



RIDING THE
RAINES

SUMMER
RAINE

LAURANN
DOHNER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RIDING THE
RAINES

SUMMER
Raine

LAURANN
DOHNER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Summer Raine

Riding the Raines – Book Three

By Laurann Dohner

Summer Raine by Laurann Dohner

Summer fled her hometown after being betrayed...twice on the same day. Her father tried to force her into marrying someone she hated and the man she was in love with turned out to be a liar. Heartbroken, she left them both behind and swore never to return.

Never say never. The death of her father and a determined lawyer force her to come back home. It will only be for one day. She'll be in and out of town before anyone realizes she's there. At least that's the plan.

The love of Ryder's life just disappeared. She didn't even bother to say goodbye or tell him why she was leaving. He tried to find her but wasn't successful. Over the years, he's hardened his heart. He doesn't need love. That is, until Summer is standing before him.

She's back. And in danger. Eleven years may have passed, but one thing hasn't changed. Ryder still wants her...now more than ever.

Riding the Raines Series List

Propositioning Mr. Raine

Raine on Me

Summer Raine

Summer Raine by Laurann Dohner

Copyright © December 2023

Editor: Kelli Collins

Cover Art: Dar Albert

eBook ISBN: 978-1-950597-26-0

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal, except for the case of brief quotations in reviews and articles.

Criminal copyright infringement is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is coincidental.

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Summer Raine – Riding the Raines

Book Three

By Laurann Dohner

Prologue

“I do.” Summer laughed, grinning up at Ryder.

“I do too,” he chuckled, his dark brown eyes flashing with amusement.

“Then I pronounce you cowboy and cowgirl,” the drunken rodeo clown slurred. “You can rope and brand her since she’s all yours now.”

“Oh man,” River groaned. “This is crazy.”

Ryder turned his pleased gaze on his identical twin. “You should grab some gal and get hitched while Bob here is in a mood to bind couples today.”

“Not even in jest, man.” River backed up, shaking his head. “Never me.”

Summer leaned in and lifted on her tiptoes, pulling Ryder down since he stood nearly a foot taller. She peered up at him with a grin. “Let’s get out of here. I have to leave in an hour, so we need a fast honeymoon. Shelly can’t cover for me after that. She has to work at five.”

“Sounds like a great plan.” Ryder wound his arm around her waist and took possession of her lips with his.

Summer wrapped her arms tightly around his neck and knew absolute heaven when the man she loved kissed her with enough passion to make her breathless. One day soon, she hoped they’d stand inside a church and the minister would be a real one.

“Fill out and sign the papers,” Bob slurred.

Ryder broke the kiss and laughed, turning to stare at the other man. “Papers, huh?”

“You both want a keepsake of today, don’t you?”

Summer took the pen from the unsteady hand of the rodeo clown and bent over, signing where he pointed. She also printed her information where it asked. The guy was weird, had a thing about performing fake weddings when he needed extra cash, but it was all in good fun. She’d have to hide the mock marriage certificate somewhere when she got home but it would be a memento she’d keep until Ryder really proposed.

She signed both papers so they each got a copy.

River laughed. “Just buy her a damn ring already. You’re signing shit to hang on your bedroom wall, saying she’s yours. You know it’s all over, bro. Your little blonde has you by the balls.”

Ryder quickly filled out and signed both documents before shoving the pen at Bob. “Thanks.”

“Here.” Bob lifted one of the papers.

“Thank you,” Summer whispered, taking it.

“Shit!” someone shouted. “Navarro was thrown hard! He’s not moving!”

Fear jolted through everyone around Summer and all humor vanished in a heartbeat. Ryder released her hand to run toward where his older brother was competing.

Summer tried to keep up but her legs were a lot shorter and when she finally reached the arena, Ryder and River were already over the fence. Navarro lay on the ground face down, and two rodeo clowns were waving wildly at a bull attempting to go after the fallen rider.

Terror gripped Summer and she watched helplessly as Ryder and River

ran for their unconscious brother, grabbed his arms, and dragged him toward safety.

The bull dodged one of the clowns to charge at the three brothers. A scream lodged in Summer's throat as she realized the horror about to happen.

The enraged bull zeroed right in on the three Raine boys. There was no way Ryder or River were going to abandon their unconscious brother to save their own lives. She knew they loved Nav enough to die for him.

River saw the bull coming and shoved Navarro at Ryder. He threw up his arms and yelled, lunged to the side, and kept the bull's attention. It rushed at him, but he managed to avoid being hit.

Ryder dragged Navarro to the fence where three cowboys waited. They grabbed Nav's limp arms and lifted the big unconscious man out of danger. Ryder turned, watching as his twin dove behind the partition across the arena to get away from the still charging bull.

The incensed animal snorted, turned, and stomped the ground. A grimace flashed on Ryder's handsome face before he gripped the top railing, pushed up with his long legs, and vaulted out of danger.

Summer moved closer, watching as a medic shoved the cowboys out of the way to reach Navarro. He still wasn't moving as Ryder dropped to his knees next his older brother to grip his hand. Fear creased his features.

"He took a good knock to the head." The first medic made room when two more rushed forward carrying the gurney from the ambulance.

"Is he going to be okay?" Worry deepened Ryder's voice.

"Your brother is tough," the medic assured him grimly. "Do you want to ride to the hospital with him? We're taking him by ambulance."

River ran up. "You ride with Nav. I'll follow in our truck."

Ryder lifted his head to meet Summer's worried gaze. She blinked back

tears and nodded, staring intently into his gorgeous brown eyes. “Call me if the news is bad. I’ll come no matter how late it is. I’ll sneak out.”

“I will. If you don’t hear anything, he’s okay. I’ll see you tomorrow for our picnic.”

“It’s going to be all right,” she swore to him, hoping for the best. She knew Ryder loved Navarro as if he were their father instead of the drunken man they all faced at home. “He’s tough.”

She waited until the ambulance pulled away before walking across the fairgrounds. She and Ryder should be making love inside the back of the Raine horse trailer, but that wasn’t going to happen. She knew it was selfish, prayed Navarro would be all right, but it saddened her that their time had been interrupted. She got too few opportunities to be with the man she loved.

She hid the mock marriage certificate under the old pickup’s seat and drove the fifty-three miles home. Dread built as every one of them passed. Summer had no idea what her father would do if he ever discovered where she’d really been on her day off...and with whom she’d spent her time. She never wanted to find out, either.

She parked the old truck by the barn and bit her lip as she climbed out. Other cars sat by the front of the house, ones she recognized. A sick feeling pitted inside her stomach.

The Woods Church members had arrived for a visit.

She hated her father’s so-called friends. If her mother was still alive, she wouldn’t have allowed those men inside her house but unfortunately, she’d died when Summer was ten years old.

Summer tried to sneak into the back of the house, her plan to bypass the living room where they held their little meetings. She eased the mudroom door open, prepared to pass through the kitchen to softly tiptoe up the back

stairwell to the second floor, but her father and Marvin Woods stood waiting by the kitchen door when she entered the house.

She froze. Fear gripped her when she noticed their angry expressions as they glared at her.

“Hi, Daddy.”

“Where were you?” Morris Decon had been drinking, his face a blotchy red. Summer wanted to flee but didn’t dare. His problem with alcohol had gotten out of hand and she’d upgrade him from unreasonable to downright terrifying when he was in a bad mood.

“I told you, I was going to be with Shelly today.”

Marvin Woods, a big-boned blond with a tendency to burn instead of tan, shook his head. “I’m a minister, young woman. It’s a sin to lie in the face of God.”

Her mouth opened and closed. Summer knew what she wanted to say would get her in a world of trouble. Her father’s best friend was about as ungodly as they came. It was also completely crazy that his ego was so out of control.

“Who were you really with?” Morris Decon lunged forward and grabbed her arm in a painful hold and dragged her all the way into the kitchen. “Don’t lie and embarrass me in front of Minister Woods.”

“I told you, Dad. I was with Shelly. Call her and she’ll tell you.” Summer stared into her father’s bloodshot blue eyes without looking away. She’d grown used to lying to him. He’d left her with no choice since he’d hooked up with the Woods Church and forbidden her to talk to almost everyone in the small town of Hailey. Thankfully, her best friend was always willing to lie to help her see Ryder.

Summer’s father shoved her and stepped back. “You’re right, Marvin.

The devil has taken hold of her soul.”

“I’m sorry,” Marvin sighed. “Able,” he bellowed. “Come in here, son.”

Able Woods stomped into the kitchen with the finesse of a bull. It took everything for Summer to hold her ground. The so-called minister’s son gave her the creeps. He always leered at her in a way that left his lecherous thoughts an open book for anyone to read. He clearly wanted her, but she didn’t return his attraction.

“Yes, sir?” Then his gaze landed on Summer, and it was evident that he was furious. “She finally came home.”

“She did.” Marvin nodded. “She’s not confessing to her sin.”

Summer glanced at her father, watched him inch back from her farther until he bumped into the counter, leaning against it. Her gaze darted between Able and her father. *What’s going on?*

“You’ve been consorting with the devil,” Marvin suddenly bellowed.

His sudden outburst made Summer jump and her heart raced while she gaped at him. He moved forward to grab Summer by her throat. “You’re a *whore*.”

Shock would’ve held her still even if the beefy, sweaty hand around her neck hadn’t kept her immobile. Terror muted her.

“Your daddy isn’t going to lose you to evil. We’ve decided that Able here will marry you and teach you how to be a fine, upstanding woman.”

She struggled finally and kicked the man hard in the shin, stunning him enough for her to jerk out of his hold. She backed up but couldn’t get far in the confined kitchen space. She was trapped.

“I know where you were and who you were with,” her father yelled. “You were with those damn Raine boys. Do you think I’d allow you to be with one of those devils? I’ll kill every one of them before you do it again!”

Summer frantically shook her head again. “That’s not true.” Ryder would be in serious danger if she couldn’t convince her father. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“One of my followers visited the rodeo and saw you.” Marvin pointed at her. “You were talking to those spawn of the devil.”

What did they see? Oh, crap. Summer knew that nothing made her father crazier than anything to do with the Raine family. He despised them.

“I hope that bastard’s son dies!” Summer’s father spat, glaring at her. “I know the twins rushed to him when he was hurt—and you were with them!”

Summer swallowed hard, thinking fast. She hadn’t touched Ryder after Nav got hurt. He usually kissed her goodbye. “Shelly and I went to the rodeo and I ran into the Raines. I didn’t want to be rude. I just said hello. That’s when someone ran up to say their brother had been hurt. I just followed out of curiosity.”

Her father could move fast for a drunk, and the backhanded blow sent her reeling into the fridge. Pain exploded in the side of Summer’s face and spots danced in her line of vision as she stared at the floor, fighting to stay on her feet when her knees threatened to buckle.

“I ordered you to stay far from those heathens. You’re a disloyal little bitch! I’m your *father*. You’ll do what I say or else. Do you hear me? I brought you into this world and I can take you out!”

She flinched as her father yelled. It was a threat he’d given many times before.

“She’s sneaking around and was seen with those devils. We know where that leads,” Marvin stated. “It’s time to take control. We’ve put it off long enough.”

Those words terrified her even more. “I’m sorry I didn’t mention that we

were going to the rodeo, but I wasn't with the Raines." Summer stared at her father pleadingly, hoping he'd believe her.

Her father crowded her against the fridge. Rage showed in every line of his face. "Do you think those bastards are interested in you, little girl? Hell no! They're just trying to get to *me*. You're so fucking stupid." He backed away. "Wise up fast. Your looks are plain at best. Those evil spawn are sniffing after you thinking they can get their grubby hands on my money. You're dumb enough to fall for it, too...just like your mother did."

Her eyes widened as his words sank in.

Her father curled his upper lip. "That's right. Your mother was homely, desperate for attention, and you look just like her. I'd swear you weren't even mine if you didn't have my blue eyes and blond hair." He backed up and waved his arms. "I wanted all this—and got it thanks to a stupid woman." He pointed at Summer. "Those bastards aren't gonna use you to get a penny from me. You're going to marry Able."

"No," she whispered, her heart hurting after learning her father had only married her mom for money.

Her father lunged forward and his fist slammed into the fridge inches from Summer's face. Her heart pounded and she flinched. The sound alone made it clear he would have seriously hurt her if he'd made contact. But of course...he wouldn't get too rough. Not with witnesses around.

"Their daddy took the only damn woman I ever loved—and what did he do? Draken Raines got her pregnant over and over like some animal until she died! I'll do whatever it takes to prevent them from getting *you*, too." He looked her in the eye. "You'd be better off dead than become some loser's whore. Do you hear me?"

Now she was shaking from fear. Her father sounded unhinged enough to actually kill her. "Yes."

“I’m hand-picking your husband, and you *are* going to marry Able. He’ll keep those Raines away from you and keep you from making dumb mistakes. That’s final.”

Summer stared up at her father with dread. He was ordering her to marry someone she hated and feared. It didn’t come as a surprise that Able was his choice. Her father and his best friend had blatantly tried to shove them together for years.

“You marry Able or you’re disowned, do you understand? Do you think any man will ever want you if they don’t see dollar signs and my ranch as a good reason? You’re fucking *stupid*, Summer. How many damn times do I have to tell you before it sinks in? You’re just like your pathetic mother, so desperate to believe me every time I said I loved her.” He snorted. “I could barely tolerate Patty. Hell, you wouldn’t be here if that bitch hadn’t lied about staying on the pill. I never wanted fucking kids.”

The pain in Summer’s chest increased and tears blinded her.

“You’re gonna do as you’re told,” her father ordered. “Or else. Do you hear me?”

“I don’t want to marry Able. Please, Daddy—”

He slapped her again, that time on the side of the head. “You’ll do it!” her father bellowed. “I’m not letting you embarrass me by getting used by those goddamn Raines!”

She lifted her gaze, staring into his red face. He looked ready to kill her, and no one in the room would protect her. They’d probably help him dispose of her body.

She nodded, hugging herself. “Okay, Daddy.”

Mr. Grams stepped into the kitchen. The husky man frowned as he glanced between her father and Marvin. “Did I hear the name Raine?”

Marvin nodded grimly. “You did, Bill. Here’s yet another victim they’re trying to lure into temptation. We’re handling it.”

Mr. Grams curled his lip in a silent snarl to reveal his crooked teeth. “Everyone knows that entire family is vile. And some of them touched my damn daughter!” He shot a glare at Marvin. “It was those Raine twins no one can tell apart. I’d heard plenty of stories about them sharing women, then they did it to my Darcy. Those bastards turned my sweet little girl into a whore with a foul mouth.” He pointed at Summer. “They’ll ruin and corrupt you, too. They were fucking my daughter at the same time and made her lose all her morals. It’s what they’re known for.”

Shock hit Summer. What the hell was he talking about? It couldn’t be true.

“I never want to hear the Raine name again. Everyone has known about their deviant behavior for years, but nobody puts a stop to it. It’s criminal.” Mr. Grams lifted his fist, waving it.

“It is,” Morris ground out. Her father kept his glare on Summer. “Now they’re after *my* girl.”

“You better lock her up good.” Mr. Grams spun, stomping out of the kitchen.

Ryder and River were into threesomes?

No. I don’t believe it, Summer thought. Ryder isn’t like that. He would never ask me to sleep with his brother.

“See what kind of twisted trash they are?” Summer’s father glared at her. “Those Raine boys are pure evil. Bill’s daughter spread her legs for them and look where it got *her*. Tainted. No decent man will look twice at her now. She might as well start charging men to fuck her, now that she’s a Raine whore.”

“That can’t be true,” she protested.

“Bill caught them doing nasty things to his daughter in the damn barn with his own two eyes. He ran for his shotgun but they drove off before he could shoot ’em.” Marvin made a disgusted sound. “It was just last month.”

No, Summer thought, pain gripping her so hard she couldn’t breathe. Ryder wouldn’t cheat on her. It had to be another lie that the Woods Church had dreamed up with. They were always trying to ruin people’s reputations.

“Damn savages. This is why we need to follow the word of God and distance ourselves from every sinner.” Able shot a cold look at Summer. “I won’t let them near her. You can depend on me, sir. I’ll keep her in line.”

“Amen,” his father said.

Summer’s dad grabbed her arm. “The sooner you’re married, the better.”

Panic hit. “Please, Daddy. I—”

Her father shook her so hard her teeth painfully clacked together, and he shoved her against the fridge again. “You’ll do as you’re told!”

Summer saw murder in his eyes. She frantically nodded.

He released her. “You better.” Her father turned his head. “What do we need to do to make this happen, Marvin? A marriage license? A justice of the peace?”

“I’m an ordained minister. We can perform the ceremony now and get the paperwork done tomorrow to make it legal.” Marvin paused, drawing a deep breath. “Able will take Summer home with him tonight. He’s a strong enough man to bend her to his will. He’ll make sure she doesn’t embarrass you again, Morris.”

Her father pushed Summer toward the back stairwell. “Go put on a dress. Something nice to show Able how grateful you are that he’s willing to marry you.”

“Yes, Daddy.” Summer’s voice broke.

Her father shoved her again, harder. “You’ve got twenty minutes to be ready.”

Summer fled, running up the back stairs, tears streaming down her cheeks. She made it to her room fighting pure panic.

She wasn’t going to be pushed into a marriage with Able Woods! She bet his version of keeping a woman “in line” involved regular beatings. He was a bully and rattlesnake-mean.

She quickly locked her bedroom door. Then she hurried around the room, shoving clothes into a backpack. She tossed her mother’s jewelry from her vanity into her purse before entering her bathroom.

Summer pulled down the shower curtain rod, twisting off the endcap. A quick tug had her pulling out the plastic bag hidden inside, filled with tightly rolled bills. She’d saved every penny her relatives had sent her for gifts over the years, along with a portion of the insultingly low wages she got paid to work on the ranch. Sadly, it only amounted to just over two thousand dollars combined, but it was better than nothing.

She put the rod back and shoved the money into her purse.

Since her mother’s death, every year had grown worse as her father’s drinking increased. Summer had started stashing money away to escape. His closeness to the Woods Church members had only encouraged her to flee Hailey. She’d been set to leave after her eighteenth birthday...then she’d fallen in love with Ryder, and stayed.

But today changed everything. *I can’t stay here anymore.*

Summer put the backpack strap over her arm, along with her purse, and secured them as best as she could to keep them from falling. There was only one way out. It wouldn’t be going down either of the two staircases inside the

house. Her father and his terrible friends would probably be waiting for her at both.

Summer quietly opened the window and turned once more to stare around her bedroom, knowing she'd never see it again. Her father wasn't the type to forgive. He'd disown her. At one time, that idea had terrified her—but not anymore. There were far worse things than being broke and without family.

She ducked her head under the windowsill and inched out onto the roof. No one rushed out of the house as she climbed down the tree that grew close to her window.

Summer ran toward the old truck as if the hounds of hell were on her heels as soon as her feet touched the ground. The ranch vehicle remained parked where she'd left it, the keys still in the ignition. She'd have to ditch it soon, guessing her father wouldn't hesitate to report it stolen.

Summer twisted the key to start the truck, knowing she'd go to Ryder. She'd call the sheriff from his house. A restraining order might scare her father into leaving her alone. She refused to believe their bullshit stories about the man she loved. Her father and everyone involved with that church were liars and haters.

A quick peek at her rearview mirror showed a few men rushing out of the house. One of them was her father. They must have heard the truck start. Summer punched the gas, speeding away.

Her mood lightened as she drove to the Raine Ranch. *It'll be okay. The sheriff and his deputies will keep Dad from doing anything and I'll be safe with Ryder.* They'd talked about living together in the future. It would just happen earlier than they'd planned.

Summer figured they could even spend her meager cash on making their secret cabin getaway more livable, so they could move in. There was no

kitchen or bathroom, but those could be added on. They'd work it out somehow. Being together was all that mattered. She had faith Ryder would welcome her.

She parked in the yard and studied the Raine house warily as she approached the front porch. It was the first time she'd been this close. Ryder wanted to spare her from being exposed to his alcoholic father. The truck Ryder and River shared was nowhere in sight.

Mr. Raine reeked of booze when he opened the front door, instantly reminding Summer of her own dad.

He squinted at her with a frown. "Which one of my sons are you looking for?"

Summer swallowed, intimidated by the man. He had a mean look about him—something she was familiar with. "Ryder. I know he's not here but could I wait for him to get home? Have they called yet?" She hoped Navarro was okay.

"Why would they do that? Come on in."

Mr. Raine didn't even seem to know that his son had been hurt. Her mouth opened to explain, but she closed it. Ryder and River probably didn't want to worry him until they spoke to the doctors. Summer wasn't about to tell the drunk that Nav had taken a bad spill off a bull.

