the plague. And all Kaylee kept doing was reminding me of how much Merit perked up when I was around and how she

couldn't keep her eyes off of me. The woman needed to mind her own damn business.

Being around Merit right now was messing with my head, and I needed to be thinking clearly.

"It doesn't make a difference to me, Mom. I'll be heading over to Ty and Kaylee's today. Ty needs some help fixing a fence on the backside of their property, and Tanner and Brock are busy on the ranch today."

With her bubble deflated, she replied, "Well, I'm sure Lori would have loved to see you. She mentioned Merit hasn't been herself the last couple of months. Very distant, and seems to be lost in her own thoughts."

That piqued my curiosity. My mother was the third person now who had said that. I couldn't help but think that it had been two months since *that* night. "Really? Is everything okay with the farm?"

"I think so. Lori thinks Merit's thinking about her own daddy. You know Lori filed for divorce?"

I frowned. "No, I didn't know that."

My mother wore a grim expression. "It's killing her; she feels like she has no choice. She can't forgive Roger."

All I could do was nod. "I guess I can see that. I hate that they're going through all of this."

She exhaled. "Me, too. I better get back up to the house. Thank you, sweetheart, for doing the chores for me this morning."

I kissed her on the forehead. "Love you, Mom."

"Love you, too."

After taking care of a few more things around the ranch, I got into my truck and made the drive over to Ty and Kaylee's place. It was right next to the Shaw ranch. It had been the original homestead, but it was given to Brock and Kaci when they got married. Once Kaci died, Brock never set foot in it again and ended up selling it to Lincoln when she moved to

Montana—who then sold it to Kaylee when she married Brock. Now, Ty and Kaylee lived there.

As I waited for the gate to open, I glanced around at the mountains. The last bit of snow still held on as it covered some of the tallest peaks. The pastures were as green as a Granny Smith apple, with horses and cows dotting the landscape.

I loved this place, loved Montana, and hadn't really realized how much I missed it or how much it was a part of me. It all made more sense to me now why Brock and Tanner had walked away from such promising careers to be here. Of course, it helped that they'd both fallen in love.

As I drove down the drive that led to Ty and Kaylee's white farmhouse, my mind drifted to Merit's new house. She owned a nice piece of property herself. I wondered if she had any plans for it.

Then, a strange thought hit me. What if she started to date someone, got married, and he used the place to ranch or something?

The idea of someone making a life with Merit caused me to grip the steering wheel harder. When I realized what I was doing, I loosened my hold. Who was I kidding? I had no claim on Merit.

I shook my head and wished I had a drink to take the damn edge off of what I was feeling.

As I came up the drive, I noticed a new Toyota 4Runner in the driveway. I parked behind it and climbed out of my truck, making my way over to it. I was expecting to see a car seat in the back, thinking it was Kaylee's new car. It screamed "family car," so it made sense. Neither Ty nor Kaylee had mentioned getting a new vehicle, though.

I jogged up the steps and knocked on the door. Ty opened it and gave me a wide smile.

"Nice car," I said.

Ty looked past me. "Yeah, it really is a nice car."

“Didn’t see a car seat in the backseat, though...you better get that in, in case she goes into labor early.”

Ty gave me a confused look before he laughed. “That’s not our car, it’s Merit’s. She just bought it.”

My smile slipped away. “Merit’s here?”

He nodded and motioned for me to follow him. “Yeah, Kaylee invited her over for lunch.”

“Son-of-a-bitch,” I mumbled. When in the hell was she going to learn to keep her nose out of other people’s business?

Ty stopped and faced me. “Is that a problem? I thought the two of you were friends?”

I swallowed hard as I looked past him and into the kitchen. I didn’t see Kaylee or Merit yet. “It’s...sort of a problem.”

Ty narrowed his eyes. “How so?”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “I don’t want to be around her right now.”

His confused expression turned slightly angry. “And why not? What happened?”

For a moment, I almost told Ty how being around Merit messed with my head, but I stopped. If I told him, he would tell Kaylee, and she would make it her life’s mission to bring me and Merit together. I knew that woman well enough.

“Nothing, sorry, dude. I’m just tired.”

Ty placed his hand on my shoulder as the anger in his eyes faded. “It’s okay, Dirk. It’s gonna take time, believe me, I know. When we lost Beck, I felt like a part of me had died along with him.”

The sound of women’s laughter filled the air, and I watched as Kaylee, Merit, and a woman I had never seen before walked in through the back door. The sight of Merit made my chest feel lighter, like the vise that had been gripping my heart eased ever so slightly. But I knew that the moment her eyes met mine, those strong feelings would come back.

Kaylee beamed when she saw me, Merit froze, and the blonde next to Merit smiled as she let her eyes move over my entire body, slowly. Christ, she wasn't hiding the fact that she was checking me out.

"Hey, just in time! You can eat lunch before you and Ty head on out to fix the fence," Kaylee said.

All I could do was smile as I said, "Hey, Kaylee." Then I turned to Merit. "Merit, how are you?"

She seemed to flinch at the cold and distant tone I put into my voice when I spoke to her. Fuck, I wanted to kick myself. I had no idea why I had spoken like that to her. Frustrated? Angry? Hell, I wasn't even sure how I felt about anything anymore.

"I'm fine."

"Nice car," I added, still hearing the prick in my voice.

She smirked. "I found a little extra money in my checking account, so I bought it."

I couldn't help it—I felt my mouth twitch with a hidden smile.

Then, I looked at the blonde, who was now smiling even wider as she stared in my direction.

"Someone introduce me to this tall, dark, and handsome man," the blonde said as she made her way over to me and held out her hand.

When it was clear neither Merit nor Kaylee was going to introduce us, I spoke. "Dirk Littlewood."

She glanced down at my cock and smirked. "Little? I doubt it."

Okay, holy shit, this woman went right for it.

She laughed when I didn't reply. "Amy White, I'm new in town." Amy glanced over her shoulder and clucked at Merit and Kaylee with her tongue as she shook her finger in their direction. "How many other handsome men are you hiding in this town?"

Merit forced a smile and then turned to Kaylee, who was glaring at Amy. “Amy just moved into the ranch down the road. She stopped by to introduce herself,” Kaylee said. “I invited her to join us for lunch.”

Merit asked Kaylee, “Do you need any help?”

Kaylee nodded. “If you don’t mind getting the plates and silverware to the table.”

“Not at all,” Merit replied, not looking back over at me and Amy—who was now looking at me like I was a fresh piece of meat, and she the hungry wolf.

Amy wrapped her arm around mine. “Let’s get to know each other better, Dirk, shall we?”

For a quick second, I thought about how easy it would be to take this pretty little thing for a walk and bury myself inside her, forgetting all the bullshit that was going on for a few minutes while I pounded into her. But then I looked up and saw Merit watching us, a pained expression on her face, even though I knew she was trying to hide it.

I also knew this woman wasn’t the woman I wanted, and no matter how much I tried to make myself think I wanted meaningless sex, what I really wanted was Merit.

“You ladies don’t mind if I steal this cowboy for a few minutes while you get lunch ready, do you?” Amy asked.

Something crossed Merit’s face, but it was gone as fast as it came.

Before Merit could reply, Kaylee did. “Sorry, Amy. Ty has something he needs to show Dirk in the barn.”

Ty looked at Kaylee, clearly confused, before they exchanged unspoken words with one glance. “Right, sorry, Amy. I’ll only take him away for a few minutes.”

Amy pouted, then smiled again and said, “No worries, I’ll come with you.”

Ty looked at Kaylee and gave her an ‘I tried’ shrug as Kaylee looked back at Amy. If looks could kill, the girl would be laid out flat on the floor.

As we headed out of the house, Amy wrapped her arm around mine once more and started to speak. “So, Dirk, please tell me you’re single.”

I laughed. “I am indeed single.”

Her face lit up like a Christmas tree. “Well, finally, something nice about Montana.”

Chapter Eighteen

MERIT

I watched as Amy walked out the door with her paws all over Dirk. And he flirted with her. The bastard actually *flirted* with her. I'd never been so angry in my entire life—and I'd never wanted to punch a person like I wanted to punch her.

“Here, let me take that glass before you break it with your bare hands,” Kaylee said as she removed the glass from my hand.

“My God!” I said, still watching the door. “Did you see how she threw herself at him? Who does that to a guy they just met?”

“Yes, I did see that. Little Amy ruined everything!” Kaylee declared as she slammed a pan down on the counter.

I jumped and placed my hand over my heart. “Christ, you scared me, Kaylee.”

She pointed toward the front door. “That...that...woman is screwing everything up!”

I blinked a few times and then shook my head to clear my thoughts. “Dirk didn't seem to mind the attention.”

Kaylee went on talking, more to herself than to me. “Well, Dirk walked in. Of course she's going to turn all, ‘*Oh, let me see if I can get into his pants because he's hot.*’ What kind of woman *does* that? I know what kind, but I'm too much of a lady to utter the word!”

I brought my hand up to my mouth to hide my smile. Once I got it under control, I asked, “What did you mean, she was screwing everything up?”

Kaylee paused for a moment and then turned to me and screwed up her face in an innocent way that said, “*Please don't smack me when I tell you what I did.*”

“Promise you won't get mad?”

I felt my shoulders slump, and I sighed. “Kaylee, you were not trying to set up me and Dirk, were you?”

“Yes! I was! Because apparently I’m the only person who sees the way the two of you look at one another—and don’t you dare say he doesn’t look at you that way or feel like that about you. The man clearly has feelings for you.”

“Kaylee, he doesn’t know what he wants right now. His father passed away, he took a leave from the PBR, he—”

“He did what?” Kaylee nearly shouted as she spun back to face me.

I furrowed my brows together. “He didn’t tell you?”

She shook her head. “No. I figured he was missing a few rides, but that he’d be heading out after they hired another ranch hand.”

A part of me was elated that Dirk hadn’t told Kaylee, but he’d told me. Childish, I knew, but it still made me feel strangely happy.

“When I saw you guys at the restaurant, he told me that he took the rest of the year off. He’s already spoken to his sponsors about it.”

Kaylee’s mouth dropped open and she stared at me in disbelief. “But Dirk lives for bull riding. It’s his entire life! He breathes it. Needs it. What is he thinking? His daddy wouldn’t want this.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know—that’s what he told me, and I haven’t really spoken to him since.”

“Oh God!” Kaylee cried out again.

“Well, gosh, Kaylee. I mean, he’s had a lot on his mind, and maybe he wasn’t ready to tell you and everyone else? I don’t know, but I wouldn’t get upset over it.”

“Motherfucker!”

I widened my eyes and held up my hands to get her to calm down. “Okay, wow. You really *don’t* like being kept in

the dark about things. Ah, one thing—will you not tell him I was the one who told you?”

Kaylee waved her hand around. “I don’t give a shit about that. I just had a contraction. A big one! I’ve been having small ones all day, but I thought they were nothing. That one was big. Really, *really* big.”

I looked down to her stomach, then back up to her face. “Contractions? As in...the baby is coming?”

Kaylee laughed and rubbed her stomach. “Oh, gosh no, I’m not due for another week.”

Suddenly, Kaylee looked down—and I followed her gaze.

I felt my upper lip curl as I saw liquid running down Kaylee’s leg. “Did you just pee?” I asked. Then it dawned on me, and I jerked my head back up. “Oh my gosh. Your water broke!”

Kaylee continued to stare down at the small puddle of water forming on the floor.

“Kaylee! Your water broke! Your water broke!” I called out.

Her head lifted, and our eyes met. A wide smile grew across her face, and she took in a deep breath, then slowly let it out. I did the same—not quite sure why, but it felt like the best thing to do.

“Okay, Merit, I need you to calmly walk out to the barn and let Ty know it’s time. I’m going to call the doctor and let them know my water broke.”

“Right! I’m on it!”

I spun around and headed through the living room to the front door.

“Merit?”

Stopping, I looked back at her. “Yeah?”

“Calm. That is the key word here, okay?”

I waved her off. “Please, I’m as calm as a cucumber!”

Kaylee frowned and then started to dial a number on her phone.

I slowly made my way out of the house and down the steps of the front porch. The barn wasn't too far away, so I walked briskly, yet without panic. I had this, easy-peasy.

The moment I walked into the barn, I searched for Ty. I didn't even care about Amy and Dirk or where they were or what they were doing. Fine, that was a lie. I *did* care. I cared more than I should, but I didn't have time to worry about them right now.

I saw the three of them standing at a stall, Amy laughing as she attempted to flirt with Dirk. I couldn't help but notice that when she went to touch him, he stepped away from her.

"Ty?" I called out, causing the three of them to turn and look my way.

He smiled. "Yeah?"

I smiled, trying to keep my voice calm. I opened my mouth to speak—and what came out was certainly not calm at all. For some reason, the panic I had been trying to keep inside rushed out.

"Kaylee had a huge contraction!" I cried out. "Then her water broke!"

Ty stood there, stunned.

"She's calling the doctor, but get in there, man! She's having the baby!" I stated as I flung my arms in the direction of the house.

"But she's not due for another week," Dirk said.

I swung my head around to meet his stare. Amy was now clutching him like he was a prized possession she didn't want to lose since he was distracted by the news of Kaylee. My gaze bounced between the two of them, and I was positive I was shooting daggers at them both.

"I'm sorry if the timing is inconvenient for you both," I said.

Dirk frowned and seemed to realize how Amy was hanging on him. He took a step away from her once again, then looked at Ty.

I focused back on Ty, as well, and smiled softly, settling my panicked voice. “Ty, it’s time. What do you need us to do?”

A wide smile erupted over his face as he fist-pumped. “Holy shit! I’m gonna be a dad!”

He quickly walked by me, and I turned to follow, not bothering to see if Dirk and Amy were behind us.

Ty quickened his pace, and I could tell he was trying not to run. He took the porch steps two at a time and disappeared into the house.

Dirk quickly passed me and ran up the steps, as well, and into the house. I paused, not sure why that made my heart drop to the pit of my stomach.

“Okay, am I missing something here?” Amy said as she walked up to stand next to me at the bottom of the steps.

I looked at her. “What do you mean?”

Amy shrugged. “I get the husband’s reaction, but what’s up with Dirk running in, as well? Is she...with both of them? Do they do that sort of thing up here in Montana? I mean, I’d be down for it, I guess.”

I was positive my mouth fell open. “Excuse me?”

Amy laughed. “Don’t act so innocent, Merit. It’s not uncommon these days for a woman to have a husband and a lover, with both a part of her life.”

I blinked rapidly. “He is not her lover. They’re friends, that’s it.”

Amy nodded. “If you say so. Guess this means no lunch. I’m off to head back home, then.”

And just like that, she turned and started toward her car. I wasn’t going to lie, a part of me was glad she was leaving.

The front door opened, and Ty came walking out, his arm around Kaylee. She gave me a sweet smile that quickly faded as another contraction came on.

“Hold on. Wait,” she said.

They both stopped, and Kaylee took in a few deep breaths. Dirk came rushing out and nearly ran into the back of them. He was carrying a small bag in his hands.

“Contraction...” Kaylee panted as Ty softly talked her through it.

A feeling of sadness washed over me as I watched Kaylee and Ty walk to his truck. The way Ty looked at Kaylee, talked so lovingly to her, and made her feel safe brought tears to my eyes.

Would I ever have that? When I went into labor, would I be alone? I’d have my mother and brother there, and most likely Timberlynn, Lincoln, and Kaylee. That was a comfort, at least.

I straightened my shoulders and took in a deep breath, holding my head high. None of it mattered. As long as I had a healthy pregnancy and baby, I could do it all on my own. I’d be fine.

I looked over at Dirk, who placed the bag into the backseat of Ty’s truck. He leaned into the truck and quickly gave Kaylee a kiss on the cheek and said, “You’ve got this, Kaylee.”

She gave him a weary smile and then looked at me. “Merit! Will you tell Timberlynn and Lincoln?”

I nodded and smiled. “Of course, don’t worry, I’ll let everyone know!”

Kaylee waved as Ty drove off. “See y’all at the hospital!”

Dirk stood there for a moment and watched as the truck drove down the driveway. I quickly pulled out my phone from my back pocket and called Timberlynn.

Dirk turned and looked at me. “Who are you calling?”

“Timberlynn,” I stated.

He nodded. “I’ll call Brock.” Then he walked to his truck.

My heart hammered in my chest as I watched him. How had we been so close at one point in our lives, and now Dirk acted as if he could hardly stand to be around me? I guess it had all been my fault. If I hadn’t asked him to take my virginity that day, things might have been different. We probably would have stayed friends.

“Hey, Merit!”

“Timber?” I said, tearing my gaze from Dirk as I headed to my SUV.

“Hey, how’s lunch?”

“There is no lunch, Kaylee’s water broke. She and Ty are on their way to the hospital.”

Timberlynn screamed. “Kaylee’s in labor!”

She shouted it to someone else and didn’t even try to cover up the phone. I couldn’t help but laugh as I pulled the phone from my ear. I heard another female scream; this one sounded like it was Ty’s mom, Stella.

“We’re on our way to the hospital now!” Timberlynn said.

I laughed once more. “Okay, well, be careful.”

“Are you not going?” she asked.

“Well, I wasn’t...I mean...I’m really only just starting to get to know Kaylee. I’m not sure if she’ll want me there.”

Timberlynn sighed. “Of course she’ll want you there. She likes you, Merit. She invited you over for lunch.”

“In an attempt to push me and Dirk together.”

“Does she know?” Timberlynn asked in a whisper.

“No, not that I’m aware of.”

Timberlynn remained silent for another moment or two before she spoke once more. “Okay, well, I don’t want to force you to go. How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” I answered truthfully. I felt like I was growing more tired as the days went on.

“Go home and nap. I’ll keep you updated.”

Smiling, I slipped into my car and started it. “Thanks, you’re a good friend. Give Kaylee my best wishes.”

“I will. Rest, okay?”

“I don’t think that will be a problem. This baby—and his father—are sucking all the energy from me.”

Chapter Nineteen

DIRK

I paced the small waiting room as everyone else sat and chatted. Every now and then I would look up and check the time. It felt like it was moving at a snail's pace.

“Should it be taking this long?” I asked as I looked at Tanner.

“I'm sure she's fine. She's got both Timberlynn and Lincoln in there with her. Plus, Ty.”

I sighed. “Why isn't anyone coming out to tell us how she's doing?”

Stella stood. “Dirk, why don't we head on down and get some coffee.”

“See if you can find some damn whiskey to put in it,” Tanner said on a laugh. “You're acting like the worried father.”

That caused me to snap my head and look back at Tanner. “What?”

He smiled, but then it faded when he saw my serious expression. “Dude, it was just a joke. Everyone knows how close you are to Kaylee.”

At that moment, someone walked up to Stella and hugged her. I turned to see it was Janice.

“Oh my goodness, Janice! How are you?” Stella exclaimed. She turned and faced me. “Dirk, you know Janice Lewis, don't you?”

I reached out my hand and shook Janice's. “Yes, we ran into each other a few weeks ago.”

“I heard you opened up your own practice in town,” Stella said.

“Yes, and it's doing well.”

Stella laughed. “There seems to be something in the water in Hamilton. Everyone is having babies.”

Janice laughed...then gave me a nervous look before focusing back on Stella.

“What type of doctor are you, Janice?” I asked.

She looked at me nervously again, and for a moment, it felt like she didn't want to answer me. “I'm an OB/GYN.”

I nodded. “Oh, that's nice.”

“It is.”

Stella went on in a whispered voice, “I'm hoping Tanner and Timberlynn don't wait too long to have a little one!”

Janice smiled and took a quick peek at Tanner.

“Dr. Lewis, here are those prenatal patient files you wanted,” a young lady said as she walked over to us. She handed Janice the files and turned to leave. When she did, she tripped and Janice reached out to steady her. The files almost fell from Janice's arms, but I caught them. One quick look at them and I saw a familiar name.

Her name.

Merit Grace Eden - Due date February 24

The two women exchanged a few words while I focused back down at the file. *Prenatal? What in the living fuck?* As I watched her and the younger woman speak, I slipped Merit's file under the rest of them just as Janice turned back to me.

I forced myself to smile and handed her the charts. My head was swirling and I needed to find out what in the hell was going on as I quickly added up the months since Merit and I had made love in my truck. My heart hammered against my chest.

I cleared my throat and asked, “Do you mind if we talk in private?”

Janice grinned. “Of course.”

“If you have a moment, that is,” I added.

“Yes, yes. Not a problem at all.” She turned to Stella. “It was so nice seeing you, Mrs. Shaw.”

“You as well, sweetheart. Tell your mother I said hi!”

Janice gave her a wide smile. “I will.”

When she turned back to me, she said, “My office is just around the corner. Our practice keeps a small office here on the maternity floor.”

I motioned for her to lead the way as I attempted to act normal when I was far from feeling that way.

As we walked down the hallway, I wondered if everyone in the entire hospital could hear my heart pounding.

Merit was pregnant?

Pregnant.

The baby *had* to be mine. We had sex in my truck. Unprotected sex. It was the right time frame.

Holy shit.

My mother’s words came back to me, about Lori saying Merit hadn’t been acting right the last few months. I counted in my head how many weeks it had been. What day was that on? It was the first week of June, that much I knew. Today was July 29th.

Maybe I had it all wrong. Maybe her file was slipped in with the others by mistake. But what about that date?

Janice walked into her office, turned on the light, and then pointed to a chair. “Have a seat.”

I did as she said, suddenly finding it hard to breathe.

“I see you and Merit spoke.”

All I could do was nod my head.

“Good, I’m glad she told you about the baby.”

My heart felt like it was about to beat right out of my chest.

“I know this is a difficult time for you, Dirk. Losing your father and knowing he won’t be here for your own child.”

I swallowed hard and gripped the arms of the chair.

“Did Merit show you the sonogram?”

My world felt as if it were turning inside out. “N-no, not yet.”

Janice smiled as she turned and looked at the files. She sifted through them and found Merit’s. Opening it, she took something out and handed it to me. “Well, here is the first look at your baby.”

I stared down at the little blub. The words *Hi, it’s baby here!* was typed across the top, and I rubbed my fist across my chest to ease the tightness.

Janice cleared her throat. “I’ll be honest, I hoped she would tell you sooner rather than later. The stress she was under wasn’t healthy for her or the baby. I hope it went well? She was so worried about telling you.”

“Worried?” I managed to get out.

She drew in a deep breath and let it out. “Yes, that you wouldn’t...well, to be honest with you, she was worried that you wouldn’t want the baby. I really shouldn’t even be sharing that with you, but I was worried about her. We were good friends in high school, and I hated seeing her so upset.”

When I didn’t respond, her half-smile faded. “Well, anyway, I’m assuming you wanted to speak with me about something in particular?”

“Everything is okay...with the baby?” I asked.

She nodded. “Very much so. I meant to email Merit the recording of the heartbeat, but I can pull it up if you’d like to hear it.”

“The...the heartbeat?” I asked, feeling angry that Merit had kept this from me. Why in the hell had she not told me she was pregnant? Suddenly, my words to Brock replayed in my mind. The ones Merit had overheard.

Fuck.

“Yes.” Janice moved to her computer, typed in a password, and then started moving her mouse before typing some more. Another click or two and she smiled. “Here it is.”

The sounds of a rapid heartbeat came through the speakers of the computer, and I felt everything pause. My breathing. My heart. My racing thoughts. The only thing I could focus on was that sound. So fast and strong.

Merit's baby.

My baby.

Our baby.

I smiled. "It's so fast."

Janice laughed. "Yes, it is. You'll be able to hear it live during the next sonogram, which won't be for a few more months."

I nodded. "Um, you know, when she told me, I was so stunned, how far along is she?"

Janice glanced at the file again. "She's now nine weeks."

"That's right," I said, not even able to do the damn math in my own head. "And her next appointment is next week, right?"

Janice glanced back at the computer once more. Clicked the mouse a few times and said, "No, she's not due to see me for another few weeks. August twenty-fifth."

"Right. Time is a bit messed up for me right now," I said with a weak smile, feeling slightly guilty I was lying to Janice.

She gave me that sympathetic look everyone had been giving me since my father died. I was getting fucking sick of it.

"Would you mind if I got a copy of the sonogram photo you gave to Merit? The one that points at the baby?"

A wide grin erupted on her face. "Not at all."

After a few more minutes, Janice walked around the desk and handed me a printed copy of the same photo she had shown me, along with a small pamphlet titled, *Things Daddy Needs to Know About My Growth*.

“This will tell you about the baby’s growth. For instance, the size, length, what part of the baby is developing right now. Right now, the baby is nine weeks. She...”

I raised a brow.

“Or he,” Janice said with a wink, “is about the size of a kidney bean. Their fingers and toes are developing, and Merit will really start seeing a change in her body going forward. How is morning sickness? I know she was struggling with it.”

“I’m not sure,” I said honestly.

“Oh, I see. You both haven’t worked things out?”

That was a fucking understatement, since Merit hadn’t even told me she was pregnant. “No, we haven’t.”

“Well, I’m sure you will. Even if you don’t, you’re still partners in this, and Merit needs your support, Dirk. This is a very emotional thing for a woman, and her body will be changing, her hormones will make her more sensitive to many things.

All I could do was nod.

“I know things have been pretty rough for you, Dirk, but I do hope that you and Merit can work things out. The last thing either of you needs is more stress.”

This time, I only sat there and stared at the photo. “Thank you, Janice. I mean, Doctor Lewis.”

She laughed. “Call me Janice. And please call me if you or Merit have any questions or concerns. Here’s my card. It has my cell phone number on there, as well. I also gave one to Merit.”

“I will—thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me,” I said as I reached my hand out for hers.

“Of course.”

I moved to go around her when she spoke, stopping me once more.

“Dirk, there *is* one thing I am worried about with Merit.”

My heart felt like it jumped into my throat.

“She admitted to not eating well. Make sure she gets a good, balanced intake of food. Lots of fruits and veggies.”

The memory of Merit dumping her food in the trash the morning after my father’s celebration of life hit me right in the chest. I couldn’t stop a wave of nausea, and I had to concentrate hard on pushing it away.

With a nod and a forced smile, I replied, “No stress, eat healthy. Got it.”

Janice winked and then turned and walked back over to her desk and began shutting down her computer.

The idea that my entire life had changed in an instant washed over me, and I fought to take deep breaths. I needed a fucking drink.

Chapter Twenty

DIRK

As soon as I walked out of Janice's office, I walked past the waiting room and went straight to the elevator. I hit the button to go down when I heard Ty start talking from the room next door.

“Well, we have a beautiful little girl. Rose Marie Shaw!”

Stella cried out and ran over to Ty, who caught her in his arms. Soon it was his father's turn, then Tanner's. Brock had stayed back at the ranch with Blayze, Morgan, and Hunter.

Then Ty scanned the area and found me. He smiled, and I made my feet walk over to him as I smiled back. I truly was happy for Kaylee and Ty. I reached out my hand to him. “Congratulations, Ty. I'm so happy for you both.”

He laughed, pulled me by the hand, and brought me in for a bear hug. Then he slapped me on the back a few times before stepping away.

Ty had a proud-as-hell expression on his face, and it was evident he'd been crying. He glanced around at everyone. “Kaylee did great. Amazing. I'm so proud of her.”

Stella let out a sob and replied, “Of course she did! She's had you by her side this entire journey. Love is a powerful tool, especially when two people are growing a child together.”

I felt an instant headache come on, and my stomach rolled once more. Merit didn't have me around for the last nine weeks. When she'd overheard me make that stupid-ass comment to Brock, she'd been carrying *my* child at the time.

Jesus. What must she have thought?

“The last thing I want right now is a relationship with Merit.”

The walls felt like they were closing in on me, and I had to fight to keep from throwing up. She hadn't told me because

she didn't think I would want the baby. That I wouldn't want *her*.

Then I remembered holding Kaylee's stomach and telling her she was the most beautiful pregnant woman I'd ever seen. Merit was there, and she had raced out of the room. All of Timberlynn's dirty looks made sense to me now. She had known. She must have known.

I shook my head and tried to clear the thoughts away.

"Dirk, did you hear me?" Ty asked, giving me a small push on my shoulder.

I looked at him and forced a laugh. "What did you say?"

"After my folks and Tanner go in and see her, I'm sure Kaylee wants to introduce you to our daughter."

"Yes, I'd love that."

He smiled, and I couldn't help but notice the change in him. I didn't think I had ever seen Ty look so damn happy before in my entire life. He was walking on cloud nine.

Something inside me shifted right then, and I wasn't entirely sure what it was.

Clearing my throat, I added, "I'm really happy for you and Kaylee, Ty."

With his hand on my shoulder now, he squeezed. "Thank you. It's you or Tanner next."

Tanner laughed. "Please, as if Dirk has any desire to settle down. I believe he once said hell would freeze over before he got married and had a baby."

I couldn't even force myself to reply. To even agree or disagree with him. I *had* felt like that, not that long ago. Now I wasn't sure what I was feeling. What I wanted. My life was a complete fucking mess.

"Someone better call Brock; you know he's waiting on pins and needles," Tanner said, breaking me from my thoughts.

Ty laughed. "I will. See you in a few minutes, Dirk."

I nodded and watched Ty and Tanner walk off. Ty pulled out his phone as Tanner laughed at something that was said between them.

Turning away, I headed over to some chairs and sat down. The need to bury my head between my legs grew by the second as my chest got tighter and tighter. I didn't even have time to process all of this. I needed time. I needed a drink. I needed to get the hell out of there.

I glanced around to see that I was alone in the waiting room. Timberlynn and Lincoln were standing down the hallway, outside of Kaylee's door, both of them talking and smiling with one of the nurses.

Sitting there, alone, I tried to figure out what to do. I wanted to go to Merit and tell her how fucking shitty I thought it was she had kept this from me. I wanted to get in my truck and drive as far away as I could. I wanted to climb onto the back of a bull and forget everything, even if for only a few seconds.

I wanted to talk to my father.

I dropped my head, and I wasn't sure how long I sat there before I felt someone beside me.

"Hey, is everything okay?" Tanner asked as he sat down next to me. "You look like someone just delivered some bad news. You did mean it, right, that you're happy for Ty and Kaylee?"

My body jerked. If Tanner thought I harbored feelings for Kaylee, then it made sense Merit would, as well. I slid my fingers through my hair and sighed. "I meant every word. I'm so damn happy for them."

Tanner lifted a brow and gave me a look that said he knew I was talking bullshit. "Only minutes ago you were pacing, worried out of your mind. Then you left and came back, and now you're acting like someone took your favorite dog."

I brought my hand to the back of my neck and rubbed at the ache. "Did you meet the baby?"

He smiled, clearly not caring that I changed the subject. “I did. My mother is hogging her right now, and Dad’s in line to be next.”

I gave him a genuine smile, but I felt it quickly fade away.

“Okay, now that we got the baby out of the way, what’s going on, Dirk?”

I drew in a deep breath and then slowly exhaled. “I found out someone has been keeping a pretty big secret from me. I’m not sure if I’m angry, scared, happy, sad, or just downright confused as fuck. Right now, I just feel numb,” I said with a humorless chuckle.

With a thoughtful look, Tanner asked, “Do you want to talk about it?”

“What I’m about to tell you, I need you to keep in confidence. And by that, I mean do not even tell Timberlynn.”

He frowned. “I don’t lie to my wife, Dirk.”

“I’m not asking you to lie, Tanner. I need you to keep something in confidence for a bit—there’s a difference.”

He nodded. “Okay. You know I will if you ask me to.”

I closed my eyes and sighed. Then, I laughed. This all felt like a damn dream. The things I once wanted, I wasn’t so sure about anymore. The things I once thought I’d never want, I was suddenly considering. It was confusing as hell.

“Did you see me leave with Janice?” I asked as I turned my gaze to his.

His brows drew in tighter. “Yes.”

“When she almost dropped the files, I grabbed them and saw there was one with Merit’s name on it.”

He looked confused. “Okay, that’s not unusual.”

I stared at him.

“Why do I feel like there’s more to this, Dirk?”

I swallowed hard. “Because there is. A lot more.”

“Okay, are you going to tell me, or do I have to guess?”

With my voice lowered, I replied, “Merit’s pregnant. With my baby.”

Tanner opened and closed his mouth a few times before he finally slammed it shut. He sat there.

Speechless.

The moment I said the words out loud to another person, everything suddenly became so very real.

I was going to be a father.

Merit was carrying my baby.

Tanner quickly regained his composure. He glanced around the waiting room. It was only the two of us. Timberlynn and Lincoln must have gone back into the room with Kaylee, Ty, and Ty’s folks. “What are you going do?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

He slowly shook his head. “Dirk, by your own admission, you don’t want a family or kids. At least, not right now. Hell, you and Merit seem to be at odds more often than you’re friends. Has that even changed?”

“No. Especially since she overheard me tell Brock I didn’t want a relationship with her.”

Tanner’s eyes widened in shock, and he sat up a little straighter. “You said that? Holy shit, dude.”

I sighed. “I didn’t know about the baby then, and I didn’t even mean it and only said it to get Brock off my back. I was lost without my dad. Hell, I still feel that way. I don’t know up from down right now.”

Tanner frowned. “You said you needed to get Brock off your back. Why?”

“Space. I needed space from Merit and the way she was making me feel. Brock wouldn’t stop pushing me on the subject of her. It was the only thing I knew to say to shut him up. I didn’t want to deal with my feelings for Merit, and the easiest thing to do was to push those feelings to the side. I

didn't even know she was at the ranch that day. I fucked up, man."

Tanner scoffed and then smirked. "You're honestly *that* afraid of committing to someone that you'd rather hurt them than come to terms with your own feelings?"

"It's a lot more complicated than that, Tanner."

"It's not if you love her."

I closed my eyes. "I don't even know if there's anything there between us."

He let out a sarcastic laugh. "The fuck, Dirk! There's a shit ton between you. There's a *baby*. There's a woman who clearly loves you, and you're too busy running from your own feelings. Dude, man the fuck up."

This time, I stood and glared down at him. "Man the fuck up?"

"Yes," Tanner said, standing, as well. "If you have feelings for her like you said you do, this should be easy. Go to her. She needs you. She. Needs. You."

"She needs me?" I said, my voice dripping with anger and disdain. "She kept this from me. She had no intentions of telling me about this baby, and trust me, she had plenty of opportunities."

A gasp came from behind me. I spun around to see Timberlynn and Lincoln standing there, both of them wearing shocked expressions on their faces.

It was Timberlynn who spoke first. "How did you find out?"

My stomach lurched. Timberlynn *did* know.

Tanner faced his wife. "You knew Merit was pregnant?"

She nodded with a few quick jerks as she softly replied, "Yes, I knew."

I looked at Lincoln. I knew instantly by the look on her face that she did, as well.

“And you? You also knew?” I asked.

Lincoln looked down and then back up at me. “Dirk, she asked us not to say anything. She’s been trying to work through this. To figure out how to tell you because she thinks you’re going to be mad and not want the baby, and then with what happened...”

“Mad? Mad! I’m fucking mad that she didn’t tell me. She lied to me!”

Timberlynn stepped closer. “She has not lied to you, Dirk.”

I rolled my eyes and let out a disbelieving laugh. “Well, she sure as shit hasn’t told me the truth. She went to a doctor’s appointment without me. Heard the heartbeat, *without me*. What else was she planning on doing without me?”

Lincoln took a step toward me; sadness, or maybe a little bit of regret, shown in her eyes. “She was going to tell you. I think she’s simply been scared.”

That made my stomach drop. “Scared...of what?” I asked the question even though I knew the answer.

Timberlynn replied before Lincoln could. “You. Your reaction, what you’ll think. She has this notion you’re going to think she’s trying to trap you.”

I stared at Timberlynn with a stunned look. “Trap me?”

Lincoln spoke again. “Dirk, it’s been eating at her that she hasn’t told you. She’s an emotional wreck right now.”

I let out a harsh laugh. “Really? How long has she known?”

They both exchanged a look, and it was Timberlynn who answered. “I was with her the day she took the test at home. It was the same day as...”

Her words faded, and she simply stared at me.

I glared at her. “Spit it the fuck out, Timberlynn.”

“Don’t talk to my wife that way, Dirk,” Tanner stated as he stood next to Timberlynn and wrapped his arm around her, giving me a warning look.

I closed my eyes and pulled in a slow, deep breath, then exhaled and opened them again as I clenched my fists. Timberlynn had tears in her eyes, and I felt like an absolute dick. “I’m sorry, doll. I didn’t mean to yell at you. Please, tell me how long she’s known.”

Timberlynn’s voice shook as she replied, “She found out the same day as your father’s accident.”

My knees nearly buckled, and I felt Tanner grab me to hold me up.

I needed a few moments to get my thoughts together. “She’s known about this for a month, and she couldn’t find the time to tell me? How about the morning after the celebration? When I was alone with her?”

Timberlynn glared at me. Her empathy was clearly now pure anger. “She was trying to be thoughtful of your pain over your father, Dirk.”

I huffed, even though I knew deep inside that her words made sense.

Timberlynn shook her head as she went on. “She planned on telling you that morning. But you decided to take a phone call from Kaylee, instead.”

That moment came back to me in an instant. I knew something was wrong with Merit that morning from the way she acted. The way she got up and threw out her breakfast and left so quickly after I took Kaylee’s call. It had been wrong of me to take the call, I saw that now; hell, I figured that out not long after Merit stormed out.

Shit, and that was the phone call where I told Kaylee I’d help them with the baby crib.

But I’d been afraid to have the conversation I knew I was going to have with Merit, and honestly, I’d felt relieved when the phone rang, regardless of who it was.

Damnit. I knew something was wrong. But I didn’t have any time to dwell on that as Timberlynn kept talking.

“Then, later that same day, you made your declaration to Brock about how Merit was the last person you wanted to be in a relationship with. Imagine hearing that from the man whose baby you’re carrying. Tell me, can you honestly blame her for not wanting to tell you?”

I opened and closed my mouth a few times as my gaze bounced between the two women. “I didn’t know she was pregnant at the time.”

“Oh, okay. Then all is forgiven, is that it? If you knew she was pregnant, you wouldn’t have admitted to not wanting to be with her?”

“That’s not what I meant,” I stated.

“Sure sounded pretty damn clear to me,” Timberlynn said, her arms folded across her chest and a look of anger on her face.

“Okay, let’s calm down, Timber,” Tanner said.

Lincoln spoke up next. “Dirk, the important thing right now is what are you going to do?”

Suddenly, my anger was back. Who exactly I was angry with was a mystery to me. I glanced past Timberlynn and Lincoln to see Stella and Ty Senior walking toward us. It was obviously my turn to go see Kaylee and the baby.

“Dirk?” Lincoln prompted again. “What are you going to do?”

I said the only thing I knew to say at that moment. I needed to be alone and think before I made any decisions. “Nothing.”

Timberlynn let out a disbelieving laugh. “Nothing?”

I dropped my eyes to hers. “Nothing.”

I moved to walk around them and made my way to Kaylee’s room. I needed time to process all of this. I had no damn clue what in the hell I was going to do. My instincts told me to run. Run away? Run to Merit? Leave Hamilton? Hell, I was good at that. Leaving. What would my father think of the

direction my thoughts were going? He'd be disappointed, to say the least.

I turned and looked back at Tanner, Timberlynn, and Lincoln when a thought occurred to me. "Does Kaylee know?"

Timberlynn shot me a dirty look. When it was clear Timberlynn wasn't going to answer me, I looked at Lincoln.

Her eyes looked so sad as she slowly shook her head. "No, Merit didn't want her to know."

Relief washed over me that at least one of my friends hadn't betrayed me.

I nodded and turned to walk away.

"You're doing it again," Timberlynn stated as Stella and Ty Senior both stopped and surveyed all of us. It was clear they had noticed the somber mood, when it should have been a time to celebrate. Stella's gaze bounced from me to Timberlynn with a confused expression on her face. Even I could hear the disdain in Timberlynn's voice.

I stopped but didn't turn around as Timberlynn drove the knife in even deeper with her next words.

"You're choosing another woman over Merit, once again. Kaylee is simply your new Kaci. Don't you see that?"

"Timberlynn!" Lincoln cried out in a shocked voice as Stella frowned and looked between us.

I closed my eyes tightly before opening them again, and I continued to walk down the hall toward Kaylee's room. With each step, I fought the urge to turn and leave. I touched the doorknob of Kaylee's room and Timberlynn's words replayed over and over again in my mind. I dropped my hand to my side, turned, and left.

Chapter Twenty-One

MERIT

I walked into the barn and the smell of alcohol hit me like a brick wall. Kimberley, Dirk's mother, had called and asked me to come quickly. Apparently, having a drunkard father made one qualified to help all men who drank themselves silly. Never mind the fact that it was only one in the afternoon—Dirk was supposedly drunk out of his mind.

I searched the area with my eyes. No Dirk anywhere. I sighed and walked up to each stall and peered inside.

Nothing.

I glanced over at the steps that led to the top of the barn. I knew there was a room up there that Dirk had begged his father to put in years ago. A place for him and Brock to hang out. At one point it held a TV and a gaming console—that is, until the boys discovered bull riding.

Focusing on the steps, I started to climb. One step at a time, each creak of the wood growing louder than the last.

When I got up to the top, I saw the stacks of hay off to one corner. The other side had various items stored up there. Mostly winter things, tucked away until they'd need to be taken out once more when summer ended.

I swung around in a circle before I let my gaze fall on the door.

“Why couldn't she have called Brock,” I whispered to myself, recalling Kimberley's panicked call earlier.

Dirk had been on a bender. Drunk for at least three days. I had to admit I wondered if it had anything to do with Kaylee and Ty's new baby girl. But then Kimberley told me that Dirk had been getting lost in the whiskey pretty much since Brad's death. Though this was the worst she'd seen him.

With a trembling hand, I knocked.

Two cold, hard words came from the other side of the door. “Go. Away.”

I moved my hand to the knob and turned it slowly, drawing in a deep breath. I needed to steel myself for seeing him.

The door opened slightly, and I pushed it harder so I could see into the room. The smell of alcohol was even greater in here. I nearly gagged but managed to keep it at bay as I stepped inside. One quick inventory of the place showed me all I needed to know.

Bottles of whiskey were everywhere. Some half drunk, some emptied. The bed was unmade, and bags of take-out food littered the small table that had been placed in the middle of the room. At least he was eating, so that was promising. How he had gotten the food was another matter.

Then, I saw him. He had pulled a chair over to the large window and was sitting in front of it. It offered a view of the Bitterroot Mountains. Today it was misting rain and the mountain peaks were covered in fog. The only thing Dirk could possibly see were clouds.

“Dirk?” I asked softly and noticed his body jerk.

Clearly, he wasn’t happy to know it was me and not his mother. “Go away, Merit.”

I swallowed hard. There was something in his voice. Hurt, sadness, anger. It all wrapped around a hoarse voice that clearly hadn’t spoken in a few days. With the exception of telling his mother to leave him alone.

“Your mother is worried about you, Dirk. Do you think it’s wise to...to cause her this stress right now?”

He didn’t move for a moment or two, and then he replied. “Tell her I’m fine. I want to be left alone.”

I swallowed hard. What had happened to throw him into such a state? As much as I didn’t want to ask it, I forced the question out. “Are you upset that Kaylee had a baby?”

That made him turn and look at me. “What?” he asked, honestly shocked by my question.

“It’s odd that you would lock yourself away and drink yourself silly right after your...one of your best friends had a child.”

He narrowed his eyes at me, and I took a step back. I had never in my life been afraid of Dirk Littlewood, but something in the way he glared at me gave me pause. I suddenly wished I’d told Kimberley to call Brock.

“You think I’m jealous that Ty and Kaylee had a baby together? You think I have feelings for her?”

I did the only thing I knew to do. I shrugged. Honestly, I didn’t know what to think anymore.

He stood and walked around the back of the chair and leaned against it. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

I flinched at his words. “I’m...I don’t know, Dirk. You seem very fond of Kaylee, but I’m not sure what’s wrong. That’s why I’m here. Your mother asked me to come talk to you.”

He laughed and looked away before glancing back at me. “You’re the last person I want to talk to, let alone see.”

Hurt raced through me, and it felt like a million needles stabbed into my body all at once. How had he come to hate me so much?

Tears pooled in my eyes as I stood frozen in place. It took me about a minute to control my emotions before I could speak. Even then, it came out so weak sounding. “I see. Then I’ll let you be so you can attempt to drown away your sorrows.” I met his eyes, and as much as I knew it would hurt, I said, “I can’t help but wonder what your father would think, though.”

That made him straighten up some.

I motioned around the room and then to him. “To see you so...weak.”

“Weak?” he repeated with a smirk.

“Yes, weak. You’re running from something, and no matter how many pints of whiskey you drink, you’ll never be able to

outrun it, Dirk.”

The corner of his mouth twitched up as he let out a scoff. “What about you, Merit? What are you running from?”

My heart raced in my chest. With a voice that cracked with sadness, I answered truthfully, “My heart.”

That caused his smirk to fade in an instant. “Your heart? What about it?”

Tears pricked at the back of my eyes as I blinked rapidly.

Do not cry. Do. Not. Cry.

“I’m tired of it always hurting.”

I’m tired of you always hurting it, I thought.

He frowned and then looked away.

“Michael stopped by earlier to help your mom with some chores.”

His body visibly flinched.

“Your father wouldn’t want you to do this, Dirk. I don’t know what you’re going through, and I won’t pretend I do. A part of me feels like I’ve lost my own father, and even my mother, if I’m being honest. She’s pulled back into herself so much after filing for divorce, and right now I really need...”

He jerked his head back up to look at me. I couldn’t help the tear that slipped free.

“You need what?” he whispered softly.

I stood straighter and lifted my chin in a sad attempt at strength. “I need her, as I’m sure your mother needs you.”

With that, I turned to leave, but his voice stopped me in my tracks.

“Do you *ever* plan on telling me about the baby?”

My breath left my lungs all at once, and I bent over for a moment, trying to breathe. I shivered, and my entire body felt heavy. I could hardly move, like every ounce of blood drained out of me in one swift motion.

Slowly, I turned to look at him. “Wh-what?”

He smirked again. “I know you’re pregnant, and I know it’s my baby.”

My heart slammed against the wall of my chest. He knew. How had he found out?

“Answer me, Merit,” he spat out. I could hear the anger in his voice.

I swallowed hard and forced my mouth to work. “Of course, I was going to tell you. I...I just didn’t know how.”

He laughed. “Seems pretty simple to me. You walk up to me, look me in the eyes, and say, ‘I’m pregnant.’”

A rush of anger replaced my anxiety. “You think it would have been that easy?”

It was his turn to shrug, and it enraged me.

“Every time I went to tell you, I couldn’t.”

“Why? Too much of a coward?”

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but it was true. I *had* been a coward. Then he drove the knife in even further.

“Did you do it on purpose?”

His words felt like a slap across my face, and for the briefest moment, I thought maybe he regretted them, but the expression on his face was gone as quickly as it came.

I stood tall and crossed my arms over my chest. “Of course not. I’m not that type of person.”

“I don’t know *who* you are anymore.”

I dropped my arms to my sides and balled up my hands into fists. “I didn’t do anything on purpose. And just so we’re clear on this, I don’t need you. I don’t have some fairytale idea that you’re going to fall madly in love with me simply because I’m carrying your child. If you want to walk away and never look back, I’ll be fine. *We’ll* be perfectly fine without you.”

It was his turn to look wounded. Good. I was glad my words hurt him.

“You think I’m going to not own up to my own mistakes?”

I gasped and covered my stomach with one hand, my mouth with the other.

Dirk squeezed his eyes shut, shook his head, then looked at me. “Fuck. I didn’t mean it like that.”

I dropped my hands to my side again and let go of the battle not to cry. Tears welled in my eyes until they finally spilled over. Dirk took a step toward me and then stopped.

Suddenly, I felt so tired. I wanted to crawl into my bed and sleep for days and days. My voice was barely a whisper. “Mistake?”

“I didn’t mean it—”

“Stop,” I said on a sob. “Just stop.” I wiped fiercely at my face and shook my head. “You do not have to be a part of this...of this child’s life. I’m not asking you for anything.” I hated that my voice sounded so defeated, but it was how I felt. “You don’t need to feel burdened by...*your mistake*. You’re free to continue on with your life as you see fit. Bull riding, endless women in your bed, it matters not one fucking bit to me. I’m done feeling this empty pit of loneliness because of you, Dirk. I can’t do it anymore. I can’t. And I won’t.”

I hated that my voice cracked, and I could hear the lie in my words. I prayed he didn’t hear it, as well.

He stood there and stared at me as if I had suddenly grown two heads. I had given him his out, and now I waited for him to take it. His throat bobbed as he swallowed; still he didn’t utter a word.

“I’ll be fine,” I stated once more as I stared off into space.

“I’m not leaving. I already told you, I’m not heading back out on the road, and I’ll be damned if I walk away from my own child.”

I tried not to react to his words when I realized he hadn’t said anything about being there for *me*. Just his child. It was fine. I didn’t need a husband, but I most certainly wanted my child’s father to want her. Or him.

I gave a shaky nod. “Then we’ll work out some sort of arrangement.”

“Arrangement?” he repeated.

My mouth felt so dry as I opened it once or twice and fought to get the words out. “Yes. Custody for both of us. I’m sure we’ll work something out. You’ll always be free to see the baby. I won’t keep that from you. Ever.”

He nodded. “That sounds fair enough.”

The tears came once more. He truly *didn’t* want a relationship with me, and the reality of that hit me so hard, I reached out for something to hold on to. He didn’t want me. Oh God, he really didn’t want me.

A sob slipped free, and I turned away, covering my mouth with my hand and inwardly cursing at myself for letting my stupid emotions show.

“Merit.”

I held up my hand and took in a few deep breaths before laughing. I kept my back to him as I spoke. “It’s my own stupidity to even want anything.”

“Want what?” he asked.

I spun around and stared at him. “You,” I managed to say as my entire body shook. “It doesn’t matter anymore. It was a stupid dream.” I laughed again, but it sounded so strange to my ears. “One I know now will never be.”

His brows pulled in tightly, yet he didn’t say a word.

I cleared my throat and turned to walk out the door. I stopped and said, “When you sober up, we can talk more, figure things out. Right now, I’m tired. I’m just really tired.”

I hated the defeated tone in my voice, but it was true. All I wanted to do was lie down and sleep for about a week.

As I made my way out of the barn, I didn’t even bother to wipe away the endless flow of tears.

There was something about barns and Dirk. They both added up to a broken heart.



A knock on my front door woke me as I slowly sat up and looked around my bedroom. It was dark, and I had a hard time seeing anything. The sadness I felt every time I woke up lately hit me once again, and I fought the urge to lie down and go back to sleep. It seemed to be the only time I didn't feel an overwhelming sense of heaviness on my chest. Sleep was my reprieve from reality—except for the few times I had gotten up to be sick in the night.

Another knock. No, it was more of a bang this time. The doorbell started next. Over and over it rang out, with banging in between. I dragged myself out of bed and walked down the hallway. I felt for the hall lights and flipped them on as I called out, “I’m coming! My God, hold on!”

The endless pounding on the door stopped, along with the doorbell.

What in the world was the time anyway? I peeked out through the peephole but it was too dark, so I turned the porch light on. I looked out again and jumped back when I saw it was Dirk.

Glancing down at myself, I cringed. I was dressed in the yoga pants and t-shirt I had put on a few hours ago after I’d left the barn and my conversation with Dirk behind. I had come home, changed, and gone straight to bed. The exhaustion from the emotional rollercoaster I’d been on was too much to bear.

“Goddamnit, Merit! Open the fucking door before I kick it in.”

I felt my eyes widen, and for a moment I thought about not letting him in. Then I thought better, knowing he’d do as he promised. I reached over and unlocked the door and then opened it.

The moment he saw me, his pinched face relaxed. He did a quick sweep of my body, then walked into the house, shut the

door behind him, and looked me over carefully again as if to make sure I was okay. Once he saw that I was, his entire body relaxed. Then the angry look reappeared. “What the fuck? I’ve been calling you. I was about to bust your door in.”

I looked at him, confused. “Why?”

“Why? Why! I was worried!”

I shook my head in confusion. “I’m fine.”

“You haven’t been answering your phone. Timberlynn stopped by last night and said you wouldn’t answer the door. She wasn’t sure if you were at your mother’s or not. I was about to ask Michael if he had a key to your house.”

Suddenly, bile filled my throat and I asked in a panicked voice, “You didn’t tell my family, did you? About the baby?”

He frowned. “No. Timberlynn told me they don’t know yet.” His frown turned to a look of displeasure. “What game are you playing, Merit?”

I was positive my mouth dropped open. Ugh, this man was enough to make me want to scream.

“Game?” I laughed and shook my head. “I’m not playing any games, Dirk. It didn’t feel right to tell anyone else before I told you. Well, Timberlynn knows because she was with me and Lincoln stumbled upon it.” With a sigh, I added, “Now that you see I’m fine, you can show yourself out the way you came in.”

Something moved over his face as he stared at me. Then he shook his head and looked me over again. “Have you eaten?”

Frowning, I asked, “What?”

“Food, Merit! Have you had any damn food?” he shouted.

I brought my hands to my hips and glared at him. “Stop yelling at me, dammit! And not that it’s any of your concern, but I ate.”

“When?”

I had to stop and think. What time was it anyway? It dawned on me that it was dark out. Good Lord, had I slept the entire afternoon away? I'd never get to sleep tonight.