He closed the door after her and waved for her to take a seat in the living room.

The house was clean but she knew it was because they had a housekeeper who lived there. Ryder always raved about Adam and Trip's mom, the woman who'd taken all the boys under her wing. He'd also shared how worried they were, because Mary had been battling cancer for the past few years. Sometimes she needed to travel to a larger city for weeks at a time

for testing and treatments.

Summer glanced around, hoping to see Mary, but they seemed alone as the elder Raine slumped into a nearby chair. Bleary dark brown eyes regarded her. Ryder might look similar to him one day, but she hoped not. Harsh wrinkles had given his father a permanent grimace.

“Did you meet the twins at the bar where they work?”

Confusion struck. *What bar?* Ryder and River both worked on their ranch, and sometimes they earned extra money putting in hours at the feed store. She licked her lips to tell the man he must be confused, but he spoke again before she could.

“You look familiar.” His gaze wandered over her. “Are you one of those women who pay to fuck ’em?” He reached to the side table to grab the bottle sitting there, taking a big swig of booze.

Shock slammed into Summer’s brain, freezing it.

He leered at her as he took another deep drink, before placing the bottle back on the table. “Why do you girls pay my boys to fuck you, anyway? It ain’t natural. You’re a decent-looking woman. You could get men to rub all over you for free.” He grinned, then patted his lap, close to his groin. “They take after me in every way. Of course, it don’t take two of *me* to get the job done. Maybe it’s the fantasy of having two men screwing you at once, huh? They tell me women really get off on them dancing.”

Summer couldn’t even talk, too confused to form words.

“I found out about it when some slut’s husband came here, screaming and yelling about the twins screwing his wife.” He locked his gaze on her breasts. “We used to have to practically beg women to fuck us in *my* day. I guess I should’ve had one of my friends offer to fuck them at the same time, then I would’ve gotten more pussy.”

Summer shot to her feet, her foot bumping the coffee table as she inched to put more space between them. Mr. Raines was drunk and didn't know what he was talking about. He was wrong. Ryder didn't work in a bar, and he wouldn't sleep around with other women. She told him as much.

The elder Raine laughed. "You think so? Go ask around about the twins. Both those idiots quit the college classes Nav paid for to swing their dicks around in a bar." He gave her the name of the place. "Hell, I caught 'em screwing some blonde upstairs just the other day. They'd snuck her in thinking nobody would notice but the bitch was a screamer. Woke the whole damn house." He squinted at her. "Was that you?"

"No! That's not true." Summer shook her head. The twins *had* taken some college courses, but Ryder told her they'd both quit because Navarro was struggling to help their oldest brother pay for law school. The brothers decided to make Drake's career the priority. They wanted him to succeed. They all pitched in to make that possible.

"Oh, it's true. They get tons of pussy by shaking their dicks at that bar." He snorted. "I raised *strippers*. It's embarrassing."

"You're lying! Why are you saying these things?"

He laughed again. "Go upstairs and take a look-see yourself. I went digging in their rooms looking for cash and found some pictures and their stripping duds in a beat-up box in River's closet." He gave directions to a bedroom upstairs. "The twins are freaks, little girl. I'm more of a man than both of 'em put together."

Summer turned and spotted the stairs. Her legs felt numb as she approached them. She ignored Ryder's father as he kept rambling on, and his voice faded as she made her way upstairs. The directions were easy to follow and she entered the bedroom. River had painted his walls black, and a massive four-poster bed took up a lot of the floorspace.

Her gaze turned to the closet, and she'd opened one of the doors before she made an actual decision to do so. She crouched, saw a bunch of shoes and boots...and in the far back there was a beat-up box.

For long seconds, she hesitated. Then Summer crawled in under the hanging clothes and pulled out the box, opening the lid.

There were dozens of loose photos stacked on top. It looked as if they'd been taken in front of a wooden stage. Ryder and River were grinning, pictured with different women—sometimes groups of them—in very intimate poses. But it was really the twins' clothing that had tears leaking down Summer's cheeks.

Both wore skimpy costume cowboy chaps that revealed a lot of skin, bright blue underwear that barely covered their penises and exposed their bare butts. The word "Stud" had been stamped in white on both legs of the black leather-like material of the chaps.

"Oh God." Summer didn't bother to look at what else was inside the box. The pictures were proof enough.

Bile rose and she wanted to puke.

Ryder had been lying to her about *everything*. Probably cheating on her as well. And she'd never suspected.

Well...her father always accused her of being stupid. *He's right. I'm an idiot.*

Summer rushed from the bedroom so fast that she bumped into the wall. The stairs were a blur as her tears fell. She halted in the living room. Loud snores came from the elder Raine. He'd passed out in his chair. The bottle he'd been drinking from was shoved between his thighs with one hand curled around it protectively.

Summer fled, needing to get out of there before Ryder came home. She

couldn't face him. He'd made a total fool out of her.

Sobs racked her body as she jumped inside the truck and turned the key. She threw it in reverse when the engine roared to life and gunned it. The tires squealed in protest when she hit the brakes, twisted the wheel hard, and took off.

She refused to go back to her father's ranch to be forced to marry Able. And the man she loved had completely shattered her heart. Nothing they'd had was real.

She wiped at the tears that streamed down her face. It was time to leave Hailey.

And I'm never coming back.

Chapter One

The present—eleven years later

Summer studied the attorney sitting across from her, behind his desk. He was a stranger, in his mid-thirties, and appeared nice enough. She knew better. “Now that you know who I am, can I have my driver’s license back?”

Johnathon Barnes slid it to her across the desk. “I just needed verification of your identity. Thank you for coming.”

She wanted to snort. “As if you left me a choice. You threatened to call the police to report me missing. You also implied my friend Lorna would be dragged into this. That’s basically blackmail. It was either come here, or allow my friend to be interrogated about my whereabouts.”

“I disagree. It *was* possible that something had happened to you, because I could tell that Miss Long was lying about not knowing where you were. For all I knew, she could have hurt you. Your father died, and you weren’t responding when I left messages and mailed notices. That alarmed me, since it’s not normal behavior.”

Summer refrained from rolling her eyes. The attorney had used intimidation tactics. She’d only driven to Texas to break into the ranch house and take some of her mother’s belongings before they were all thrown in the trash. A stop at the attorney’s office had given her a reason to be in town if she was spotted by anyone from her past.

She leaned back in the chair. “You and I both know you made that threat to force me into this face-to-face meeting. What happened to Hershel Gregor?”

“I was asked by my law firm to take his place. He needed to retire after being diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. I spend two days a week in Hailey and the

rest of my time in Dallas.”

She nodded. Mr. Gregor been a sour, quiet man who’d ignored her every time he’d visited the ranch to hold meeting with Morris. But she was still sorry about his diagnosis. “May I ask you something, Mr. Barnes?”

“Please, call me John.”

“Okay, John. I haven’t talked to…” Summer paused, unwilling to call him “Father”. “...Morris in almost a decade. I’m stunned he left anything for me in his will, unless it’s something unpleasant. Why do this for him? He’s dead. It’s not like he’d be able to fire you now.”

“I don’t understand.”

Summer saw genuine confusion on his face. “Is it a letter telling me to fuck off? Or calling me every name in the book? A box of fresh cow shit? I know it *has* to be something along those lines.”

His expression transformed into shock. “Cow shit?”

“There’s plenty of it at the ranch.”

John shook his head. “All the livestock was sold eight years ago. According to the file notes, your father no longer wanted to care for them. His health had declined.”

She imagined all that heavy drinking had finally caught up with Morris. “Fine. No cow shit. Just tell me what you were ordered to say or hand over whatever he left me. Then I can get the hell out of Hailey as fast as possible. Daylight is wasting, and I want to leave already.”

“But what about your ranch? We should discuss what you’d like to do with it, now that Morris isn’t managing the property anymore. Do you have someone in mind to take that position?”

Summer must have heard the attorney wrong. “My what?”

“Your ranch.”

She gaped at him, replaying his words. “You’re saying Morris left me the ranch?” It was too crazy and unreal to be true. “You *must* be mistaken.”

He shook his head. “The ranch belonged to your mother, and she left it to you in *her* will. You weren’t aware of this?”

Summer had never been one to faint, but she knew as she sucked in air that she was close to doing just that. Tiny spots danced before her eyes as she felt light-headed. She stared open-mouthed at the attorney and had to blink repeatedly to clear her vision. For good measure, she pinched the inside of her arm.

“Ouch!”

John stared at the red mark, jerking his gaze to her face as his mouth dropped open. “Are you all right?”

She rubbed the tender skin where it still hurt. “I’m peachy keen. You just turned my world upside down, is all. You’re saying that the ranch is mine? It’s *always* been mine?”

He frowned at her. “Are you taking medication?”

“I’m not nuts *or* on meds. I’m just floored. How could this happen? Notice me having to pick my jaw up off the ground?” Summer didn’t bother trying to hide her angry reaction as the shock wore off. “Seriously! I had *no* idea.”

“Um.” The attorney paled. “Hershel Gregor should have explained all of this to you immediately after your mother died. He claimed that he did. It’s in the file notes.”

“He lied. My mother passed right after I turned ten.” Summer shook her head. “Mr. Gregor *never* talked to me. But he and my father were good friends.”

John cleared his throat, shifting uncomfortably behind his desk. “Well,

the ranch belonged to your mother's father. Patrick Horner made some excellent investments and he owned several businesses until he sold them before moving to Hailey. I understand that he wanted to run a hobby ranch? That's when he moved here with his daughter."

"My grandmother died in a hotel fire while visiting family," Summer filled in, familiar with the history. "Grandpa Pat wanted to devote his time to raising my mom away from the city. She was only eight when they moved to Hailey."

John nodded. "As I understand it, your grandfather didn't like your father much...so, um...he made your father sign certain documents before the marriage, to protect the assets your mother would inherit one day. Patricia was Patrick's sole beneficiary. Control of the money and the property converted into a trust for *you* upon her death."

Summer had to close her mouth after it dropped open again. "What does that mean? What kind of trust?"

"To put it simply, your mother had our law firm safeguard your inheritance." He paused. "We make certain that the taxes, insurance, upkeep, maintenance, and utilities are paid for at the ranch out of allotted funds. Your father received a stipend to oversee the ranch for you."

Summer just stared at him, her mind trying and failing to make sense of everything he was telling her. She was too stunned.

"The monthly allowance you've declined since turning eighteen has accumulated into a hefty sum. You really should start drawing from that soon. I admire your determination to support yourself, but Patricia Decon wanted you cared for."

"What allowance?"

The attorney gaped at her for long seconds, paled yet again, then softly

cursed. “Um, Hershel left notes in the file that said you...” He sealed his lips, swallowed, and cleared his throat. “You were supposed to begin receiving money every month from the trust, after you turned eighteen. It states in the file that you refused the funds.”

She stood up quickly but had to sit back down when the room spun a little. “What a dirty bastard!”

“Who? *Me*? I hope I haven’t offended you, Miss Decon.”

“No. I’m talking about Morris—and hell, even his *pal* Hershel. I always thought it was *his* money, *his* ranch, and all this time I’ve struggled when I didn’t have to. I haven’t seen a dime! That bastard didn’t want me to know about my own money!” She shook her head. “I’m shocked that Hershel and Morris didn’t go so far as to forge my signature and lie to say I was giving the ranch and all my money to *them*.”

“The trust wouldn’t have allowed for that to happen. Your mother set it up to allow for the dispersal of limited funds, for only the items she deemed essential. You don’t have the option to end the trust or sell the ranch until your thirtieth birthday.”

“She did it to protect me,” she whispered, thinking aloud. “I have to guess my mom realized that Morris would have stolen everything if he was able to.”

Summer sat there as her heart pounded painfully in her chest and she tried to let the lawyer’s revelations sink in. But she was in denial. Surely someone would have said *something* if the money belonged to her...right?

No. No one would’ve known. Her father would never have admitted that his wife had left everything to their only child instead of him. He’d been a controlling bastard, always threatening to cut her off to keep her in line, all the while hiding the truth. He’d done a bang-up job too. She’d never once suspected.

Summer was beyond dumbfounded.

The attorney found something he was looking for in a file folder on his desk, lifting out a single piece of paper. “To be perfectly clear, you *didn’t* refuse your allowance when you turned eighteen?”

She didn’t even bother to glance at it. “No. What part of Mr. Gregor never said a word to me did you miss? I never signed anything. No one *told* me anything. As far as I knew, everything belonged to Morris.”

“I feel sick that this happened, Ms. Decon. I’m so sorry.”

Summer studied the attorney. Sweat had broken out on his upper lip and forehead. It wasn’t his fault. “What’s done is done. See now why I left this town and stayed away? Morris and his friends were great at screwing people over. Welcome to the club, Mr. Barnes.”

“I can suggest that we file criminal charges against Hershel. His children put him in a care facility. Your father, of course, is already gone.”

“I’m not going after some old man in a nursing home.” Summer’s mind was working again. A chill ran down her spine as she asked the next question. “What would have happened to the trust if I’d died? Would Morris have inherited what my mother left me?”

The attorney shook his head. “No. In the event of your death, the ranch would have been immediately sold and all funds would have been disbursed to various charities your grandfather and mother had chosen.”

Summer felt sick knowing that was probably the only reason Morris had never had her killed...or done it himself. He would have lost everything.

John swallowed hard. “We’ll fix all this and get you access to your money. I swear. Let’s start right now. There are a few matters we need to clear up. I hired a private investigator to find you after your father died. It wasn’t easy.” He looked up at her, meeting her gaze. “You move around a

lot.”

She nodded. “I didn’t want to be found.”

“I’d heard some town gossip that there was tension between you and your father. He always denied that, saying you were fine, just enjoying spending time with various friends. His reason for you not responding when I requested he ask you to call me regarding the trust were…” He grimaced. “Well, I’m *now* guessing they were lies. He wasn’t giving you my messages, was he?”

“No. We weren’t in contact at all. I was hiding from him.” Summer hesitated. “He’d hired a couple private detectives to find me over the years, and it always turned ugly.” She inwardly winced. Morris had actually sent men to terrorize her. She’d had to move countless times to remain hidden, working crappy jobs that paid cash to remain off the grid. “He wasn’t a nice man.”

“May I ask why he was looking for you if you two weren’t speaking?”

“He was an asshole, Mr. Barnes. He was basically pissed that I wasn’t under his control after I left town. He probably wanted me to come back just so he had someone to make miserable again.”

“I’m sorry. I had no idea your relationship was so strained.” He paused. “Just so all the paperwork is completed, could you answer a few questions for me?”

“Sure.” Summer leaned back in the chair again, forcing her body to relax, still reeling from finding out she wasn’t flat broke anymore. The ranch belonged to her. She might have fled Morris, but he’d still been screwing her over for a decade by denying her money left for her by her mother.

“Do you still have a valid Texas driver’s license? I couldn’t find one.”

“No. I’ve been living in Nevada for the past few years. I just have the

one from there that I showed you.”

He nodded. “I can work with that.”

“Okay.”

“What is your current address? Lorna Long swore you no longer lived there, despite that being the address on your driver’s license.”

“I did that on purpose, and I’m sorry but I’m not telling you where I live. That woman you harassed is a good friend of mine. I see Lorna every week. If you need to mail anything to me, I’ll get it from her.”

“I’m going to need your cell number.”

Summer sighed, resigned. “All right, but you’re not allowed to share it. Are we clear?”

“My firm will have access to that information once I update your file.”

“Fine, but only them.”

“Understood. I need your banking information to give you access to funds.”

“I don’t have a bank account.”

The attorney glanced at her.

“I pay cash for everything.”

“You need to open an account to gain access to your money. I could go with you to the bank.”

She numbly nodded, figuring they’d deal with that later. “Is that it?”

“No.” He shuffled through some papers before selecting one. “Where was your divorce finalized? My PI couldn’t find that information. He checked Texas, Oregon, California, and Nevada. Those were all the states the PI tracked you to.”

She blinked, confused. “Excuse me?”

“Where did you file, and do you happen to have a copy you could give me of your divorce decree? The firm wasn’t notified of your marriage until the PI uncovered it while searching for you.”

“I’m not married. I came close once but no dice.”

John frowned deeply and withdrew some papers. “You *were* married. My PI assumed you were divorced, because he found you living under your maiden name and you’re obviously no longer with your ex-husband.”

“No. Trust me, I’d remember something like that.”

Now the attorney’s frown deepened into profound groves. “I don’t understand. A certificate of marriage was filed. Are you claiming you were never married?”

“That’s what I said. You must have found one for another Summer Decon. I’ve never been married.” A horrible suspicion arose. “If Morris and that damn Marvin Woods claimed that I married Able, I want to press charges. I never married that asshole.”

“Able Woods? No. That’s not the name on the marriage certificate.”

She relaxed.

“You’re saying you *never* married Ryder Raine?”

The ability to breathe left Summer for long seconds while she gawked at the lawyer across his desk. She managed to shake her head.

He scowled. “I don’t understand. Your marriage was filed with the neighboring county’s clerk’s office. The minister was legally licensed to perform marriages in the state of Texas. I haven’t contacted your ex-husband, of course, because you hadn’t given our firm permission to disclose any information to him, and the PI was certain you weren’t together any longer.”

“I think I’m going to faint,” Summer whispered. “Let me see that.” She held out her hand, hoping he didn’t notice how much it trembled.

John passed her a marriage certificate—an exact copy of the one stored away inside her apartment. She gasped.

“This is fake.” She looked up at the attorney. “A rodeo clown married us. He wasn’t a real minister.”

“According to the state of Texas, he certainly was. This document was filed and it’s legal. Are you saying you never obtained a divorce?”

“It was a fake ceremony!” Summer repeated. “Bob always performed mock marriages at the rodeo.”

“Ms. Decon...it’s legal.”

She gaped at him. “Don’t you need to get a marriage license first? We didn’t do that! It was just drunk Bob, the rodeo clown. He kept blank certificates in his trailer for people to fill out and sign after we said a few vows and that was it. It wasn’t real!”

The lawyer cursed softly, taking the copy of the marriage certificate from her numb fingers. “Well, now I understand the reason your ex-husband didn’t attempt to claim anything from the trust. Clearly, neither of you knew about the legal marriage. I’ll take care of this. I’ll begin the paperwork so you can immediately file for a divorce.”

“Divorce? *I’m not married!*” she sputtered.

John stared at her as if she were a child having trouble understanding. “It’s a legally binding document that was filed in a legitimate courthouse. According to the date, you were eighteen. You’re still legally married if you never obtained a divorce. Was the marriage in any way consummated? If not, I can go before a judge to ask for an annulment. That would protect your assets.”

Summer took a few deep breaths before she spoke, trying to calm down. “You’re telling me I’m actually *married* to Ryder? Legally?”

“Yes, but I’ll take care of this for you. I can get an appointment with a judge and I’ll have the court clerk fill out forms to have Mr. Raine served.”

Summer lurched to her feet quickly, her heart pounding, and she had to grip the desk to remain upright. “Don’t!”

The attorney frowned. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t file a thing. I’m legally married to Ryder? You’re positive?”

“Yes.”

“Son of a bitch,” she gasped. “I need to go. Leave it be. I can’t deal with this right now on top of everything else.”

Summer stumbled toward the door, reeling from the shock.

She was legally married to Ryder Raine.

It was a nightmare. Worse, actually, because she wouldn’t be waking up in a cold sweat, only to realize it was only a dream.

“But—”

“Don’t you dare contact Ryder for *anything*,” she ordered, pushed outside and inhaled fresh air. Summer closed her eyes as the pain of the past hit full force.

The office door opened behind her and keys jingled. “These are yours,” John informed her gently. “This ring holds keys to your ranch house, all the outbuildings, and the new truck your father drove. The vehicle is registered as ranch property, since the trust paid for it.” He paused. “Ms. Decon, I can see that you’re shocked, but please call me soon so we can finish all the paperwork that has to be filed. You need to open a bank account to gain access to your money. We also—”

Summer snatched the heavy key ring from him. “I’ll call you tomorrow. Please, just go away. I need time to think. I’m about this close to falling apart.” She put half an inch of space between her index finger and thumb. “I

promise, tomorrow I'll do whatever you wish but right now, please back off. I'm trying really hard to not puke my guts up. Your shoes look expensive and so does your suit." She glanced around, feeling panicked. "How in the hell did this happen? First the ranch. All the lies Morris told. Bob was an alcoholic rodeo clown, for God's sake! How in the hell did we end up married for real? Oh my God. I really am going to be sick!"

"I'm so very sorry. I can make a few discreet inquiries. You just lost your father and have learned a lot of shocking information in a short time. Please call me whenever you're ready." He gently touched her elbow, backed away, closed the door, and left her alone.