Glancing around, I looked back at him as I answered. "This morning, I ate breakfast. What time is it?"

His brows pulled in tight. "What do you mean, what time is it?"

"Exactly that, Dirk. After I left you earlier today, I came home and went to bed. I told you I was tired. I only missed dinner, so please don't suddenly feel like you have to worry about me."

A look of surprise passed over his face. "You left the barn *yesterday* afternoon, Merit."

"Yesterday?" I asked, now even more confused.

"It's three in the morning on Saturday. The only reason I came over this late was because I haven't been able to get a hold of you. You scared the shit out of me."

I gasped and took a few steps back. I had been sleeping for over twelve hours.

"You didn't eat lunch yesterday *or* dinner?"

My mind whirled. I must have been so exhausted to sleep for that long. Or too afraid to face reality.

Glancing around the room frantically, I tried to make sense of how in the world I could sleep for so long. "Um...I wasn't hungry. I just wanted to sleep."

He cursed, grabbed my hand, and headed toward my kitchen with me in tow.

"What...what are you doing?"

"Feeding you."

"Feeding me?" I asked as I yanked my hand free from his grip, then crossed my arms over my chest in defiance. "I don't need you to *feed* me, thank you very much. I'm capable of taking care of myself."

A muscle in his jaw twitched, and he flexed his hands open and closed at his sides. “Obviously you do. Do you have any idea how bad it is to skip meals? You’re pregnant.”

I curled my lip at him. “Really? I had forgotten that. Thank you so much for the reminder.”

“You need to take care of yourself and my child.”

I widened my eyes and glared at him. “Your child. *Your child?* She happens to be mine as well, in case you’d forgotten.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “She? No, it’s a boy, darlin’.”

Now I really was mad. “Get out of my house, Dirk. I can manage to eat without your help.”

“Really? Because skipping two meals and falling asleep so hard you don’t even hear your phone ring or people banging at your door doesn’t really sound like you’re taking care of yourself very well, Merit.”

I rolled my eyes and pushed past him. I wouldn’t admit it to him, but suddenly I was starving. And I knew he was right. It was a foolish thing to do, going without eating like that. But I needed to sleep, plain and simple.

After I turned on the kitchen lights, I got to work taking out everything I needed for a sandwich and a salad.

“How about I make you breakfast, instead?” Dirk asked as he grabbed everything I had taken out and put it back into the refrigerator.

The nerve of him! Damn insufferable man. I brought my hands to my hips. “You do not get to come into my home and decide what I’m going to eat!”

He pulled out eggs and bacon. Then milk.

I frowned. What in the world was the milk for?

“Milk?” I asked.

He looked back at me and winked. My stupid stomach flipped at the gesture. “I’m making you my famous pancakes

you used to love so much.”

It was in that moment my stomach growled. I placed my hands over it and sheepishly looked away. Damn it all to hell. Pancakes sounded so good, and Dirk knew they were my favorite thing for breakfast. Correction, *his* pancakes were my favorite breakfast.

“I can make my own—”

He silenced me with one hard stare.

I looked away again and then slid onto a stool and watched as he moved about my kitchen. I didn’t want to think about how nice it was to have him here. I was too pissed off at him, and I really wanted to stay that way.

He moved with ease as he started the bacon and got to work on the pancakes. I was annoyed at myself because I was totally loving what I was seeing. Dirk in my kitchen, making me breakfast. Lord, the smell of his woodsy scent mixed with whatever type of soap he used nearly made me dizzy.

With a shake of my head, I internally cursed at myself. No, I wasn’t going to let him affect me. I was mad at him. So very mad. Not to mention, he’d made it very clear where we stood. There was no us, and there wasn’t going to be.

I cleared my throat and spoke as he went about frying up bacon and mixing the pancake batter. “I don’t normally skip meals; I need you to know that. It’s just that I wasn’t feeling well, and I guess I needed the sleep.”

He lifted his eyes and met mine. “Are you feeling okay now?”

I chewed on my lip and noticed his gaze flicker down to my mouth, then back up. “Yes. I was just so tired.”

He nodded and then looked away for a moment before fixing his stare on me once more. “I’m sorry, Merit. I’m so sorry I upset you yesterday. I tried calling you about an hour after you left. I must have called a hundred times.”

I pulled my brows in slightly and tilted my head at him. Was he actually worried? About me? “I turned off my phone.”

“I figured,” he said.

I let out a sigh. “The baby is fine, Dirk.”

It was his turn to frown. “It’s not just the baby, Bugs. I’m worried about you *and* the baby.”

My breath stalled in my throat. “Me?” I spoke on a barely there whisper.

“Why is that so hard for you to understand? Merit, we were once so close. You were...you were my best friend besides Brock and...”

His voice trailed off.

I finished for him. “And Kaci.”

Dirk looked back down at the pancake batter. “I’m tired of her coming between us, Bugs.”

My eyes stung, and I looked away. He was right. Maybe I needed therapy. Someone to talk to about these stupid emotions that still plagued me all these years later. After a few moments, I turned back to him. “How are Kaylee and the baby?”

That caused his head to jerk back up. His eyes changed, as well as his expression. He seemed lost for a moment, maybe in a memory, before he shook it off. “I guess they’re fine.”

“You guess?” I asked. “You haven’t seen them?”

“Not yet.”

I lifted my brows in surprise. “I figured you’d be over there all the time.”

He looked at me again. “No. Kaylee and Ty deserve this time together with their daughter.”

I slowly nodded. Then I wrung my hands in my lap, suddenly feeling uncomfortable in my own skin. I hated my insecurities so much. God, what was wrong with me?

“The reason I went on a bender was because I found out about you and the baby. It had nothing to do with Kaylee. She’s like a sister to me, that’s all.”

Our eyes locked, and I tried not to let him see how much his words impacted me. How they made my foolish jealousy seemingly disappear in an instant. It wasn't really Kaylee I was jealous of—it was more the attention Dirk showered her with. Call me greedy, but I wanted that from him, no matter how much I told myself I didn't. I missed our friendship.

Dirk was the one person I could talk to about anything. When I came home and found out about my father and his betrayal of my mother, Dirk was the first person I wanted to talk to. Just like when I was offered my first job, it was Dirk I had longed to call and tell. My first apartment, I had almost called him. All those times I had wanted to hear his voice, to see him. I had never truly allowed myself to heal after walking away from him that night. I had been walking away from the only best friend I'd ever truly had.

I broke our gaze and looked down at the bowl of batter. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the baby when I found out. It's just, I found out the day of...well..."

"My father's accident."

Without looking at him, I nodded. "Yes. Then when Brad passed, I couldn't figure out a good time, and every time I did try to tell you, something would happen. I know what I did was wrong—not telling you, I mean. I really didn't mean to keep it from you." I looked up and found him still staring at me. "I was so afraid you'd be angry."

He flinched, then closed his eyes for a brief moment before looking back at me. "Why would I be angry?"

A laugh mixed with a sob slipped free. "Because I know you don't want this. I mean, I know you don't want a family, a child." I wiped at my tears. "I'm not asking for anything from you for *me*, but I do think it's important for you be in her..."

"Or his," he said softly with a crooked smile.

I laughed. "Yes, or *his*. I think it's important you're in their life. We both had amazing parents growing up, and I want our child to have the same thing."

“A lot has changed over the last few months,” he said, pinning me with his gaze again.

“Some things have. Not everything, though,” I whispered.

His eyes widened. “What hasn’t?”

I chewed nervously on my lip and let out a laugh as I shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter anymore. We have a little one to think about.”

“Yeah, I guess we do.”

Dirk went back to the pancakes and bacon as I fought the emotions that were waging a battle inside of me. I loved this man, and I knew it would most likely destroy me not to have him in my life. To watch him leave to go back out on the road. To know there were other women. To maybe see him settle down someday with someone else. I also knew that having him in our child’s life would be worth all the pain and hurt I’d most likely go through.

“The baby is due February twenty-fourth, by the way,” I blurted out.

Dirk didn’t bother looking at me. As a matter of fact, he did everything in his power *not* to look at me.

“You already knew?” It was more of a statement than a question. I stared at his back and asked, “Who told you?”

Chapter Twenty-Two

DIRK

I hated the way she looked so damn sad. I had done that to her, and it made me feel like a class-A jerk. No, an asshole. I had been so damn confused about my feelings for this woman, and now suddenly everything seemed so clear to me. If anything, my feelings for Merit had grown even stronger. I thought about Merit almost constantly, even more so after I found out about the baby.

With our eyes still locked, I said, “A lot has changed the last few months.”

Her eyes filled with defeat, like they had last night. “Some things have. Not everything, though.”

What did she mean by that? “What hasn’t?”

Merit chewed nervously on her lip, and it made my cock jump. I was a dickhead for letting her turn me on when she clearly didn’t mean to, but that was nothing new when it came to this woman. Even at sixteen, all Merit had to do was smile, rub her lips together, laugh, or simply look at me, and my body reacted.

Then she let a small, nervous laugh slip free. “It doesn’t really matter anymore. We have a little one to think about.”

“Yeah, I guess we do.”

Her entire body sagged, and I wanted to climb into her brain and figure out what she was thinking. Feeling. I busied myself with her breakfast, trying to find a way to tell her how I felt about her without her thinking I’d only had a change of heart because of the baby.

Suddenly, she said, “The baby is due February twenty-fourth, by the way.”

I focused back on the mix and worked on turning the bacon. I could feel her eyes on me.

“You already knew?” she said. “Who told you?”

“It wasn’t Timberlynn or Lincoln,” I quickly said.

A hard laugh came from her, and I looked over my shoulder.

“That only leaves the doctor, then.” Her eyes widened in shock. “Janice told you?”

“Not exactly.”

“What do you mean, not exactly? How did you find out?”

“When I was up at the hospital, waiting for Kaylee to have Rose, Janice saw Stella. They got to talking, and her nurse handed Janice some files she said were prenatal files. The nurse turned and tripped and Janice reached for her. She almost dropped the files but I caught them and ... well ... I saw your name and it said the due date.”

She worked her mouth open and closed a few times before snapping it shut. Most likely feeling guilty.

“Needless to say, it didn’t take me long to put two and two together,” I said. “I asked to speak to Janice, and she assumed it was about the baby. I didn’t correct her when she thought I already knew.”

I couldn’t read Merit’s expression. Her breathing picked up a bit, but she didn’t appear to be angry.

A part of me felt guilty, but only a small part. “I’m sorry I got her to answer questions under false pretenses.”

“No, please don’t be sorry, Dirk. I should have told you the moment I found out. Everyone told me to tell you, so the fault lies with me. It’s just that so many things happened all at once, and I couldn’t bring myself to tell you right then.”

She slipped off the stool and walked over to her purse, pulled out an envelope and placed it on the counter. “I had a copy made for you, for when I told you.”

I smiled and placed my finger on the envelope, sliding it over to me. I opened it and saw our baby once more. That rush of happiness hit me all over again, but now it felt different. Merit standing there, knowing our child was growing inside her, made it all feel real.

I suddenly realized I wanted this more than I had ever dreamed. This being Merit, our child, a family. I wanted Merit in every way possible. No, I needed her.

Merit stared down at the photo and smiled. “I was going to frame the other one. Or maybe put it in a baby book,” she added with a half shrug.

“I’ve got another copy in my wallet, the one that Janice printed out for me.”

She lifted her eyes to look at me, a stunned expression on her face. “You carried it in your wallet?”

“Yeah, of course. It might have taken me by surprise and threw me into a drunken binge for a few days, but it’s still my child. I think I instantly fell in love with the little peanut the moment I heard his heartbeat. Or hers,” I said with a wink.

She smiled softly. “I did, too, and I cried, but I mostly remember wishing you were there.”

“I will be, next time.”

Her eyes lit up, but then her happy expression slipped. “Dirk, this doesn’t have to change how you...um...live your life. I’m not asking you for anything. You know that. The only thing I want is for you to be a part of the baby’s life.”

I felt my entire body still. What in the hell was she saying? Did I have this all wrong?

I turned and faced her, my arms crossed over my chest. “Basically you’re telling me I’m still free to keep fucking women.”

She took a step back. I hated myself for even uttering the words.

“I heard what you said to Brock that day, and I know you’re not looking for a relationship with me. I’m okay with that...at least, I’m trying to be okay with that, if I’m being honest. You’re free to keep living your life the way you want. I won’t burden you with anything more than being a father to our child.”

Finally, after a few moments, she stood taller. “If that’s what you want.”

“Is that what *you* want, Merit?”

“Me?” she asked, suddenly looking uneasy. “What I want doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t?”

She shook her head.

“Why doesn’t it matter?”

With a disbelieving look, she turned away from me and held onto the counter. I could see her body shaking, and I had to fight the urge to pull her to me. I needed her to tell me what she was thinking. Her thoughts about me, about us. About our future. But it was time I opened up my own heart and set aside my own scared feelings. Before I had a chance to speak, she did.

When she spoke, her voice kept faltering, and each time I heard it crack, it cut into my heart deeper. “I’m not going to beg you to want to be with me, Dirk. I begged you once for something, and it led me to nothing but heartache. I can’t do that again. I can’t allow myself to go down that road once more.”

She wrapped her arms around her body and took in a long, deep breath as she went on. “You made it very clear you wanted nothing from me, and I need to make it very clear to *you* that I’m positive my heart cannot possibly survive any more disappointment.”

“Turn around and look at me, Merit. Look me in the eyes and tell me you don’t care if I walk out that door right now, because I’m telling you that is the last thing I want to do. I’ve been a complete dickhead. I’ve been lost and confused and I know that’s not an excuse, but the one thing I do know is I don’t want to hurt you ever again.”

She spun around, and it was finally there. Finally! Emotion. Anger. Sadness. Desire. “What are you saying?”

“I want *you*, Merit. I’ve always wanted you.”

She slowly shook her head, and I nearly felt my knees go out when I saw a tear trail down her cheek.

“Just because I’m carrying your child doesn’t change anything. I’ve never been the one you’ve wanted, Dirk. *Never*. First it was Kaci, and now it’s our unborn child. I’ve never fit into your equation, and I’m not going to try to now.”

I closed my eyes, and it was my turn to shake my head. The pain I felt in my chest was like nothing I had ever known, not even when my father died. I’d made Merit think she wasn’t the most important person in my life, when she was everything plus that. “That’s not true. Not one word of it is true.”

“It’s not?” she asked with a bitter laugh. “Because you may not remember, but I do. All the times you walked away from me when Kaci showed up. The broken plans because she *needed* you. The way you said her name when you...when you were with me.”

A sob slipped from her lips and she shook her head quickly as she wiped away her tears.

“God,” she cried out. “I’m so tired of being second to everything else when it comes to you. I can’t do it. I won’t do it anymore. I won’t! I have a child to think of now, and for once, I’m focused on something other than you.”

My chest had never felt so tight. A sickness rolled through me, and I nearly felt my legs give out on me. Holy shit. Had I made her feel like that?

“Second?” It was the only damn thing I could say. I hated myself more than I ever had before as I watched those tears fall.

“I know you don’t have romantic feelings for Kaylee, but that morning after the celebration for your dad’s life when we sat in this very kitchen, you were going to tell me something you regretted about that night. *That* night! What night? I literally held my breath and waited for you to finish. Was it regret over the first time we made love? Was it the night in your truck when we made this baby? What did you regret?”

“Then your phone rang, and you looked at Kaylee’s name on the screen, and without a second thought you pushed me and my feelings aside *again* and took her call. Do you know how many times I’ve thought about what you were about to say? What did you regret? Taking my virginity? Saying Kaci’s name? Or maybe you regretted the second time we slept together. I nearly drove myself crazy because you never finished talking! You left me hanging to take Kaylee’s call. It was like all the times you left me for Kaci. I wanted to tell you about the baby that morning. But...I couldn’t. All I could do was run and get as far away from you as I could.”

“Merit.”

She kept talking, the words now flowing from her mouth in a rush. “Do you know what it was like to see you touch Kaylee’s stomach, and offer to build her crib, and look so happy for her, knowing I was the one carrying your baby...and that you had zero interest in being with me?”

She started to cry harder, and I went to her, but she put her hand up.

“No, don’t. Don’t you dare!” She frantically shook her head. “I’m not done. I need to get this all out. I had to sit there and watch you dote on Kaylee. Tell everyone what best friends you are, when I missed *our* friendship...” She gasped for air before she went on. “I missed our friendship so much at times that I could hardly breathe. Seeing you talk about her baby while I was the one carrying your child, it reminded me of all the times I had to listen to you talk about Kaci and how much you wanted her. Do you have *any* idea what that does to a woman?”

I squeezed my eyes shut and felt my own tears building. When she continued to speak, I looked at her again.

“I heard you tell Brock you didn’t want a relationship with me. And now you want to be with me because of a mistake you made. Do you hear what you say when you talk to me? I can only take so much, Dirk, before I break completely.”

I fisted my hands. “I didn’t mean any of that.”

“You said it, Dirk!” she shouted. “You said it, just like you said Kaci’s name. Like you chose Kaylee’s phone call over me.” Tears slipped down her face as she looked at the floor. “If you think it’s easy for me to tell you to go live the life you want, you’re crazy. It’s the hardest thing I’ve ever had to say in my entire life. Even harder than when I walked away from you that night. I never thought anything could hurt me like that, until right this moment.”

She lifted her head and stared into my eyes. “But sometimes if you love someone hard enough, you have to let them go. And I love you so much, that I’ll let you go. I. Will. Let. You. Go.”

My heart slammed against my chest, and when I spoke, my own voice cracked. “I don’t want you to let me go, Merit. Ever.”

Her lips pressed together tightly, and she quickly wiped her tears away as she shook her head frantically. “I can’t play seconds anymore. I know I deserve more than that. Being around you and all the times you put me in second position has taught me that I won’t be that same naïve girl again.”

It was my turn to yell. “You’re not fucking second to *anyone*, Merit. You never were. Not ever!”

She stared at me with a confused look on her face. She slowly shook her head as if my words sounded so foreign to her.

I scrubbed my hands down my face, then dropped them to my sides and tried to calm down. She needed to finally hear the truth.

“I don’t know when I actually fell in love with you. Maybe the first time we kissed, or the first time we danced. Or the first time I looked at you and you made it so hard for me to breathe. All I know is, I’ve loved you for as long as I can remember.”

Merit’s mouth formed an O as she stood there and finally listened to me.

“I fought my feelings for you, because I never wanted to ruin our friendship. You meant...no...you *mean* the world to me. When I saw you again on New Year’s Eve, I couldn’t stop those old feelings from flooding back. Do you want to know what I was going to say that morning in your kitchen? I was going to tell you that night when we were first together, I regret more than anything that *her* name came out of my mouth, because I can promise you, Kaci was *not* who I was thinking about. It was you. It’s always been you. I just didn’t know it then like I know it now.”

“If I wasn’t pregnant right now, would you be standing here telling me this?” she asked, her voice clogged with emotion.

I didn’t want to lie to her. I never wanted to lie to her. “Honestly, I don’t know, Merit. I’m scared shitless. The only reason I told Brock that bullshit about not wanting a relationship with you was because he wouldn’t stop talking about you. About us. I was so confused about what I was feeling for you. How you infiltrated nearly every moment of my thoughts. Hell, I didn’t mean a single word of it, Merit. I swear to you, I didn’t.”

Merit took an unknowing step toward me and it was all I could do to not reach out for her and hold her to me. Beg her to believe me.

“I needed to think. My head was so confused with Dad dying, and these intense feelings I have for you. That night, when we made love, I had this feeling in my chest that I’ve never felt before, and my God, that scared the shit out of me. I mean, I was scared before, that’s why I kept you in the friend zone. You were my everything, Merit. And I know I didn’t show you, and I know that stupid thing with Brock and Kaci caused distance between us. Maybe in the back of my head, I thought I needed Kaci around to keep from ruining my friendship with you.”

“What?” she asked, confusion all over her face.

I shrugged. “I don’t know. The only thing I *do* know is, I have never in my life felt this way about any other woman,

including Kaci. I think she knew how I felt about you, and a part of her was jealous. If you only knew how many times I accidentally called *her* Merit. It drove her crazy. You know how she was, she always wanted...”

“What she couldn’t have,” Merit softly added.

“When you walked away that night in the barn, I told myself it was for the best. That you and I would never work. You were too good for me, and I didn’t deserve you. I didn’t deserve the gift you gave me that night, and I sure as hell don’t deserve your forgiveness now. I threw all of my feelings into a woman I thought I loved, but it was only because you scared the hell out of me, Merit. I knew I’d hurt you, and that I was fucked up in the head, and that if I stayed and tried to fight for you, I’d only hurt you more. So I let you go.”

It was my turn to take a step close to her. My fingers twitched to touch her. To wipe away her tears.

“But let me tell you right now, there is not a day in my life where I didn’t regret not going after you. To beg you to listen to me, to prove to you that you held my heart the entire time. I don’t think I truly understood it then, but I know it now. I know it with all my heart. I’ve said over and over these last few years that I didn’t want a family, or that I had no desire to settle down. It’s only because you’re the only woman I’ve ever thought about having a future with—and that future seemed like a prize I couldn’t win, because I was the one who hurt you. I don’t want to hurt you anymore, Merit.”

She pulled in a breath and slowly let it out, then drew her brows in tight. “You would have given up anything to be with Kaci. You even said so.”

I felt my face heat up, and I couldn’t look at her in that moment, because I *had* said that. I did think that what I felt for Kaci was love, but not the same love I felt for Merit. That love was fierce and strong and scared the shit out of me.

I swallowed hard. “I thought what I felt for her was love... but after being with you that night, I knew it wasn’t. The type of feelings I had for you...I knew they could destroy me. What I had for Kaci, hell...I think it was the fight to win her

attention more than anything. You and I both know we never would have lasted if Kaci had picked me. After she married Brock, I knew I cared about her deeply, but I didn't love her. I can look back now and say that without a doubt. With Kaci, I didn't feel like this, like how I feel right now with you."

I placed my hand over my chest. "This feeling inside me here...I can tell you that when we were together, it's never felt like that with any other woman. And I'm not talking about the sex, I'm talking about how you make my soul feel, Merit. It's different with you, and that scared me because I knew you had the power to bring me to my knees."

She wiped her tears away again. "Dirk, how do you know this isn't simply everything bombarding you all at once? Your dad dying, an unplanned pregnancy. Can you honestly say you're ready for all of this?"

I motioned between us. "I'm not saying this thing we have is going to be easy. I have no clue what I'm doing, Bugs. I only know that when Dad died, everything changed. I don't know what's going to happen in the future. But I can promise you right now, the one thing I know for sure is that I want to be here, for you, for our baby. I want to spend time with you. Learn you all over again. I don't want to let you slip through my fingers. We both know I'm going to mess up. Probably multiple times."

Merit ran the back of her hand over her nose, and I wanted to smile but didn't.

"Merit, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since New Year's Eve. You're in my thoughts, my dreams, and yes, you're pregnant now with our baby. But I'm not doing this out of obligation. And I won't lie to you and say I'm not scared, because I'm fucking terrified."

A small smile played at the corners of her mouth. "Me, too."

I looked at her with what I knew were pleading eyes. "Please, *please* don't push me away because you think I'm doing this because of the baby. Yes, it was the push I needed to

be honest with myself and you, but I'm begging you. Don't push me away."

"Dirk," she whispered as we both made our way to each other like magnets. I suddenly needed her in my arms. Needed to be near her, in her, around her. Hell, I simply needed Merit like I needed my next breath.

I stopped right in front of her and cupped her face in my hands. We gazed into each other's eyes.

With as much conviction as I could put into my words, I said, "I love you. I've loved you for as long as I can remember. I was too stupid to see it and an idiot not to admit it. But never again."

It felt like a million years before she reacted. I saw her take every word I said and let them sink into her brain. I knew she was trying to decide if what I told her was true. Finally, her face erupted into a brilliant smile. She reached up on her toes and brought her lips to mine.

Just before we kissed, she whispered back, "I love you, too."

Chapter Twenty-Three

MERIT

The moment his mouth met mine, everything inside me exploded. The need to feel him closer and have his body against mine was almost painful.

“Dirk, please,” I begged as I moved my hands to his chest and grabbed his shirt. I wasn’t even sure what I was asking him for. More of him. More of us. More of this. Something to make me feel like this moment was truly happening.

“Merit. I need you. God, I need you.”

I reached down and pulled his shirt over his head. “Then take me,” I panted before his mouth claimed mine once more.

Our hands were clumsy as we worked at getting one another’s clothes off and our kissing turned more intense. I could feel my body vibrating with the need to have him. Not even the first time I was with Dirk, the night he took my virginity, did I feel this way. This was a want I’d never had before, and it was almost all-consuming.

Dirk pulled back and stared down at me, almost as if he felt the same way I did. I smiled, suddenly feeling shy from the intense way he was watching me.

“It’s always been you, Merit. Even if I wouldn’t admit it to myself, it was always you.”

I blinked rapidly in an attempt to keep my tears at bay. His words were what I had always longed to hear. This man, whom I had given my heart to so long ago, was here. Kissing me and saying things that made me both happy and scared. That insecure part of me, deep down inside, wanted me to think he was only saying it all because of the baby. That he was upset over losing his father and was afraid of not having his child in his life. I swallowed hard and pushed those thoughts far, far away.

Dirk gazed down at me with nothing but love and honesty in those green eyes of his. I decided to open my heart up and

fully give it to him because I knew he was worth the risk.

I gave up the fight and felt my emotions threatening to spill free once more. Dirk quickly cupped my face in his hands and shook his head before he leaned down and kissed my wet cheeks.

His mouth moved softly over my face, placing gentle kisses as he whispered, "I'm never letting you go. *Never.*"

My legs grew weak, and I reached up once more to hold onto his arms to steady myself.

Dirk lifted my shirt over my head and threw it onto the floor. He reached around my back and unclasped my bra, allowing it to fall down my arms and off my body. A low moan came from the back of his throat as he bent his head and took one of my nipples into his mouth. I laced my fingers through his hair as I pulled him closer to me. Pain and pleasure hit me at the same time, and I felt a rush of wetness between my legs.

"More," I begged. "I need more."

He dragged his mouth away from my nipple and looked back at the food. He quickly walked over and turned off the stove and was back in front of me before I'd even uttered a word. He fell to his knees and slowly peeled my yoga pants and undies off at the same time, holding my hand as I stepped out of them. Then he simply stared at my stomach.

My stomach. Where our child grew inside of me.

Our child.

I swallowed and my heart pumped hard in my chest when he leaned in and kissed me gently on the stomach. I closed my eyes and pressed my lips together tightly in an attempt to not cry yet again. Stupid emotions. The gesture was so sweet, yet so erotic at the same time. My body hummed with desire.