Shock didn't come close to the emotions assaulting her as reality set in.

Summer was somehow legally married to Ryder Raine. The ranch belonged to her and had since her mother's death. Tears filled her eyes and spilled down her cheeks as the Texas summer heat blasted her.

It had been difficult starting her life over with little money and no support, but she'd done it. And she'd never contacted Ryder after fleeing that day. He'd lied to her, broken her heart, and hadn't been the man she'd thought he was. The fact that he'd almost certainly cheated on her to boot was the last straw.

She forced her legs to move toward her SUV and slid into the driver's seat. The ranch belonged to her, she had a husband, and she wasn't flat broke. Her world had turned upside down less than half an hour after returning to Hailey. That was an omen if she ever heard of one. Breaking her promise of never returning had been a huge mistake.

"Son of a bitch," she whispered as Ryder's image surfaced in her mind. She'd always regretted not telling him what a bastard he was for lying to her—and now she'd have to get an annulment from a marriage that should never have been filed. How had that even happened? Who filed the paperwork?

Bob?

Summer hoped it would be an easy fix. They'd never had sex after saying their vows, so John was right. And annulment was best.

She tipped her head up, staring into the clear sunny sky. "What did I ever do to deserve this?"

Faded memories of the drunk rodeo clown surfaced. Bob had always been full of wild stories of his life before the rodeo. Yes, he'd claimed to be a real minister once upon a time...but he'd also sworn he'd been an astronaut who'd walked on the moon.

No one had ever taken Bob seriously. How had their fake marriage been legally filed? It was beyond shocking. It was a mistake. It had to be.

She'd deal with it later, eventually get to the bottom of it...but she'd had enough for one day.

The urge to visit the ranch surfaced. She wanted to see her childhood home. The house she'd been raised in suddenly seemed like the place she really needed to be. It would hopefully help her find some peace.

Chapter Two

Summer shoved the key into the ignition and the engine of her SUV sputtered to life. She winced, praying her old Ford wouldn't break down. The rough idle shook the vehicle a little but it smoothed out. She smiled, reached out to pat the dashboard, and glanced at the street to check for traffic before pulling away from the curb.

Someone caught her attention across the street, and she stared at the heavysset blond man who stepped out of the feed store. He looked familiar...

Recognition hit. Fear sliced through Summer as Able Woods stared back.

He left the curb, heading her way.

"Oh shit," she hissed. "Can my day get any worse?" She checked traffic again and pulled away. The last thing she needed on top of everything else was to deal with him or his father.

"Summer!" His voice boomed even through the glass of her closed window.

She forced her foot to stay light on the gas and coast down the street slowly to avoid hitting any of the town's residents that might step into the two-lane road. Her gaze flickered to the rearview mirror in time to see Able standing in the road, staring after her.

Summer smirked, glad to avoid that shit show of a confrontation. And it would have been. Someone like Able wouldn't have it any other way. He'd always been a dick. Her escaping their forced marriage would be something he'd hold a grudge over.

She punched the gas once she'd passed the main part of town. Summer had an idea why Able would want to speak to her, but she wasn't the one he

and his daddy should be pissed at. The Woods family probably assumed they'd inherit the ranch. Frankly, that's what *she'd* thought would happen too, since her dad had sworn he'd disown her. But Morris had deceived them all with his lies and schemes.

No. She had no time for Able. She'd dealt with enough of the brutes her father had sent after her, other members of his so-called church, to last her a lifetime.

She'd go to the ranch, grab some of her mother's belongings, and keep right on driving. John Barnes could come to Nevada to handle any legal stuff, or take care of everything via emails and video chats.

It still blew her mind that she owned the ranch. Summer regretted not asking the attorney how much money she would gain access to after opening an account. He'd also mentioned something about the trust ending when she turned thirty. That birthday was less than a year away. She would sell the ranch as soon as possible after her thirtieth, cutting her last tie to Hailey, and avoid ever seeing anyone from her past again.

Her mind drifted as she drove toward her childhood home, thinking about what she would do first when she gained access to her trust. Maybe put a down payment on a small house. Apartment living sucked. Especially the one she currently lived in. It was a dive, but at least it was cheap.

A horn blasted her out of her musings and Summer glanced in the rearview mirror, alarmed to see a big red truck coming at her fast.

She edged to the side of the two lane road to give the other driver plenty of room to pass. She'd forgotten how fast some people drove out in the country. The jerk must be doing eighty.

He didn't blow past her though, instead slamming on his brakes after almost plowing into the rear of her SUV. She startled hard.

“Asshole!” She shot a glare at the driver in the mirror.

Fear hit and turned into downright terror when she identified that face. Able was behind the wheel of that truck.

She slowed, preparing to turn back around to return to town. She’d march into the sheriff’s office if need be. Able wasn’t going to get her alone. She wasn’t that stupid.

Able rammed the back of her SUV when she came to a stop, throwing her forward hard.

She gasped. Stunned, she straightened, watching him back up. He turned the wheel of his truck, blocking off both lanes, as if guessing she’d come to a stop to make a U-turn on the narrow two-lane highway.

Summer reached over to the passenger seat to call for help—but her hand stilled before she even opened her purse. She’d forgotten to pack her cell phone charger, and she only now recalled the battery had died on the long trip to Texas. She hadn’t had enough spare money to replace the charger, figuring she’d survive without a phone for the few days it took her to reach her childhood home and steal some of her mother’s belongings before driving back to Nevada.

Her gaze went to her side mirror as she watched Able get out of the driver’s door, rounding his truck in the narrow strip of grass between the front and the fencing that kept someone’s cows on their property.

The handgun he gripped in his fist had panic shooting through her. *Jesus! Is he going to shoot me? Force me to go with him to talk to his father?*

“You crazy bastard!” she hissed—and punched the gas.

A second later, she screamed when Able fired the gun. None of her windows blew out. She looked in her mirror and saw him running back toward his truck. It was clear that he planned to come after her again. She

floored the gas harder, gripping the wheel with both hands. Returning to town wasn't an option. He wasn't about to let her turn around.

"Think!" Summer tried desperately to keep her panic at bay. There was a side road that would lead her toward the town of Bait in her current direction. It was tiny, more like a village, but they'd have phones and people. It was a good twenty some miles away for that turnoff, though. Nothing else sat out here except farms and ranches. And not many of those, either.

Terror coursed through her as she glanced in her mirrors. The truck was behind her, the grill becoming larger as Able kept advancing. He got right up on her bumper.

She expected the impact, but it was more violent than she'd anticipated when he rammed her a second time.

The hit shoved her SUV into the oncoming lane and left her praying that no one would come along to slam into her. Able's truck accelerated and moved up on her right side, coming fast. It was a much newer model than what she drove.

Summer clenched her teeth and twisted the wheel hard, moaning as her smaller vehicle slammed into the side of his truck. *Two can play this game.* She needed to take this bastard out if she didn't want him getting his hands on her.

Satisfaction was instant but short-lived as his truck was thrown out of the lane and into the grassy area beside the road. She cringed when he slammed against the fence protecting the neighboring field. It slowed Able down but he managed to make it back onto the road, now a bit behind her.

She stomped hard on the gas again and floored it. Able's newer truck easily caught up to her old SUV. Another impact with the back of her vehicle caused her to scream less than a minute later. She nearly lost control when the ass end went into a skid but she managed to steer out of it. Able wasn't

messing around, hell-bent on making her wreck.

Summer glanced down at the speedometer, only to see they'd hit speeds over ninety miles an hour. Fear gripped her harder. She'd be killed for sure if he made her crash in the hilly area they were approaching. There were large, unforgiving boulders she could slam into, strewn all over those pastures. She wondered if she should just stop to confront him...when she remembered he had a gun.

She didn't.

Able's truck rammed her again. She screamed from pain that time as the force shoved her forward, her stomach slamming into the wheel and her ass leaving the seat. She'd forgotten in her haste to escape the jerk to put on her seat belt.

The road began to incline on a hill, and she finally had hope when she noticed his truck slowed, struggling to keep up with her smaller SUV.

The Barker family ranch was a few miles ahead. She remembered them as a large, friendly family—who kept guns inside their trucks. Surely they'd help her if she could only make it to their place. It was clear Able wasn't going to let her make it to Bait.

Her SUV went airborne at the top of the hill, and Summer screamed again at the feeling of nothing under her tires until the brutal slam of the vehicle hitting pavement cut off the sound and she landed violently.

She reached for her belt while she could, fought to get it around her waist, and heard it click when it locked into place. Her gaze darted to the road behind her just in time to see Able's truck fly up and slam hard into the road just as she had moments before.

The asshole almost lost control and swerved toward one of the fences that lined the two-lane road, but he managed to straighten out before

crashing.

Clearly, Able had grown up to be even crazier than his fanatical father.

Summer had to slow down as a curve came, terrified she'd roll her heavy vehicle. Able didn't seem to care about that as he screeched around the bend and closed the distance. Hot tears threatened to blind her but Summer fought them back, promising herself a good cry later. Right now, she was focused on survival.

Able caught up to her about a mile later, after they passed the curving hills and entered a straight stretch of road. Summer looked over as he used the oncoming lane to catch up to her. She knew he'd cut her off if she let him get in front of her SUV.

She tensed and jerked the wheel in his direction. The vehicles collided hard, her driver's door smashed against his passenger side. The sound was ear-splitting as they seemed to lock together, and she could feel a heavy drag on the steering wheel.

They tore apart with a loud scrape of metal in time to make the next curve but slammed back together when he rammed her on the next straightaway. She dragged her gaze away from his truck...

And saw three cars parked across the road ahead.

Two of them had their front tires on the grass, parked nearly bumper to bumper to not only block both lanes, but the narrow areas between pavement and fences. The third sat right in the middle of the road behind them, blocking the little remaining space between their bumpers.

She hit the brakes hard and knew if it wasn't for the seat belt, she would have slammed into the steering wheel as she came to a screeching halt.

The red truck flew by and the smell of burning rubber became strong inside the cab of her SUV.

Able slammed on his brakes seconds later. He stopped about fifty feet down the pavement, barely missing the other cars blocking the road and the ass end of his truck fished around until he blocked both lanes, along with the cars. Black tire marks scarred the pavement. He revved his engine loudly and sat there as Summer's heart pounded and she took several deep breaths.

She quickly glanced in her rearview mirror, planned to reverse and back up, but spotted two more trucks coming down the road, side by side, taking up both lanes.

They were blocking her in.

A guy stood in the back of one of the trucks, holding onto a roll bar, and she could clearly see his shoulder holster. She knew they had to be part of Marvin and Able Woods' church members. She had no doubt Able had called his dad the second he saw her, and now the bastards had herded her into a trap.

They were going to kill her as payback to her asshole father. She knew it. Everyone associated with the Woods and their church were all crazy. She'd realized that even as a teenager.

The only protection she had was her SUV, but it wouldn't stop them from getting to her. They'd just break a window and yank her out.

"No."

Summer turned her head and glanced at the chain-link fences running along both sides of the road, further blocking her in. If she remembered right, she should be next to the Johnson place. She could cut across their land to reach their house. They'd have a phone.

Tires locked up behind her, and she twisted in her seat to stare out her back window at a blue truck that skidded sideways across the road about a dozen yards behind her. The passenger door opened and another nightmare

from her past stepped out wearing black jeans, a matching shirt, and a Stetson.

Marvin Woods hadn't changed much over the years, except his gut that always hung over his belt had grown slightly larger.

He put his hands on his hips. "Stop running, Summer," he yelled. "We just want to talk to you. It's about your daddy's ranch and who it *really* belongs to."

She just bet he wanted to have a chat about the ranch. The Woods had drooled over Morris's money and land ever since she'd known them.

Given her meeting with the lawyer, the reason behind the attempted forced marriage to Able suddenly became crystal clear. Morris had probably feared she'd marry someone he couldn't control—especially after learning she'd been seen with the Raine boys. The Woods must have seemed like the perfect solution. Both father and son were major ass-kissers. They'd do whatever her dad wanted if it meant a cut of her money. And Morris thought she'd remain ignorant of the truth with Able as her keeper.

Dread filled her as she realized they had to know the details of her mother's will—and knew killing her wasn't an option. The only way they'd get their hands on a dime of her money would be if she was under their control.

Summer had a feeling the Woods still believed in forced marriages.

She turned her head and saw five men climb out of the vehicles in front of her, including Able. Two of the men held rifles in clear view. The threat level was more than obvious.

"Nobody is going to hurt you," Marvin yelled as he stepped several feet closer.

A hysterical laugh rose but she choked on it. *Lies. Your crazy son*

already shot at me and tried to make me crash!

She twisted her head again to see Marvin approaching the back of her SUV. No friendly or familiar faces were in their group. None of those men were going to stick their necks out to try to save her.

Two more strangers exited the truck behind the one Marvin had arrived in, both toting handguns.

“Don’t make this any worse,” Able yelled, approaching from the front. “You’ve got nowhere to run. Your ass is mine now, sweetheart.”

The comment had pure panic surging through her body.

Summer took her foot off the brake and stomped down on the gas.

Her old SUV jumped forward and she sharply twisted the wheel. Her vehicle hit the nearest fence, causing Summer to wince. She figured her headlights were the source of the loud crunching sound. Next, she prayed the wire and posts on the fence wouldn’t pop her tires. They seemed to hold as she drove off, the men yelling at her to stop.

The terrain became brutal as her SUV shook over hard-packed, uneven ground. She had to twist the wheel sharply to avoid a grouping of boulders and ended up sliding about ten feet down into a dry riverbed. It was a slightly smoother ride than the rocky area behind her. And another upside, nobody took potshots at her while she fled.

She glanced in the rearview mirror, relieved not to see anyone behind her—yet. Summer slowed a little, the bumpy ride made her bones ache.

She glanced to the side, where plumes of dust drew her attention. Trucks appeared on the rim of the riverbed above her, and she realized they were going to follow her wherever she tried to flee. Three vehicles were chasing her down.

She didn’t know where to go, too unfamiliar with the Johnson ranch, but

she didn't care as long as they couldn't pin her in. One glance told her they were keeping pace with her SUV, their trucks having an easier time driving off- road. She'd bought a city vehicle, with no extras like four-wheel drive. She prayed that her SUV wouldn't break down and that the tires continued to hold.

Seconds later, something in the distance caught her attention near a line of trees. She leaned forward a little, squinted—and relief washed through her. It was a mobile home roof peeking between trees up on a hill. Her eyes tracked a dirt road that led to a bright blue truck parked up on that same hill. A smaller building sat beside the mobile home. Maybe a garage.

A truck meant someone would probably be home. A mobile home would mean a phone and help. It wasn't the Johnson place, they had a farmhouse. But it would do.

She twisted the wheel, heading toward the higher ground. Her SUV protested driving through dirt, the tires having a hard time finding traction, but she managed to get out of the riverbed. The blue truck with Marvin inside careened into the riverbed in pursuit, but she kept driving.

Summer blared her horn when she got closer to draw attention from the mobile home and whoever lived there. She spotted another truck parked on the other side of the first. Two trucks meant more people, and she choked down her tentative relief. Whoever lived there would probably be chasing her already if they were part of the church.

Maybe, just maybe, that meant the family in that mobile home would help her.

* * * * *

Ryder grinned at Trip. “Thanks for lunch.”

“That's what brothers are for. I'm just glad you're home for a while. I

know you're avoiding the house, and I don't blame you. I had dinner with the family last week while you were doing that promotional thing in Austin. Talk about feeling like a fifth wheel. I don't know how you live there."

"I'm ready to buy a motorhome to stay in when I'm not touring. Try going to sleep there if you think just watching the two couples fawn all over each other during meals is rough. I call them my bookend moaners. I'm getting it from both sides of the house."

"I have a couple spare bedrooms." Trip shrugged. "And I'm certainly not seeing anyone." Anger compressed his mouth and his blue eyes narrowed dangerously. "My wife had me served with annulment papers."

"Damn." Ryder sighed, feeling sympathy for his friend. "I'm sorry, man. I'm still in shock."

"You? Regina and I were married for less than a week!" Trip pushed back from his chair, got to his feet, and his hands tightened into fists. "I think I set a new world record for fast marriages. Now it's over and I don't even understand why. I thought we were happy."

"I'm—"

The faint sound of a horn blaring cut him off. Ryder frowned and stood, moving toward the front of the house.

"What is that?" Trip asked, keeping pace with him.

"I don't know." Ryder opened the door. The sight that met his searching gaze stunned him.

"What the hell?" Trip muttered.

Ryder stared at a dirty, damaged old white SUV driving toward the base of the hill, moving far too fast for it to be safe on that rough terrain. Whoever was driving, he was a damn fool.

But then he saw that behind him were three trucks, right on the ass of

the SUV.

A red truck suddenly slammed into the back of the SUV, nearly causing it to flip as the ass end wildly fishtailed in the dirt, but the driver corrected in time to straighten out. The horn cut off, probably because the driver needed both hands to control the fast-moving vehicle.

“Shit,” Trip hissed. “I know that blue truck. It belongs to Becker Follis. See the black emblem on the hood? That means the other trucks must belong to his asshole friends, more members of that screwed-up church. I think the red one might be Able Woods. There’s a ton of those models around here but chances are it’s him, since he’s tight with Follis.”

Ryder agreed. “Look at the damage to both sides of the SUV. They’re really after that guy.”

Trip spun around and darted into the house. “I’ll use the rifle over the mantle. You grab the one from my bedroom. It’s in my closet on the top shelf, left side. Bullets are next to it.”

Ryder quickly retrieved the second rifle, grabbed a box of bullets, and loaded it. He ran back outside with the weapon in hand. He walked to the far edge of the porch, lifted the rifle, and aimed.

The SUV had reached the incline of the start of the dirt driveway and was still coming in fast.

He hesitated only a second before firing. Seeing steam pour out from the hood of the blue truck, he knew he hit the engine, and he grinned. He hated Becker Follis. The guy was a first-rate prick.

A shot from his left made him chuckle. “Don’t take out the damn tires, Trip. We don’t want them stranded at the bottom of your hill. Aim for the radiators. I like the idea of them breaking down on their way out, having to walk to town or sweat it out waiting for a tow truck. It’s damn hot today.”

Trip laughed, too, and aimed his rifle. “Red one.” He fired and hit his mark. “Like shooting fish in a barrel. They’re breaking off.”

Ryder lowered his weapon and watched three trucks turn in different directions. The blue one he’d hit drove toward the side of the hill where Trip’s home sat, and he worried the bastard planned to try to sneak in from behind. “I’ll watch the back while you help whoever’s coming up.”

“Got it,” Trip agreed grimly, reloading. “I guess I should be calling this in while I’m at it. It’ll cover our asses if those assholes try to have us arrested for shooting at them.”

“They’re trespassing on your land, but yeah, do it.”

Ryder rushed around the porch that encircled the entire double-wide mobile home and moved into position at the back. He watched the blue truck dodge some boulders and, sure enough, it slowed at the bottom of the hill behind the house.

He shook his head. “Dumbass.”

He aimed for Becker’s truck bed and took a shot.

The jerk punched the gas, sent up a cloud of dust, and drove away.

Ryder stood there to make sure he didn’t turn around, not willing to put anything past any members of the Woods Church. He cocked his head and heard the engine of the SUV die when it finally stopped in front of his brother’s home.

He lingered at the back of the house, just to make sure nobody tried to approach again. It could take a while for someone from town to get out this way.

Chapter Three

Summer had been afraid for a moment when she watched two men rush onto the extended deck off the front of the mobile home, both with rifles. Dust coated her windows, making her view distorted, but she could make out those guns. She'd flinched when they fired, but no bullets had torn through her SUV.

One glance in her rearview mirror assured her they'd targeted the men chasing her. White steam billowed from under the hood of the blue truck. She slowed a little as all three pursuing vehicles suddenly veered away, driving hell-bent for leather in different directions. All of them getting away from her.

I'm saved! Summer slowed more as her engine protested the steep incline of the graveled driveway but she kept going. She only stopped when she parked behind the two trucks, hating how badly her hands shook when she turned off the engine and set the emergency brake. She reached for the door handle as a tall blond man jogged down the porch steps to confront her. It took a second to remember to unlock her door.

She tried to open the door—but it wouldn't budge. Summer glanced at the lock to make sure it wasn't still down. She shoved at the door again but it refused to move. She rolled down the window to try the outside handle.

"The door's crushed," the deep voice attached to the big blond informed her. "Shit, you're a woman! I couldn't see you with all the dust coating your windows."

Her gaze lifted as he stopped on the other side of her door, and shock tore through her as quickly as the recognition hit. "*Trip?*"

He cocked his head, a frown on his full lips as he set his rifle across her

hood and reached for the damaged door. “That’s me. Do I know you?” He glanced at her before yanking on the door. It still wouldn’t budge. “I think you need to climb out. The door is pretty hammered. What did they do? Ram you? Your side mirror is gone too.”