"Mine," he whispered as he kissed my stomach again. "Both of you."

Those three words nearly made my knees buckle out from under me. Hearing Dirk say that was more powerful than I had

ever imagined it could be. And true. Even if I never wanted to admit it to myself, I had always belonged to Dirk. Or, at least, my heart did.

“Dirk,” I whispered, moving my fingers once again through his thick, dark hair. He looked up and smiled. Goodness, that smile alone nearly had me coming undone.

“I want to taste you,” he said.

I pulled my lower lip between my teeth and felt my cheeks heat up. The idea of his mouth on me nearly caused me to moan.

Dirk stood and picked me up like I weighed next to nothing. He placed me on the island, and then his eyes drifted over my shoulder.

He looked back at me and frowned. “You need to eat.”

I sent him a look that said if he stopped now, I would never forgive him. He smiled and adjusted me on the island. “Okay, eat food later. Got it.”

Then, he was there, his face buried between my thighs. I gasped and dropped my head back as I let out a long, deep moan. The pleasure instantly overwhelmed me as I felt my body start to wind up in the most delicious way.

“Merit, I’ve been dreaming of doing this to you,” Dirk said before he went back to work, sucking and licking my sensitive bud.

“Oh God. Oh God.” My orgasm built up quickly, and before I could even prepare myself, it exploded. I screamed out Dirk’s name and held on to the side of the island as I pushed my hips into his face. He licked and sucked and nibbled as he slipped his finger inside of me, and I came again, this time harder—if that was even possible.

“Dirk! It’s too much! Oh God. Yes! Stop! Oh God!” I cried out, not wanting it to end, but needing it to. I fell apart while the room exploded with bursts of light that left me feeling dizzy.

When I managed to get my wits about me, Dirk picked me up once more. “I’m not fucking you on the island. I want to make love to you. Where’s the bedroom?”

I smiled. The idea of him fucking me on the island sounded nice. Really nice. But so did a bed. The only two times we’d been together had been in awkward places, and I really wanted to know what being with Dirk in a bed felt like. “Down the hall, last door on the right.”

Dirk moved quickly, like our lives depended on getting to my bedroom. He gently laid me on the bed, and I watched as he undid his jeans, kicked off his boots, and in what seemed like one movement, rid himself of his clothes.

He stood before me naked and oh so beautiful. I had never in my life seen anything like him. His broad shoulders stood atop a massive chest that screamed this man was in the best shape of his life. Rippled abs led down to one hell of a hard-on. I chewed on my lip as I took in every inch of him.

He finally moved and crawled onto the bed, his hands moving up my legs as he placed kisses on my inner thighs. “You’re so damn beautiful, Bugs.”

I groaned and dropped my head onto the pillow as he laughed. “Please, if you insist on calling me that nickname, can we not use it before you make love to me?”

He lightly chuckled again and moved completely over my body. His smile faded as he settled between my legs and our eyes met. He brushed stray pieces of my hair away and gently kissed the tip of my nose, then all around my face. The feeling of his erection against my body caused my insides to melt. I slid my foot lazily up and down his leg and let him take his time. I felt so cherished with each kiss, and I didn’t want the moment to end.

“I’ve never been so nervous in my life to be with a woman,” he finally said, his forehead pressed to mine.

“Nervous?” I asked with a chuckle. “Why on Earth are you nervous?”

He lifted his head, pinning me with his gaze. “Because it’s *you*. I’ve missed you so much, more than I ever realized. You mean so much to me, Merit, and I...” He closed his eyes as he spoke the next words. “I don’t want to ever see pain in your eyes again. I don’t want to hurt you, and I’m terrified I’m going to.”

I brought my hands up to his face and spoke softly. “Look at me, Dirk.”

He opened his eyes and stared into mine.

“The only thing I’ve ever wanted from you was *you*. This. Us.” I slid one hand down to his chest, where his heart pounded against my palm. “Your love, your heart. That’s all I want. I’m not asking you for anything more than that.”

“It’s yours, Merit. All of me. Every single heartbeat belongs to you.”

I pulled in a breath, and before I was able to say anything else, he kissed me. His body shifted, and I opened to him. The moment he pushed inside of me, it felt like every single worry or fear I’d had over the last few months simply slipped away. All the stupid words we’d exchanged were gone and forgotten. The only thing that mattered was the two of us.

“You feel...oh God.” Dirk breathed against my neck as he moved in and out of me. It was a deliciously slow pace, and I knew we both needed more, but this felt so right.

His voice sounded so strained as he whispered, “Merit...I never...”

His hot breath against my neck sent a thrill over my body. The feel of Dirk inside of me nearly left me dazed and confused. I opened my eyes to see him staring at me. “You never what?” I asked as I fought for air.

He slowly shook his head. “I never thought it could feel so good.”

I wrapped my legs around him tightly. “More, Dirk, please.”

He kissed my neck and along my jawline before he confessed, “I’m afraid I’m going to hurt the baby.”

I giggled. “Trust me, you’re not going to hurt the baby.”

“I don’t want to lose control, and I’ve got to be honest, I’m balancing on the edge here, sweetheart.”

I dug my fingers into his ass as I lifted myself up into him. “Don’t treat me like a china doll. Please, Dirk. Give me more of you.”

He moved faster, and I raised my hips to match his rhythm. “Harder!” I cried out. I had never been vocal when it came to sex. I hadn’t had very many partners since my first time with Dirk, but being with him made me feel so...powerful. I knew what I wanted from him, and I had every intention of taking it.

“Fucking hell, Merit.”

“Yes! Dirk, fuck me harder.”

And that was his undoing. He lifted up and grabbed onto my legs and gave me exactly what I asked for. I gripped the bedsheets and relished in how his body moved against mine. The sounds of our lovemaking caused my body to wind up tightly, and another orgasm started to build deep in my body.

“So close,” I panted out.

“That’s it, baby. Tell me what you want me to do,” Dirk panted out.

I thrashed my head back and forth. Never had I ever experienced such raw passion while with a man. It was powerful, yet so beautiful. I was moved almost to tears. My mind whirled as I rode on the edge of an orgasm. So close, but out of reach.

“Merit, baby, you’re squeezing on me. God...I can’t hold back.”

I lifted my hips more to meet him, trying to get him deeper. He grabbed my leg and lifted it higher, which in turn caused him to go exactly where I needed him to. He hit that elusive spot that my body needed in order to lose control.

“Yes! Yes! Dirk, yes!!”

Then he touched my clit, and I could feel my body pulsing around him as he grew bigger, his own body shaking with the force of his orgasm. It was blissful, yet so intense. Unlike anything I had ever experienced. We both cried out each other’s names as we fell apart...together.

Dirk slowed his movements, then pressed his mouth to mine in another searing kiss. “I love you,” he mumbled over and over against my lips. As if he had waited a thousand years to declare it and couldn’t say it enough. “I love you. I love you. I love you...”

I was in a bubble of euphoria as I took in every single word and let them settle around me like a warm blanket.

Was this even real? Could I possibly be this happy? This content?

I wasn’t sure how long Dirk stayed inside me as we kissed, neither of us in a rush to leave the bed, or one another. It was only when my betraying stomach growled that Dirk snapped out of it.

He pulled out of me and then smiled. “Quick shower and then breakfast.”

Nodding, I let him help me up and off the bed as we walked into the master bathroom. I turned on the water, and what should have been a quick shower turned into another amazing moment with Dirk buried inside of me. This time he cherished my body and moved deliciously slow.

When I came, Dirk followed quickly after.

He leaned his forehead against mine as he fought to regain control of his breathing, and I did the same.

“Are you okay?” I asked as I toyed with his wet hair, water still pouring over both of us.

With a chuckle, he pulled back and met my gaze. “Am I okay?”

I nodded.

“I’ve never felt so alive in my entire life.”

There was no way I could stop the smile that spread over my face.

“Come on, let me dry you off and finally make you breakfast, Bugs.”

I rolled my eyes at the nickname but didn’t say anything as I watched him step out of the shower first and dry off. After he thoroughly dried me—stopping to kiss my mouth and then my stomach—he walked back into the bedroom and grabbed his t-shirt and slipped it over my head. He looked me over slowly... and I saw it in his eyes and laughed.

“If I don’t get food soon, I’ll have zero energy.”

His eyes met mine. “Shit. Food. Right.”

An hour later, I dropped onto the sofa and moaned. “I’m so full, I don’t think I can move.”

Dirk sat next to me and pulled my feet onto his lap. He looked exhausted, and I finally realized how early in the morning it was. Had he gotten any sleep at all?

“Have you slept at all, Dirk?”

He dropped his head back onto the sofa and mumbled, “Not really. I was worried about you.”

My stomach dipped; I felt guilty for making him worry, even if I hadn’t meant to do it.

His fingers, still massaging my feet, slowed, and I smiled. He was exhausted, and yet he had just made me a full breakfast and helped clean up the kitchen. There was no way I was letting him fall asleep on my sofa.

I moved and stood, which caused him to stir and open his eyes. I held out my hand to him, and he smiled.

“Come on, let’s get you to bed,” I said.

Without a single argument, Dirk took my offered hand and we walked back to my bedroom. We both slipped out of our clothes and climbed into the bed. Dirk instantly pulled me against him, his arm holding me protectively, and I was

positive he was asleep within a minute. After waiting to make sure he was, I turned in his arms and watched him. Everything felt so surreal as I stared at the man sleeping in my bed.

He looked so at peace, and I wanted to crawl into his head and hear his thoughts. His chest rose and fell with each breath, and I soon found myself fighting to keep my eyes open. I couldn't possibly be tired. Not after sleeping for as long as I did.

Somehow, though, I snuggled in closer to his side and felt his arm wrap tightly around my body. Soon, I gave in to the fight and drifted off to sleep in the arms of the man I was crazy in love with.

Chapter Twenty-Four

DIRK

With a start, I jerked my eyes open and glanced around the room. It only took me a moment to realize where I was.

Merit.

Glancing down, I smiled at the sight. For the first time in my life, I felt a contentment I never dreamed I would feel rush over me. My best friend, and the woman I loved, was in my arms sleeping so peacefully.

I closed my eyes and took in a slow, deep breath. The last few months, so many things had changed. My father's death being the major one. Everything had looked so different after he left. Things still looked and felt different, but a small spark of hope started to build inside of me the moment I found out Merit was pregnant.

Hell, if I was being honest, things hadn't been the same since I saw her on New Year's Eve. Being able to finally utter the words to her earlier this morning—that I loved her—had felt so freeing. Once I said them, I couldn't seem to *stop* saying them.

Merit stirred and then froze. She suddenly sat up straight, covered her mouth, and jumped from the bed.

“Merit?” I called out as she ran into the bathroom. “Shit.”

I scrambled out of the bed and stopped when I saw her bent over the toilet. She was throwing up, and the strangest sensation came over me. I wanted to do whatever I could to make it better.

“Baby,” I said as I dropped down and rubbed her back. She threw up with so much force, I felt my own stomach lurch.

I quickly glanced around her bathroom. Hanging on the towel rack was a washcloth. I grabbed it, ran it under hot water, and waited for her to finish. When she dropped back and leaned against the wall, I handed her the washcloth.

“How long have you felt sick like this?” I asked as I wrapped a towel around myself and sat down across from her. She must have gotten up at some point and put my t-shirt back on, because she was currently wearing it.

She smiled weakly. “Um...a while now. It seems to be getting worse, though.”

Guilt hit me square in the chest as I watched her bury her face in the cloth. I should have been here for her.

Merit pulled the washcloth away and rubbed it behind her neck. “I felt sick a few hours ago, but it passed once I got up and drank some water.”

I frowned. “I didn’t hear you get up, I’m sorry.”

Her eyes met mine. “Don’t be sorry, Dirk. It’s normal. I’m fine.”

“I don’t like seeing you sick.”

She let out a soft chuckle. “I don’t like *being* sick, but I don’t think either of us have a say in it at this point.”

I nodded and laughed. “Guess not. Is it just in the morning you feel sick?”

“Mainly. There are points during the day where I feel a bit queasy, but mornings seem to really get me. Like as soon as I open my eyes, you better get out of my way!”

We stared at one another for a few minutes, neither of us saying a word.

Finally, I broke the silence. “I have to leave town for a few days.”

She lifted her brows.

“It’s a benefit ride I agreed to do before...um...before Dad died.”

“Where at?” she asked as she settled her hands in her lap.

“Colorado Springs. Would you like to come?”

Her eyes widened, and I couldn’t help but notice the corner of her mouth twitch with the urge to smile. “I haven’t seen you

ride in a long time. Since high school.”

I placed my hand over my heart. “You haven’t even watched me on TV?”

Merit’s cheeks turned a beautiful shade of pink. “That doesn’t count.”

Reaching for her hand, I flashed her a smile. “It counts in my eyes.”

She dug her teeth into her lower lip and grinned. “Then, yes, I’ve watched you ride a number of times.”

Something about her confession made my heart feel like it swelled up in my chest. I drew in a deep breath and exhaled. “I’ve missed you.”

Her eyes searched my face. “I’ve missed you, too.”

“Then we agree we have a lot of catching up to do?”

Merit nodded.

“It only makes sense for you to come with me. Besides, if you think I’m going to leave and not be able to kiss you for more than twenty-four hours, you’re crazy.”

A wide smile grew across her face. “When are you—”

“We,” I corrected with a wink.

“When are *we* leaving? I’ll need to let Michael and my mother know.”

“Next weekend.”

Her mouth dropped open in surprise. “Oh, wow. Okay.”

“Will you be okay to travel? I mean, with the morning sickness and all.”

“I’ll be fine,” she answered.

I nodded, then stood and reached down to help her up. “I have no idea what time it is, but I’m sure my mother is worried.”

“I sent out a text earlier this morning when I woke up. My mom, brother, Timberlynn, Lincoln, your mom, and Libby all

texted. I told them I'd been exhausted and just needed some sleep. Your mom asked if you were with me. I said you were; I hope that's okay?"

With a chuckle, I pulled her into my arms. "Of course, it's okay. I don't want to hide my feelings for you anymore, Merit. I've done it for too many years."

She reached up onto her toes and kissed me softly on the cheek. "I need to brush my teeth before I kiss you properly. I just threw up, remember? I keep an extra toothbrush in the top right drawer, just in case. It's yours if you want it."

With a quick kiss on the tip of her nose, I replied, "Thank God. I'm dying to kiss you."

Once we both finished brushing our teeth, I kissed Merit properly. Her little moans nearly drove me insane. I picked her up, sat her on the bathroom sink, and slipped my hand between her legs.

"You're so wet, baby," I murmured against her mouth.

"I want you, Dirk. Now."

"The bed," I said as I went to pick her up.

"Here. Now." She wrapped her legs around me and pulled me to her. "I need you *now*."

I smiled. "On the bathroom counter, Bugs?"

She chewed on her lip and met my gaze. "I've been so..."

"So?" I prompted.

"Horny. Pregnancy hormones cause that, apparently. I feel like I've become addicted to you. God, I want you to fuck me right here, Dirk, and I'm not even embarrassed to say it."

My damn legs nearly buckled. Hearing that come out of Merit's mouth did something to me. "Christ Almighty, woman. You keep talking like that, and I'm going to take you on every surface in this house."

Her eyes darkened, and she nodded. "I like the sound of that."

My cock grew painfully hard as I took it in one hand, grabbed her by the ass, and pulled her to the edge of the counter.

“Is this what you want?” I asked as I rubbed it against her wet pussy.

She nodded and opened her mouth, but no words came out. She looked down at my cock in my hand and whimpered.

“My cock inside you?”

“Yes, please.”

“Say it. Let me hear that pretty little mouth say it.”

Her eyes jerked up to meet mine. She paused for a moment, then said, “I want your cock inside me. Dirk, please don’t make me beg you.”

I positioned myself at her entrance and pushed inside. She gasped as she grabbed onto my shoulders.

“You will never have to beg for me to be inside you, Merit. Never. I’m yours. Only yours.”

She dropped her head back as I moved in and out of her.

“Say it, Merit. Say I’m yours and only yours.”

“Oh God, Dirk!”

I slowed my pace and pulled almost all the way out of her. “Say it. I need you to know it. To believe it.”

She lifted her head and met my gaze. Her mouth formed a slight O shape as she breathed rapidly. “You’re mine, only mine. And I’m yours. Forever yours.”

“Fuck yes,” I said and slammed back into her.

“Yes!” she cried out.

“Baby, I’m not going to last,” I cried out.

When my mouth claimed hers on a hard drive in, she screamed. Her pussy squeezed my cock, and it didn’t take me long to spill myself inside of her. The whole sex without a condom was fucking fantastic, and I knew that even after Merit had our baby, I was never wearing another one again.

The feel of her against me bare was one of the greatest things in the world. If that meant we had a gaggle of kids, so be it.

After I came, Merit wrapped her legs and arms around me tightly. I lifted her and carried her into the shower. I reached over and turned it on, stepping in with her.

“I’m in your t-shirt!” she cried out as water cascaded over us.

I gently pushed her against the wall, pretty sure my cock was still hard as I moved ever so slightly in and out of her body.

“Oh, Dirk,” she whispered, and my mouth found hers once more.

“I love you,” I whispered. “You. Are. Mine.”

She nodded and sliced her fingers through my hair. “I love you, too. And I keep hoping this isn’t all a dream.”

I reached down and played with her clit as I moved in and out of her. My cock wasn’t quite fully hard again, but it was getting there. “It’s not a dream, baby, and let me prove it to you once more.”

It didn’t take long before I brought her to another orgasm. The way her body responded to mine was fucking amazing. I had no idea if it was all Merit, or the benefit of being pregnant. Ty and Brock had both told me how Lincoln’s and Kaylee’s sexual appetites had grown when they were pregnant. All I knew was that I would do everything in my power to make Merit know that she had my complete attention. Both in and out of bed.

When I pulled out of her and placed her feet gently on the shower floor, she grabbed onto my arms for support and laughed.

“I think you’ve made me weak from multiple orgasms.”

I dipped my mouth to the side of her neck and kissed her there. “Better get used to it. This is just the beginning.”



Brock opened the front door and stared at me. His eyes narrowed a bit before a smile slowly grew over his face.

“Are you going to let me in or stand there and give me that goofy-ass grin?” I asked.

He slowly shook his head. “Oh hell. I’ve seen that look before, but never in my wildest imagination did I think I’d see it on *your* face.”

“Fuck you, Brock. Let me in.”

He stepped to the side as he let me past. “I’m going to guess that you finally came to your damn senses and made up with Merit.”

I couldn’t help the smile that spread over my face even if I wanted to. “We more than made up.”

His brows rose. “I think this conversation needs a beer. Let me grab two, and I’ll meet you on the back porch.”

I glanced around the house. “Where are the kids and Lincoln?”

“Lincoln took Morgan and Blayze over to my folks’ house to swim. Hunter is napping.” He held up the baby monitor as he walked into the kitchen.

“When did he go down?” I asked.

“About ten minutes ago. His afternoon naps are the long ones.”

I nodded and suddenly realized that this would be my life in a few months. I was going to be a father.

I exhaled deeply, and Brock looked over at me. “You okay?”

I felt a slight chuckle slip free. “For the most part, I’m great.”

He frowned, then reached into the refrigerator and grabbed a few beers. He tossed me one and motioned for us to head out

onto the back porch.

“Talk to me, Dirk,” he said as we both took a seat.

I let my eyes focus on the mountains dotting the horizon. A small cap of snow still covered the peaks. The sky was so blue against the few white clouds that were scattered across it.

I rolled my neck to ease the tension that suddenly weighed down on me. “Everything has changed, Brock. Everything.”

He opened his beer and took a drink. He didn’t speak, only waited for me to go on.

“Since my dad died, I feel so lost. A piece of me is missing, and I’ve been honestly scared to death I’ll never be able to get it back. I slowly realized I’ve been feeling that way long before I lost my dad, I just never wanted to admit it. The loss grew bigger when he left.”

“Bigger?” Brock asked. “I’m going to guess this has to do with Merit.”

“Did Lincoln tell you that Merit’s pregnant?”

His eyes widened, and his mouth dropped open.

I laughed. “I’m sure that was probably my expression as well when I found out.”

He slowly shook his head. “Guess that explains the bender you went on.”

“Yeah, not one of my finer moments. Things didn’t really go that well when I confronted Merit about the baby. We exchanged words, and she left.”

“I take it you went after her?” he asked.

“Not right away, but long story short, we made up. A few times,” I said with a grin.

Brock rolled his eyes, then laughed.

“I admitted something to her earlier this morning,” I said. “Something I’ve kept inside for a really fucking long time.”

“Keep going,” Brock prompted.

I swallowed hard and looked at him. “I told her I loved her. That I’ve always loved her, I just never wanted to admit it before.”

Brock’s eyes went wide once more. His mouth opened, closed, then opened again. “You love her? You’ve *always* loved her? This from the guy who only weeks ago said you weren’t interested in a relationship with her? Dirk, are you sure your father’s death isn’t making you feel...lonely? Merit is familiar. Hell, she was your closest friend aside from me for all those years. The fact that she’s carrying your baby—”

“Has nothing to do with how I feel about her,” I cut him off. I could feel my anger starting to grow, and I knew it wasn’t Brock’s fault to question this. Hell, I fought him tooth and nail to win Kaci’s affections all those years ago, and now I was admitting to being in love with Merit. Even *my* head was spinning. “Listen, I know I love her. I also know I never wanted to admit it because of everything with Kaci. But this feeling I have for Merit...I don’t even know how to explain it, Brock. It’s so different. It’s always been different with her. On some level I knew I loved her, but I cherished our friendship more. So I pushed my feelings to the side, too damn afraid if I was truthful with her it would ruin our friendship, or worse yet, ruin *me*. Of course, we all know how that ended anyway.”

Brock thought for a moment while he rubbed the stubble on his chin. “Do you think that’s why you went after Kaci so hard?”

I shrugged. “Deep down, I knew Kaci would always pick you over me. I knew that, and maybe by throwing my attention at her, I thought I could forget how I felt about Merit. Then, when I fucked up and slept with her and lost her, I vowed I’d never open my heart up again. I’d lost both Kaci and Merit, but truth be told, the loss of Merit has always torn me up inside. I only realized how much I was hurt by her leaving when I heard she was back in town last year. All those feelings came flooding back.”

“So why push her away?” Brock asked.

Staring at the beer in my hand, I answered honestly. “I was afraid. That night, when I took her virginity, it was so different with Merit than it had been with any other girl, and I knew it would be because of how I felt for her deep down. Hell, I don’t even know why I uttered Kaci’s name, because all I could think about was Merit. How she made me feel. How *scared* I was by the way she made me feel.”

“Maybe that was why you said Kaci’s name. Subconsciously, you knew it would push Merit away, and you wouldn’t have to deal with how you were feeling. It’s easier to pine over a woman you can’t have, rather than deal with a woman who makes you feel things.”

Our eyes met, and I nodded. “Maybe so. I’ve slept with so many women over the years, and every single time I crawled out of a bed, I thought about that night. How Merit made me feel...and how none of the women I slept with ever came close to holding a candle to her.”

“What did she say when you told her how you felt?”

I let out a gruff laugh. “She stared at me for a few moments. I think she was trying to see if my head would explode, or if I’d turn and run. When that didn’t happen, she told me she loved me, too.”

Brock smiled. “I always knew she felt more than friendship for you, Dirk. It was obvious, the connection the two of you shared. I honestly never knew how you felt about *her*, though. I always assumed it was Kaci you wanted.”

“It was, but for all the wrong reasons, and I see that now. Or, at least, I can admit to it all now. I don’t want to mess this up with her, Brock.”

He leaned forward, rested his arms on his knees, and gave me a serious look. “You do hear yourself, right? Because not that long ago you professed in front of God and witnesses that you had no desire to settle down.”

I forced myself to nod.

“Dirk, you need to be sure that you’re not doing this because one, Merit’s pregnant, and two, you’re still lost in

your grief for your dad.”

I felt my brows pull in tight. “Do you not think I’m capable of loving her?”

He sat back and gave me a hard stare. “I know you’re very capable of loving her. I see it in your eyes. I’ve never seen you look like this before. I only want to make sure you’re doing it for the right reasons, Dirk. For her.”

“I am,” I stated.

“And if she wasn’t pregnant? Would we be having this same conversation?”

“Maybe not right now, maybe not in a month or even six. But I’d like to believe my stupid ass would have realized how much she means to me sooner rather than later. That I want her in my life. I love her, Brock. I really love her.”

Brock nodded, seemingly happy with my answer. “As much as I’d love to tell you that you’re not going to mess things up, I can’t. We’re men, and eventually we mess things up one way or another. The best advice I can give you is to always be honest and upfront about your feelings. Don’t hide anything from her; if you’re scared shitless, then tell her you are. If you’re angry, tell her why. Talk to each other.”

I brought the beer to my lips and took in a long drink. Brock and I sat there for a few minutes not saying a word. We both stared out over the pastures at the base of the Sapphire Mountains.

It wasn’t until my phone went off in my pocket that we were both pulled out of the trance. I didn’t even bother to see who it was. I knew it wasn’t Merit, because I’d already changed my notifications on my phone so it would alert me differently when she called and texted.

Brock was the first to speak. “I’m happy for you, Dirk. It’s about damn time you found your own happiness.”

I smiled. “Guess I’m going to need a crash course in being a father. Know anyone who can teach an old dog some tricks?”

He laughed, then turned to look at me. “That can be arranged. When?”

With a shrug, I replied, “The sooner the better, I guess.”

A slow smile spread across Brock’s face as an idea hit him. “How about tonight?” he asked.

I swallowed hard as I choked out, “Tonight?”

Chapter Twenty-Five

MERIT

I stared at Dirk and tried to figure out if I wanted to laugh or cry. “What do you mean, we’re babysitting Hunter?”

Dirk stood in my kitchen, a smile plastered on his face. “I mean, we’re going to watch Hunter tonight. You and me.”

“Why?” I asked, still perplexed by his giddiness. Albeit, I had every inclination to say his so-called happiness about babysitting was forced.

“Why?” he repeated with a laugh. “Bugs, this will be practice for us.”

I closed my eyes and inwardly cursed. Slowly, I looked at him. “Practice? You want us to practice being parents with Hunter? I’m pretty sure Lincoln wouldn’t appreciate that very much. Besides, shouldn’t we practice being a couple first before we try the parenting thing?”

He flashed me a smile that nearly melted my panties off. “That’s the best part—Lincoln was totally on board. They’re dropping Morgan and Blayze off at Stella and Ty Senior’s house, and you and I are watching Hunter for the night.”

I felt my mouth fall open, and I stuttered out a few sounds. “Did you say for the night? As in, all night?”

Dirk winked, and Lord, my insides clenched. A part of me wanted to jump on him, have my way with him, and then figure out what was going on. I shook my head to clear my wayward thoughts.