“Yes.” Tears threatened to spill but Summer managed to blink them back. “They tried to run me off the road several times.”

Trip held out his hands. “Climb out. I’ll help you. You’re safe here. I called the sheriff’s department on my cell and someone’s on the way. What did they want from you? Do you know?”

Summer trembled as she unfastened her belt. She wiggled as she pushed the seat back to make more room, then Trip reached inside the window to gently help her climb out.

Trip had turned into a big man, strong, and he easily lifted her once she was clear of the window to carefully place her on her feet. Her legs wobbled a little when he released her, when she finally got a good look at the damage done to the driver’s side of her SUV.

“Oh shit,” she hissed. “My baby!”

“You’re lucky.” His voice sounded calm, reassuring. “Becker Follis was the owner of that blue truck, and that idiot is pure bad news. Did you piss him off or something?”

With dread, Summer turned to face someone from her past she hadn’t been prepared to see.

Trip appeared confused when their gazes met and he studied her. “You look familiar.”

She took a deep breath. “Marvin and Able Woods were in two of those trucks. They tried to trap me on the road. I’m sorry, but I had to drive through your fence. I’ll pay for the damage. I thought I was on Johnson land.”

“Yeah, this spread used to belong to them. I bought it because the back of the property touches part of the ranch I grew up on. Now it’s all combined. You’re officially on the Raine Ranch now. The Johnson family moved to Florida after their house was destroyed by a flash flood. I had the mobile home and garage put on top of this hill for that very reason.” He paused. “Plus, the views are nicer, especially when the creek bed isn’t dry.”

“Oh,” she whispered, utterly stunned now. “Um...I should go, now that you’ve run them off. I’ll drive into town to file a police report.”

Summer needed to leave before Trip recognized her. She turned to face her damaged SUV, tucked her chin lower to prevent him from studying her any closer, and allowed her loose hair to fall forward.

“I think it’s best if you wait here.”

“I don’t want to cause you trouble if they come back. I’ll leave my number so you can send me a bill for the damage to your fence.”

“Look, I know you’re in shock. Hell, so am I. We were having lunch and all of a sudden, I’m firing on assholes obviously trying to attack someone. What in the hell’s going on, anyway? Who are you? And how do you know Marvin and Able Woods?” When she didn’t respond, he sighed. “The least you can do is look at me when I’m talking, since we just shot at people for you.”

Her fists clenched as Summer turned to face the tall cowboy, lifted her chin, and took a shaky breath. Trip wasn’t going to let this go without getting answers, and she couldn’t blame him. “I shouldn’t be here. I didn’t know it was now part of the Raine property. I really need to leave.”

His blue eyes narrowed. “Are you a member of that fucked-up church? That’s pretty much the only reason you’d be worried about being here. They live by some seriously dangerous views of the world and how it should be. We’re actually considered devils by those bastards. Anyone who associates

with us is pretty much deemed unworthy of breathing.”

“No!” Summer couldn’t believe that Trip hadn’t recognized her yet. She kept her blonde hair a bit longer, had filled out a good twenty pounds since her teens and aged eleven years, but she didn’t look *that* different.

Of course, she hadn’t spent that much time around Trip. She’d known his younger brother Adam better, since they’d been closer in age.

“I’d rather die than be a part of the Woods Church. That’s why they were trying to grab me. I was nearly forced into marrying someone from that family once, but I left town to avoid it.”

Trip blinked a few times. “You used to live around here? I noticed the Nevada plates on your ride, but I guess that’s how you knew who this land used to belong to.”

She avoided answering, hoping to leave without Trip figuring out her name. As long as she paid for the damage to his fence, it shouldn’t matter.

She’d take care of that *after* she left town to avoid dealing with Ryder’s family. Trip and Adam weren’t biologically related to the Raines, but they’d grown up together, and they all considered each other brothers.

She turned away from Trip again to walk around her SUV. Hot tears burned when she reached the back of the vehicle.

The damage was extensive. The bumper was nearly torn off, hanging almost to the ground, and the lift door was pushed in. She walked to the passenger side and had to look away. Both doors were crushed from being rammed, the paint gone in jagged gouges, and the panel over her front tire had been completely ripped off somewhere. A black stain on the gravel behind the same tire made her crouch down, and she watched as liquid dripped from the underside of her engine.

“It looks like you tore out your oil pan,” Trip said softly from behind

her. "You could have been killed driving that fast off-road."

"I could have been killed if they'd caught me. Better my SUV get damaged than me."

"True."

"They're driving away," a man called out. "That idiot Becker tried to park behind your place but I changed his mind."

That voice.

Summer froze where she crouched, her heart pounding, and listened to boots crunch on the gravel driveway as someone else approached. She didn't dare turn to watch him move closer.

She swallowed the lump that formed inside her throat. She knew it had to be River. Both brothers sounded alike, since they were identical twins, but Ryder wouldn't be in town. She'd checked online before packing her bag. His band website listed his tour dates and locations. It stated that he would be performing in Alabama this week, far from Hailey, Texas.

"It's a woman? Jesus! What in the hell did Follis and his friends want with you, lady?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Trip agreed. "She identified Marvin and Able Woods, but she says she's not a part of their church."

Summer was out of options. Her SUV wasn't going anywhere without a tow truck. She knew enough about vehicles to feel certain it was leaking too much oil to drive into town without it breaking down.

There was no way to avoid a confrontation. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and knew without a doubt that River would recognize her.

Maybe if she begged him, he'd refrain from telling his twin that she'd come home until after she'd left town. John Barnes could deal with Ryder. She never wanted to come face-to-face with him again. It would be too

painful.

“Lady?” The voice moved closer until she was sure he stood right behind her. “What did those guys want with you? Do you know?”

Summer used her hand to push up as she straightened to her full meager height of five-foot-two and slowly turned, hating that she’d have to face part of the past when she wasn’t ready.

She wasn’t sure who was more shocked as her gaze fixed on Ryder Raine.

It was *him*. Not River.

Summer had always been able to tell them apart. And she still could. It didn’t matter how many years had passed.

Ryder and River were identical at first glance, but if someone looked close enough, there were slight differences...such as the thin line of a scar under Ryder’s chin. River had one of his own, near his forehead.

The scar on his chin would have been proof enough, but there was also the earring Ryder sported. River had always hated needles, refusing to get tattoos or piercings.

Summer had no doubt she was facing the man she’d left behind when she’d fled Texas eleven years before.

Ryder’s tan skin paled noticeably as he stared down at her. She saw his dark brown eyes narrow and his generous lips hardened into a grim line. His six-foot-two frame of solid muscles swayed a little. He’d filled out over the years, she noticed, as her gaze swept down his body. His shoulders were broader, his arms thicker in the biceps area, his thighs thick. She looked back up.

“Son of a bitch,” he hissed.

“Hi, Ryder.” Summer’s voice shook slightly, but she was proud that

she'd been able to speak at all. "Long time no see."

"That's the first thing you've got to say to me, Summer?"

He threw the rifle down. The action startled Summer enough that she jerked back, stumbled, and fell against her SUV. She heard material rip along her back, her shirt catching on a jagged piece of metal from the SUV.

Something burned on her shoulder and hot tears blinded her. She blinked furiously and curled her arms around her waist. She'd expected Ryder to be angry with her for skipping out without a word, but the pure fury on his face was a shock.

Trip turned his head, a frown firmly in place. Then his blue eyes widened. "I didn't recognize her."

"'Hi'? 'Long time no see'?" Ryder's voice grew louder. "That's all you've got to say to me? You left without even bothering to say goodbye. Just disappeared. How could you do that to me?"

Summer's gaze lifted to Ryder's face. It had been a lot of years. She figured he might have been mad when she took off, but after all this time, she'd assumed he'd long-since gotten over it. According to the band's social media, he'd become an even bigger ladies' man over the years.

She'd made the mistake of clicking on links to the band's socials, where women left plenty of comments that she'd been stupid enough to read. His female fans adored him and thought he was super-sexy. They were always promising to meet up with Ryder at every venue he played. They also made countless suggestions of what they wanted to do with him—in lewd detail.

Ryder continued to glare at Summer. "I heard that your father kicked the bucket a few weeks ago. Is that why you're back?"

She tried to recover a little from the shock of seeing Ryder, of facing his obvious wrath, and from the harrowing experience of being chased. That was

on top of all the things she'd learned from John Barnes. Her day was just getting worse and worse.

Summer licked her dry lips and cleared her throat, taking a deep breath to avoid arguing with him. Instead, she focused on the pain in her shoulder. "I need a bathroom."

Ryder took a step closer. "I need answers."

Summer reached a hand behind her, holding the area that felt as if it were on fire. She felt wetness on her fingers, and she pulled her arm down to see blood on her fingers.

"Fuck," Trip muttered. "She's hurt." His hands were on Summer a second later. He turned her enough to get a look at her back. "The shirt's torn. She wasn't bleeding before. Some of this metal on her vehicle is pretty jagged."

"Could I *please* use your bathroom?" Summer asked again, pulling out of Trip's hold.

"I didn't know you were hurt," Ryder murmured, his tone softened.

"Come on," Trip urged. "Let's get you inside to clean and bandage the cut."

Ryder nodded. "Take her inside. I'll stay out here to make sure they don't come back." He turned his back on them, bending to pick up the rifle.

Trip waved Summer toward his house. She spun quickly, marching toward the mobile home. Her shoulder hurt and she fought the urge to be sick.

Ryder had no right to be angry. She might have disappeared, but he'd lied about *everything*, making a mockery of their entire relationship.

The mobile home was tidy, considering it belonged to a man. It also looked like a newer model, spacious with a large living room and kitchen. A

long bar separated the space, complete with black barstools. She passed them on the way to a hallway, the bathroom easy to find. It was the first room on the right.

Summer closed the door and flipped on the light. Her shoulder burned worse as her shaking fingers unbuttoned her top and slid it off one shoulder. She twisted to get a look at it in the mirror.

A bloody scratch about two inches long marred her skin. It didn't look deep but it was painful.

A tap on the door made her startle. Her gaze swung around as it slowly opened. She tensed, but it was Trip who stuck his head in. She wanted to kick herself for being upset enough to forget to lock the door.

His gaze left hers to fix on the mirror. He cursed, shoving the door wide. "Let me help."

"No! Get out."

Trip ignored her demand and yanked open the medicine cabinet. His body blocked the door, trapping Summer inside the room. "I'm going to clean and bandage that cut."

"I can do it myself."

That earned her another frown. "I don't know what happened between you and my brother, but I don't care at the moment. You're bleeding in my home, so I'm taking care of you. My mama raised me right. Now close your mouth and turn. I'm going to fix you up. Do you even remember what hospitality is? Well, keep in mind what being a good *guest* is while you're at it."

Summer grudgingly turned to show Trip her back. She carefully covered her bra as much as possible where the shirt gaped open from the unfastened buttons. "Thank you."

Trip turned on the water and used a wet, cold washcloth to dab at her scratch. It helped the burning sensation fade. Her tense body relaxed just slightly, and she turned her head to watch Trip in the mirror.

“Will you at least tell me why I had to shoot at those assholes?”

She hesitated. “I always hated Marvin, Able, and everyone in their so-called church.”

“Who didn’t, besides your daddy?”

She couldn’t deny that fact. “I made a mistake coming back here. Able saw me in town and came after me.”

“Why? Was he pissed that you disappeared too? How many guys were you leading on?”

She glared at Trip’s reflection as their gazes held. “You know *nothing*. Don’t judge me.”

“What don’t I know? You broke Ryder’s heart. You could have at least left him a ‘screw off’ letter.”

“Maybe I learned how to be so forthcoming from *him*,” she snapped.

Trip’s gaze narrowed. “What does that mean?”

She looked away. “Can you just slap a bandage on it and let me out of here? I’ll wait with my SUV for help to arrive.”

“I deserve to know why I had to shoot at those assholes.”

Summer knew Trip was justified in wanting answers, and she grudgingly admitted that if it wasn’t for him—and Ryder—she might have a lot worse than just a scratch right now.

She sighed. “Morris ordered me to marry Able, that last day I spent in Hailey. The day Navarro was hurt at the rodeo. I ran away to avoid being forced into it. I thought I’d be safe, now that Morris is dead. I came back to sneak into the ranch house to grab some of my mother’s things.” She paused.

“But it all went wrong.”

He gently cleaned the wound with alcohol, and she winced. “Sorry. I know this stings but infections are way worse than a little pain for a few seconds. So they came after you because you tried to break into your old house? They weren’t playing around by the looks of your SUV.”

“They were probably planning on kidnapping me to attend that forced wedding I avoided eleven years ago. It’s the only way they can get a hold of the money and the ranch.”

She regretted admitting that part when Trip’s hands stilled. She met his surprised blue eyes in the mirror. It was the trauma of everything that had happened in the last hour that made her babble too damn much.

“Your *father*’s money and ranch?”

What the hell. The cat was already out of the bag. “It’s mine, actually.” God, her life was a mess. “I’m pretty sure Marvin and Able were set on inheriting everything when Morris died. It’s always been implied that’s what would happen. The joke was on all three of us.”

Trip resumed treating her scratch by putting a bandage on it before adjusting the back of her shirt. “What joke?”

“The money and ranch solely belonged to my mother, and she left it all to me. I learned that just today, at a meeting with my mother’s lawyer. I never had any idea. Morris never told me. Always threatened to cut me off, actually. And he was a proud jerk, so I’m guessing he didn’t tell his good pal Marvin the truth, either. I guess my grandpa Pat hated his future son-in-law, and he only allowed Morris to marry my mother after he signed papers that guaranteed he’d never get his hands on her money or property. And Mom did the same, leaving everything to me in her will.”

“Shit!” Trip muttered.

“Exactly,” Summer agreed. “Morris would never have admitted he wasn’t as in control as he liked people to believe. Now Marvin and Able seem pretty desperate to gain access to the money and the ranch. That means getting a hold of *me*.” She turned after buttoning her shirt to face Trip. “I’d rather burn the ranch to the ground before letting that happen. Thank you for saving me, Trip. I’ll be out of your hair as quickly as possible.”

Trip blocked her path to the door. “That’s why you left Ryder? You should have told him. My baby brother would have left *with* you if you were in danger, or you could have stayed at our ranch. We would have protected you from a forced marriage.”

The younger part of Summer had believed exactly that. A life with Ryder at her side had once been all she’d ever wanted. She pushed back the pain in her heart, admitting she’d never gotten over the betrayal of her first love lying about everything.

“Thank you for tending to my back. I really should go wait with my SUV until the police arrive.”

“You need to tell Ryder what you told me, Summer. It destroyed him when you just disappeared. He looked for you.” His voice lowered to a husky whisper. “That’s why he’s so pissed. He deserves the truth.”

“I know exactly how that feels.”

He appeared baffled. “What does that mean?”

“Please move, Trip.”

He hesitated but finally stepped aside, and she eased past him. Summer strode to the open front door. One glance outside revealed Ryder standing on the porch. She avoided looking at him as she walked down the porch steps. The sensation of being watched by him was strong.

“Summer?”

Ryder's voice halted her at the bottom. She didn't turn her head to look at him, despite the urge. It was still too painful, even after all these years.

"I didn't meant to scare you. I lost my temper."

She gave a sharp nod, not trusting her voice. It was difficult to put one foot in front of the other but she did it until she reached her damaged SUV. The sight of what had been done to it was enough to have her tearing up once more.

Summer was having one of the worst days of her life. She'd had plenty of those, but this ranked right up there in the top three with the day she'd left Hailey. Her mother's death was included on that list.

The porch steps creaked, and she tensed, not needing to turn her head to know that Ryder had followed. She could almost feel his presence as he paused too close. His boots on the gravel gave away his location.

"Look at me."

It took courage to slowly face him, but Summer did. Ryder took her breath away. He'd aged well, and that angered her. *He should have gray hair, maybe a bald spot or a pot belly.* Instead, he looked better than ever. The softer boyish looks had transformed into a hard, sexy man over the past decade.

It was painful to stare into his gaze. The dark chocolate color of his eyes was still all too easy to fall into. Summer had dreamed about him often, feeling disgusted with the memories that haunted her. Ryder had broken her heart and his good looks had helped him do it. She'd loved him deeply, had believed every word he'd ever said.

That stupid, naïve girl she'd once been had been ripped to shreds by his betrayals.

Ryder studied her, too, as silence stretched between them. She'd

forgotten how tall he was, how silky his dark hair appeared. The sun glinted off the locks, and they looked good reaching to his broad shoulders. It wasn't a wonder why he had so many female fans. Ryder Raine was total eye candy.

Memories from the past struck with a vengeance. She'd lost her virginity to Ryder the summer after her eighteenth birthday. He'd taken her on a romantic picnic next to the creek that ran through his property.

Her Ryder had been the guy she'd wanted to grow old with. She'd once envisioned having his children, hoping they'd look just like him. He'd been so loving, so sweet, but she hadn't known at the time how easily it must have been for him to seduce her. He'd had lots of experience, judging by those photos she'd seen. Women had been draped all over him, and she wouldn't be surprised to learn he'd slept with most, if not all of them.

Her body tingled from the memories of him making love to her. She should have known he was too good at it for a guy his age. No fumbling hands or hesitation on his part, ever. Ryder had mastered her body as easily as he had her heart. Summer had lived and breathed for him once.

It always bothered her, not knowing why he'd been attracted to her in the first place. Ryder had been the one to pursue *her*. It wasn't for the money. That, she fully believed. Morris hated the Raines, and everyone knew it. She'd mentioned at least half a dozen times how her father would disown her if their relationship came to light. Ryder hadn't cared about that.

The temptation to ask Ryder why he'd wanted her so much surfaced now, but she didn't think she could handle the truth. It would devastate her more if it turned out he'd only used her to get back at her father somehow. That concept had crossed her mind often.

No one had known how bad her private life with Morris had grown—not even Ryder. He might have mistakenly thought it would hurt Morris to cut his only daughter out of his life.

Then again, Ryder had helped her keep their relationship a secret. Which didn't make sense if dating her had been a big "fuck you" to Morris Decon.

"You were in Nevada?"

Summer's mind blanked.

"The license plates are from there. Is that where you disappeared to?"

It was a safe topic that helped Summer speak. "California, then Arizona, and I spent a winter in Oregon. After that, I moved to Nevada."

His gaze dropped to her left hand. She followed his focus and looked up to find him staring at her again. "Not married?"

"No." She tensed, hoping Ryder didn't ask her outright. Did he know they were married? She guessed not. He would have annulled it himself. It was probably bad if he had a wife in his business, with all those adoring fans. She silently swallowed down that bitter assessment.

"Kids?"

She shook her head. "You?" Once the question was out, Summer desperately wished to take it back. She didn't want to know.

"No."

She could breathe again. The idea of another woman having his children just about killed Summer inside. It was completely unreasonable, but she couldn't deny feeling relief at his answer.

Ryder cleared his throat. "I'm sorry about your dad."

"I'm not." His surprised expression made her glance away, and she felt the urge to explain. "We didn't have a good relationship, and it certainly didn't improve after I left." She dared look at his face for a reaction.

"Did you just disappear on him too?" His voice deepened with anger, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"I sure tried. He hired people to find me, and a couple times they

succeeded. That wasn't fun."

"He was obviously able to afford better investigators than I did, since mine weren't able to locate you."

His response astounded her and only backed up what Trip had stated in the bathroom. Ryder had searched for her. *Why?* She didn't know, but she refrained from asking outright. "He sent some of the Woods Church members after me, trying to force me to come home. It meant having to move a lot."

His jaw clenched but he said nothing. Ryder turned his head when the faint noise of an engine reached them. Summer spotted an SUV in the distance.

"That would be Mark or Dennis. Ted and the new guy who works weekends both drive a car."

She glanced back. "Who?"

"Our current deputies. There's only four. Not counting the sheriff himself, who pretty much doesn't work at all. They got here fast. They must have already been on a call out this way."

"Oh." Summer tracked the advancing vehicle. It traveled the path she'd taken, instead of the dirt road she could see from her vantage point on the hill.

"I assume that means you'll be leaving. You..."

He paused long enough for her curiosity to get the better of her, until Summer had to see his features. "I *what?*"

"How long are you going to be in town?"

"I had only planned to be here long enough to talk to the attorney who'd been trying to reach me, then stop at the ranch to grab everything I want of my mother's. I regretted not getting the chance to take her photo albums and her diaries when I left. I was on my way to the ranch when this happened."

She glanced at her poor SUV. “Shit. I won’t be leaving tonight, like I’d planned.”

Ryder took a step closer. “Why were they after you? Why did they attack you?” His gaze shifted to her SUV before he held her stare. “What did you do to piss them off?”

It angered her that Ryder instantly assumed she’d deserve something like this. “I refused to marry Able.”

His hands fisted at his sides. “You were dating us both?”

“No. I’d *never* date that jackass. I couldn’t stand him back then, and that’s never changed. Morris ordered me to marry Able the day I fled home. The church members were all at the ranch when I returned from the rodeo, and it got ugly the second I walked in the door. Marvin said he’d perform the ceremony, and I was given twenty minutes to get ready. I climbed out my bedroom window and fled.”

He took another step closer, until Summer had to tilt her chin to hold his stare. “Is that why you left without telling me first?”

She swallowed. “I had no intention of leaving until that happened.”

“Then why *did* you? You could have come to me.” His gaze searched hers. “You never even called.”

The SUV came up the hill as they regarded each other. Ryder waited for an answer, while she debated. This was finally her chance to confront him, but as the car stopped, she knew the moment was gone. She wasn’t going to have it out with him in front of a stranger.

“What in the blue blazes is going on?”

She twisted away from Ryder’s intense stare to study the deputy. He looked vaguely familiar, and she realized it was Mark Hayes. He’d been a year behind her in school. The geeky kid had filled out over the years and no

longer wore braces.

He finally glanced at her. “Summer Decon? Is that you?”

“Hi, Mark. It’s nice to see you, but I wish it were under better circumstances.”

“Is this yours?” He jerked a thumb at her car. “I got a report of a fence down and was on my way to check it out when I got the call. I found the section along the road with damage and followed it here. Guess that was you?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t an accident.” Summer tried to forget that Ryder stood so close. She couldn’t take a step backward without bumping into him. “It was Able and Marvin Woods, along with some of the church members. Able rammed into me several times, both from the back and both sides. Then they tried to cut me off and trap me on the road. I had to flee through that fence to get away from them.”

Mark gaped at her. “Why would they do that? Your daddy was their biggest supporter.”

“I wasn’t.” She stepped closer to Mark, putting some distance between her and Ryder. “I want to press charges. You also might find a bullet hole somewhere in the back of my SUV. Able took a shot at me with a handgun. I want them arrested.”

An uncomfortable expression filtered across his face. “You know they’re just going to deny it.”

“We saw them going after her.” Trip’s voice was clear and loud as he joined them on the driveway. “We had to shoot a few holes into their trucks to get them to stop chasing Summer. They weren’t screwing around, Mark. There’s matching damage on a red truck that we saw ram her from behind times. Those bastards could have killed her. Something needs done to stop

them before someone else dies.”

Summer’s head whipped around. “Someone *else*?”

“There’s no proof of that,” Mark quickly interceded. “Suspicion, sure. Evidence? No way.”

Trip glanced at her. “Someone set fire to the Rodriguez house, and old Ella died. They were being harassed by the church to leave town.” He glared at Mark. “We all know they’re responsible. They terrorize almost all the racial minorities in these parts. Anyone they think they can bully.”

Mark shifted his stance, appearing uncomfortable. “No one wants to press charges when they receive threats. My hands are tied on the Rodriguez case. Don’t you think I want to lock them up? My mother’s from Ireland, and they told *me* to get back on a boat and go home, despite the fact I was born in this town. Hell, most of the folks in their church aren’t originally from Texas.”

“Summer just said she wants them arrested. That means she’s willing to press charges.” Ryder suddenly stepped up to her side. “So arrest them, Mark. I know you’re afraid, but do your damn job. They can’t hurt anyone if they’re behind bars.”

“It’s not that simple. I arrested Becker and some of his buddies. Their lawyer had them sprung within hours and it just made everything worse. They broke all the windows in my house. I know it was them, but they were smart enough to use baseball bats and they didn’t touch anything to leave fingerprints. My insurance hiked up my premiums after that. Then the original charges got tossed because they all alibied each other.”

“Unbelievable,” Trip rumbled. “You know how bad they are, but you do nothing to stop it! Who runs this town? The law or the goddamn criminals?”

“We’re just a few against that whole church! The budget cuts have

killed us.” Mark’s shoulders slumped. “I’ve made calls for outside help but nobody gives a shit. Money is tight everywhere.”

“The judge threw out the case?” Summer wanted clarification.

Her previous classmate grimly nodded. “No matter what they’re charged with, they just lie for each other. The judge’s hands are tied because there are never any witnesses to their crimes. Not that many people here are even willing to press charges in the first place. Everyone’s afraid of them. Like Trip said, that church bullies everyone.”

“They tried to *kill Summer*,” Ryder ground out. “Do you see what they did to her SUV? What if they’d gotten their hands on her?”

Mark glanced at the vehicle before turning his attention to her. “Look, Summer...you don’t live here anymore. I could arrest anyone you can identify, but are you actually going to stick around long enough to testify? I’m friends with John Barnes. I know he had a hell of a time even finding you. Even if you were willing to move back here and wait months for a trial, they’d just terrorize you the way they do to anyone else who tries to stand up to them. You’d probably be too scared to go to court by the time we go before a judge; it’s happened before. I can get Jessie on his way out here, and he could patch you up enough for you to drive to the next town. I’ll make sure you get out of Hailey safely. That’s the best I can do.”

“Jessie isn’t going to be able to get her vehicle running tonight.” Trip glared at Mark. “She’s stuck here until at least tomorrow. If not longer. Look at the damage on that damn thing! It’s probably totaled.”

“She also wants to pick up some things from the ranch that belonged to her mother,” Ryder added.

“Shit.” Mark cringed, looking at Summer. “I guess you could spend the night at the station, and I’ll drive you to your father’s place on the way if you insist on going there. I’ll make sure someone sticks around the station tonight

so no one bothers you. They wouldn't dare enter there, though. We have several cameras, and the surveillance is automatically transmitted to the security company that monitors them. I'll have Jessie tow your vehicle, and I'll give you an escort to the shop when it's fixed."

"When did you lose your balls?" Disgust dripped from Trip's harsh tone. "How can you sleep at night?"

"I'm realistic." Mark's cheeks reddened. "And I sleep with a loaded shotgun within reach, just like everyone else in this town. I'm not a member of their church or a believer in their bullshit. I'm a target, too."

Summer was stunned that things had grown so bad. She sighed. "I never thought I'd be happy to sleep in a jail cell, but I don't want to have them come after me at the ranch or in a local motel." She had little doubt that Marvin or Able would just give up on getting their hands on what she'd inherited.

Ryder stepped in front of her and frowned. "You can stay at the Raine Ranch. You'd be safe there and we have extra bedrooms."

"Or you could stay here," Trip offered. "I've got rifles and an endless supply of bullets. I *hope* they come looking for you again. I need the target practice."

She avoided Ryder's gaze, needing to get away from him. "Thank you for the offers, but I'll be fine in town with Mark." She inched around the first love of her life and gave the deputy a forced smile. "Let me get my bag and purse from my SUV. I'd really appreciate you taking me to the ranch. I only want a few boxes of things."

"We'll go now. I'll radio Jessie and tell him to call when he knows what needs to be done to get you back on the road."

"Summer?"

Her spine stiffened as she glanced back at Ryder.

“I want to talk to you before you leave.”

She licked her lips. “I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“It is.” He grew angry again as his hands fisted at his side. “You owe me answers before you take off. Plan to see me around six tonight. I have to give an interview in a few hours for the band, but then we’re going to talk.”

It sounded like a threat. Mark wrestled open the back door of her SUV and grabbed her suitcase. He also used his bulk to yank open the front passenger door to reach her purse on the floor, where it had fallen.

“Expect me,” Ryder warned.

She hesitated. “We’ve got nothing to discuss.”

“I disagree. Do you really think I’m going to allow you to blow out of here before you tell me how you could do that to me? You just *left*. Not a letter, a phone call, or a ‘fuck off’.” His voice rose in anger. “How could you do that to me? To *us*?”

Summer knew they were being closely watched by Trip and Mark, but Ryder obviously didn’t care. He seemed intent on having a confrontation.

She refused to fight with him, turning away and heading toward the police vehicle.

“Damn it, Summer. I thought I knew you. I’m suddenly feeling *grateful* you took off on me. You’re definitely your father’s daughter, aren’t you? Morris Decon didn’t have an ounce of empathy for anyone else’s feelings, either.”

Pain sliced through her heart at that particular accusation, and she halted long enough to swing back around and glare at him. She kept her voice even as she said, “I wouldn’t talk about not being what someone thought you were, or point your finger at *me* when it comes to blaming who actually ruined

what we had.”

“What in the hell does *that* mean?”

She took a deep breath, suddenly exhausted. “Sometimes when people come to you for help, they discover your dirty little secrets instead...the way I did before I left town.”

Confusion clouded Ryder’s features as he seemed to mull over her words.

“I went to your ranch before I left. Your father was there, and we had a talk. I refused to believe the awful things he was saying about you—until he told me where to find a certain box in your brother’s closet. Ring any bells?”

His mouth dropped open, and his tan skin noticeably paled.

“Do you really want to talk about it in front of others, Ryder? Should we discuss all the things you kept from me? Your father was nothing like *you*, by the way. He was only too happy to tell me everything...all the things *you* failed to mention. Why *should* I have stuck around? Everything we had turned out to be a lie.”

Summer fled while Ryder stood there, gaping at her. Her hands trembled when she belted herself into the passenger side of the police SUV.

“Please get me out of here,” she mumbled to Mark, fighting tears and avoiding looking at Ryder.

“What was that all about?” He started the engine and backed down the hill.

“Nothing,” she lied.

Chapter Four

“Do you want to tell me what she was talking about, and why you resemble Mama’s best white sheets?”

Ryder forced himself out of the shocked stupor that held him still. “She knows.”

“Knows what?”

“That River and I used to be strippers.”

Trip frowned. “You didn’t tell her? What was in the box she was referring to?”

He clenched his teeth. “River used to keep mementos of our wilder times.”

“What kind of mementos?”

Ryder stared at him with a grimace.

Trip softly cursed. “Like naked proof?”

“Naked? No. But close enough. The bar we danced at used to take photos for women to buy. River kept a few copies, pictures of his favorite tippers. He also kept our outfits. I told him to burn it all, but he didn’t. Not until *he* fell in love. Fuck!”

“You should have told Summer about your old job when it got serious between you two.”

“She wouldn’t have understood.”

Trip stepped into his personal space to glare at him. “If I followed that right, the old man spilled the beans. That means Summer *did* try to go to you that night, instead of just taking off. Damn it, bro! Were you really that stupid? It wasn’t like the gossips in town weren’t wagging their tongues over

your exploits. That shit got around. Did you think she wasn't ever going to hear something?"

"Everyone loved to make up lies about us. Summer knew that. She wouldn't have understood," he repeated, still trying to come to grips that he'd lost Summer because his *own father* had ratted him out. His knees weakened and he swayed slightly.

Trip gripped his arms. "Breathe."

Ryder sucked in a harsh breath, doing as his brother advised. It helped slightly. "I need a drink."

A rough shake snapped his head back when Trip jerked him hard, putting them nose to nose. "No, you don't. Not when you're pissed or upset. You know the rule."

"I'm not the old man or Dusty. I'm not gonna allow myself to become an alcoholic."

"It runs in this family, and we don't drink booze when we're in Hell. You should have told Summer about your past before she found out the truth. All these years, you've been suffering because you lost her—and it all could have been avoided. She may have been okay with it, but you didn't give her a chance to decide. No wonder she took off! I'd be fucking *pissed* if someone blindsided me with that kind of shit. But it sounds like Summer was devastated."

Ryder closed his eyes, trying to get a handle on his ragged emotions.

"Are you hearing me, Ryder? Did you pick up what she said about everything between you being a lie? *That's* how it made her feel when the old man told her your secrets."

"She was a *virgin*," Ryder barked, opening his eyes to hold Trip's gaze. "Sweet. Innocent as hell. She grew up in a nice house, with money, and a

daddy telling her we were Satan's spawn. He hated our entire family. It was a miracle she gave me the time of day in the first place! I was afraid Summer would be disgusted by me, or regret giving me a chance if she found out I used to be a stripper. I thought I'd lose her!"

Trip sighed. "What a mess. You were young and wild, bro. We *all* tried to warn you that some of your and River's exploits might one day come back to bite you in the ass. Not that I'm trying to throw it in your face."

"You just did."

He nodded. "I'm sorry. But you were pretty carefree with your dick."

"Until I fell in love! I gave that shit up for Summer."

"You did." Trip patted his shoulder. "Until she was gone. You had a few more wild years in you, but I know that's how you dealt with the pain of losing her. I've always understood that. Well...now you know why Summer left. *Fuck.*" He sighed again. "Imagine how she must have felt. The old man wasn't one to mince words. It had to be pretty brutal."

"I think I'm going to be sick."

"I don't blame you."

Ryder glared at his brother.

"What? Do you want me to fake sympathy? You should have told her the truth. Summer was bound to find out from someone at some point. When *don't* the gossips love to tear into us Raines and make our lives hell? You've spent all these years thinking Summer dumped you because *her* daddy convinced her we were no better than the dirt under their feet. Instead, it was the secrets you kept. She must have been gutted when the old man spelled shit out for her. No *wonder* she got the fuck out of here. Who wouldn't?"

"What exactly did the old man tell her, do you think?" Ryder wished he could confront his father.

Trip hesitated. “Probably the same shit he used to say to me and Nav... and none of it was nice. To hear him tell it, you and River were both in need of mental help and couldn’t get your dicks hard unless you shared a woman—*after* dancing in front of a crowd of horny ‘bitches’. He went on and on about women paying you both to fuck them, how it must’ve been a trait inherited from your mother.”

“We never whored ourselves out for money.”

“Well, the old man saw it that way. And you have to admit it looked bad when that guy showed up at the ranch, raving about his wife giving you a few thousand dollars each.”

“It wasn’t true. She lied. I have no idea what she spent that money on, but it sure as fuck wasn’t me or River.”

“The old man believed it. I’m sure that’s one of the things he must have told Summer. He ranted to me about it often enough. I think he was mostly pissed thinking you had that kind of money, but you wouldn’t buy him booze.”

“*Fuck!* He knew I was in love with Summer. I told him!”

“How would that have mattered to the old man? Don’t you remember what he used to tell us? Never fall in love. He said it would destroy us the same way it did him, when his wife died. He probably figured he was doing you a favor by chasing Summer away.”

“I hate him,” Ryder snarled. “To this goddamn day.”

“He was still your old man.” Trip shook his head and looked away. “But I get it. I hate my biological piece-of-shit old man, too. And *he’s* still breathing. Last I heard, anyway.”

Ryder stared into the distance as Mark’s SUV drove farther away... watching Summer leave him. *Again.* “I need to talk to her.”

“She made it pretty clear she doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“Too bad.”

“Always real sensitive, aren’t you?”

He turned to glare at Trip. “She’s the only woman I ever loved.”

“Bro, she was almost killed by a bunch of crazy assholes. She’s got more on her mind than you.”

Rage gripped Ryder. “Those fuckers tried to kill her.”

“They did.” Trip glanced at the heavily damaged SUV. “They weren’t screwing around, either. Did you hear her say that Able shot at her?”

“She’s in serious danger.”

“More than you know. Summer just found out the ranch belonged to her mother all along, and it was left to her. I heard Marvin was bragging in town right after Morris died, talking about the money they were going to get for selling the Decon ranch. I bet it came as an ugly shock when they realized they weren’t getting it after all. From what I heard, they already had a buyer lined up and everything.

“When I was patching her up, she told me she was almost forced to marry Able the night she ran away. They’re going to want that ranch any way they can get it, and she thinks they might try to force a marriage again. The money she has in the bank would be a nice bonus. Rumor always had it that Patrick Horner, Summer’s grandpa, was richer than sin—and she told me her mama left her *everything*. She had no clue before meeting with a lawyer here in town. She always thought the money and the ranch belonged to Morris.”

“They aren’t going to hurt Summer,” Ryder swore, allowing his rage to simmer. He turned to Trip. “I’m gonna go get her after that interview and bring her back here. Do you got a problem with that?”

“It would be better to take her to the ranch.”

“I thought so at first, but I’m not putting our sisters-in-law in danger, especially when one of them is pregnant.”

“I see problems with this plan of yours, no matter where you take her. Let’s face it. Summer obviously prefers a night in jail over spending time with you.”

“Too bad for her. I’m bringing her back here.” Ryder frowned. “Is that okay?”

“We’re family. You know I’ve got your back. I’ll take a nap so I can stay on guard duty outside to not let anyone sneak up on us after dark.” Trip glanced at his mobile home. “It’s insured. And hey, maybe those fuckers will give us another chance to shoot at them. This time we won’t aim for their radiators.”

“It’s not like we’d get arrested for it. Hell, Mark might give us an award.”

“I’ll go put away anything that I don’t want Summer using as a missile directed your way.” Trip smirked at him before stomping up the porch steps.

Ryder stared at the old, damaged SUV. Summer really could have been killed. “I don’t plan to fight with her,” he called out. “I just want to get answers.”

“Sure you do. I saw the way you were looking at her. Fair warning—if I’m not getting laid in my own home, nobody else is, either.”

Ryder didn’t think that would be an issue. Summer clearly hated him. She hadn’t even wanted to glance his way. They *would* talk though. He just needed a few hours to get his head on straight.

He’d spent a lot of years feeling bitter over her leaving him behind, believing she’d done so because of his heritage. Her father was the biggest racist Ryder had ever met.

Their family had a history, though. He knew Summer's father used to chase after Nav, Dusty, and Drake's mother in high school. The bastard had been considered a catch...but she'd chosen Draken Raine instead. Morris Decon hadn't taken that too well, and he'd held a grudge that lasted until the day he died.

Now he know Summer actually left because she'd learned about his past.

Ryder winced, wondering exactly how much of it she'd been told. His old man could be a mean drunk with a nasty mouth. He could imagine she'd gotten an earful when she'd arrived at the house, if his father had been on a bender. It actually surprised him that the man hadn't thrown it in his face after he'd returned home that night.

He thought back to the day Summer had disappeared out of his life. Some details were etched into his mind forever. They'd met up at the rodeo early to support his older brother. Nav had gone to sign in, and they'd walked the parking lot to say hello to some of the friends they'd made on the circuit. One of them was a rodeo clown. Drunk Bob had offered to marry him and Summer...

It amused him to see Summer's reaction. The way she looked at him with excitement had melted Ryder where he stood. He would have liked nothing better than to put a ring on her finger, but he wasn't ready to take her home to live with his old man.

He was working his ass off to help at the ranch and saving money on the side. He planned to build them a house on the property. Summer deserved more than he could ever give her, but he figured their own place without a drunk underfoot would be a good start.

"How about it?" She winked at him. "Wanna marry me?"

He'd have followed Summer to Hell and back. "Anytime, anywhere." He lifted her hand in his, struck once again by how delicate she was compared to him, and kissed the back of it. "I love the sound of Summer Raine. It's all wet, hot, and gets me damn excited."

She blushed, dropping her gaze and reminding him of how sweet she was. He was also impressed that she'd gotten the innuendo. He was a bad influence on her, but he didn't feel any guilt. Summer was *his*.

Bob swayed on his feet as he performed the mock ceremony, the strong smell of cheap vodka rolling out of his mouth with every word. Summer didn't seem to notice. She stared up at Ryder instead, looking at him in a way that made him feel ten feet tall.

Nobody had ever done that before. Ryder wasn't just the town drunk's kid in her eyes. He wasn't poor trash living out on that dirty horse ranch, the son of an actual whore. She didn't snub or pity him. Summer loved him. Together, he knew they could do anything. The world could go fuck themselves.

They signed both keepsake certificates that Bob kept on hand for his phony marriages and Ryder slipped him a twenty dollar bill. The guy made a decent living at it, the fun of being married without legal strings something few couples could resist.

That's when it had turned to shit, and Navarro had gotten hurt.

He sat at the hospital thinking about Summer while he waited for the doctors to give them an update. Nav had woken in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, thankfully. He still needed to be checked over.

Ryder always liked to follow Summer home when she met up with him in another town. It was a long drive, and the Decon ranch truck made his seem new in comparison, but it was still an old piece of shit. Her father should have been shot for forcing his only daughter to drive that rusted trash.

Ryder always worried it would break down. The idea of her stranded on the side of the desolate road home made him itch to leave the hospital.

“Don’t even think about it,” River warned, when he saw Ryder fingering his cell. “You know you can’t call her house to make sure she got there. Her old man might answer. You’d get her into trouble.”

Ryder stared into eyes exactly like his own. “You know me too well.”