“Yeah. Lincoln and Brock booked a hotel room for the night.” He slapped his hands together, and I jumped. “So pack up a bag and let’s head on over.”

I rubbed the tips of my fingers against my temples in an attempt to get rid of the instant headache that had formed. “Dirk, you volunteered us to watch a baby! A three-month-old baby!”

He frowned. “Are you nervous about watching Hunter? How hard can it be? Every time I see him, he’s sleeping.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Dirk’s sudden urge to learn all about how to take care of a baby was cute, I had to admit. “Dirk, we haven’t even been”—I motioned between the two of us—“a thing for twenty-four hours yet, and you want us to watch a baby? Alone? Without his parents there?”

“Honestly, Bugs, he’ll be asleep most of the night. How hard will it be? He’s just a baby.”

“Just a baby?” I asked, positive my eyes were about to pop out of my head.

He shrugged. “Yeah, I mean, you know what to do with babies, don’t you?”

“The only thing I know to do with a baby is hold it for five minutes, say how beautiful he or she is, and give it back to their parents!”

For the first time since Dirk walked back through my door, he looked worried. “He *will* be asleep most of the time, right?”

“I have no clue!” I said, laughing once more.

He raked his fingers through his dark hair. “Well, shit. What in the hell did I get us into?”

I walked up and wrapped my arms around him, playing with the hair at the back of his neck. His green eyes darkened as he looked down at me. “I don’t know. But it looks like we’re in it together.”

“Maybe I can bribe Timberlynn and Tanner to babysit instead of us.”

I shot him a dirty look. “You’ll do no such thing. Lincoln thinks it’s going to be us.” I chewed on my thumbnail before I said, “I mean, how hard can it be to watch a sleeping baby?”

“Right? He’s little. He can’t run around or talk back. I can change diapers; I’ve done it before.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “You’ve changed diapers?”

“Don’t look at me like that. Yes, I’ve changed plenty of them. If you don’t remember, Brock was a single dad. I was there for him. I changed that kid’s diapers a lot. I won’t even begin to tell you how many times that little shithead pissed on me mid-diaper change. By the way, that would be the only downside of having a boy.”

I rolled my eyes as he went on.

“I was never left alone with the baby, but I can change diapers. I consider myself a master diaper changer if I do say so myself.”

I tried with all my might to keep in my laughter. “Is that right? Then, I hereby dub thee the diaper changer for this evening’s events.”

He looked worried but played it off. “Fine by me.”



“Oh. My. Gosh!” I said as I covered my mouth and tried not to gag. “What is that smell?”

Dirk held Hunter away from his body and tried to hand him to me.

I put my hand up and shook my head. “Unless you want me to throw up, do not hand me that baby.”

“I’m going to throw up if you don’t take him!”

Taking a step back, I dropped my hand. “But you said you were the master diaper changer.”

“That was before Satan took over this kid’s body and shit in his diaper. There’s something strange coming out of him.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“It’s not funny, Merit. You have to do something!”

“Nope. You offered us up to babysit, you claimed to know all when it came to diaper duty, so *you* are changing his diaper.”

He glared at me. “I hope our son pays you back someday and pees on you.”

My stomach fluttered, and I smiled. “Do you want a boy?”

He paused for a moment, then smiled, too. “Honestly, I want a healthy baby; I don’t care if it’s a boy or girl.”

Hunter started to cry, apparently tired of being suspended in midair with a very dirty diaper.

“Well, practice away, diaper master.” I quickly turned and called back, “I’ll get his bottle ready!”

Dirk mumbled something about payback under his breath as I dashed out of the nursery and made my way to the kitchen. Lincoln had left instructions on how to heat up the bottle Hunter was supposed to get before going down for the night. She also informed me that Hunter had been sleeping through the night, which was good news for sure.

After heating up the bottle, I turned to see Dirk standing in the archway of the kitchen, holding Hunter in his arms. My stomach dropped at the sight, and I swore my heart skipped a beat or two as I stared at them both.

“What’s wrong? Do I have poop on me?” Dirk asked as he held Hunter away from him.

I slowly shook my head. “No. You look so...”

He raised his brows. “So?”

“Handsome. Sexy. Handsome.”

Dirk smirked. “You said handsome twice.”

With a quick shake of my head, I took the bottle and reached for Hunter, carefully taking him in my arms. “It’s time to eat, little man.”

“After that explosion in his diaper, he’s more than ready to fill his stomach back up.”

Hunter gazed up at me with his big blue eyes, and I smiled. “He was only doing what babies do! Isn’t that right, little man?”

A smile appeared on Hunter's face, and I felt a bubble of happiness build inside of me. For the first time since I'd found out I was pregnant, I was actually excited. A feeling of longing for my own child hit me right in the chest, and I almost started to cry. Damn hormones.

I sat down in the rocker and got comfortable. Hunter reached his little hand up and rested it on mine, and I swooned.

"Goodness, someone is hungry. Here you go, sweet boy."

He latched on and started to eat like he was starved.

I slowly rocked as Hunter drank his bottle. When I glanced up, I found Dirk staring at me with a look on his face I couldn't read.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He sat down on the sofa and kept his eyes locked on us. "Seeing you holding him does something to me." He proceeded to rub his chest, almost as if he was attempting to get rid of an ache there.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

A slow smile spread over his face. "I can't wait to see you holding our baby."

In an instant, a deep warmth spread through my body and settled in the pit of my stomach. If I hadn't been holding Hunter, I was positive I would have thrown myself at Dirk. It all still felt so surreal.

Dirk came over and bent down in front of me, a concerned look on his face. "Tell me what you're thinking, Bugs."

I let out an exasperated laugh. "Stop calling me Bugs!"

He smiled, and if I hadn't known better I would say my heart skipped a beat. This man certainly knew how to make me long for him.

Dirk leaned in and kissed me softly. His eyes smoldered, and I nearly moaned but held it back. It somehow didn't seem right when I was holding my friend's baby in my arms.

He pulled on my lower lip with his teeth before he let it go. “Do I need to pinch you to prove you’re not dreaming?”

“Please don’t, not with my son in her arms,” a voice said from behind us.

Glancing past Dirk, I saw Brock standing there. My cheeks instantly felt hot. “Brock, what are you doing here?”

Dirk glanced over his shoulder and looked at Brock. “Didn’t trust us, did you?”

Brock shrugged, but I saw the smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

Standing, Dirk turned to face Brock. “Your son took a massive shit. Like, massive blowout. What did you feed him to make that happen?”

Brock let out a roar of laughter. “If I’d thought of doing that I would have, but he did that one all on his own.”

I glanced down to see Hunter falling asleep. I gave the bottle a little shake in his mouth, and he promptly started feeding again.

“You’re a pro at that, Merit. You’re going to make a wonderful mother,” Lincoln said as she came in and sat down on the sofa and watched me feed her son.

“Why are you back?” I asked.

Lincoln sighed. “The hotel double-booked and didn’t have any rooms. We went to dinner, and the idea of finding another hotel was just too daunting. So we decided to come back home.”

I smiled and asked, “You want him?”

She nodded and quickly scooped her son out of my arms and settled herself back onto the sofa. I handed her the bottle and watched her with a smile on my face.

“Did you miss him, only being gone that short amount of time?” I asked.

Lincoln nodded. “Yes. I miss Morgan and Blayze, as well, but with this guy, I feel like I could hold him all the time.”

My smile grew bigger. “He smells so good!”

“Yes! That baby smell. There’s nothing like it,” Lincoln said as she looked over at where Dirk and Brock were talking before she focused back on me and raised her brows. “So? Things okay with you two? We didn’t get a chance to talk when you got here earlier.”

I stole a peek in Dirk’s direction. The mere sight of him standing there made me think of naughty things. I swallowed hard and pushed those thoughts to the side. “Things aren’t bad.”

Lincoln giggled. “You’re glowing, Merit.”

I brought my hands up to my cheeks. “Am I?”

She nodded. “Are you happy? Less stressed now?”

I exhaled slowly. I honestly wasn’t sure what I was feeling at the moment. “I’m glad he knows. I wish it had been me who’d told him, but I think we’re going in the right direction.”

Lincoln nodded and looked at both men again. “I can honestly say, since I’ve known Dirk, I haven’t seen him this... relaxed. He seems happy...content, if that’s the right word I’m looking for.”

I twisted my hands together nervously in my lap as I took in the way Dirk was listening to Brock so intently. They were talking about bulls, something about one of Ty’s bulls going into the PBR lineup.

“Has he mentioned anything about going back on the road?” Lincoln asked in a hushed voice.

I shook my head. “No. He does have a benefit ride he’s doing in a week, though, that he said he won’t back out of.”

Lincoln stood. “Come with me, and I’ll put Hunter down.”

She gently laid the baby over her shoulder and started to pat his back as we both stood. I followed her through the house and to the nursery.

When we walked in, Lincoln sat in the rocking chair and continued patting Hunter’s back.

I glanced around the nursery and really took it in for the first time. Earlier, I hadn't paid much attention. Now I couldn't help but grin as I admired the Winnie the Pooh-themed room. The walls were painted in a light yellow, with white trimmed-out panel boxes on the lower half. Adorning the room were photos of Pooh, Tigger, Eeyore, Roo, Piglet, Kanga, and Owl, as well as Christopher Robin.

White curtains framed the large window that overlooked the Shaw ranch. The view of the sky after the sunset was breathtaking, and I wondered if there was a single place on this ranch that had a bad view. My mind wandered back to the room, and I felt my hand go to my stomach. What theme would Dirk and I settle on for our baby? Animals? Baby animals, maybe?

Lincoln must have noticed me staring at the walls.

"Morgan and Blayze picked out the theme. Morgan's obsessed with Tigger right now."

Picking up a stuffed animal, I clutched it to my chest and leaned against the wall. My body suddenly felt heavy. "Lincoln, I need your advice."

"Of course, what is it you need advice on?"

I looked down at the wood floors, and then back up at her. "You know Dirk gave up riding for a bit due to his father's death. I can't pretend to understand what he's going through, and I think we can all agree it was a bit of a surprise that he walked away from bull riding for the rest of the year."

She nodded. "Yes, Brock was stunned. That's all Dirk has been focused on for years now. And he was on his way to possibly winning again."

I frowned. "Yeah, I know. But now with the baby, he seems to be taking it...well..."

"Too good?"

"Yes! I figured he'd be spooked and would run back to the bulls the minute he found out. I mean, this is Dirk we're talking about. I'm not stupid—I know the life he's led the last few years. He hasn't exactly been an angel. And from what

I've heard, he's made it clear in the past that settling down wasn't something he was interested in. But, instead of getting spooked like I thought he would, he confessed all these feelings he has for me and we...well, we spent a good amount of time...um..."

Lincoln laughed as she said, "Getting to know each other again?"

I felt my face heat once again. "Yes. The last thing I want is for Dirk to give up something he loves because he feels pressure. I don't *think* he feels pressure, but I want to make sure. If that makes any sense at all."

Lincoln's smile was so sweet and genuine. She tilted her head slightly as she replied, "But he didn't give it up because of the baby. And he said he wasn't going back until after the new year long before he found out about the pregnancy."

When I didn't say anything, Lincoln raised her brows. "*Oh*. You don't want him going back at all."

I closed my eyes and felt my body sink even more against the wall. With a sigh, I glanced back at her. "I would never ask him to give up something he loved, please know that. If he decides he wants to keep bull riding, I'll stand by his side. If things work out between us, I mean."

"If?" she asked, one brow arched.

"Not if; they will. I feel it in my heart they will. But I still can't shake this feeling of being scared to see him go off and climb on the back of a bull, and I don't want to feel this way. I truly don't."

Lincoln stood and placed a sleeping Hunter in his crib. "Let's go outside for a bit."

I followed her as we made our way back through the house. Lincoln stopped in the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of wine and one glass. Then, she reached for a bottled water and handed it to me. "Sorry, water is all you get."

I chuckled and took the bottle.

Brock and Dirk both turned and looked at us.

“Merit and I are going to enjoy a beverage outside.”

Brock smiled, and I could practically feel his love for Lincoln when he looked at her. My gaze moved to Dirk, and my breath caught in my throat. He looked at me with a brilliant smile on his face. Our eyes locked for a moment before he winked, and I was broken from the spell.

“Ready, Merit?” Lincoln softly asked as she touched my arm.

I nodded and tore my gaze away from Dirk.

As we headed outside and over to the gazebo, Lincoln laughed.

“What’s so funny?” I asked as I sat down and opened my water. Lincoln poured a glass of wine and set the bottle on the large oak table that sat in the middle of the gazebo.

“I can honestly say I never thought I’d see the day Dirk Littlewood was head over heels in love.”

I looked out at the last bits of light that peeked up over the mountains.

“Merit, you have to know he loves you.”

I chewed on my lip and grinned. “He told me he loves me, numerous times.”

Lincoln nearly choked. “What! He did?”

I nodded. “Yes. That’s where I’m struggling with it all. I do believe that he’s had these feelings for me all this time and was simply afraid to admit them. I’m not the least bit afraid to say I love him, Lincoln. I’ve loved that man for as long as I can remember. He’s the reason I haven’t moved on. Why my last boyfriend told me we were better as friends with benefits, because my heart clearly belonged to another man.”

“Really?” Lincoln asked, taking a sip of wine. “What made him say that?”

With a shrug, I said, “I told him about Dirk. I wanted to be upfront and honest with him. I tried so hard to push Dirk out of my heart. I simply never could. I’m not sure I would ever be

able to. It was obvious to Chris things were never going to get serious. We had fun together, he was safe. He wasn't looking to settle down, but he didn't want to play the field. When I found out I was moving back to Hamilton, we called it quits. He's since met someone, and they're pretty serious. I had a lot of guilt for a while, thinking I was holding him back from finding someone who wanted to give him a hundred percent."

"It sounds like things worked out exactly how they should."

I nodded. "They did."

"It's okay to be scared about this new path you're on, Merit. Given Dirk's past and your past together—and then throw a baby into the mix—your emotions are going to be all over the place. And let's not forget about pregnancy hormones. I think I can say with certainty, Dirk is not with you because you're pregnant. If you could see what *we* all see when he looks at you... It was clear to me on New Year's Eve that he had feelings for you. The man couldn't keep his eyes off of you."

Smiling, I pulled in a slow, deep breath. "I don't ever want him to look at us and regret any decisions he's made."

"Well, from where I'm sitting, the only decision he's made is to be with you. Taking a break from bull riding was something he decided to do after Brad passed."

"Ugh. I just don't want to have these doubts or insecurities or whatever the hell they are. I know he loves me, but I think maybe it's just a bit of whiplash. It wasn't that long ago he was doing everything in his power to push me away."

Lincoln reached over and took my hand in hers. "The only thing I think happened to Dirk is that he's finally growing up. It took his father dying for him to see that there's more to life than climbing onto the back of a bull. I think he got tired of fighting off the things he secretly wanted, and truth be told, bull riding has been his safe place. The place he could go and hide. Hide from his feelings for you, hide from his own insecurities. And as much as it seems like it happened

overnight, Merit, I think it's been happening a lot longer than you both realize."

"Thank you, Lincoln."

She smiled. "I didn't do anything."

"You did more than you know."

Chapter Twenty-Six

DIRK

I pulled the saddle off my horse and carried it into the tack room. The early-morning ride was exactly what I needed to clear my head. Last night, I'd dropped Merit off at her house after we left Brock and Lincoln's. We both decided it was probably better if we spent the night alone. Well, it was more Merit who thought it was a good idea. I, on the other hand, hardly slept at all last night.

Things seemed like they were moving at warp speed, and I knew I should be spooked, but I wasn't. For once in my life, things felt right. Well, they *almost* felt right. There was still a nagging voice in the back of my head that kept asking me about my future. I knew what I wanted to do, but I also knew that if I did it, Merit would most likely think it was a rash decision caused by the baby.

"Dirk?"

I turned at the sound of my mother's voice.

"Morning, Mama. Everything okay?" I asked as I walked over and gave her a kiss.

She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. No smile had since my father passed away. "Dirk, I've been thinking about your decision to not go back out onto the circuit."

I sighed. "I'm not going, so there's nothing to talk about."

She sighed heavily. "I don't think your father would want you to walk away from something you love so much."

I stopped messing with the tack and looked back at my mother. Merit and I hadn't agreed on telling our families just yet, but a part of me wanted to give this to my mother. She needed something else to hold on to.

"There's something I love more here." I shook my head. "No, not something. Someone."

“I’ll be fine, Dirk,” my mother insisted, her hands on her hips and a stern look on her face.

With a light chuckle, I pulled my mother into my arms and kissed the top of her head. “I know you will, Mama. Things have changed, and if you’ll give me a second, I’ll explain it all to you.”

She relaxed a bit in my arms. “Time isn’t always gifted to us, Dirk.”

I closed my eyes and held her a little tighter. “I know. That’s one of the reasons I’m staying, Mama.”

With a firm pat on my back, she pulled away. “So, are you going to tell me what’s going on with you and Merit?”

I felt my eyes widen, and I tried to form words but nothing came.

“You two used to be the best of friends, and don’t think for one moment that I haven’t noticed the two of you avoiding each other the last few months. I also saw her leaving the barn a few days ago in tears. The girl was downright sobbing, Dirk. Then, all of a sudden, you’re staying over there.”

I leaned against the wall and looked at my mother. She was hellbent on knowing what was going on, and the least I could do was tell her most of it. “We got into a bit of a fight, and we both said some things we didn’t mean. More me than her. I hadn’t heard from her and was worried, so I went over there.”

My mother nodded. “And since you disappeared for nearly a day, I’m going to assume you made up?”

A rush of warmth ran through my body, and I had to force myself not to think about how many times we made up. “We did.”

She smiled. “That’s good. You two always were peas and carrots, and I never did understand what happened to end your friendship.”

“It’s all in the past.”

“Good,” she said as she patted me on the cheek. “Now, open your damn eyes, son, and realize that the two of you have

been in love since the moment you kissed behind this barn. If you're determined to stay in town, I hope she's one of the reasons why."

I grinned. "She is, Mama. She is."

For the first time since my father left us, I saw a bit of hope in my mother's eyes. "That makes me so happy, son. Now, make sure you muck out the back stalls." And with that, she turned and walked out of the tack room.

I pulled out my phone and hit Merit's number. It only rang a few times before she answered. She was out of breath. "H-hello?"

"What are you doing?"

"Helping Michael unload feed."

My heart nearly stopped. "Why in the hell are you doing that, Merit? The baby—!"

"Is fine. I'm not lifting anything heavy, trust me. Michael barely lets me help as it is. It's good to move around, though, and I promise, I'm not ever going to do something to put her at risk."

"Or him..." I added.

Merit laughed. "Or him."

"That's the reason I'm calling. When do you want to tell our families? I really think my mother could use a bit of good news. I told her about us."

She paused for a moment. "What about after the benefit ride this weekend? I sort of want this to be for us, just a little bit longer."

I smiled. "Okay."

"But I did tell Michael and my mom we were dating."

Another smile came, this one bigger. "Before I told my mother about us, she told me to open my damn eyes because you and I have been in love since we kissed behind the barn."

“What!” Merit said, laughing. “She always did hope we’d end up together.”

I nodded and walked out of the tack room and back to my horse. “Well, wait until she finds out you’re carrying my baby.”

“I hope she’ll be happy.”

A roar of laughter came out. “She’ll want to start planning the wedding, I’m sure.”

The line went silent.

“Bugs?”

“I’m here.”

“I’m going to hose down Murphy, and then I was hoping to see you. Will you be at the farm for a bit?”

“Yes, after this I’m going to go over the plans for the next you-pick-it season, so I’ll be up at the house.”

“I’ll see you soon, then.”

“See you soon.”

“Merit?” I said, feeling my stomach drop slightly as the memory of her whispering that she loved me while we made love popped into my mind.

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what?” she asked.

“For being scared of my own feelings for you. For wasting so much time.”

I could hear the smile in her voice when she replied. “I’m sort of looking forward to making up for said lost time.”

My dick grew hard in my pants, and I had to adjust myself. “I’m staying the night tonight, I hope you know that.”

Merit laughed. “Pack some things to keep here. I have a feeling you’ll be staying over often.”

With a smile, I stopped in front of Murphy and ran my hand over his side. “I will. See you soon.”

“See ya soon.”

I hung up and pushed my phone into my pocket. Roy, one of the ranch hands I hired, was already in the process of cooling the horse down from our ride. I had given Murphy water while I put up the saddle, and now Roy was hosing him down.

“I’ve got this, Mr. Littlewood.”

“Thank you, Roy. If you don’t mind, give him a little treat before letting him out to pasture. Offer him an apple and he’ll be your best friend.”

The young man grinned. “Will do, sir.”

I quickly made my way up to the house, showered, and headed over to the Eden farm next door. The place where I had gone countless times growing up, which Merit and I had explored every inch of, and where we had laughed, cried, and even shared our first intimate moment. If you didn’t count the kiss behind my family’s barn.

As I pulled up to the drive, I stopped when I saw a truck at the end of it.

“Oh, shit,” I mumbled, staring as Roger Eden, Merit’s father, entered in the gate code and drove through. I knew for a fact that Merit had no idea her father was out of rehab and on his way up to the house. I reached for my phone and dialed her number.

“Hey, are you here?”

“No, I’m pulling up to the gate. But, Merit, I’ve got something to tell you, and I’m not sure you’re going to be happy about it.”

“What is it?” she asked, a nervous edge to her voice.

“Your father, he’s on his way up to the house. I just saw him drive through the gate.”

She was silent for a moment. “My father? What! What in the hell is he doing here?”

I could hear the panic in her voice. “I’m on my way, sweetheart.”

Her voice came through the phone in a whisper. “My mother and Michael. They don’t know he’s out of rehab, I haven’t had a chance to tell them. Mike is furious with him still.”

“I’m right behind him.”

Roger wasn’t that far ahead of me, and we would most likely get to the house at the same time.

“Where’s Michael?” I asked.

“The barn,” she answered. “Damn. Why would he show up unannounced like this? This isn’t good, Dirk. Not at all.”

“Call Mike, and let your mother know so they have a heads up. I see your dad’s truck; he’s less than a minute from the house.”

“O-okay. Crap.”

She ended the call, and I slowed down as I drove up behind Roger’s truck. I saw him look in the rearview mirror, but I wasn’t sure if he knew it was me or not. I was in my father’s truck, so in all likelihood he’d think it was my dad.

Then a thought hit me so hard in the chest, I was nearly left breathless. Dad wasn’t here. It couldn’t be him coming down the drive to see his old buddy. It couldn’t be him coming over to make sure Roger wasn’t drinking. It couldn’t be him, because he was gone.

I felt my hands grip the steering wheel tighter, and I pushed away the sudden onslaught of emotions.

“Why the fuck are you here, Roger? Why now?” I asked out loud.

I drove behind him as we made our way down the long gravel road that wound through the farm. One side of the road had corn and wheat growing. The other had rows of produce.

Behind that was the Christmas tree farm that Michael had taken over. I knew they had big plans this winter for the tree farm from what Merit had told me the other night while she laid in my arms.

Now their father was back, and I knew Lori had filed for divorce. This wasn't going to turn out well. At all.

Roger pulled up and parked behind all the vehicles. Everyone was there for the big welcome home.

As Roger got out of the car, Michael came walking around the corner of the house from the direction of the barn. Thank fuck. He had a blank expression on his face, but I could tell by the way he walked that he was pissed.

Merit walked out of the front door, her eyes landing on me before she even looked over at her father. I could see the uneasiness in her gaze, and my only desire was to get to her. I made my way toward her as Roger turned and looked at me. He didn't say a word as I jogged up the four steps that led from the driveway and headed to the walkway to the porch.

“Dad, what are you doing here?” Michael asked.

His father let out a bark of laughter as he walked up the steps. “What do you mean? I live here.”

“No, you don't, Dad. Not anymore,” Merit said. I walked up to her and she reached for me, slipping her hand into mine.

“What do you mean, no, I don't?” Roger barked out.

The screen door opened on the old farmhouse and Lori walked out. She moved past Merit and headed down the steps.

Roger smiled at his wife and gave her a quick once-over.

“Did you get the papers from the lawyer?” Lori asked.

His smile faded. “Why do you think I'm here?”

Merit and Michael exchanged a confused look before Michael asked, “Your stint in rehab is over?”

Roger nodded without taking his eyes off of Lori. “Nothing like being served with divorce papers the same day you get out of hell.”

Lori slowly shook her head. “Your hell cannot possibly compare to the one you’ve put me or the kids through.”

Roger’s gaze flickered around to all of us. “Seems like everyone is doing well. Dirk, you home for the week?”

“No, sir.”

He waited as if expecting me to explain why I was there. When I didn’t offer another explanation, he went on. “I was sorry to hear about your daddy. He was a good man, and if I could have gone to the funeral, you know I would have been there. We were friends; I’ll miss him.”

Merit squeezed my hand, and I gave her a reassuring squeeze back. “Thank you, Roger. I appreciate it.”

Then, Roger narrowed his eyes at me and looked at my hand laced in Merit’s. “Doesn’t explain why you’re here.”

“It’s none of your damn business why he’s here,” Michael bit out.

Roger turned and glared at his son. “It’s still my farm.”

This time, Michael laughed. “Your farm? The same farm you almost lost because you couldn’t keep yourself out of the bottle? Were you thinking about the farm when you screwed some other woman and cheated on Mom?”

“Michael!” Lori and Merit both said at the same time.

Michael took a step closer to his father. I could see the rage building in Merit’s brother. He practically shook as he spoke. “You’re not welcome here, and you will *never* be welcome here. It was Merit who got us out of trouble while you sat in a rehab clinic and complained about how hard your life was. You didn’t give a damn about any of us while you got lost in the bottle. You didn’t give a damn about this farm. So excuse me if I say fuck off, you’re not welcome here.”

“Michael, stop it,” Lori pleaded.

“Feel better, son?” Roger asked, a slight grin on his face.

That set Michel off, and he charged his father.

“Shit!” I said as I ran down the steps. I hadn’t seen Merit following me, or I would have told her to stay away.

I stepped in front of Michael while Merit went to her father.

“Merit, get back on the porch,” I demanded. There was no way in hell I wanted her between these two men.

Pointing his finger at Roger, Michael cried out, “You are a drunk, cheating loser, and Mom’s better off without you!”

Roger’s face went red, and he lunged at Michael.

“Daddy, no!” Merit yelled, attempting to stop him.

“Merit, don’t!” I cried out as I tried to keep Michael back.

Lori ran over to Michael. “Stop it! You’re only making it worse.”

I wasn’t sure if I should go to Merit or keep myself between the father and son.

Then everything changed when Michael drove the final nail in.

“Besides, Mom’s moved on and she doesn’t want you any longer.”