“Damn straight. We’ll drive the same route she takes, just to make sure. Will that chill your ass out? Summer’s smart and wouldn’t ever take a ride with a stranger if that hunk of junk dies on her. She also knows you’ll check on her. If anything happens, she’ll just lock herself in the cab and wait for us to find her.”

“True. I want to buy her a cell phone.”

“It’s not worth the money and her old man possibly finding it. Summer doesn’t need the headache of having her daddy yell at her about how worthless we are.”

“I just worry.”

“I know.” River rolled his eyes. “You’re in love.”

“Fuck you. Jealous?”

“Hell no. I like being single.” His brother shuddered. “You’re totally whipped.”

Ryder contemplated that before grinning. “Guess what? It’s fantastic.”

“You know what they say about virgins. You nail one, you own them.”

“Perfect, since I’m never letting Summer go.” Ryder stood when the doctor finally approached. The guy was smiling, always a good sign.

Nav had only suffered a mild concussion and some bad bruising. He’d gotten lucky.

The drive home with their bitching older brother wasn’t fun. Navarro

was pissed that he'd gotten hurt, when he should have been grateful it wasn't anything life-threatening. He'd also flat-out refused to stay overnight in the hospital.

Summer's truck hadn't broken down anywhere on the road, and Ryder had driven right up to the open gate leading to her ranch to be sure. You couldn't see the house from the road, but not seeing the truck en route was a relief.

"See? She made it safe." River snorted. "Let's get home."

Their old man was passed out cold in his favorite chair. Ryder and his twin lifted their father out and carried him to bed. It was something they'd done a hundred times over the years.

Then Dusty had come home shortly after—with some alarming news. "Summer's crazy old man and that damn church he belongs to are tearing the town apart looking for her. Tell her to get her ass home, Ryder."

"What are you talking about?"

Dusty crossed his arms over his chest. "Her old man's ranting about how she ran away from home. Summer might be an adult, but you know it's only a matter of time before he comes here looking. This town is only so big. We don't need that kind of trouble." He glared at Navarro. "Did you say she could stay here? We should all get a vote. Did our old man approve of this?"

Ryder knew terror in that instant. "Summer never made it back from the rodeo?" He grabbed Dusty by the front of his shirt.

"She made it back just fine." His brother frowned, gripped his wrists, and broke his hold. "She got into a fight with her old man, from what I heard. Just packed a bag and took off. I was at Jenna's house, about to nail her, when a couple of those assholes pounded on the door to see if Summer had gone there. Send her home before her crazy fucking dad finds her on our

ranch. You know that's only going to make shit worse. He already hates us."

"She's not here."

Ryder grabbed the truck keys and rushed out the door. He had to find Summer!

He'd driven around almost all night, looking everywhere he could think of that she might've hidden...but she was just gone.

"Hey!"

Ryder turned, brought back to the present by Trip poking his head out the door. "What?"

"I put away my important shit. If Summer breaks anything, you replace it and clean up the mess." His brother tapped his watch. "You need to get ready for that interview. Change your clothes. You said they're taking pictures."

"Right." Ryder trudged back inside the mobile home, where he'd stored a bag with a newer pair of jeans and one of his band T-shirts. "I wish I could cancel this interview."

"You can't. I know your mind is all screwed up right now, but this is business. Set it aside or your agent will chew your ass. Then you'll have *two* pissed-off women to deal with. Man, your agent scares me. She's like the meanest grandmother I ever met. Couldn't you get a hot one?"

"Not after the way Jimmy screwed over our *last* agent. I'd replace him in the band if he didn't draw a sizable crowd to our venues. He's super popular with the ladies."

"You mean he fucked her, period. Wasn't that the agent he dated, then ended up sleeping with her sister, too?"

“Yep. Tina booked us into shitholes for six months to get even with him until her contract ended. Lesson learned. Pam is an excellent agent, but Jimmy won’t be tempted to nail her. She’s in her late sixties.”

Trip chuckled. “Are you sure about that? Jimmy doesn’t come across as picky.”

Ryder paused. “He’s in rehab. I’m pretty sure she’s safe once he’s sober.”

“Is that what you told her when you had to cancel tour dates while he’s drying out?”

“I sure did. It worked for her. He’s not Pam’s type, either.”

* * * * *

Summer pushed back tears at seeing her childhood home. It hadn’t changed much from the outside in the past decade. The paint was fresher, and a new truck sat parked by the front porch under a large awning.

Mark shut off the engine when he stopped behind it.

“That was your daddy’s truck. He bought it last year. I guess it’s yours now.”

She glanced down at the key ring she’d dug out of her purse. “I think the key for it is on here.”

“Did John give you those?”

She nodded, opened the vehicle door, and slid out. Mark exited from the other side. “I’ll stay here.” He glanced around. “I’m hoping there’s no trouble but first sign, we’ll get out of here. I want us at the station. Like I said, the Woods Church won’t go in there because of the cameras. The last thing Marvin or his followers want is video evidence of their threats. Don’t take a long time inside, okay? I want to leave here before they figure out where you

might've gone.”

Summer nodded. “I’m surprised none of them have moved into the house.”

Mark hesitated.

Summer met his gaze, waiting for him to continue.

He must have decided to tell her what was on his mind. “They tried to get the keys from John, after your father died. John rents a room from Thomas, over his bar, since he works in town a couple days a week after taking over Hershel’s law office. I share meals with him sometimes. He’s a nice guy.”

“And? What happened?”

“Marvin wasn’t happy to learn your daddy didn’t leave him the ranch. John doesn’t talk about legal stuff, but *everyone* heard Marvin yelling outside his office. Ranting about hiring a lawyer and fighting the will or whatever.”

Summer nodded, not surprised by that information.

Mark continued. “I also know Able was bragging at the diner the night your daddy died, saying they were gonna be rich once they sold the ranch. They never planned on moving here. This ranch is large but Marvin built a church and a bunch of cabins at his place, to house all his followers.” He glanced toward the driveway nervously. “That’s enough chatting for now. Go get what you want.”

“I’ll be quick. Thanks.”

Summer walked up the wide porch steps, assaulted by memories. She stared at the swing creaking in the light wind to the left. Her mother used to read to her there. They’d been close until it all came to a painful end, when her mother had gotten sick.

The key fit the front door without issue and she pushed it open. The

formal living room had drastically changed. All the original furniture and paint had been redone. It resembled more of a sterile hotel lobby than a homey area to greet guests. Her mother would have hated what Morris did to the house. Summer did too.

The kitchen had also undergone a remodel. The dark wood cabinets had been replaced by stark white ones, with matching tile and countertops. It held no warmth. Dread hit that her bedroom might have also become a target of whatever decorator Morris had hired.

She quickly rushed up the back stairs, down the hallway, and paused before the closed door of her old bedroom. It took courage to turn the knob and enter.

Shock stalled her feet as she stared at a room that seemed to have been frozen in time.

Everything remained the same. Summer slowly stepped inside to gape at the band posters taped on the walls...dirty laundry overflowing a hamper next to her closet...makeup still displayed on the vanity. The layers of dust covering every surface and the smell of stale air hinted that it had been a long time since anyone had breached the space.

Her legs felt a little numb as she walked to the closet, pushing open one side. Her clothes from the previous decade remained on the hangers. Hot tears burned behind her eyes. Had Morris kept it that way in hopes of her returning? Was it even possible a small part of him loved her enough to enshrine her bedroom?

She backed away and exited her room, heading to the one at the end of the hallway. She paused again, took a breath, then twisted the double knobs and pushed the doors open. The master bedroom had changed. Her mother's touches had been replaced with heavy, dark furniture more common for a man.

The double walk-in closets beckoned to her, and she bypassed the first one in favor of the second. It had been her mother's. Summer silently prayed as she opened the door that the space hadn't been emptied.

Relief was instant when Summer spotted the neatly packed boxes and her mother's old clothes stored in plastic bags on hangers. Morris hadn't gotten rid of his wife's belongings. Now that she knew the truth, it was possible he hadn't been allowed to. All her mother's possessions belonged to her.

Summer quickly located the marked boxes she wanted the most, the ones containing photo albums and diaries. She silently promised to come back before she sold the ranch to go through the rest of her mom's things.

The two boxes were heavy to carry, but she lugged them downstairs and out the front door. Mark looked relieved as he rushed forward to help. He accepted the boxes as he asked, "Do you want me to put these in your father's truck?"

"No. Everyone would see it and know it belonged to Morris. I'm not making it that easy for Able or his father to find me."

"That's a good idea. Is this all of it?"

"For now." She spun, going back to lock the front door. "I'll write out a list tonight of other stuff I want and make one more trip before I leave."

"I'll have to escort you." Mark didn't sound happy.

"I could have John Barnes collect it." The trust *did* pay the attorney, after all. He should do a little work. "He could just ship stuff to me."

"Great." Mark put her things on the backseat of his SUV and glanced around. "Let's go."

She studied him. "Marvin and Able really scare you, don't they?"

"You have no idea how much." He lifted his hand to run his fingers

through his hair. “It’s gotten a lot worse since the last time you lived here. They were always nasty and rude to folks, but over the past few years, they’ve actually run some people off. We had to lay off most of the department, so there’s less law enforcement to keep them in line. Times are terrible, and we can’t get any help out here. The sheriff is practically retired and doesn’t give a shit.”

“Someone needs to stop the Woods from destroying this town.”

“I agree.” He climbed into the driver’s seat. “But who? You’re lucky you’re leaving. Feel bad for those of us who have no choice but to stay.”

She belted herself into the passenger seat. “It’s *your* job to stop them, Mark.”

He turned his head and held her gaze. “We’re a few men against those jerks. They always seek revenge anytime we try to touch them, and I’m the only one who doesn’t have a family to protect. It actually makes me happy *not* to be married. Do you remember Frida Vega?”

“Yes. Of course. She married Tommy Jolter.”

“Tommy pissed off Marvin because he wouldn’t give shit from his hardware store to the church for free. They were harassing him, telling him he’d be sorry. Then I get a call from Dr. Bardly. Frida was brought in by her husband. Doc tells me she’s beaten so bad, he’s called in a life flight helicopter to come get her. I drive to his house in shock, because Tommy isn’t the sort to hurt his wife. He’s real laid-back, and Frida hangs the moon in his eyes.”

He cleared his throat, looking a bit haunted. “I walk into the hospital, prepared to arrest Tommy...but she tells me it was four men from the church. They threatened to kill her next time if they didn’t get what they wanted from Tommy. That beating was just a warning—and she damn near died. Tommy put the hardware store *and* their house up for sale while she was in the

hospital and never brought her back here. They just fled. They weren't willing to press charges, too afraid that someone would come after them."

"There's got to be *something* you can do."

"I've contacted every law agency in this state. And I'll *keep* doing it, hoping they finally get sick of hearing from me and send someone to help. That's about what it's going to take to shut those assholes down. Everyone I've called is worried this situation could turn into a bloodbath or something. Nobody wants to take on some crazy religious group that's known to have piles of weapons. That leaves us pretty much on our own here. The men I work with don't want their wives attacked or murdered."

Summer understood where he was coming from, but it was so unjust. Horribly so. "Well, they won't get any of my money to support their shitty cause. I'm getting out of here and putting the ranch up for sale as soon as possible."

"I don't blame you." Mark started the engine, pulling away from her childhood home.

Summer turned her head, leaving her home behind for what she hoped was the last time, watching it grow smaller in the distance. It saddened her, thinking about her mother. She'd married a man whose heart had belonged to another, and she'd died too young, never getting the chance to break away from Morris and find true happiness.

"Are you okay?" Mark's voice interrupted her depressing thoughts.

"Yes."

"Are you sure you want to sell the ranch? That land has been in your family for a couple generations, hasn't it?"

"Yes. My grandfather bought the property and passed it to my mother, and now to me."

“You might want to hang on to it.”

“No.” She faced forward, tearing her gaze away from the ranch house. “It holds more bad memories than good ones. Maybe a new family can fill it with laughter and love someday.”

Chapter Five

Summer resisted the urge to get up from the desk and smack Paul Chip. Her gaze drifted to the wall clock, and it made her groan. It was just after seven at night, far too early to go to sleep, but staring at bars in the tiny cell they said she could sleep in was sounding better than listening to the jerk hit on her one more time. He had the lamest pickup lines ever.

“Aren’t you married?”

He glanced at his wedding band. “The finger is taken but the rest of me is still free.” He winked and flashed a grin. “I have a whole other hand.” He waved it. “It can do all sorts of good things to you.”

“Your wife must be so proud. Who is that again?”

“I ain’t telling you her name. You wouldn’t know her anyway. You’re just passing through.”

“I was raised here. Was *she*?”

He suddenly sobered. “I didn’t know that.”

Summer forced a smile. “Surprise. Does your wife know that you flirt and try to sleep with other women? I’m betting not.” She studied him. “I don’t see any dents in your head.”

His mouth fell open.

“It’s a tradition to nail flirty, stupid husbands with a cast-iron skillet around here, every time they step out of line. They train us young on how to swing those suckers.”

The deputy scowled. “That’s not true.”

“Uh-huh. What was her name again?”

He clamped his lips together and dropped his chin.

Summer smiled, leaning back in the chair. Mark had abandoned her to his coworker hours before and only returned to drop off a fried chicken dinner from the diner. He'd left soon afterward, and she had a suspicion it was to avoid the deputy sitting across from her. Summer wished she could leave, too.

Paul looked back up at her, waiting until she met his gaze. He smiled. "Bored? I could cure that. We could play strip poker. I keep a deck of cards in my desk."

"Oh my God! Knock it off. Never, okay? Ever."

The door opened, and she tensed, afraid it might be Able Woods. Her head turned in time to see Ryder stepping into the building. He'd changed his clothes since she'd seen him last, wearing a nice pair of jeans and a black T-shirt with his band's latest album cover stamped across the chest. His hair was pulled back into a neat ponytail. His dark gaze pinned her where she sat.

"What do you want, Raine?" Paul stood, his hand resting over the weapon strapped to his belt.

Ryder ignored him. "Hi, Summer."

She wasn't happy to see him, but she wasn't surprised, either. Ryder had warned her that he'd show up. There were a lot of bad things she could say about her first love, after learning what a big liar he was, but he'd always been punctual.

"Figures," Paul snorted, sitting down hard enough to make his chair protest with a groan. He smirked at her when she glanced his way. "Any pretty girl comes to town and a Raine's trying to screw them. Go away. I saw her first."

"You really take that pig nickname to heart, don't you?" Summer shot him a dirty look.

Ryder grinned. “Paul’s a creep.”

“Fuck you, Ryder. Yeah, I know which one you are.” He pointed at Ryder’s T-shirt. “Your brother has better taste than to promote that crap you call music.”

“Don’t be jealous.” Ryder grinned wider. “I know your wife is a *real* big fan.”

Paul stood so fast, his chair slid along the floor until it slammed into another desk. “What does that mean?”

“Relax. I signed a CD for her while she was in town with her parents yesterday. She told me she likes the new songs.” Ryder purposely continued to ignore Paul, his stare not leaving Summer. “Do you really want to sit here with him, or sleep on a cot in a jail cell? There’s a perfectly good guest room waiting for you at Trip’s—with a lock on the inside of the door.”

Sleeping inside a jail cell really wasn’t appealing to Summer. It was tempting to let Ryder take her away, but he’d want to talk. “I’m fine.”

Ryder glanced at Paul, then back at her. “Are you enjoying the company?”

She cringed.

“That’s what I thought. Paul has a bit of a reputation.”

“What kind?” The deputy sounded pissed. “Are you insulting me, Raine? *You*? That’s laughable.”

“At least I don’t get accused of pulling over women and asking for blow jobs to avoid tickets.”

Paul grabbed his weapon, clearing the holster. “You goddamn—”

Summer quickly rose to her feet. “Enough!” Her gaze lingered on the gun. “Put that away! Are you nuts? You can’t shoot someone who’s unarmed just because you lost a battle of insults.” She glanced at Ryder. “And don’t

piss off someone with a gun.”

Ryder didn't seem fazed. “There are cameras recording everything inside and out. Dipshit there will eventually remember that and put away his gun. Come with me, Summer. Have you eaten?”

“Yes.”

Ryder stepped closer. “Then at least I'm better company. I won't hit on you...or sneak up on you while you're sleeping to cop a feel.”

“You can't leave.” Paul had holstered his weapon.

She ignored him, debating leaving with Ryder.

“Mark said you were here for the night.” Paul shook his head. “You're staying with me.” His gaze dropped to her breasts and he licked his lips. “*All* night.”

She bit back a sigh before grabbing her purse. The alternative to Ryder was spending the evening with an annoying deputy who hit on her every two minutes. Anything seemed better than that, even facing her past. Summer was starting to suspect the offensive man might actually attempt what Ryder had just suggested while she was asleep.

“Fine, Ryder. My stuff is behind you on the bench. I'm not leaving it here. It goes where I do.” She marched closer to help with her suitcase and boxes. “Don't make me regret this.”

“You can't just leave,” Paul whined. “I had plans.”

She spun. “Never means *never*. Learn that. I'm totally going to find out who your wife is and have a talk with her if you don't stop *right fucking now*.”

“Claire Thompson,” Ryder muttered, bending to lift the boxes she'd taken from the ranch.

She groaned, staring at Paul with disdain. “Shame on you! She's the

sweetest person ever. What does Claire see in you?”

Paul paled. “You know my wife?”

“I do. But I’d be more worried about Cathy if I were you. Did you know your wife’s sister used to work at a slaughterhouse after high school? She isn’t one to mess with, and she’s always been pretty protective of her baby sister.” She glanced at Ryder. “Let’s go.”

He chuckled, shoving open the exterior door. Summer followed, lugging her suitcase. The evening air had cooled a bit from the heat but not by much.

The bright blue truck she’d seen at Trip’s was parked at the curb. “Yours?”

“It is.” He lifted the boxes into the bed. “Things changed a lot over the years. It’s less than a year old and paid off.”

“Is your band doing well?”

He turned his head, giving her a suspicious look. “You know about that?”

Summer clenched her teeth, regretting speaking. She’d given away information she hadn’t meant to. “I heard about it inside, remember? You also mentioned it earlier when we were at Trip’s.” No way would she admit to following his career or even listening to some of his songs when she was really feeling like a glutton for punishment.

“Right. We do okay.”

“Good for you.”

“What do you do for a living?”

The temptation to lie was strong but she resisted. “What *don’t* I do is the question. I’ve had a lot of jobs over the years but mainly I wait tables, bar-back sometimes, and I’m pretty good at cleaning houses and offices.”

He frowned. “I figured you’d go to college.”

“I couldn’t afford that.”

“They do school loans.”

Summer shrugged. “I couldn’t afford to repay something like that since I was working under the table. It means earning less money.”

He took the suitcase from her, loading it into the back of his truck, and swung open the passenger door. “Why under the table?”

“It’s harder to find someone if you can’t trace them by using a social security number. The only reason I used my social was for filing taxes. An attorney I met while bartending assured me I wasn’t committing tax evasion as long as I was honest with the IRS on the cash I earned and paid what I owed. I moved around a lot, and I had my driver’s license registered with a good friend’s address. She swore she didn’t know me when anyone my father sent showed up. She usually told them I’d rented a room for a month but disappeared owing her money. We wanted to give them the impression I wouldn’t have a reason to keep in contact with Lorna.”

He closed the passenger door, rounded the truck, and climbed into the driver’s seat. It remained quiet between them until he’d started the engine and drove them out of town. “Tell me about Able.”

“There’s not much to tell. I hated him. He was a bully, and he scared me. But my father still ordered me to marry him. I refused.”

“Why?”

“Because Able’s an ass.”

“I mean, why did your father want you to marry him?”

“At the time, I just thought Morris wanted to punish me, and he was freaking out because someone saw us together at the rodeo. Now I wonder if he wanted me married to Able because it was another way to make sure I stayed ignorant that the ranch was really mine. Both Marvin and Able acted

like his puppets, doing everything he said. He had them snowed already, so...”

She stared out the dark passenger window, avoiding looking at Ryder. It was easier to talk to him if she wasn't looking into his eyes. Their past lingered in her mind. It made her feel nervous and uncomfortable being so close to him. It might have been a mistake to agree to leave the sheriff's station.

“Trip said you found out your mom owned the ranch. I take it the money is yours too?”

“That's what the attorney said today.” She refused to mention the rest. Their legal marriage *had* to be a mistake.

“Marvin and Able must really want your ranch.”

“They sucked up to Morris for all these years, obviously expecting a payout. I'm sure they were fit to be tied after learning he'd lied to them about owning the ranch and inheriting money. Even the new truck he drove is ranch property. I didn't even know my mom left everything to me instead of Morris. You can bet he didn't mention that fact to them, since he never told *me*. He always said it was *his* ranch and *his* money. I lost track of the number of times he threatened to disown me, saying I wouldn't get a penny if I didn't do as told.”