Lori sucked in a breath as Roger growled and made his way toward us. I watched Merit step in front of her father once more to stop him.

I shook my head. “Fucking hell, Merit! Don’t!” I yelled as she placed her hands on her father’s chest.

“Stop this! Stop! You cannot come home and do this! What is the matter with you?” Merit screamed.

Roger grabbed hold of Merit and started to shake her and yell. “You can’t show up with your money and fix everything! Not when you abandoned us!”

I dropped my hold on Michael and rushed toward Roger and Merit as I tried to control my own rage. “Let her fucking go, Roger! Now!” I shouted.

Then, he did the unthinkable—he pushed Merit out of his way so hard it caused her to stumble and fall down the small group of stairs that led back down to the driveway. My heart stilled as I watched her tumble down the steps.

“Merit!” I yelled, running to her. My stomach lurched when I saw her head hit a rock and her body go limp. I dropped to my knees and pulled her to me. “Merit! Merit!” I cried out as I held her.

Michael was at my side a moment later.

“Oh my God, is she okay?” he asked, his voice filled with the same fear that coursed through my veins.

“She...she hit her head,” I managed to say as I heard Lori on the phone with 911.

“I...I think she hit her head. She’s unconscious,” Lori cried out. “Is she breathing?”

“Yes!” Michael said.

It felt like an eternity before an ambulance finally came. Merit was still unconscious, and Michael held his shirt to the large cut on her head.

“Sir, I need you to let her go,” one of the paramedics said to me.

I shook my head, momentarily scared to death at the thought.

“Sir, please.”

Michael tugged on my shoulder, prompting me to let Merit go. I watched as they took care of the cut and strapped her onto a stretcher.

As they started to take her to the ambulance, I quickly walked alongside them. “She’s almost ten-weeks’ pregnant.”

I could feel Michael’s eyes on me, but I didn’t bother to look at him. I had no idea if Lori heard me, and at that point, I didn’t care. The medic asked me if I wanted to ride in the back of the ambulance with her.

I nodded and climbed up. Turning, I looked at Michael. “I suggest you tell your father to leave. If *anything* happens to her or our baby, I swear to God, I will hunt him down and kill him!”

Michael swallowed hard. “You won’t have the pleasure of killing him, not if I get to him first.”



The door to Merit’s room opened, and I jerked my head up to look at the doctor who entered. They had decided Merit would stay the night in the hospital and had given her a room while she got a CT scan.

“She’s done with the CT scan, and I’m happy to say she woke as we were taking her up. No internal bleeding, and there doesn’t seem to be any damage other than a concussion.”

I let out a breath. “And the baby?”

“Is fine.”

I scrubbed my hands down my face and held them there as a sob of relief came bursting out of me. I felt the doctor place his hand on my shoulder and give it a light squeeze.

“This early on, they’re so well protected in the womb. The head wound was more a concern than anything else. But, needless to say, the trauma of the accident could always have an adverse effect. The main thing we want to do is make sure Miss Eden isn’t under any stress. I’d like to keep her in the hospital overnight, especially since she lost consciousness. But honestly, everything is fine besides the nasty cut on her head and the concussion. It could have been a lot worse.”

I nodded. “Thank you.”

“Her mother and brother are in the waiting room. I’ll let them know the news.”

“Doctor, can you not mention the baby? Merit hasn’t told her mother yet.” I had to assume that Michael hadn’t said

anything to Lori.

He smiled. "Of course."

Then, he walked out the door, and I sat in the hospital room alone. A sudden rush of emotion came over me, and I leaned my head down and let it all out. I wasn't sure if it was relief, fear, happiness, or simply being downright scared to fucking death. My body shook as I cried like I had never cried before. Not even after my father died did I cry like this.

If I had lost Merit, I wouldn't even know what to do. The thought of not having her in my life was something I wasn't willing to even consider. And then the baby. My God, was it even possible for me to be in love with a child I only found out about a few days ago?

Yes. It was. It was like the moment I opened my heart and admitted my feelings for Merit, everything became so freaking crystal clear.

My mind raced as I remembered what it felt like to watch Merit fall. To see her head hit the ground, and then that rock, and how scared I'd been. Then the thought of anything happening to the baby had filled me with dread.

I squeezed my eyes shut and willed myself to stop replaying it in my mind. They would be bringing Merit back soon, and she was awake. She didn't need to see me falling apart like this.

I pulled in a deep breath and stood. I walked over to the window and stared out over the town I had grown up in and loved. Everything made so much more sense to me now. Why I hated coming back home. The fear of admitting why I had run off to bull ride in the first place. Running from a past that I had fucked up so royally.

The phone in my pocket buzzed, and I pulled it out to see Brock's name.

I opened up the text and read it.

Brock: Timberlynn just showed up and told me and Tanner that her father called. Merit was in an accident? Is everything okay with her and the baby?

Instead of bothering with texting, I hit Call instead.

“Hey, is everything okay?” Brock asked without even saying hello, his voice filled with worry. “Timberlynn is fit to be tied, and Tanner had to keep her from rushing to the hospital.”

“Merit is fine. Her good-for-nothing father pushed her, and she fell down some steps and hit her head on a rock. She got a pretty good cut, and it knocked her out for a bit. She’s awake, and they did a CT scan. All’s okay with both her and the baby. I’m waiting for her to come back to her room.”

“Thank God. Let me tell Timberlynn.”

Brock covered the phone and proceeded to inform Timberlynn—and I was guessing Tanner, as well—that Merit and the baby were okay.

“You okay, Dirk? You sound...tired,” Brock asked.

“I don’t know, Brock.”

“Dirk,” he said in a warning voice. If I knew him, he was thinking I was on the verge of running. Something I used to be damn good at.

“I’m not leaving or running or anything like that. I have all these emotions rushing through me. I can’t make heads or tails out of anything. I have *never* been so scared as I was watching her fall down those steps. I wanted to kill her father. Hell, I still do. My head is spinning, and I want to make some decisions right this second, but I know I need to settle down. Especially before they bring her back to the room.”

“Decisions? What sort of decisions?”

I rubbed at the tension in my neck and glanced back at the door, making sure it was shut. “I think I’m done with bull riding. For good.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

MERIT

My head hurt so badly, I could hardly open my eyes as I felt the nurse push me into an elevator.

“Miss Eden, how are you feeling?” she asked, looking down at me.

“Like I drank about six bottles of tequila.”

She smiled. “That bad, huh?”

I nodded, but quickly stopped when a shooting pain hit my temple. “Ouch,” I mumbled as I lifted my hand and felt the bandage again. I was going to kill my father for doing this to me.

The moment they told me they had to do a CT scan, I nearly shouted that I was pregnant. They already knew, thankfully, since Dirk rode with me in the ambulance and had informed them.

“If it helps any, there’s a rather handsome cowboy waiting in your hospital room for you.”

“That helps a lot,” I said with a smile.

“He’s been worried. It took three nurses and two doctors to convince him to wait in the room for you and that you’d be okay. You woke up right after they took you out of the ambulance, so as far as he knew, you were still unconscious.”

“Oh no. I’m sure he’s worried sick about the baby.”

She gave me a wink. “I’m sure he is, but it’s obvious how much that man loves you by how worried he is about *you*. Do you know he actually told one of the doctors he’d break his legs if he didn’t let him go with you to get the CT scan?”

I groaned. “Oh geez.”

She giggled. “It was cute. Although, Dr. Richards didn’t think so.”

I closed my eyes as I replied, “I would think not.”

“Anyway, let’s get you back up to your room. I’m sure Dr. Richards has already gone and spoken to your cowboy.”

I swallowed and gave a slight nod. “You said Dirk was in a room? Will I have to stay overnight?”

“The doctor thinks it’s best to at least keep you overnight, just to be on the safe side.”

It was probably wrong to admit to the nurse that I wanted out so I could track down my father and murder him—that is, if Michael hadn’t already done it.

The elevator doors opened, and I felt my heart rate pick up slightly, knowing I would be seeing Dirk soon. I couldn’t ignore the anxiety I felt. I knew Dirk—or, at least, the old Dirk. The one who hated to confront anything that made him uncomfortable or unsure. He had admitted to it, and I was worried he would freak, even if he did care about me.

“Here you go,” the nurse said as she pushed the door open.

My breath caught in my throat at the sight of Dirk standing in the room. His cowboy hat was off and his hair looked a mess. Those dark green eyes caught my gaze, and when he smiled, I momentarily forgot where I was. The sudden urge to rush to him and have him hold me was overwhelming. I already felt a thousand times better knowing he was here.

“Hey, you,” he said as he quickly came over and leaned down to kiss me. “How’s your head?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He kissed me once more. This one lingered a bit longer, and the feeling of his mouth on mine and the concern on his face when he drew back caused my eyes to water.

Dirk stilled. “Are you okay? Are you in pain?” He glanced over at the nurse. “Have you given her anything for the pain?”

“Yes, we have,” she replied with slight amusement in her voice.

I slowly shook my head and reached for him. “Give me a moment,” I whispered.

Dirk nodded and took a step back as the nurse helped me into the bed. “We won’t have to keep you hooked up to anything, so that’s nice. We will, however, pop in and out to check your vitals and see about your pain.”

I nodded as I gave her a smile and tried not to let anyone know how dizzy I felt. The nurse knew, though, when I held on to her tighter and she helped to guide me into the bed.

“Go slow. It’s okay, Merit,” she whispered. “I’ve got you.”

“Thank you,” I said as I settled down on the mattress.

She lifted the covers and gave me the sweetest smile. “I’m sure you’re thirsty, so let me go get you a pitcher of cold water.” She looked at Dirk. “You’re in charge.”

He nodded while he chewed on his bottom lip, worry very much evident on his face. The moment the door shut, he was by my side.

“You were about to cry, what’s wrong?” he asked as he took my hand in his.

And finally, I let the tears fall.

“Let me go back and get the nurse,” Dirk said.

“No,” I said as I held onto his hand. “I’m not in pain. I mean, my head does hurt, but I was overwhelmed for a moment.”

His brows pulled in closer. “Overwhelmed by what?”

A slight chuckle slipped free, and I wiped my tears away. “To be honest...you.”

“Me?” he asked, his head jerking back in surprise.

I closed my eyes and leaned back against the bed. I took in a few deep breaths and then looked at him.

“For as long as I can remember, I’ve wanted this, Dirk. Wanted you to look at me like you just looked at me when I came into this room. The memory of you and me the other night, the idea that I’m pregnant with your baby...I don’t want to be that woman who feels like she needs a man in her life, but the last few days with you...”

My voice trailed off for a moment before I went on. I knew I needed to be honest with him about my fears. “It scares me how much I love you, and I’m even more scared that you’re going to slip out of this confused daze you’re in and realize this isn’t what you want. *I’m* not what you want.”

He remained silent as he stared at me. He cleared his throat, and for a brief moment, I was terrified he was going to agree with me.

“I know I haven’t given you reason to believe my one-eighty. The only thing I know to do from this point on, Merit, is to prove to you how much I do want this. You, the baby, a life where I go to sleep and wake up with you in my arms. Today, when I saw you fall, it was the worst moment of my entire life. All I could think about was how I had finally gotten my head out of my ass and now you were going to be taken away from me. The fear I had...” He closed his eyes and shook his head. “Fuck, I was so scared.”

“I’m okay, and the baby is, too,” I whispered as I brought his hand up to my mouth and kissed it softly.

“I know. And if I didn’t think I’d end up in jail, I would hunt your father down and kill him with my bare hands.”

With a humorless laugh, I said, “I’m pretty sure Michael wants first dibs on that.”

Dirk shook his head. “We’d have to fight for who got to him first. The point I’m trying to make here, and not doing a good job of it, is that you are my everything, Merit. I fought these feelings for entirely too long. I tried my best to forget you, but you’ve always been at the back of my mind, never letting me forget the mistake I made. The way I hurt you. I’ve been given a second chance with you, and I know how rare that is. I’m not going to mess this up.”

I smiled as a rush of both happiness and desire came over me.

The door to the room opened, and the nurse knocked lightly before making her way in. “Here’s the water. This is the call button if you need anything. I’ve already sent for a tray of

food for you. The only thing you need to do now is rest.” She looked at Dirk. “The chair slides out and makes a bed. I’ll be sure to bring you a pillow and an extra blanket so that you can stay the night.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that,” Dirk said, his eyes still focused solely on me. I could practically feel the love ebbing off of him.

After the nurse left, Dirk motioned for me to move over some, and he lay down in the bed next to me.

“You’re going to get us in trouble,” I said in a hushed voice.

“Only if I do naughty things to you. For now, all I want to do is hold you.”

I wasn’t sure if it was my imagination, or possibly the pain meds kicking in, but my headache felt like it was fading some.

“That sounds amazing,” I said on a long sigh.

As I drifted off to sleep, I felt his warm breath against my ear as he asked, “Will you marry me, Merit?”

A smile formed across my face as I replied, “Yes.”



Timberlynn and Lincoln stared at me with disbelieving expressions, while Kaylee sat there with a wide, knowing smile.

“I knew that man was in love with you the moment Stella mentioned your name in the kitchen before New Year’s Eve,” Kaylee stated as she patted Rose softly on the back.

“Did you?” I asked, a hint of surprise in my voice.

“Hell yeah, I did. And I’ll be honest, I thought I would have to work harder at getting him to realize it, but I underestimated the power of fate and the love you two share.”

For a moment, I felt so guilty for ever being jealous of Kaylee. I, of course, had already confessed to her about it, and she laughed her ass off. I really did adore her, as well as Timberlynn and Lincoln.

“Dirk asked you to marry him?” Timberlynn asked for the third time.

I laughed. “Yes. Twice now. Once in the hospital, and then again this morning. I think he was worried I answered him in a daze of pain meds.”

Lincoln smiled. “I cannot believe it. I mean, I can. I’ve always thought he declared himself too much of a bachelor to truly desire to be one. And the way he is with all the kids...he was meant to be a father, anyone with eyes can see that.”

Goodness, the image of Dirk holding our baby made my tummy flip. I settled my hand over it.

“He will make a wonderful father,” Kaylee agreed as Timberlynn nodded.

“So, have you talked about dates?” Lincoln asked.

I sighed. “Well, considering our mothers don’t even know I’m pregnant, we haven’t gotten that far. Do you think we’re moving too soon? I feel like we might be.”

“No!” the three of them all said at once, causing me to laugh as I held up my hands in mock defense.

“Well, okay. Don’t all voice your thoughts at once!”

Timberlynn took my hand and squeezed it. “You love him, right?”

I felt my cheeks burn as I grinned like a mad woman. “More than anything.”

She smiled. “And he loves you, and you’re having a baby. It makes sense.”

“You don’t have to be married to have a baby, though,” Lincoln interjected. “You could simply be in the moment with one another. Don’t put any more pressure on things if you don’t have to. You’ll know when the time is right to marry.”

“Shut up, Lincoln,” Kaylee stated. “I want to plan this wedding.”

I chewed on my lip as I met Lincoln’s gaze. She was right. Just because Dirk asked me to marry him, it didn’t mean we had to run off and get married right away.

“Lincoln’s right. We have so much to talk about. Like, will Dirk move in with me? How will it be when he goes back out on tour? I am not carting a baby around from city to city, no way. But I still want to support him in every way possible. How much of the baby growing up will he miss, and will he be okay with that?”

I frowned, not really wanting to think about any of that. At least Dirk would be there through the pregnancy and when the baby was born.

With a sigh, I said, “We could plan on getting married after I have the baby. Maybe during one of his breaks.”

Timberlynn pouted as Kaylee sighed.

“Do you think he’ll change his mind about wanting to marry?” I asked Kaylee. If anyone knew Dirk the best, it was Kaylee and Brock. Even as close as we used to be, I hadn’t really known this adult Dirk for very long.

“What? No. God, no,” Kaylee said. “Anyone can see that boy has done a complete turnaround. He’s not going to change his mind.”

I felt my mouth twitch with a smile. “Well, like I said, we still have things to talk about, especially what life will be like when he goes back to bull riding.”

Lincoln looked away for a moment. Almost as if she didn’t want me to see her expression, but I caught something.

“Lincoln?” I asked. “Do you know something I don’t?”

“No,” she replied way too quickly.

“Liar!” Kaylee said. “Spill it!”

“Yeah, you’re totally keeping something back,” Timberlynn agreed. “You cannot lie to save your life. Your eye

does this weird little twitch.”

“That’s not true!” Lincoln stated. “I can lie...when I need to.”

“Okay,” Kaylee said as she stood and placed Rose in the bassinet. “Do you know something you’re not telling us?”

Lincoln’s eyes bounced around to all of us before she let her gaze fall to the floor as she replied, “Nope.”

“She is totally lying,” Kaylee said, her arms folded across her chest.

Lincoln sighed. “Fine. I can’t lie. But I also can’t say anything. It’s not for me to tell Merit.”

My heart felt like it seized in my chest, and Lincoln noticed.

Reaching for my hand, she gave it a squeeze as she added, “It’s nothing bad, I swear to you. But, I’m not the person to tell you.”

Kaylee turned to Timberlynn. “So, when can we expect you to be next in line?” And with that, the subject was changed.

“Next in line?” she asked with a confused expression.

Kaylee laughed. “There’s clearly something in the water the men are drinking up here.”

Timberlynn stared at her, slightly amused and baffled. “What do you mean?”

With a dramatic eye roll and sigh, Kaylee said, “When are you going to get knocked up, Timberlynn?”

All eyes went to Timberlynn. I was positive we all expected her to brush it off—but when her cheeks turned pink, and she looked away for the briefest of moments, we all knew.

“Oh. My. Gawd!” Kaylee exclaimed.

Lincoln reached for Timberlynn’s hands and smiled. “Oh, Timberlynn, are you pregnant?”

She drew in a deep breath and looked at me, a huge smile instantly appearing on her face. “I found out the day after you did, Merit. And the crazy thing is...we have the exact same due date.”

The entire room erupted into cheers as we all surrounded Timberlynn and hugged her.

“Stella is going to shit her pants!” Kaylee added, and everyone laughed even harder.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

DIRK

I walked up the porch steps of Merit's house, a bouquet of flowers in my hand, and drew in a long, deep breath. I exhaled slowly and rang the bell.

The door opened, and I was greeted by the most beautiful woman I had ever laid eyes on. Merit was dressed in overalls that had giant flowers painted on them. Underneath, she wore a white tank top. Her brown hair was pulled up into a messy bun with long strands of hair falling around her face and neck. Those violet eyes of hers sparkled, and she smiled as she looked down at the flowers. "Are those for me?"

I took her all in. She was in bare feet, and for some weird reason, that turned me on. She looked fucking adorable, and it took every ounce of willpower I had not to toss the flowers to the floor and demand she strip right there.

"You look adorable," I said, my voice sounding a bit strained.

Merit took in her appearance and laughed. "I do?"

All I could do was nod. "Please, wear those all the time. Except, maybe next time forgo the tank."

Her cheeks turned pink, and she shook her head. "You are impossible."

No, I was madly in love, and being able to finally acknowledge it felt fucking fantastic. "Not impossible, Bugs, in love. Madly in love."

Something changed in her eyes. The usual light violet turned darker, and her tongue swept quickly across her lips to moisten them.

"I'm going to hand you these flowers—do what you want with them—but you have five minutes before I strip you naked and bury myself inside of you."

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened before she quickly closed it. She took the flowers and headed into the house. I followed and shut the door.

“I was getting ready to call you. I wanted to talk to you about paint.”

“Trust me, paint is the last thing on my mind right now,” I said as I admired how nice her ass looked in that outfit.

Merit chuckled as she pulled out a vase and filled it up with water. She carefully arranged the flowers and turned the vase a few times to study it.

“You have a minute and a half left,” I stated.

With a smile, she picked up the vase and set it in the middle of the kitchen island. Then, she folded her arms across her chest and tilted her head as she studied me. “We should talk, Dirk.”

“Talking is so overrated. Forty-five seconds,” I said as I reached down and pulled off my shirt.

Merit drew in a sharp breath and stared at my chest, then my abs. “True, but we keep putting it off, and we really need to. If we’re leaving tomorrow for the benefit ride—”

“I’m not riding in that event.”

She frowned. “Why not?”

“I pulled out, but don’t worry, I made a very generous donation.” After I kicked off my boots, I walked over to her and unsnapped one of the overall straps. “Time’s up, baby.”

The denim fabric fell away and exposed more of the tank top. My knees went weak when I realized she wasn’t wearing a bra.

“Mother of God, you’re not wearing a bra,” I said, running my tongue over her nipple through the shirt.

“Dirk,” Merit gasped as she dug her nails into my hair.

I licked and sucked until the white fabric was wet, and I could see her hardened nipple through it.

“Sexy as fuck,” I whispered, unclasping the other shoulder strap and repeating the process with her other nipple.

“Wait, you’re making me lightheaded. Why did you pull out?”

“Later. Right now I want to focus on this moment. On you,” I said softly as I kissed up her neck, across her jaw, and finally captured her mouth with mine.

Merit wrapped her arms around my neck, and it didn’t take long for the two of us to get lost in the kiss.

“I want to make love to you, Merit.”

“Yes,” she replied, dropping her head back. I placed featherlight kisses along her neck. “Please.”

I picked her up and carried her quickly to the bedroom. Gently, I placed her feet on the floor and slowly undressed her. Merit’s body was perfect. I loved her shapely curves and couldn’t wait to see her body change as her belly grew larger with our baby. I longed to run my hands over every single inch of her body. Study every bit of her with both my mouth and hands.

“Dirk,” she pleaded as I kissed all around her stomach.

“Tell me what you want me to do.”

She groaned and arched her back. “Anything, just touch me!”

With a smile, I settled myself between her thighs and blew gently.

“Damn it. More!” she cried out and grabbed my head, guiding me to the sweet spot where she needed relief.

“I love making you come,” I whispered before I gently flicked her clit and caused her to gasp.

“Yes. Yes, I love it, too, now get on with it!”

With a chuckle, I did as she asked. When her body was finished shaking, and her breathing settled back into a somewhat normal pattern, I stood and finished undressing. I

was back over her and settled between her legs before she even knew I was gone.

“There’s never been anyone who makes me feel the way you do, Merit.”

She opened her eyes, and I was struck once again by the bright color of violet.

“Tell me you believe me,” I whispered.

Her mouth opened and then closed again as she stared up at me. She looked confused.

“Please tell me.”

Her reply came out in a soft rush of words. “I believe you, Dirk.”

I pushed inside her in one quick move, and she cried out in pleasure. Merit wrapped her body tightly around mine as I buried my face into her neck and moaned in delight. “Move, Dirk. Please move.”

The feel of my body tightening already took me by surprise. If I moved, I was scared I would come. Christ, what did this woman do to me? “I can’t. Give me a second,” I replied.

Merit moved her hands gently over my back and lifted her hips ever so slightly. “Are you okay?” she asked.

Laughing, I drew back and looked at her. “I almost came.”

That made her brows rise and her eyes widen. “Really?”

I nodded and slowly pulled out before sliding back into her delicious heat.

“Yes,” she whispered as we set the rhythm together. “Dirk, don’t move. Oh God. God. I’m going to come.”

“Merit,” I cried out, feeling her tighten around me.

The moment she fell, I went right along with her.



Merit was snuggled up next to me as we lay in her bed, neither one of us ready to leave it.

“Dirk?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you worry that I doubt your love for me?”

I stopped stroking her for the briefest of moments before I started again softly. “Honestly, yes. I know I talked a lot of shit before you came back into my life. I said I wasn’t interested in settling down, that I could never be a one-woman kind of guy. It was never true, at least not a hundred-percent true. But everything has changed, and for the better. I want this, Merit. I want these moments, and I want as many of them as I can get.”

She moved her body and put her hand on my chest before resting her chin on the back of it. “I do believe you, Dirk. I know you love me and the baby. And as much as I love living in this bubble, we need to talk about the future.”

I nodded. “Okay, first thing. I think I should move into the house with you.”

A smile spread across her face. “Here?”

“Of course, here. This is your house, and it’s a damn nice one. I want to pay for half of it.”

“No!”

“Merit, it’s the right thing to do, and you know it.”

She dug her teeth into her lip. “Okay. I like the sound of you moving in.”

“And you’ll let me pay for half?”

She nodded.

“Good, I was hoping you would.”

Her smile faded, and she moved and reached for something on the floor. She slipped her tank over her body, and then sat up and looked at me. I rose into a seated position and leaned against the headboard.

“I want you to know right up front that I’ll support your career one-hundred percent,” Merit said. “I won’t lie to you and say it doesn’t scare the crap out of me, and I’m worried about how often you’ll be gone and how dangerous it is. I’m positive we can make things work, with you spending enough time with the baby, but I can’t promise you that I won’t worry. I need to be honest about that.”

I nodded.

She went on. “I’ll probably have to hire someone to watch the baby, though, because it’s important for me to keep working for the farm. Especially with my father not being in the picture right now.”

I took her hand in mine and squeezed. After the whole incident that had left Merit in the hospital, Roger had checked himself back into rehab and was also seeing a counselor, along with Lori. It looked like Roger was going to attempt to fight for his family, and that was a good thing to see. After Merit and Michael had confronted their father during his last appearance, it was clear they all had a lot to work out.

“We probably need to tell our moms and Michael about peanut,” she said as she looked down at her stomach.

With a smile, I felt my own gaze drop to her stomach and then back up to her.

“How about tonight? We can all go out to dinner.”

Her face lit up. “That’s a great idea. I’m so afraid I’m going to slip and say something.”

“Just so you know,” I said as I kissed along her knuckles, “Michael knows. He heard me telling the EMTs.”

“He does?” she asked with a surprised look on her face. “He hasn’t said anything to me.”

I shrugged. “He’s probably waiting for you to tell him first.”

Merit nodded. “Okay, then for sure tonight we tell our mothers.”

“What about getting married?” I asked.

She looked down at our intertwined hands. When she remained silent, I decided it was time for me to tell her what I'd been thinking.

“I think it's my turn to tell you about *my* thoughts for our future.”

Her head snapped back up and our eyes met. “Of course.”

“Well, I think the idea of you hiring a nanny for our baby is good. You'll be busy with the farm, and I'll be busy with the ranch.”

Her brows pulled in slightly, but to her credit, she didn't say anything.

“I've already talked to my mom and told her we needed to hire a foreman who would be on the ranch twenty-four-seven, since I figured I'd be living here. That way, if something happens, he's right there and can be quick to respond.”

She nodded.

“I wouldn't mind getting some bulls and partnering with Ty on raising them for the PBR—if that's something you're interested in, of course. I never thought being a stock contractor was something I'd want to do, but in all honesty, I'm really looking forward to this joint venture with Ty. Since I'll be retiring from bull riding for good, I think it's still a good way to be a part of the community. That and guest commentating. I already said I'd do that a few times a year. So I'll still be traveling some, but not often. And I figured you and the baby could come with me on those few trips. I don't think I could fully walk away like Brock did. In time I will, but I can't go cold turkey.”

Merit sat and blinked rapidly at me as I talked. Every now and then, she closed her eyes and gave her head a quick shake.

“That's only if you don't have any other plans for this place. You've got the space, and we could keep Milo and any other horses you wanted to get in a completely different pasture if you're worried. I know how much you love to ride, so I think adding onto the barn will also need to be at the top

of our to-do list. I'd also love to pick up where dad left off, with a little bit of mutton busting at the ranch."

She brought her hands up to her cheeks and laughed. "Wait. Wait. Dirk, I don't expect you to retire from bull riding. Please, please don't think I want—"

I pulled her closer until she straddled me. I cupped her face in my hands and said, "Hush, Bugs."

"But—"

"Wait. Let me talk, okay?"

She bit down on her lip, then whispered, "Okay."

"Bull riding has always been a way for me to escape. Always. When I found myself falling for you, I threw myself into bull riding even harder in high school. Do you remember that?"

"Yes, your mother was furious and said you were too young."

I smiled at the memory of my mother informing me that at sixteen years old, my number-one concern should be finishing high school, not climbing onto the back of a bull.

When I didn't say anything, a frown creased between Merit's eyes. "You're not simply taking the year off? You're stopping for good? For like, ever?"

"Yes." I slipped a piece of hair behind her ear. "I want to be here for you, for our baby, for my mother. I know I don't *have* to be here, I *want* to be. That's the difference, Merit. I lost so much time with you, and I feel like this has been my second chance. My do-over. I don't want to mess it up. I've been watching those Shaw boys fall head over heels the last couple of years, and outwardly I laughed it off, but inside, I longed for what they had."

A brilliant smile moved over her face. "You're sure? This isn't because you think I don't want you to bull ride?"

"No, baby. This is me wanting to start my life with you, right now. I don't want to waste another minute." I placed my

hand on her stomach. “This is our future. Our family. That is the only joy ride I want to be on.”

She wrapped her arms around my neck and laughed. The sound filled my entire body with a happiness that still caught me off guard sometimes. “I’m so afraid I’m dreaming all of this.”

I lifted a brow. “The offer still stands for me to pinch you.”

A hint of mischief crossed her face, and her eyes grew dark with desire. She pulled the tank off of her body and tossed it to the ground. “It’s going to take a lot more than pinching to convince me.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

MERIT

The forty minutes to Lolo Creek Steakhouse was worth the drive. The moment we walked in and I smelled grilled steak, I nearly cried out for joy. To say I was craving steak was an understatement.

“They have good steak in Hamilton, ya know,” Michael whispered as he looked at me.

“Yes, but I wanted the huckleberry hog wings and the steakhouse mud pie,” I replied.

Michael laughed and shook his head. “Mom thinks you’re announcing your engagement this evening. It was all she talked about on the drive up here.”

I gave my brother a knowing smile and winked. “It’s possible.”

He frowned as he looked at Dirk and then back to me. “Did he tell you I know about the baby?”

With a deep exhale, I looked at him. “Yes.”

Michael leaned in closer and whispered for only my ears to hear, “I want to kill him, you know that, don’t you? How long have you known? Where has he been?”

With a stern look, I replied, “It’s complicated.”

This time his frown deepened, and a concerned expression now covered his handsome face. His blue eyes searched mine for some sort of silent answer to a question he clearly had in his mind.

I jumped when someone spoke. “Please follow me and I’ll show you to your table,” the hostess said as she gave my brother and Dirk a flirty smile. I rolled my eyes and followed.

The hostess led our group—which included my mother, brother, and Dirk’s mother, Kimberley—through the restaurant and to a large table in the back corner. The giant, exposed log-

beam walls and ceilings, as well as the antler chandeliers, screamed Montana. And the food was beyond amazing. It had always been one of my favorite places to eat.

After getting settled in our seats, the waitress came over. She smiled politely at each of us, and when her gaze landed on Dirk, she gasped.

“OMG! You’re...it’s...oh, holy crap! You’re Dirk Littlewood! Where have you been? You didn’t get hurt, so why haven’t you been riding? I mean, I know your daddy died—they told everyone that was why you were taking a break—but when are you going back? Will you be riding next weekend?”

Dirk gave her a polite smile and mused, “Now would be a good time to take a breath.”

She laughed. “I’m so sorry. It’s just my father and brother are bull riders. They love you!”

“I appreciate that, thank you.”

“Will you sign something for me to give to them? Please? Then I won’t bug you the rest of the dinner. Oh my gosh, I can’t believe it! I never thought...I knew you were from Hamilton but I...I...”

Dirk laughed. “Sure, I’d love to sign something for your father and brother, no problem.”

“Thank you!” she exclaimed as I smiled at Dirk. Clearly he didn’t like being the center of attention. It showed on his slightly pink cheeks.

The waitress seemed to shake herself and then looked at the rest of us. “Right. What can I get everyone to drink?”

After we gave our drink orders, and I asked for two orders of the huckleberry hog wings, the waitress left.

“Do you get recognized often, Dirk?” my mother asked.

“No, not really,” Dirk answered as he gave me a quick smile. I returned it and focused on the menu.

After we all placed our orders, Dirk reached for my hand and squeezed it as he spoke. "I'm sure you're all probably wondering why we asked you to join us this evening for dinner."

I stole a quick glance around the table. My brother took a drink from his beer, and my mother and Kimberley both wore wide grins.

"Well, since you informed me that you were moving in with Merit, I'm going to safely guess you're dating," Kimberley said.

It was my mother's turn. "I always knew the two of you were meant to be together. Ever since that kiss behind the barn at the chicken coop!"

I rolled my eyes as my brother chuckled.

Dirk drew in a breath and slowly let it out. Things would get out of hand if we didn't rein them back in.

I cleared my throat to get everyone's attention. "We *are* moving in together, yes. But, we've got some other news we need to share with you."

The three of them stared at us.

I looked at Dirk. We never actually decided who was going to break the baby news.

"Do you want me to tell them?" he asked as he ran his thumb gently over my hand.

With a smile, I asked, "Do you mind if I do?"

"Not at all," he said with a wink.

Butterflies swarmed in my stomach, and I felt my free hand settle on it to calm myself. With a slow breath in, I exhaled and faced the three sets of eyes that were patiently waiting.

"Dirk and I are expecting a baby in February. February twenty-fourth, to be exact."

I looked at my brother first, who wasn't the least bit surprised, of course. Then, I turned my attention to my mother.

She looked stunned. Finally, Kimberley wore a smile so big and bright that I couldn't help but smile in return.

"I knew it! I just knew it!" she exclaimed as she stood and rounded the table. First she kissed Dirk, then she pulled me up and wrapped me in a tight hug.

"This is the best news I've had since we lost Brad. Thank you, sweetheart! Oh, thank you for this!"

"Are you certain of the due date?" my mother asked.

I prayed the disappointment on my face didn't show. Those definitely weren't the first words I wanted her to utter.

"Positive," I said, my voice void of any emotion. If I thought too much on it, I might start crying.

"Wait, if you're due in February, then you've been together for a few months. Why did you keep it a secret?" my mother asked.

Michael set his drink down and glared at Dirk but didn't say anything.

A flash of hurt raced through me. That was *really* all my mother had to say about the news of our baby?

"Things were complicated between us at first," Dirk said as I slowly sat back down and he took my hand.

Kimberley rubbed my back and then awkwardly sat back down next to Dirk.

"Are you getting married?" my brother asked.

Anger replaced my hurt. "Does it matter?" I could feel Dirk's eyes on me.

"Yes, it matters," Michael said. "We have the farm to think about."

I felt my eyes widen, and I was positive my face was riddled with both anger and shock.

A bitter laugh escaped. "This isn't the 1800s, for shit's sake, Mike. A man and woman can have a baby without being married. But, to clear anything up, yes, we're getting married."

Kimberley let out a squeal of happiness and clapped.

My mother, however, sat there with no expression on her face whatsoever.

The utter pain I felt in my heart was hard to ignore. I desperately fought to keep the tears from my eyes. The idea that my mother wasn't happy for me nearly left me frozen. After everything that I'd done for her and for this family. I took a drink of water and then waited. She clearly had something on her mind.

When she didn't speak, Dirk did. "Lori, I'm getting the impression here that neither you, nor Michael, are happy about the baby."

My mother sat up straighter and smiled. "I'm not upset about the baby, or you getting married. Like I mentioned earlier, I always thought the two of you would end up together."

"Then why do you look like I just told you bad news?" I asked, hating that my voice wobbled some.

"I can answer that," Michael said.

"Michael," my mother said in a hushed voice.

"He's Dirk. He's a manwhore, sis."

Anger shot through me. "That is enough, Mike!" I said as I shot my brother a hard look.

"Okay, let's not call names," Kimberley stated.

Michael looked at Dirk's mom. "I'm sorry, but it's true. He's never made it a secret that he likes to hit the sack with a plethora of women. He's got a dangerous job, and he'll be gone ninety-five percent of the time, leaving you alone with a baby. And what will he be doing? No offense, Dirk, but I don't really see you being a faithful husband."

I was ready to kill my brother for acting like a Class-A jackass.

That made Dirk drop my hand and lean forward. "I have every intention of being a faithful husband. As much as you

find it hard to believe, I love your sister and I want to marry her. I'm not going to be gone, because I officially retired from the PBR—it just hasn't been announced yet. My plan is to be here for Merit and our child. To run my family's ranch. Not to mention, I'm joining Ty Shaw's breeding business to produce top-quality bulls for the PBR. Merit and I have talked about it, and it's something we're both interested in doing. She'll continue to work for the farm, I'll be running my family's ranch, as well as being a business partner with Ty. Does that meet *your* fucking expectations, Michael?"

"Dirk," Kimberley said.

"No, Kimberley, he has every right to say what he's saying to my...*brother*," I snapped.

Michael looked regretful, if only for a moment.

Then, as if his words just sank in, Kimberley whispered, "What did you say? You've retired? For good?"

Dirk gave his mother a sweet smile. "It's not for the reasons you think. I want to be here, in Hamilton. I need to be here, Mom."

"I thought it was only 'til the end of the year," Michael added. "What made you change your mind?"

Dirk and I turned and caught each other's eyes. He smiled, and I felt a warmth spread through my entire body. The way Dirk looked at me utterly stole the breath from my lungs. How I had longed for him to look at me this way. I felt giddy with happiness.

Then, he said, "I fell in love...or at least, I was finally able to admit it."

"Are you sure this is what you want, Dirk? Bull riding has always been such a large part of your life," Kimberley said.

"And you're on top right now," Michael added. My mother still remained silent.

"I've never been so sure of anything in my life. And there's no better way to go out, Michael."

My brother nodded and gave Dirk a smile. "I'm sorry for all of that earlier. She's my sister, but I shouldn't have said the things I said."

Dirk looked at Michael and simply nodded. Then, he leaned over and kissed me. When I turned to look at my mother, she at least had a smile on her face.

"This news is all so wonderful! I'm gaining a daughter, a grandchild, and my son back home for good. What a blessing," Kimberley said as she smiled at everyone.

Michael picked up his beer and held it up. "If you're happy, Merit, then I'm happy. Welcome to the family, Dirk."

All eyes went to my mother. She smiled and looked down sheepishly before her gaze met mine again. "I know my first reaction wasn't very joyous. I guess maybe I've been jaded about love, but I am truly over-the-moon happy for you both. Please, accept my apologies, Merit. Dirk."

My chin wobbled as I said, "Of course, Mom."

Dirk reached over and squeezed her hand. "No need to say you're sorry, Lori. None at all."

With a pat on Dirk's hand, my mother said, "I always knew you loved her."

"As did I," Kimberley added.

"Hell, I didn't!" Michael said.

My mother shot Michael a look that silenced him before she focused back on us. "Do we have a date for the wedding?"

"Not yet," I answered. "Dirk and I haven't figured all of that out yet."

"It would be better if you were married before you had the baby," Michael interjected.

"Pish-posh, they'll do it when they're ready," Kimberley said as my mother nodded in agreement.

"Any idea where you want to get married? It's not a bad idea to start thinking about it," Mom asked.

I let out a breath and looked at Dirk. “Honestly, I haven’t thought about it yet.”

Dirk smiled, but there was something in his eyes that seemed so sad. I knew exactly where his thoughts had most likely gone. His father wouldn’t be here when we got married. Finally, he said, “I haven’t thought much about it, either. Maybe we should get married behind the barn. Where it all started.”

With a smile, I shook my head, and he winked at me. I knew he was joking, but it launched our mothers into full-on planning mode.

Michael groaned and ordered another beer, while I tried to keep up with the fast flow of conversation that was suddenly taking place between our two mothers.

When the waitress brought Michael two beers, he handed one to Dirk, who took it gratefully and nearly downed it in one drink.



Dirk and I fell back onto the bed and sighed.

“That was exhausting,” I said as I closed my eyes.

“I should have never mentioned the barn,” Dirk said with a groan.

I turned and looked at him, a slight smile on my face. “Did you see your mother’s face when my mom suggested we get married in the same spot where we first had sex?”

“Oh God, don’t remind me. I thought your brother was going to jump across the table and hit me.”

I giggled. “He had that look about him through most of dinner.”

Dirk rolled over and looked at me. “Let’s go get married.”

Laughing, I asked, “You mean, elope?”

“Yes. Right now. Let’s leave tonight.”

I sat up and looked at him. “You’re serious?”

He sat up, as well, and I could hear the urgency in his voice. “Hell yes, I’m serious. Do you really want to go through a wedding that our mothers are going to plan? Did you not hear those two talking? My God, all of Hamilton will be there. And at one point, I was positive I heard one of them suggest a Halloween wedding.”

Chewing on my lip, I exhaled. “I think they desperately need an outlet. They’ve both lost their husbands. Maybe not in the same way, but the hurt is very much a part of them right now. It’s more a distraction than anything.”

Dirk’s eyes turned sad. “At our expense. Listen, I know my mother needs something to keep her mind off of my father but...but...”

It pained me to see the hurt on Dirk’s face at the mention of his father. I reached for his hand and squeezed it when his voice trailed off.

Closing his eyes, Dirk said, “Fuck, I wish he was here.” He looked at me, and I was taken aback by the grief that I saw in those green eyes of his. “I want him to be here, to meet his grandchild.” Dirk’s fingers grabbed at his hair as he tugged. “It’s not fair.”

Maybe a small family wedding would be okay, but something big and grand wasn’t what either of us wanted. My father wouldn’t be there to walk me down the aisle, and Dirk’s father wouldn’t be there to see his son get married.

If eloping helped him deal with that, I’d do it. I’d do anything for Dirk, and it was time I showed him that.

“Let’s do it. Let’s just go get married!” I said with a laugh.

“Wait, you’re serious? You’d do that?” Dirk asked, his eyes suddenly full of excitement.

“Yes, of course, I would!”

Dirk smiled, and it left me nearly breathless. “Where? Vegas?”

I shook my head quickly. “No. I hate Vegas. It’s loud and busy and doesn’t scream romance. Maybe we could go to Lake Tahoe for a few days. We could get married on the Nevada side, spend a few days at a hotel there,” I said.

“One of the guys I ride with has a house up at Lake Tahoe. I’ve been there a few times. It’s insanely beautiful.”

I felt myself grin. “Can you see if we can use it?”

Dirk nodded and reached for his phone. “Doug’s house has views of the lake and mountains. We could probably get married on his deck.”

A thrill of excitement rushed through me, but I didn’t want to seem too excited. “Are you sure this is what you want, Dirk?” I asked.

He cupped my face with his free hand and smiled. “Marry me, Bugs. Today, tomorrow, next week. I don’t care. All I want is for you to be mine. For us to start living and planning our future. And I won’t lie—it would be nice to be married before we have the baby.”

I chewed on the corner of my lip and then nodded like a crazy woman. “What are you waiting for! Call Doug and let’s make some plans!”

Chapter Thirty

DIRK

Brock stared at me with a disbelieving look on his face. “You’re eloping?”

With a quick nod, I replied, “Yes.”

“Kaylee is going to be pissed,” Ty stated as he folded his arms across his chest. “I’m going to have to hear about it for a week probably.”

I looked over at him and laughed. “I’m sure she’s busy with the baby. She won’t care.”

Ty let out a gruff laugh. “You do know it’s Kaylee we’re talking about.”

“She can plan a reception then,” I volunteered.

Brock folded his arms over his chest, as well, and frowned slightly.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” I asked.

He cleared his throat as he shook his head and met my gaze. “This isn’t like you, Dirk. I only want to make sure you’re not letting your...emotions...get the best of you.”

I raised a brow. “My emotions?”

“You *are* rather emotional, dude,” Ty added with a shit-eating grin.

Brock sighed and dropped his arms to his side. “A year ago, if I were to tell you that you’d be standing here telling me you’re eloping, you’d laugh your ass off then profess that you’re a bachelor for life.”

“I can’t argue with you on that. But you, more than anyone, have got to know that all it takes is one woman to change your entire life. And Merit...” My voice trailed off before I took in a deep breath and slowly let it out. “Ever since my father died, I can’t help but realize that every day we have is a gift. And I’m tired of fighting this feeling. I’m tired of

pretending I don't want what the two of you have, because I do. I just didn't want it with anyone but Merit. We were brought back together for a reason, Brock. I'm not going to question it. I'm going to hold on to it as tight as I can and never let it go again. I love her more than I ever thought possible."

Brock let a wide grin spread across his face. "What do you need us to do?"

I felt my body relax. "Tell our mothers we eloped."

"Oh, *hell* no!" Ty said as he threw up his hands. "Tell the moms? Are you insane?"

Brock slowly shook his head as he looked at Ty. "We're gonna need Mom's help with this one."

Ty stared at his brother. "We? Why we? He's *your* best friend?"

Brock's brow rose. "He's your future business partner."

Ty laughed. "Best friend trumps business partner."

"You could always get Kaylee to do it. She's not afraid of anything," I interjected.

Ty and Brock exchanged a look.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Ty said, "That might work, but she's going to be mad, as well. And probably pissed you didn't tell her yourself. But she might get a kick out of telling the moms."

"They all need something to do. I'm sure planning a reception would keep their minds occupied," I said.

"And no one likes to be more of a boss than Kaylee," Brock added.

Ty nodded. "This might work. Yeah, I think it *will* work."

I looked between both men. "I need to get back to Merit; our flight leaves in a few hours."

Brock pushed off the side of the desk where he had been leaning. "Don't worry, we'll figure it all out. Go get married,

enjoy the time together, and don't worry about anything here.”

I reached for Brock's hand, and he gave it a shake and then pulled me in for a quick hug. “I'm glad you finally found love, Dirk. No one deserves it more than you.”

With a quick slap on his back, I felt my throat tighten slightly. “Thanks, Brock.”

We stepped apart, and I looked at Ty. “Tell Kaylee I'm sorry I didn't tell her myself.”

He smiled. “I'm sure once the initial anger wears off, she'll forgive you.”

I slapped my hands together. “Well, I'm off to tie the knot!”



“Dirk, if you pace any more, you're going to wear a rut in my wood deck,” Doug mused as he leaned back in a chair and smirked.

I forced a smile at my friend. When I'd called Doug and asked if I could rent his house in Lake Tahoe if he wasn't using it, he laughed and told me it was mine to use for as long as I wanted. When I told him I was getting married, he went silent for a good full minute—then asked if I was drunk.

When I told him the shortened version of the story, he told me he was booking a flight the next morning. He needed to be present to watch history go down.

The moment Merit walked out onto the deck after we'd arrived, she'd cried. “It's so beautiful and perfect,” she gushed.

I'd pulled her into my arms and kissed her before I whispered how much I loved her. Then I'd held her in my arms as we gazed out over the turquoise water. I never thought anything could be more beautiful than the mountains of Montana, but Lake Tahoe gave it a run for its money. The mountains seemed to be held between the blue waters and blue

sky. I'd always thought the view was stunning when I came here before to visit Doug, but with Merit in my arms, it was a thousand times more beautiful.

"Dude, I still cannot believe you're getting married. You..." Doug said with a slow shake of his head. "Does she know how many women you've..."

"Fucked?" I said. I couldn't use any other word, because that was exactly what every single one of them had been. I hadn't made love to any of them. With more than half of them, I'd never even bothered to ask what their names were.

"Okay, I was going to be a little more sensitive, but it looks like you're getting straight to the point."

"She knows I have a colorful history when it comes to women."

He smiled. "Why this one?"

"Because she's the reason I *had* such a colorful past. Partly. I slept with all those women thinking it would put her out of my mind, but it never really worked."

He nodded. "Oh Lord, I've been there and done that. Why did we think sleeping with other women would erase the ones burned in our hearts?"

I shrugged. "Too afraid to admit there was actually one to burn *into* our hearts."

He grinned. "Exactly. Men: we are a beastly bunch."

I looked at him thoughtfully. "You're happy now, right? Now that you're married to Jill?"

Doug didn't even have to answer; I saw it in his eyes. "I've never been happier. She saved my life the day she showed back up in it. I'd be lost without her."

I went back to pacing.

"Is Merit the reason you quit?" he asked. I knew it was a question that had been burning inside of him since he found out.

“Partly. I took the rest of the year off after my father died because my head wasn’t in it, and I needed to be home. But when Merit told me she was pregnant, that changed everything.”

Doug’s chair tipped, and he fell backward. He jumped up and straightened his tie and then looked at me with a stunned look on his face. “She’s pregnant?”

“Yes, but again, that’s not why I’m marrying her. I’m marrying her because I love her, and I don’t want to spend another day without knowing she’s mine and I’m hers.”

Jill walked out about that time and sighed dramatically. “That is so romantic, Dirk Littlewood! I always knew you had it in you.”

“Romance, or finally getting someone knocked up?” Doug asked.

Hitting her husband on the shoulder, she laughed. “Stop it.” Jill faced me. “She’s almost ready. The pastor I arranged for y’all will be here any minute, and the photographer friend of mine showed up a little while ago. She wanted to catch Merit getting ready, so she went straight up to the bedroom where she’s getting dressed.”

I nodded. We had gotten into Lake Tahoe three days ago. In that short amount of time, we’d gotten our marriage license, contacted a pastor, hired Jill’s friend to take photos, and shopped for something to wear for the wedding. Merit wanted to keep it simple, so I was in jeans, a button-down white shirt, and a light blue tie. Doug and Jill, who were our witnesses, were dressed up, as well. Doug was wearing the same thing as me—Merit had bought two ties—and Jill was in a blue dress that she and Merit had picked out together yesterday.

“Jill, was Merit able to find a dress she liked?” I asked.

With a huge smile on her face, Jill nodded. “The first store we walked into, as a matter of fact. I think it was fate. It fits her like a glove. I have a feeling it won’t stay on long after Doug and I leave.”

The loud pounding in my ears was my heartbeat, I realized.

“My only concern was that her heels might get caught in the boards out here on the deck,” Jill said as she looked around their massive wood deck that overlooked the lake and mountains. “But she informed me she wasn’t wearing heels.”

I frowned. “What’s she wearing?”

Jill winked. “You’ll see.”

The photographer walked out onto the deck. “Jill, I think the pastor is driving up.”

With a little hop and squeal, Jill quickly ran out the door.

The photographer, Mary, headed over to me with her hand outstretched. “You must be Dirk. It’s a pleasure.”

“Pleasure is all mine,” I said as I shook her hand.

“Sorry I didn’t come out and introduce myself, but when Jill said that Merit was getting ready, I wanted to document it.”

I held up my hands. “No worries at all.”

“Let me just get you to stand over here, Dirk. Doug, will you stand on the other side and play Merit?”

Doug frowned. “Why can’t he play the girl’s part?”

I fought to keep from smiling as Mary rolled her eyes. “He’s the groom, therefore he’ll stand where he’s going to be standing. Besides, you’re shorter, so this will work out well.”

This time I lost the battle and laughed. Doug shot me the finger as Mary walked around us, bent down, and snapped a few photos. She looked at her watch and smiled. “I’m going to get amazing shots once the sun goes down.”

Someone cleared his throat from behind us. The three of us swung around to see a man standing there who wasn’t that much older than myself. He held a Bible and was dressed in a suit.

“I was told to make my way out here and tell everyone it’s show time,” he said with a smile.

Suddenly, my stomach felt uneasy, and beads of sweat started forming on my forehead. Doug slapped me on the side of my arm. “Breathe, Dirk.”

“I’m breathing,” I stated.

The pastor walked up and reached for Doug’s hand, and then mine, as we exchanged introductions.

“I’m told there are no personal vows, so we’ll stick with the traditional ones?” he asked.

I swallowed hard and tried to speak, but nothing would come out. After another attempt, I gave up and nodded.

Doug went into the house and walked back out. “It’s show time!”

Mary positioned everyone exactly where she thought she would get the best photos. Then, she looked toward the large, sliding glass doors and gave a thumbs up.

Jill walked out carrying a small bouquet of flowers as Mary snapped pictures. I had no idea how Merit and Jill had pulled off this small, yet well-planned wedding. Especially since they’d only met a few days ago.

I closed my eyes and took in a few deep breaths as I attempted to calm both my heart and my breathing. I wasn’t scared about getting married. Not in the least bit. I was, however, terrified I’d be a crappy husband and father.

One quick look at Jill, who flashed me a wide smile as she stood across from me, and I felt the air around me change. I turned and saw Merit stepping out onto the deck.

My eyes filled with tears, and I blinked rapidly in a mad attempt to hold them back. When Merit looked at me, her violet eyes caught my green, and I gave up the attempt and let a tear fall. Quickly, I wiped it away as she started to walk toward me. She smiled, and I swore the Earth tilted slightly.

I took in every inch of her. She wore a white, two-piece wedding dress that showed off her midsection and made my knees weak. The fact that she was pregnant with my child and had left her stomach bare did something primal to me. I was

already picturing what I would do once I took the gown off of her. The crystal beads on the straps of her dress caught the sunlight and made it look as if light bounced all around her. I saw the tips of her cowboy boots peeking out, and I couldn't help but smile. Only my Bugs would wear cowboys boots on her wedding day.

Her hair was swept up in a pile of curls on the top of her head, with strands of curls framing her face and neck. A thin veil hung down her back and was held in place by a small diamond tiara that was tucked into her massive curls. She wore the slightest touch of makeup, and her lips were the sweetest shade of pink. I wanted desperately to kiss her. She was beyond beautiful.

She walked up and stopped in front of me, that sweet smile still on her face.

“You look...so beautiful,” I whispered.

“Thank you,” she replied. “You look handsome, as usual.”

It took everything I had not to lean down and take her face in my hands and kiss her. To hell with the wedding vows—I wanted her. Needed her. Wanted to strip her down and make love to her until we were both exhausted.