Ryder softly muttered something.

“What?” She glanced at him.

“It's nothing you want to hear.”

“Okay.”

He was quiet for a long moment while she stared back out the passenger window. Then he said, “I can't believe your father left you in this mess. He had to know how pissed his buddies would be.”

“You’re giving him credit for giving a shit. Don’t.”

“You’re his daughter.”

“Morris was always a selfish ass.”

More silence stretched between them. “Why do you call him Morris? Did you find out he wasn’t your biological father or something?”

She’d dreamed of that possibility plenty since her mother’s death. “No. Unfortunately, I’m pretty sure he was. He just didn’t act like a father should. Once I left, I stopped calling him daddy.”

“Because he tried to force you to marry Able?”

“That, and his goons harassed me every time they found me. Not exactly something a good father does.”

“Harassed you how?”

She took a deep breath. “I really don’t want to discuss it, Ryder.”

“Then let’s talk about us.”

“There *is* no us.”

“We’re going to talk about it, Summer.”

“Save your breath. I’m over it.” *What a liar*, she silently admitted. There was no getting over Ryder and the memories of the past they’d shared. They’d had something special but it had been built on lies. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I never meant to hurt you.”

She clenched her teeth. She’d just told him she didn’t want to talk about the past. She’d cried plenty of nights over his loss. It had taken her *years* to be able to think about him without it feeling as if her heart was being wrenched from her chest.

“I was afraid to tell you certain things about my life that happened before we were together. Your father always tried to poison you against my

family. It would have just given him more ammunition.”

“*You* ruined what we had, not him.” Her hands fisted in her lap.

“What did my old man tell you?”

“That women paid you and your brother to fuck them.” She didn’t mince words. “At the same time. That you were both strippers. I didn’t believe him at first. The pictures I saw in that box confirmed that part.”

“That’s not true. I mean, about being paid to sleep with women. River and I were strippers for a while, but it happened before we dated. I swear I never cheated on you, Summer. You changed my life.”

Hot tears burned at the back of her eyes and pain squeezed inside her chest. She didn’t believe him. “It doesn’t matter. It’s done and over with.”

The truck slowed, and she was suddenly nervous when he pulled off the road, stopping near a fence. There was no signs of life anywhere, no houses. He shut off the engine but kept the headlights and dash lights on.

“Summer? Look at me.”

The interior overhead light came on, momentarily blinding her. She blinked rapidly to make sure he wouldn’t guess how close she was to tears before turning her head. Ryder peered at her with a look of sincerity.

“*I swear* I never cheated on you.” His voice lowered, turning raspy. “You were all I wanted, and you made me a better man. I should have told you about the things I did before we were together, but I didn’t want to risk losing what we had. You were so sweet and good. I wasn’t sure you would look at me the same if you knew I’d been a stripper. It tore me up inside to keep shit from you.”

It was sad to Summer how much she wished she could believe him. “It’s in the past.”

He looked away. “I guess it is. I just wanted to tell you why I didn’t say

anything.” He started the truck, turned off the overhead light, and pulled back onto the road to drive them to Trip’s place. “You shouldn’t have had to hear that stuff from my old man.”

She had to agree. “I’m sorry that you lost him.” She refused to admit she’d read about his father’s death in an interview he’d done for his band.

“I take it you weren’t talking to anyone in town? We lost Mary weeks after you left, and he died about a year after her.”

“No. I didn’t trust anyone. I’m sorry for your loss.”

He ignored that last part. She guessed it was too painful to talk about. “Not even Shelly? You two were tight.”

“She liked Tim Halloway. His father was involved with the church. It would have put a target on her if I’d contacted her or asked her to keep secrets for me. If I cut ties, at least she didn’t have to lie.” She decided to be totally honest. “I *did* call her a week after I left. We were best friends and I didn’t want her to worry. Shelly pleaded with me to come back and marry Able. Tim’s dad had twisted everything, so she truly believed marrying Able was for the best. She went on and on about how we could raise our kids together. I knew then that I’d already lost her for good.”

“Tim and Shelly got married, had a little girl, but they moved away two years ago. I think to somewhere in Arkansas. Tim’s dad and her parents moved with them. I didn’t know his father was ever a member of the church.”

She shrugged. “There were a lot of things I didn’t mention.”

The silence stretched before Ryder finally broke it. “I knew everything important about you.”

Bitterness tightened her chest. “No, you didn’t.”

“Your favorite color is robin’s egg blue. You love yellow roses, and you always wanted a puppy, but your old man hated dogs.”

It hurt Summer that he'd remember those things. "Do you really want to know why I hate Morris so much?" She refused to meet his gaze when he turned his head to look her way.

"He was involved with that church," he guessed.

She hugged her waist. "That was part of it. They were a bunch of racist jerks he allowed to invade our home." She paused...then sighed. "He hit me, Ryder. His drinking was out of control, always had been, and he'd go into these rages. I'll spare you the gory details, but he never touched my face. Couldn't have visible bruises showing. The worst part was, I really thought he might murder me. He threatened to do just that often, especially that last year I was here."

"Fuck!" Ryder sounded furious. "Why didn't you tell me? I would have killed the bastard if I'd known."

"That's why. I was terrified of him, of his friends...but mostly I was afraid that one of you would end up in prison for murdering the other. I didn't want that guilt or horror to become a reality."

The miles passed in silence. Summer closed her eyes and she just hoped they were done confessing secrets. No good had come from the past and never would.

Ryder gripped the wheel with both fists, fighting the urge to reach across the seat to touch Summer. He should have realized that her dad abused her. Morris drank too much and was a loudmouth bully. Their fathers had that in common. He'd been knocked around a few times by his own father, when his older brothers weren't around. Of course, it had stopped after he'd turned twelve. He'd been big enough by then to shove the old man away before he became too violent.

Summer wouldn't have stood a chance against her father. She'd always been petite. It was probably one of the things that had drawn him to her. There was something vulnerable about Summer that stirred his protective instincts. She'd been kind of timid and shy, unlike most of the girls he'd known.

Women he'd met working at the bar had left him with less than a stellar opinion of the opposite sex. They tended to come on strong and only wanted a good time. Most of them were divorced, or at least lied about being single. Ryder hadn't asked many questions, not wanting to know the truth. The women had been looking for no-strings-attached sex with a male stripper, and he'd been happy to oblige. River, too.

He'd always had a need for acceptance. All the Raine brothers did. It was tough having an entire town look down on their family. Tougher still when their father was an alcoholic and they'd been piss poor.

He and River had the extra burden of literally being the sons of a prostitute. Their father had picked up their mother at a truck stop, where she'd been turning tricks. Draken Raine had literally offered her the "job" of sleeping with him and taking care of his three young sons at the ranch.

It would always be painful, knowing they were only alive because a condom broke. Their old man had been brutally honest with his twin sons that the pregnancy hadn't been planned and shouldn't have happened. Their mother had taken off shortly after giving birth, apparently unwilling to care for two more kids.

Their own mother hadn't loved them enough to stick around.

As a stripper, Ryder had used the easy sex to bury his pain and build his self-esteem. It was easy enough; women always wanted him, and he was happy to forget his troubles for a short while between their legs. That was, until he figured out he was only good enough to fuck. Not to date. The

realization left him bitter and cold inside.

Until Summer came along.

His Summer had never looked at him as if he were tarnished in any way. She'd held her head up high with his arm wrapped around her, proud to be seen with him at the rodeos and parties they'd attended together. They'd had to sneak around, and always away from Hailey, but he hadn't minded. He knew her father was an ass. As soon as Ryder had enough money to build them a home, Summer would tell the whole town to go to hell and move in with him. He had faith that she'd stay forever.

It had devastated him when he discovered he'd been wrong. Summer had dropped him like a hot potato and taken off to parts unknown. Once again, a woman who should have loved him had disappeared from his life. He'd been *certain* Summer had left to avoid anyone from finding out about them.

Now he realized how wrong he'd been.

It shamed him to realize how much he'd failed to protect her. He wanted five minutes alone with Morris Decon, but the bastard was already dead.

Now she was being targeted by someone else. The devastation done to her SUV gave him chills. She could have been killed. "Tell me about Able and his old man." He needed to know the trouble he faced.

Her silence irritated him.

"They could come after you again, damn it."

"There's not much to tell. Marvin started showing up right after my mom died. Morris was an idiot, who bought into his racist bullshit. It probably helped that they kissed his ass. Marvin and my father became fast friends. He allowed his new bestie to hold services in our house, spewing the garbage that came out of his mouth."

“They’re a bunch of hateful bullies.”

“Exactly,” she agreed.

He frowned, slowing to take the turn onto Trip’s part of the ranch. “Go on.”

“Morris had become a full-blown alcoholic by the time I hit twelve, and he listened to everything Marvin said as if it were gospel. It was sickening. I refused to be a part of it and would avoid the house when they held their meetings.

“By the time I was fifteen, they started pushing Able at me. It creeped me out. He was twenty-one, so not only was it technically illegal for him to touch me, I got *serious* bad vibes off him. I’d take off on my horse for hours to check fences along the property when they were at the house, so he couldn’t find me, and when I got a driver’s license, I’d leave the ranch. That *really* pissed them all off, not knowing where I was, who I was with. My dad would sometimes hit me after everyone went home, accusing me of being an embarrassment. It just grew worse from there.”

“Did that son of a bitch Able touch you?” Ryder silently swore to kill him if he’d physically harmed Summer.

“No. And you know I was a virgin. He just made me really uncomfortable and would talk about the day we’d finally be together. It wasn’t ever going to happen. I just ignored him, because I’d learned telling him to leave me alone only got me into more trouble with Morris.”

“What exactly happened the day you left?”

“I came home from the rodeo and walked into a trap. There’s no other way to describe it.” She drifted into silence.

“Tell me the rest, Summer.”

She looked out the passenger window. “Someone from the church had

seen us together. Or really, saw me with you and your brother, so they technically didn't know about us, specifically. Regardless, Morris lost his mind. They had me cornered in the kitchen the second I walked in. He hit me a couple times. Threats were made." She paused. "Then Morris said Able would make sure I stayed away from you. He gave me twenty minutes to prepare for a wedding. Marvin was going to perform the ceremony, and he said he'd get the paperwork to make it legal after the fact."

"Did Able touch you then?"

"No."

Ryder seethed, imagining how terrifying that must have been for Summer.

"Tell me about Darcy Grams."

Her voice was so soft, he barely heard the question. "What about her?"

"Her father was there. He said you and River had both slept with her at the same time."

He flexed his fingers on the wheel, grinding his teeth. "River might have, but I never touched her."

"Bill Grams was pretty clear that the two of you fucked his daughter at the same time. Said he caught you guys red-handed with her in his barn. He also made it clear that it happened while we were dating."

He shook his head. "It was probably Dusty and River. Those two hung out a lot, especially after we started dating. I swear, Summer, it wasn't me. I *never* cheated on you. I give you my word. Darcy was always chasing after us. I'd heard her old man was pretty stern, and I assumed she was looking to use us to rebel a little."

Summer grew silent again. He parked in front of Trip's mobile home, killing the engine. He turned in the seat to study her. The porch lights were

on, so he could clearly see her beautiful face, even though her chin was down. She was hugging her middle, something he noticed she did fairly often now.

“Look at me.”

It tore him up when she turned her head and he saw the pain in her gaze.

“I never cheated on you, Summer.” He willed her to see the truth. “I never touched Darcy, or anyone else, while we were together.”

“It was a long time ago. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“It *does*. I don’t want you to think I’m guilty of something I’m not. I kept secrets from you, yes, but that wasn’t one of them. I was afraid to tell you about things that happened before you and I got together. I didn’t want to fuck up the *one* good thing in my life. That was you.”

She turned her head away. “I’m tired, Ryder.”

He didn’t believe her, and they weren’t done talking.

Movement from the side of the porch drew his attention. Trip moved into the light, a rifle cradled in his arms. Probably making sure it was them instead of unwanted company.

“Let’s go inside, where it’s safer,” he said.

She reached to open the door.

“Don’t you dare. I’ll come around.”

She paused. “We’re not dating anymore. I can get it myself.” She opened the truck door and slid out.

“Fuck,” he whispered, climbing out of his side. “Go on inside and I’ll bring in your stuff.”

Chapter Six

Summer nodded at Trip when he opened the door wide to admit her into his home. The lights were on as she entered the living room. The smell of cooked hamburgers lingered. Ryder followed her inside, holding her things. He glanced at her once before disappearing down the hallway, out of sight.

“We’re putting you in the room at the back of the house. It’s right next to Ryder’s. My bedroom is on this side.” He jerked his head to indicate the other side of the house. “I wanted the master separated from the guestrooms.”

Summer forced a smile. “Thank you for allowing me to stay the night, Trip.”

He nodded. “You’ll be safe. I slept this afternoon while Ryder was doing his interview. I’ll keep guard.”

“What kind of interview was it?”

“He always does press for his band after or right before they release a new album. Sometimes it’s in person, but he usually does them via phone. This time, it was a magazine out of Austin. They sent someone to Hailey and met with him at the bar to take some pictures. Ryder doesn’t invite anyone to the ranch. He likes to keep that part of his life private.”

“Wasn’t he supposed to be on tour right now?”

Trip hesitated. “Their lead singer was just put into rehab. The problem had to be addressed after Jimmy damn near overdosed on booze and sleeping pills. A groupie he slept with couldn’t wake him the next morning. They had to call an ambulance, and I guess it was touch and go for a few hours.” He sighed. “Jimmy tested five times the legal limit, from what I heard. I can’t even imagine being that drunk. Ryder and the other members threatened to replace him if he didn’t seek help. They agreed to suspend the rest of the tour

until he's healthy enough to come back."

She frowned. "Ryder can sing." He had a beautiful voice, actually.

"He doesn't like to be the center of attention."

Summer arched her eyebrows. "Since when?"

Trip smiled. "I know, right? He does write all their music and lyrics." He waved her into the living room. "Let me show you the guest bedroom."

"Thank you."

"Who had the night shift? Paul?"

She winced. "Unfortunately."

He shook his head in disgust. "He's terrible."

"He kept hitting on me. I can't believe he's married to Claire Thompson. That poor girl."

"She's too sweet to be married to that jerk, but she met him at college and brought him home. He probably would have been fired already, but nobody else is jumping to take that job."

She nodded, following him down a hallway to the guest bedroom. Trip opened a door and flipped on a light, moving out of her way. She glanced at the sparsely furnished room and smiled. It was just a queen-size bed, one nightstand, and a plush chair but they looked new. "Thank you. This is nice."

He shrugged. "Nobody's slept in here before. I hope the bed is comfortable."

She stared up at him. Questions filled her, but she didn't want to be rude.

Trip studied her back. "What?"

"Nothing."

"Are you wondering how I got the money for all this? New mobile home, the land, the fancy furniture?"

She bit her lip. "It's none of my business."

He leaned in close, and she tensed when Trip almost touched her ear with his lips. "I write mysteries," he whispered.

Her eyes widened and her head jerked back. She stared at him in shock as he winked and inched away.

"Don't tell anyone. Only the family knows. I write under a pen name, and I've done rather well for myself."

"That's great!" Summer was surprised but happy for him.

"I think so. I always loved books and had a lot of free time when the sun went down to read growing up. I started writing, and it eventually turned into a book. Then I wrote a few more, and finally worked up the nerve to learn how to self-publish. They've done better than I ever thought possible."

"Why did you stay here?"

He smiled. "Hailey is where family is."

Footsteps came down the hallway, and Trip exited the room, getting out of Ryder's way. She noticed he didn't wait in the hallway, instead disappearing and leaving them alone.

Ryder turned to study her. "Are you sure you're not hungry? I haven't eaten yet. Trip made burgers, from the smell. I know he'll have leftovers for us, since I told him I was bringing you back here."

"I'm good, but thank you. Mark brought me dinner earlier."

It was uncomfortable being in a bedroom together. They'd once been close, but the long years had left them almost strangers. Ryder took a hesitant step forward, and she tensed.

He froze. "Will you at least join me while I eat?"

"I think I'll get some sleep. It was a long drive to Texas and I didn't waste money on motels. I took a nap in my SUV last night at a rest stop, but

I'm still exhausted. And today was...a lot."

"We have things to discuss."

"We don't." Summer hugged her waist. "I'm leaving in the morning if my SUV is drivable, or I'll take Morris's truck. It's a long drive back to Nevada. I need my sleep."

"You could stay here for a few days."

"No. I can't."

"Able and that bunch aren't going to get near you. You're safe here, Summer." He inched a little closer. "Trip will keep an eye out for them tonight, and I'll take over in the morning."

"There's no reason to stay."

His eyes narrowed. "What about us?"

"There *is* no us." Summer avoided his gaze.

"You don't feel *anything* for me anymore?"

"It turns out I never knew you, Ryder."

"That's not true."

She turned away, taking a few steps to get some distance. "You weren't who I thought you were. And I came to terms with that a long time ago. I just want to sleep and get out of here as fast as possible tomorrow. Coming back to Hailey was a mistake."

Movement from the corner of her eye had her turning, and she gasped when he suddenly was in front of her. Ryder gripped her arms but his touch was gentle. "You're wrong. What we felt was real. It's haunted me, Summer." He tilted his head down until their faces were too close. "*You've* haunted me. I tried to find you so many damn times, just to find out why you left me."

"Now you know."

“I do.” His temper showed in his deepened voice.

“So there’s nothing else to say.”

A muscle in his jaw jumped. “Yes, there is.”

It hurt Summer too much being so close to him, and she just wanted Ryder to leave her in peace. “There’s no changing the past. It’s done, and we both moved forward. You didn’t know why I left, but now you have your answers. You said you never cheated on me, and I’m willing to believe that. Discussion over.”

He scowled. “So that’s it?”

It was obvious to her that Ryder wasn’t going to accept that. “What do you expect from me? Do you want me to tell you that it’s okay you built our relationship on lies? It wasn’t...but I get it now. You’ve explained. Your lack of faith in me still stings, but it’s done.”

“You should have stayed to speak to me. Asked *me* about everything my dad said. Instead, you just left. How could you do that?”

“I felt like everything was a lie! Do you blame me? I didn’t even know who you were anymore.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“No, it’s not. The Ryder you portrayed to me was sweet, kind, and completely honest. I found out differently, in the worst way possible. I saw the photos of you and River in your stripper chaps, surrounded by other women. They had their hands all over you. And your father told me about catching you and River banging some blonde together in the house.”

“That happened once, and it was two years before we were dating.”

“He told me it was recent. ‘Just the other day,’ I believe were his exact words.”

“My old man was drunk twenty-four seven and mixed up everything in

his head. He couldn't have told you the difference between last week and last year." Ryder looked sincere.

"It doesn't matter. That guy in the photos, the man who would share women with his twin, wasn't the Ryder I knew." She jerked out of his hold and backed away. "Why would I have stuck around to be lied to some more? Or worse, allow you to push me into doing something I didn't want to do—like maybe your brother."

He took a few deep breaths but stayed back. That muscle in his jaw clenched again. "I never would have shared you with River. Those women didn't matter to me...but you were everything."

Summer just wished he'd leave her alone, not wanting to rehash such painful memories. "I'm tired, Ryder."

"Too bad. Let it out. Tell me how you *really* feel about me after learning my secrets."

She met his stare. "What?"

"Do you want to call me names? Go for it."

"Are you *trying* to start an argument?"

"Yes. We should have had this fight eleven years ago. Yell at me." Ryder opened his arms wide and lifted his chin. "Do you want to take a swing or two? Do it. I certainly won't hit you back."

His words stunned Summer. "I'm not going to hit you."

"Did you *ever* love me? Even a little? Or was I just your way of getting back at your old man? Did you spread your legs for me just to fuck *him* over?"

"Fuck you." Her temper flared. "How dare you!"

"You never even called me!" he yelled. "Not even to tell me to fuck off or drop dead. Who does that? I'll tell you. Someone who never gave a damn."

You were using me to get back at your old man. Morris Decon *hated* my family. You got your revenge against him for treating you badly by screwing a Raine. Admit it!”

Years of pain erupted as Summer blew up. “I loved you! I went against my father because you became *everything* to me! You don’t know how terrified I was at all times, thinking he’d find out.”

“Yeah? Why don’t you tell me.”

She really did want to punch him now. She even balled her fist—then looked down at it, horrified by her thoughts.

Summer retreated until her back touched the wall. Part of her was tempted to flee the room. It was possible she’d get lost out in the dark, but wandering Trip’s property trying to find the road back into town was sounding better than remaining in this room with Ryder.

“Tell me!” he shouted.