The pastor spoke, and Merit turned to look at him. I, on the other hand, couldn't take my eyes off of Merit. She wore the pearl earrings we had bought yesterday while we were out shopping for wedding rings. Merit wanted something simple, yet vintage looking. The second jewelry store we went to had a ring Merit had fallen in love with on the spot. It didn't even matter to me how much it cost; she loved it, therefore she got it. It was a princess-cut diamond that sat atop a beaded and ribbon-twisted white-gold band. It looked timeless. Just like our love.

I hardly heard anything the pastor said. I somehow made it through the vows, my voice cracking a few times. When he finally said I could kiss the bride, I gently cupped Merit's face in my hands and kissed her. I wanted to make it last longer, but I was pretty sure the pastor didn't want to see me deepen the

kiss, so I pulled back and leaned my forehead against Merit's, fighting to control my breathing.

One kiss, and she had me undone. Except it hadn't been this kiss. No. It was the kiss we shared when we were ten years old and I knew that someday I'd make her mine.

"Mrs. Littlewood," I said softly.

Merit reached up and held on to my arms as she chuckled. "I love the sound of that."

I drew back and looked into her sparkling eyes. "So do I."

Doug and Jill walked up and offered their congratulations, along with the pastor. Mary asked us to pose for more photos as the sun started to set, causing the lake to take on a purple color. The sky was filled with red, yellow, and blue as the sun slowly sank behind the mountains. The color reflecting on the lake made Merit's eyes stand out even more. Mary gasped and positioned Merit off alone and must have taken a dozen photos of just her.

"Your eyes," she kept saying as she clicked photo after photo. Finally, after what seemed like endless amounts of photos, we walked back into Doug and Jill's house. Doug popped open a bottle of champagne and poured four glasses. Merit took the tiniest of sips as Doug offered up a toast.

"Well, we're going to leave you to enjoy the house," Jill said.

"Oh, no, we don't want to push you out of your own house!" Merit said, even when I attempted to try and get her to stop talking.

Doug laughed. "Don't be silly. There's a guesthouse on the other side of the property. Jill and I are going to stay there for a couple of days, and then I need to get back. I can't wait to tell everyone that Dirk Littlewood got married!"

I smiled as I held Merit against my body.

Jill walked up and kissed Merit softly on the cheek. "Congratulations!" She then whispered something into Merit's ear that caused Merit to blush and nod. I gave them a quizzical

look and started to ask what it was they were whispering about, but Doug pulled me off to the side.

“I know you’ve been so busy, and you probably don’t remember much about the house, but up on the roof is a terrace.”

“Really? I didn’t see that the last time I was here.”

“We’ve added it since you were here last, I guess. Go up and check it out. There’s a bed swing up there, if you get my drift. It might make a nice place to stay for your honeymoon night. Jill made sure everything was in order for y’all up there. Trust me when I say—go up there.”

I reached out and shook Doug’s hand. “Thank you for everything, Doug. For letting us use your house, for standing in as our witnesses, and for making this easy for Merit, with Jill’s help.”

“Are you kidding? Jill had a blast helping out. It was our honor to get to spend this special day with you both.”

I had to admit I felt guilty that Brock wasn’t here. If I could have had him there to stand in as my best man, I would have. But asking him and Lincoln to leave baby Hunter to go on a last-minute trip would have been selfish. Someday, maybe Merit and I would renew our vows, and Brock could be my best man then.

After a quick bro hug, Doug and Jill slipped away, leaving me and my bride staring at one another.

“Have I told you how beautiful you look in that gown?” I asked as I swept a curl from her face.

“You might have mentioned it once.”

Leaning down, I brushed my lips across hers and whispered, “You look beautiful, Mrs. Littlewood.”

Her lashes fluttered as she fought to keep her eyes open. I felt her body melt against mine.

“Dirk,” she said softly while she wrapped her arms around my neck and started toying with the back of my hair.

“What should we do now?” I asked.

Eyes so beautifully brilliant stared up at me. “I heard about this swing that’s like a bed on the roof.”

Chapter Thirty-One

MERIT

Dirk's brows rose, and a wide grin spread across his face. The breeze coming off the lake caused his dark hair to blow ever so slightly, and I moved my hand to lace my fingers through it. When Dirk moaned, I felt a rush of wetness between my legs and my body trembled. Lord, how I ached for him all the time.

"Are you cold?" Dirk asked while he ran his hands over my arms.

"No."

"You're shivering."

I could feel my cheeks heat. "I'm thinking about being with you, as your wife."

Dirk's eyes turned dark with desire. "As much as I love this wedding dress, it needs to come off."

I jutted my lower lip out in a pout. "I've only had it on for a couple of hours...if that!"

Dirk moved his hand down my arm, and when I felt his fingertips stroke softly over my exposed stomach, I gasped.

He dropped to his knees and stared at my stomach before he placed a kiss on it. I parted my lips slightly and felt a rapid fluttering in my chest. "Tell me what you're thinking," I said as I brought my fingers back to his hair.

Dirk drew in a deep breath and slowly let it out. "That there's a baby inside of you. My baby, our baby. I'm scared I'm going to be a terrible father, yet I'm so excited I want time to hurry by."

I grinned. "I can't wait to meet the baby, as well, but I'm going to be a bit more selfish."

He looked up with a confused expression on his face. "Selfish? How?"

“I want to spend as much time with you as I can. Making love, talking, learning what your favorite foods are.”

“That one’s easy. You make it, I’ll eat it.”

“You say that now!” I said with a slight chuckle.

Something in Dirk’s eyes changed, and I felt my skin flush from head to toe.

He stood, and I felt a pang of disappointment hit me at the loss of the moment. “Are you hungry?” he asked.

“I am, but not for food.”

Moving quicker than I had ever seen him move, Dirk picked me up, and I squealed. “Where are we going?”

“To the roof.”

I quickly became aware of my own heartbeat hammering away in my chest. A rush of desire pulsed through my veins as Dirk took the steps ever so slowly and carefully.

“You could go faster, you know,” I pointed out.

“I’m carrying precious cargo. This pace is perfectly fine.”

I giggled and buried my face into his shirt. At the top of the steps was a door that led to what I assumed was the rooftop deck. When Dirk opened it, we both sucked in a breath.

“Oh my goodness!” I cried out as I took in the scene before me.

“Did they do this?” Dirk asked, gently placing me down.

“When would they have had time?” I asked, marveling as I looked around at the beautiful sight before me.

White twinkle lights littered the entire rooftop. The glow it cast was nothing short of breathtaking. To the right side of us was a large bed that hung down from a rafter of sorts that had been built specifically to carry its weight. Sheer white curtains blew softly in the wind at each corner of the roof, adding another element of romance. In front of the bed was a table that had an ice bucket filled with champagne, and next to that, two champagne flutes.

The swing bed was covered in pillows and linens and it looked so inviting that I nearly ran to it.

“Can you believe the view from here?” Dirk said as he took my hand and we walked farther out onto the terrace.

I shook my head, looking around. Lit candles in rustic white lanterns were everywhere as soft music played in the background. “I cannot believe how romantic this all is. How do they not live here full time?”

Dirk laughed. “Well, considering Doug’s out on the road a good portion of the year, they mainly live in Idaho. At least, that’s where their main residence is.”

I sighed as I spun around and laughed. “I feel like a princess!”

Dirk caught me and lifted me up. “You’re a queen. My queen.”

With a smile, I kissed him. It started off slow and sweet, until Dirk let my body slide down his and then placed his hand at the back of my neck, drawing me in deeper. Soft kisses turned to passionate ones, and I moaned into his mouth as I dropped my hands to his jeans and started fumbling with the button. Dirk laughed and took a step back, leaving me panting like I had run a marathon.

“You first,” he mused as he lifted his hand and played with one of the curls at my neck.

Then his hands fell to my waist, and he brushed the back of his knuckles against my exposed stomach.

“I think it’s hot as hell you wore a two-piece wedding dress, and I’m thanking God we’re not at a big wedding where I have to share you with other people while we make small talk and I have to wait hours to make love to you.”

I drew in a shuddered breath as I felt him reach behind me and unclasp the tulle skirt, letting it pool around my feet. I had no idea why I felt nervous. It wasn’t like it was our first time making love. Maybe it was because this time I was officially his, and he was mine.

Dirk dropped to his knees once more and his eyes went wide. He swallowed hard and stared at the baby blue lace panties I had on. His gaze moved down to the blue garter with white stockings.

“Christ Almighty,” he whispered. “I think I’m in heaven.”

I smiled and watched as his hands moved gently down my thighs to where the garter was clasped to the stockings. Although I was wearing cowboy boots that Kaylee found at a local boutique after doing an intense Google search, I still wanted to wear a garter and stockings. I remembered once listening to Brock and Dirk talk about how they thought garters were sexy. They couldn’t have been more than sixteen, but I vowed then that if I married Dirk, I would wear them.

“I...um...I...I can’t think,” Dirk said as he fought to put a sentence together.

It took everything I had not to giggle as he stared at me. I rested my hands on his shoulders and stepped out of the skirt. He looked at the cowboy boots and smiled up at me, seeming to regain his thoughts.

“Nice touch, by the way.”

I shrugged and held up one foot as Dirk pulled the boot off and set it gently to the side. He repeated the process with the other boot. When he placed his hands on my legs, I shivered from his touch. He slid his hand softly over my calf and unclasped the garter, gently rolling one of the stockings down my leg. I was so aroused, I was positive the wind would be able to make me come.

“I’ve always wanted to do this,” he said as he concentrated on the other garter belt. “You need to make sure you keep these.”

I couldn’t help the smile that spread over my face as I fist-pumped internally. “Okay,” I mumbled, attempting to keep my breathing even. With the way his hands touched me, I was struggling to stand, let alone form any cohesive words.

After the stockings were removed, Dirk leaned in and blew on my lace panties, which caused me to gasp. My legs felt like

they were about to give out on me at any moment.

“I think I’ll wait until you’re lying down before I strip those off of you.”

I nodded as words failed me.

He stood and placed his hands on my shoulders, turning me so that my back faced him. Slowly, he unbuttoned my crystal and pearl halter top.

“Your skin is glowing,” he said as he placed soft kisses on each shoulder and around my neck.

“I...I think it’s the...um...the, ah...lights, maybe?”

He chuckled, and the warm air on my neck made every part of my body tighten with anticipation. “No, it’s not that. It’s you. You have a glow about you, Bugs. It’s beautiful to see, and makes me hard as hell.”

I dropped my head back against his chest and took deep breaths as I leaned into his body to keep from tumbling over.

“Dirk,” I moaned in something that felt like utter frustration. He moved so slowly, and all I wanted was to feel him inside of me.

Another soft laugh came from behind me before he pushed the halter off my body and I was left wearing only my panties.

Dirk brought his hands around my front, where he played with each sensitive nipple, causing me to squirm and moan in delight.

“Does that feel good?” he asked.

I nodded and pushed my ass into his erection. “More.”

He let out a groan and laughed as he teased me. “More, huh?”

I turned and quickly went to work on removing his tie and shirt, while he undid his jeans and pushed them down his hips before he toed off his boots and got completely undressed.

“Don’t touch me, Merit,” Dirk said as my hand went down.

“Why not?” I asked.

Even in the dimly lit area, I could see his cheeks flame red. “I’ll come if you touch me, I’m that turned on.”

“Oh,” I said with a breathy voice. Clearly I wasn’t the only one on the verge of falling.

Dirk took my hand and walked us over to the swing bed. He pulled me to him and gently kissed me as he lowered us both down. The need to feel him inside of me was stronger than it had ever been, and I had to grab the bed linens to keep from clawing at his back to pull him closer to me. If I could have pulled him inside of me, I would have. I needed to feel him that much.

He placed soft kisses everywhere on my body as he whispered my name over and over while I squirmed under him.

“Dirk,” I gasped when his hand went between my thighs.

“God, you’re so wet, you’ve soaked your pretty panties.”

“Please. I need you.”

“Not yet, I want to keep kissing you.”

I thrashed my head from side to side. “Dirk! Now! Please!”

I could hear the smile in his voice as he moved down my body. “Not yet, baby. I want to play.”

He slowly removed my panties and blew on me, and I nearly bolted off of the bed. When his mouth took my clit, I almost came. “Oh God!”

He moaned and licked and squeezed my ass as he brought me to the edge of an explosive orgasm. Every time I felt like I would finally fall, he backed off, keeping me from finding that sweet release I desperately needed.

“Damn it, Dirk! I want to come!”

His hand went to my stomach, and I stilled. The feel of his breath against the most intimate part of my body was almost as good as his mouth. He was panting.

“Please,” I whimpered.

Before I could say another word, he moved up my body, claimed my mouth with his, pushed inside of me, and I came.

Jerking my mouth from his, I cried out his name, and then words I couldn't fully understand tumbled out, along with my moans of pleasure as I rode out the most intense orgasm of my life. When I squeezed my eyes shut, I saw nothing but bursts of lights. Tingles raced over my body, and I felt my legs tremble from the sheer force of it all.

When my body finally settled down, I felt him inside of me, not moving except for the kisses he placed across my neck and over my breasts. I opened my eyes and gasped at the sight of a million stars above me.

“The stars,” I panted.

“That good of an orgasm, huh?” Dirk mumbled, kissing the corner of my mouth before biting down lightly on my lower lip. I couldn't help but giggle.

“No. I mean, yes, it was amazing. But I see the stars in the sky. Look.”

Dirk stopped what he was doing and looked up. “Oh, wow.”

Even with the soft glow of the twinkle lights, the stars still sparkled in the night sky like a thousand diamonds catching the sun's rays.

“It's so beautiful,” I said, wrapping my legs around my husband tightly.

Dirk looked back at me as he rested on his elbows. He cupped my face in his hands and replied, “Not as beautiful as you.”

Then, he made love to me. Over and over, until we fell into a blissful silence in one another's arms. I wasn't sure how long we lay there as I drifted in and out of a light sleep.

“Do you have names picked out?” Dirk asked, and I snuggled in deeper against him on the bed swing.

“To be honest, I haven’t thought about it. You?”

He chuckled. “I’m still getting used to the idea that I’m going to be a father, and now I’m married.”

I moved and rested my chin on the back of my hand, which I had placed on his chest. “Then, should we talk about it? I heard some couples fight over names for months. Sometimes babies are born with no names until the very last minute, when the couple is forced to give the child one.”

Dirk frowned. “That’s terrible. We’re not going to fight over names.”

“I hope not,” I replied with a wink.

“Let’s think about this,” he said as his fingers moved lazily over my bare back. “We probably need to narrow down names before we go back.”

“Why?” I asked with a giggle.

“Tanner and Timberlynn are having a baby, also. We need to make sure we’ve got the one-up on them.”

“Dirk!” I said as I playfully hit him on the chest with my free hand. He grabbed it and kissed my knuckles, then the inside of my wrist.

There was something terribly romantic about being outside under the stars lying naked next to this man. My husband.

“Okay,” he stated, then drew in a deep breath. “Boys first?”

“Why boys?” I asked, drawing a small pattern of circles over his chest.

“Because I’m almost positive it will be a boy.”

Laughing, I asked, “Positive, huh?”

“*Almost* positive,” he countered with a wink.

I let out a dramatic sigh. “Fine, boys first.” After a few moments, I said, “Dirk, if we have a boy, I think we should name him after your father.”

He stilled, and I felt myself stop breathing.

Then, his fingers began to move once again on my back. “You want to name him Bradley?”

“Yes, if it’s okay with you. We can either use it as a first name or a middle name.”

He tightened his arm around me, and I tried to get even closer to him.

Then, he finally spoke. “I’ve always liked the name Michael.”

I smiled, knowing he was picking my brother’s name on purpose, even after he had insulted Dirk. They had always been good friends, though. “Me, too.”

“Bradley Michael Littlewood,” Dirk said, barely above a whisper. His green eyes filled with tears as he looked at me.

I did my best to hide my own emotions, and focused on keeping my voice steady and strong. “I think it’s perfect. If the baby is a boy, Bradley Michael it will be.”

He let out a shaky breath, and I kissed his chest ever so lightly.

After another minute or two, Dirk asked, “What about a girl’s name?”

“Oh, a girl. This one might be hard.”

He chuckled, which made me relax. The intense moment from earlier was clearly ebbing from his body. “Why is it going to be hard?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve always loved that my name was different and not like most girls. I guess I always thought if I had a little girl, I would want her to have a unique name, as well. Or at least, not a common one.”

“Okay, non-common names. I’ve always loved your middle name, though.”

“Grace?” I asked in a surprised voice.

“Yeah. What about Avery Grace?”

My heart felt like it stumbled in my chest. “You’re teasing, right?”

He looked at me with a confused expression. “Do you not like Avery? Did we know an Avery in high school whom I can’t remember?”

I sat up and pulled the sheet around me. “Dirk, you don’t remember?”

A confused look passed over his face, and he sat up. He cursed. “Fuck, I know I didn’t know an Avery in high school. I...I don’t know where I came up with the name. It’s just a name I’ve always remembered, for some reason.”

I reached over and took his hand in mine. “Breathe, Dirk. Breathe.”

He stared at me, and I knew he was worried that he had made another mistake like he had the time he’d called me Kaci.

With a warm smile, I quickly said, “Avery was the name of the doll you gave me at the first real birthday party I had. You named her, and you told me that when you wouldn’t be able to be there as a friend for me, Avery would.”

The memory hit him, and he opened his mouth, then snapped it shut again.

“Do you remember?” I asked.

He nodded quickly. “I didn’t remember until you said it just now. Now I remember her. She had dark brown hair and eyes the same color as yours. My mother had a friend of hers make the doll for you after I told her I wanted to give you something special.”

I felt a tear slip free and make its slow journey down my cheek. “I still have her, in my room at my parents’ house.”

“Shit,” he mumbled and then pulled me to him. His mouth pressed against mine. “I love you, Merit. I love you with every ounce of my being. From this moment on, I don’t think I could ever be strong enough to live without you.”

I settled over him and wrapped my arms around him as our eyes locked. “It’s a good thing I don’t plan on going anywhere.”

Epilogue

MERIT

Christmas Day, Five years later

Stella stood with her hands on her hips and gave everyone a look that made us all tremble. “Someone ate the elderberry pies I made for today.”

Brock and Ty both pointed at one another as Tanner took a step back to hide behind Timberlynn.

Timberlynn laughed. “If you think my eight-month-pregnant belly will hide you, you’re mistaken. I think she already saw you. And seriously, do you think that the woman who’s pregnant with your second child would want to be seen as big enough for you to hide behind?”

Tanner kissed his wife. “I love you.”

“Good thinking, Tanner,” Ty said, and he stood behind Kaylee, who was seven-months’ pregnant herself with their second child.

Kaylee sighed. “You’re hiding behind your son, you coward?”

“Hello? Have you met my mother?” Ty stated.

I couldn’t help but smile as I peeked over at Dirk who had evidence of said elderberry pie on the corner of his mouth. Our son Brad sat next to him and tried to hide the fact that he was chewing.

Lincoln walked into the living room with Blayze hot on her trail. “But, Mom! Dad said I could give it a try.”

She stopped and looked at Tanner. He shrank back even farther behind Timberlynn.

“Guess he told you about the horse,” Tanner mumbled.

“The one he said *you* told him he could help break?”

Ty turned to Blayze. “Ah, we have a bucking bronco in our mix.”

Lincoln whipped her heated gaze over to Ty. He held up his hands and pressed his lips tightly together.

“He’ll be fine, sweetheart,” Brock said as he walked up and pulled Lincoln to him. “I promise.”

She sighed and relaxed into him the moment his blue eyes landed on her and he whispered her name.

“Good Lord, how do you do it, man?” Ty wondered.

Stella cleared her throat. “Don’t think I don’t notice two of my sons taking shelter behind their pregnant wives! I raised you better than that. What you *should* be doing is running.”

Blayze looked around. “No one saved me a piece of pie?”

Everyone turned and looked at him with panicked expressions. By everyone, I mean Ty, Tanner, Dirk, and Brock.

Blayze turned to Dirk. “You ate the last piece, didn’t you?”

“No!” Dirk said.

“I see it on your face, Uncle Dirk. And Brad is still eating it!”

A wide smile erupted across my son’s face. “I was good, Gwammy!” Brad declared.

Stella melted on the spot as she rushed over to him and scooped him up. “Oh, my sweet, sweet boy. Did you like it?”

Bradly nodded as Stella kissed him.

“Come on, let me clean you up,” she said as they started out of the living room.

“Hey, how come he’s not getting the side eye?” Tanner called out.

Stella turned and shot daggers at her youngest son. “Because he’s four and doesn’t know any better. And he’s adorable.”

“Hey, I’m still adorable!” Blayze stated.

“Once you hit double digits, kid, you’re no longer adorable enough to get away with things,” Dirk informed him.

Blayze rolled his eyes. “That’s stupid.”

“Come quick! Hurry!” Ty Senior yelled.

Everyone quickly turned and headed off toward the sound of Ty Senior’s voice.

“Stop!” Rose declared as she stood at the entrance to the game room that Ty Senior and Stella had added on. With seven grandchildren, and two more on the way, they decided the grandkids needed a place of their own.

“Don’t go crazy, stay calm,” Rose said.

“My goodness, she really is a mini-Kaylee,” Lincoln said with a giggle.

Kaylee beamed. “She really is.”

“What’s going on, sweetheart?” Ty said as he leaned down and put his five-year-old daughter onto his shoulders.

“Avery took a step.”

I gasped, and before I could do anything, Dirk pushed his way through everyone and into the room. I followed.

Ty Senior was across the room, his hands holding Avery’s as she stood there. The moment she saw her daddy, she squealed in delight. Our daughter Avery was madly in love with her father. He was—and had been since the day she was born ten months ago—the only person who could calm her down when she was upset.

“Stop right there, Dirk. She only took a few steps and fell. Most likely because I yelled out for everyone,” Ty Senior said. His eyes were bright with happiness as he looked up at me and grinned like a proud grandfather.

Even though he wasn’t Bradley and Avery’s actual grandfather, he treated them like his grandchildren, nonetheless. He’d also become even more of a father figure to Dirk in the years since Brad had passed.

My own father was part of my children’s lives, of course. After a year of remaining sober and going to therapy, he started helping out on the farm again. It took another year for

him and my mom to work things out, but they only ended up being friends and decided to divorce. My brother Michael still wasn't married, but I had a feeling there would be an engagement soon. He had been dating a girl named Angela for almost two years, and everyone in the family adored her.

“She took some steps?” I asked Ty Senior.

He nodded.

Dirk dropped to the floor and gave our daughter the same smile that made me weak in the knees. “Come to Daddy, Avery Grace.”

She laughed and started to take a step. Her dark brown curls were pulled up into a tiny little ponytail on top of her head. Her eyes, the color of the Montana sky, looked directly at Dirk. Ty Senior let go of her hands, and she took another step. Then another...and another.

“That’s it, baby girl. Come to Daddy.”

Everyone held their breath as she made her way toward Dirk.

“Ten bucks says she falls before she gets there,” I heard Hunter say.

“Hunter Shaw!” Lincoln whisper-shouted.

For only being five, Hunter’s personality was the mini version of his late Uncle Beck, and he seemed to have the soul of a thirty-year-old man.

With a laugh that made my heart fill with joy, Avery threw herself into her father’s arms. Dirk picked her up and held her as he said, “That’s my big girl. Such a smart girl!”

I fought to hold back my tears as I watched them. Dirk spun around, and our eyes met. Oh, how my heart filled with love. I didn’t think it was possible, but every day I fell more and more in love with my husband. He was so devoted to me and our two kids. I wanted to press my mouth to his and beg him to take me home to be alone with him. Since it was Christmas Day, I’d have to be patient.

“I got it all on video!” Timberlynn called out as Lily, her and Tanner’s four-year-old daughter, hung onto her leg.

“Mommy, how old was I when I started walking?” Rose asked Kaylee.

Kaylee looked down at her daughter and brushed her blonde curls to the side. “You were almost one.”

“And me?” Hunter asked.

Brock reached down and picked up his son. Like Blayze, he was the spitting image of Brock. Brown hair and eyes that looked like an ice-blue glacier. “You started walking right about the same time as Rose.”

Dirk walked over and stopped in front of me. I saw the pride on his face. “She totally skipped crawling. She obviously gets her skills from her father.”

I nodded and laughed.

“You know what that means?” Kaylee said, a smirk on her face.

Everyone turned and looked at Kaylee as she rubbed her belly.

“What does that mean, Kaylee?” Dirk asked, clearly dreading her answer.

“She’s the child who will bring karma back onto your ass.”

“Kaylee!” Lincoln cried out. “Little ears!”

The End

Dear Readers,

I hope you have enjoyed reading the Meet Me in Montana series as much as I've enjoyed writing it. I fell so madly in love with the characters that writing *The End* on this last book has left me feeling sad. Thank you so much for coming along on this journey with me.

Although this is the last book in this series, I am so excited to share a new series with you. *The Butterfly Effect*, the first book in the Boggy Creek Valley series, will be out on April 6, 2021. I can't wait to introduce a new town, new families, and a new journey with you.

Thank you for all of your love and support!

Hugs!

Kelly

*The butterfly effect — one small change, one moment in time
that impacts the future.*

At twenty years old, I never dreamed I'd walk in on my husband in bed with my best friend. At twenty years old, I found myself divorced and the mother of a one-year-old son. Never mind that I was learning to take the reins of my family's apple orchard business. There was no way my life could be any more complicated...or so I thought.

Can a woman who's lost all trust in men help a man who can't even trust himself?

Aiden O'Hara is my brother's best friend, and I've secretly loved him from afar. But when he moves back to Boggy Creek Valley after serving his time as a Navy SEAL, I cannot deny the pull I feel between us.

Aiden is haunted by his own demons—demons that seem bigger than the both of us—and my heart warns me to stay away. But one moment in time changes everything between us, and neither one of us can deny the hidden feelings we share.

Our pasts want to keep us apart...our futures will be up to the wings of fate.

The Butterfly Effect is book one in the Boggy Creek Valley series and is a stand-alone novel.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelly Elliott is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling contemporary romance author. Since finishing her bestselling *Wanted* series, Kelly has continued to spread her wings while remaining true to her roots with stories of hot men, strong women, and beautiful surroundings. Her bestselling works included *Wanted*, *Broken*, *Without You*, and *Lost Love*. Elliott has been passionate about writing since she was fifteen. After years of filling journals with stories, she finally followed her dream and published her first novel, *Wanted*, in November 2012.

Elliott lives in Central Texas with her husband, daughter, and two pups. When she's not writing, she enjoys reading and spending time with her family. She is down to earth and very in touch with her readers, both on social media and at signings. To learn more about Kelly and her books, you can find her through her website, www.kellyelliottauthor.com.

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