She forced her temper down, speaking quietly. “I lived in terror that Morris would find out we were seeing each other. He had such a horrible temper, and every time he started punching me and shoving me, I wondered if that was the day he’d take it too far. He used to tell me that he’d brought me into this world, and he could take me out of it. They weren’t just words to him, Ryder. I knew he was capable of killing me...*that’s* what I risked being with you. My life.”

She held his gaze as she continued, “Did you know I planned to leave before we started dating? I’d saved money for years. I graduated, turned eighteen, and was looking for a job far away from here.”

Ryder just stared at her, frowning.

“I thought becoming a live-in nanny for a family would be perfect. I’d have a roof over my head, paychecks I could save up to buy a car, and I’m

good with kids. I never had siblings, but Shelly has seven of them, and I loved helping her care for them. That day you first spoke to me? I was at the diner because they have free wi-fi. Shelly brought her laptop for me to use in my job search. I *did* love you, Ryder. So much that I stayed, willing to risk even more abuse from my father. How dare you accuse me of being with you for any other reason.”

Ryder seemed to study her, his face going slack as his anger seeped out of him. “Do you really think your old man would have killed you? You’re his daughter.”

“You underestimate his hatred for your family. I remember as a kid, hearing him and Mom getting into fights over his obsession with another woman. As an adult, and knowing what I do now, I can fill in the gaps.”

“What would those be?”

“The night I left, Morris screamed at me about how your dad killed the only woman he ever loved by getting her pregnant over and over. He admitted he’d never loved my mom and married her for the money and the ranch.” She fought back tears. “Those fights I heard were about your mother. My mom clearly knew that Morris never loved her. The bastard. He was in love with *your* mom, but she married your father instead.”

He shook his head. “Morris was talking about Nav, Drake, and Dusty’s mom. She died when they were young. My mother was a prostitute my dad was desperate enough to bribe into coming home with him. She got pregnant with River and me, then took off after we were born. The woman who birthed us never cared enough to come back. Not so much as a call to find out what happened to us.”

Summer lifted her head to stare into his eyes. He was so close, she could have reached out and touched him if she just lifted her hand. She didn’t, holding his gaze instead.

“I’m sorry. You never talked about your mom. I just assumed it hurt too much because I thought she’d died.”

“Didn’t your father ever tell you we were the sons of a whore?”

“He called most women that. Or sluts. I tried really hard to tune out most of his rants. He loved to twist everything with an ugly spin.”

“Can you understand why I was so pissed that you did the same thing by just leaving? The two most important women in my life just walked away from me like I was garbage. My mother never looked back, and neither did you.” He looked away briefly, shaking his head. “What makes me so goddamn unlovable?”

Summer had to rapidly blink but was still blinded by tears. “You’re not. And that’s not true. I was so in love with you that it ripped me to shreds to find out you’d been lying to me. Leaving was the hardest things I’ve ever done, and I wanted to call a thousand times.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Was I supposed to give you another shot to do more damage?”

“That’s a bullshit excuse, Summer. You owed me the chance to defend myself.”

Her anger returned. “You made a fool out of me—and everyone else seemed to know it! There was so much about you that I didn’t know, yet you swore I was the most important person in your life. Who does that?”

He reached up, seeming intent on wiping away a stray tear that slid down her cheek. “Sum—

She jerked away to avoid his thumb. “Don’t touch me.”

He let out a harsh breath. “This is exactly what I was afraid of,” he rasped.

She used the back of her hand to dry her own cheek and slid a few

inches along the wall to put a little space between them. “What does that mean?”

“I knew you’d be disgusted by me if you learned about my past.” He dropped his hand to his side. “River and I took that job at the bar because we needed money badly at the time. Our old man had sold anything worth a damn already, including our best horses, so we couldn’t breed more to sell. We found out he’d even taken down payments on horses we didn’t own to support his booze habit. Most of Nav’s money was going to Drake to keep him in law school. Drake had earned some scholarships, but that didn’t include everything, including living expenses. No one told him how bad things got because he would have felt obligated to drop out of school, just like River and I did. Drake always dreamed of becoming a lawyer. It was important that he thought we were doing okay, to keep him from coming home.”

“I didn’t know things were so bad for you. Everything seemed fine when we were dating.”

“That’s because working at the bar helped to get our family out of the hole. That’s also where River and I discovered our effect on women. In Hailey, we were just the local drunk’s worthless sons. As strippers, we were two hot guys women loved to fantasize about.” He cocked his head slightly, watching her. “It changed our lives in more ways than one. I won’t deny that. I can’t.”

He turned away and walked over to the bed, taking a seat on the edge of it. He hung his head and continued. “River asked me one night if I’d be interested in a threesome, because some woman wanted to do identical twins. I was single, it was something new, and I thought...what the hell?”

Summer pushed away from the wall to take a seat in the chair. He watched her for a little bit before he started talking again.

“Working the ranch had made us pretty fit. No gym membership required. Our old man had put us to work almost as soon as we could walk.” Ryder paused. “All those women thought we were sexy as hell. Imagine the head rush we felt, coming from this town, being looked at as scum all our lives, then suddenly having all that attention... Do you want to hear the rest?”

“Yes.”

He hesitated. “You might hate me even more.”

She studied him for a moment, acknowledging his words. “I still want the truth.”

Ryder was afraid Summer would say that. He’d lost her once because of secrets. He wouldn’t make the same mistake now.

“It was a rush, having women flocking toward us. It was almost like we were gods.”

Her mouth parted but Summer didn’t say whatever she was thinking.

“Go ahead,” he urged.

“Gods?” Her tone was loaded with sarcasm.

He gave a small grin. “You know, something spectacular. Somebody they wanted to get to know better. They offered us sex, which is every guy’s fantasy.” He took a deep breath. “At first, it’s all great and wonderful. You’re getting laid whenever you want. Name one single guy you’ve ever met who wouldn’t think that’s living the dream. I haven’t met one yet. And I thought that way too...but after a while, it started getting to me.”

“How?”

“There was this regular customer who came into the bar. Her name was Gloria.” Ryder wasn’t sure if he should mention this, but at least Summer was no longer trying to kick him out of the room. “She was in her early

thirties, said she was divorced, and I'd been sleeping with her off and on for a couple months. I was starting to feel things for her, but every time I mentioned taking her out on a date, she always came up with an excuse. She was going out of town to visit her parents. Work was too crazy. It was always something."

He paused, trying to judge how she was taking the story. Summer just watched him, her face giving nothing away. He decided to continue. "One day, I ran into Gloria at a gas station before my shift...with her husband and two small kids in tow. You should have seen the fear in her eyes when she realized I was standing at the next pump, putting gas in my truck just feet away."

He winced from that terrible memory. "They looked like a perfect family, if you know what I mean. Her husband seemed like a nice guy. He was calling her sweetheart, and I could tell by the way he looked at Gloria that she was everything to him. It made me feel like total shit. That poor bastard obviously had no clue. If he found out she'd been sleeping with me, it probably would have destroyed their marriage. Those kids would have gone through the hell of a divorce. Gloria looked ready to faint or throw up."

"She was probably afraid you'd reveal that you knew her."

"Oh, she was." He blew out a long breath. "Gloria showed up at the bar the next day, before it opened, and offered me five hundred bucks to forget we ever met. As if I was going to track her husband down and tell him the truth if she didn't bribe me to stay quiet. That's how little she thought of me. It reminded me of my mother. Men paid her to fuck them, but it turns out someone will *also* offer you money to pretend you never touched them. She was ice cold, said some shit that really hurt. I felt so stupid. Here I was, trying to get her to date me, and she just wanted to use me for sex."

"What did she say?"

“Just the normal bullshit about how I was a great fuck, but I wasn’t worth ruining her life over. She made it clear that I didn’t mean anything to her. I told her to keep her money and assured her that her dirty little secret was safe. But it made me wonder how many other women would be horrified if anyone found out they’d touched me. It destroyed my god complex pretty quick, that’s for sure. And I grew really bitter.”

Ryder needed to pace, and he did so on the opposite side of the bed, keeping his distance from Summer. He was pretty sure she preferred it that way. He glanced at her, but she refused to meet his stare. She seemed more interested in the floor.

“After that, I only fucked women I knew River had slept with, too. It ensured I’d never start to feel things for a woman if I knew my brother had been with her already. It doesn’t exactly inspire you to get attached. At least not for me.”

Summer looked up to meet his gaze, and he hated to see the pain in her face.

“I wasn’t in love with Gloria, but I liked her a hell of a lot.”

Summer nodded. “I don’t understand why you were attracted to me then. It sounds as if you preferred older women.”

“I wasn’t attracted to you at first.” At her frown, he quickly said, “Not because you weren’t pretty. I always knew who you were, but you were a few years younger than me, and we never hung out in school or anything. Then... you went from this young girl with literal pigtails to a beautiful woman. I don’t even think I’d seen you since I graduated high school, before spotting you in the diner with Shelly. I didn’t recognize you at first. I thought, who is that? Then Adam told me. The pigtails were gone, and so were the baggy clothes you always wore. I couldn’t stop staring, and then you looked up and caught me.” He smiled, remembering how she’d blushed and dropped her

chin. “You were so shy. Unlike anyone else who’d ever caught my eye.”

“I dashed out the door.”

He chuckled. “You sure did.”

“I was terrified you were going to yell at me or even hurt me because of Morris. He was always so mean to your family.”

That made him scowl.

“I grew up with Morris’s stories about the horrible Raine boys.” Summer rolled her eyes. “But I quickly realized you’d never hurt me.”

Ryder nodded. “It took me weeks to get you to stop avoiding me. I just wanted to get to know you...and I did. You were so sweet, Summer. Your smile lit up my whole world. I wanted to be a part of yours, and the more time we spent together, the more it was never enough. You were something special. I make a living writing songs now, and most of them are still about you.”

She flinched.

“What?”

“The cold-hearted witch one included?”

“You heard that song?”

She nodded, avoiding his gaze.

“Guilty. I was mad at you when I wrote that one. But my point is that I fell for you hard. I quit working at the bar as soon as we started dating, since we weren’t desperate for money anymore, and I shut women down fast when they hit on me. I can’t stress enough that I *never* cheated on you, Summer. I swear to God. I wanted to tell you about my past. I just thought you’d take it bad.”

She looked up at him as he took a seat back on the bed, near her.

“You didn’t even give me a chance to see how I’d react, Ryder.”

He regretted that now. “I was terrified that you’d believe everything your old man said about my family if you heard about my past. We aren’t devils, even if my old man could act like Satan at times. I already had poverty, a prostitute mother, and a drunk father as strikes against me.

“Nav was just starting to make it big on the rodeo circuit, and he was going to use some of his winnings to buy breeding horses to get our family business back up and running. I had real hope at that point that one day soon, we’d be able to make something of our ranch. I wanted to build us a house, so you’d never have to live with my old man. He was crude and obnoxious and mean. I just didn’t have enough money yet to break ground. I was putting aside money just for us almost as soon as we started dating. It might sound crazy, but I *knew* you were it for me. I planned to ask you to marry me as soon as I could. I didn’t want to lose you before we even had a chance at a future...but that’s what happened anyway. You left without talking to me.”

She was quiet for a beat. Then asked, “Why would your dad say all those awful things about you if they weren’t true?”

Ryder resisted snorting. “He was a broken man, Summer. I was no saint, but he had a real bad way of looking at life. That’s why I didn’t want you around him. He always said that the way to kill a man’s soul was to let him fall in love with a woman. That’s basically what happened to him when his wife died. He never bounced back. He just crawled into a bottle to drown his sorrows and never came out. I guarantee whatever my old man said was in the hope that you’d dump me. He knew I was in love with you. I’d already told him. In his own twisted way, he probably thought he was doing me a favor.”

Summer clasped her hands in her lap. “I was devastated when I left. I felt really stupid, and I was so angry with you.”

“Why stupid?”

“Morris always told me I had shit for brains. And to never trust a Raine. See where this is going?”

“I do. I’m so sorry. I should have told you the truth before you heard it from my old man.” Ryder wanted to touch her but refrained. He couldn’t stand seeing her flinch away again. “So...now you know everything.”

“Thanks for that.” Summer looked at him. “I guess that’s all there is to say. Everything’s cleared up now.”

“Not even close.”

“What else do you want to discuss?”

“Are you seeing someone?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

She stood. “I’m too tired for this. I wasn’t lying about driving straight through to get here and only stopping for a few hours to sleep in my SUV.”

“I’m single.” Ryder threw that out there, hoping she’d be interested.

Summer turned her back on him and walked to the door. It was clear she wanted him to leave. He didn’t budge.

“It’s been a really long day, Ryder.”

“You still planning on leaving tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Just like that?” He walked toward her. He couldn’t stop himself any longer. The urge to touch her was too great. Summer looked so damn good, even better than he remembered. He liked her longer hair and the curves that had filled out her hips. “Stick around for a few days.”

“There’s no point.”

“What about us?”

She turned and pressed her hands to her stomach, locking her fingers together. “I already told you. There *is* no us. That was a long time ago, and we’re both different people now.”

“Aren’t you curious?” He wanted to kiss her. Was dying to see if she’d respond to him the way she had in the past.

“About what?”

“If there’s something still between us?” *Can’t you feel the attraction?* He sure as hell could.

“No.” Summer didn’t sound convincing. “Your life is here and on the road with your band. Mine is back in Nevada.” She licked her lips. “Don’t you have groupies now, anyway?”

“What does that mean?”

“I knew about your band before I got here, Ryder. I thought you were on tour in Alabama, that’s why I came. I thought I could slip in for a day while you weren’t in town. You wanted honesty? There you go. And one thing sure hasn’t changed—women are still desperate to nail you. That’s not the kind of life I’m willing to sign on for. Yes, I’m single, but I want to find someone to settle down with who’s going to be around. Someone who isn’t on the road half the time, and who I don’t feel like I have to compete with other women to keep his attention. Now...*please* let me get some sleep. I’m exhausted and want to get on the road early.”

Ryder clenched his teeth and stepped around her, entering the hallway. He spun to tell Summer he didn’t give a shit about any groupies—but she’d already closed the door. He heard the lock click from the other side.

“Damn it.” He closed his eyes and fought the serious urge to kick the door in, which would only put Summer off more. Instead, he spun on his heel and marched down the hallway.

Trip waited in the living room. “Didn’t go the way you thought it would, huh? I don’t see any blood on you, though. Didn’t hear anything breaking in there. I take it Summer didn’t throw shit at you?”

“Not yet. I’m regrouping.”

“Great.” Trip rolled his eyes. “I’ll be outside. It’s getting a little chilly, but I bet it’s warmer out there than it will be in here.”

Chapter Seven

“I really appreciate this.” Summer flashed Trip a smile. “The drive and letting me use your phone charger so I could make a few calls.” She motioned to where it was currently plugged into his dash.

“Not a problem. I wish you’d have let me wake up Ryder before we left, though. He’s going to be pissed that I’m the one driving you into town.”

“I thought I’d handle some things with my attorney while I’m stuck here. It’s still weird saying that. My attorney. I never thought I’d have or need one.”

“I bet. I have one too.”

“You do?”

“Unfortunately.” He gripped the wheel of his truck a little too tight, his knuckles turning white. “I’m in the process of getting an annulment. I should say, *she* is. Regina changed her mind about being my wife less than a week after the wedding.”

That stunned Summer. “I’m sorry. Is she anyone I know?”

He shook his head. “No. I met Regina at a book signing. We hit it off big time, so I stuck around for a few weeks. I thought she was the one, and I impulsively asked her to marry me. She said yes. We went to a chapel that same day. Here’s a tip—never rush into marriage. It rarely works out.”

“Ouch. Sorry.”

Trip parked in front of John Barnes’s office. “Do you want me to go inside with you?”

“No!”

He glanced at her, looking slightly alarmed. Summer wanted to kick

herself for her reaction, but she was afraid John might mention her marriage to Ryder. That was the last thing she needed.

“Sorry. It’s just that I won’t be in there long. I just need to finish up some business. You probably have errands to run. I know I always did when I came into town.”

“I’ll stay here.” Trip glanced around. “To make sure nobody bothers you.”

“Thank you.” She checked her cell. It wasn’t fully charged yet. “Do you mind if I leave this here? It’s only at thirty-three percent.”

“No problem.”

She took off her seat belt and slid out of the passenger side of Trip’s truck. She entered the office to find John sitting behind his desk.

He grinned when he saw her. “Hello! I’m so glad you called me this morning. I just put on a pot of coffee. Would you like some?”

“No.” She collapsed into one of the chairs across from him and opened her purse, removing the pad she always kept inside. “I made a list of things I want you to get from the ranch before you put it up for sale.”

“That won’t be until your birthday.”

“Right. When I turn thirty later this year.” She paused. “I won’t have to physically return here when that happens, right? Can we handle all that from Nevada?”

That wiped the smile off his face. “Are you really sure you want to sell? I was hoping you’d want to move back. Perhaps you’d agree to join me for dinner tonight and we could discuss it?”

Summer was speechless for a second. “Didn’t you hear about what happened yesterday after I left your office?”

“No.”

That surprised Summer. It was a small town. Rumors always used to spread fast when anything happened. “Do you know who my father hung out with?”

John’s mouth compressed into a tight line. “Yes.”

“Not a fan of Marvin Woods, huh?”

“No.”

“Right. Well, he and his son aren’t happy about me owning the ranch.”

“I’m more than aware of their displeasure. Marvin and Able Woods came in here the morning after your father died. Both seemed to be under the impression that they would be the beneficiaries of your father’s entire estate. But your father spent every dime of the salary the trust paid him. He didn’t even have a will. That means his clothing and personal belongings would go to you, as his only child. The vehicle he drove is an asset of the ranch, so that’s also yours.”

He shook his head. “I’m not allowed to divulge details of the trust to anyone but you, so I simply informed them that Morris Decon had *never* had a legal right to the land, the house, or any monetary assets earned by the estate, so none of it was his to bequeath.”

“Able followed me out of town yesterday and decided his truck would make a great weapon against my little SUV. He smashed it up pretty good. He shot at me, too. Not only that, but he must have called his father and some of the church members while he was chasing me. They cut off the road in both directions to trap me, and pretty much everyone had guns. I got away by plowing through fencing on the Raine property and going off-road. It was terrifying.”

John’s face was a horrified mask. “We’ll file a criminal report and have a restraining order issued against everyone involved.”

“That’s not going to happen.” Summer clutched her purse. “Mark Hayes explained the reality of what he can and can’t do, in regard to the Woods. The deputies are vastly outnumbered and seem scared shitless of Marvin and Able. Mark wouldn’t even let me file charges for assault.”

He gasped. “You were hurt?”

“My SUV took the brunt of it. I’m not even sure if the repair shop can fix any of it. That’s my next stop. I might have to take off in the ranch truck if mine is totaled. Am I allowed to do that?”

John managed to nod, still appearing stunned by what she’d told him.

“Good. I’m leaving town as soon as possible. I want to wrap up anything we can this morning in person. The rest of it can be done after I’m safely back in Nevada. Just get the ranch listed when it’s possible for me to sell. Once it’s sold, those idiots won’t have a reason to come after me again.”

“They can’t force you out of town, Summer.”

She frowned. “You’ve never lived in a small town, have you?”

“I stay here two days a week.”

She rolled her eyes. “So it’s more like you vacation here. Let me spell it out for you. We’re cut off in Hailey. Outside help takes a while to get here. I was attacked in broad daylight yesterday, and probably would have been kidnapped if I hadn’t been able to escape by blowing through that fence and finding help at someone’s home.

“Talk to Mark. He’ll tell you I can’t file charges against the men who attacked me because there are only four deputies, and they’re all terrified of retaliation by the Woods Church. Trust me—it’s too dangerous for me to stay here. I’m not going to stick around past today to give Able or his father another chance to come after me. I almost had to spend the night in a jail cell.”

“You were arrested?” John barked. “For *what?*”

“It wasn’t like that. It was to keep me safe. But I stayed with a friend instead.” She wasn’t about to say where. “Now, as to the reason I wanted this meeting.” She glanced at the door, seeing the outline of Trip’s truck through the shades. She cleared her throat and turned back to John. “Please get my marriage annulled. Ryder and I never had sex after we were married. I still can’t understand how that happened.”

“I made a call yesterday after we spoke.”

“And? Please tell me it was some horrible mistake.”

“I spoke to Mr. Dowl’s daughter. It seems he had quite the drinking problem.”

“Mr. Dowl? Who’s that?”

“Robert. Also known as Bob.”

“Right. I told you he was an alcoholic. Every time I saw him, he was drunk as a skunk, and I got the impression that was a common thing with him.”

“According to his daughter, it seems that a few weeks after he performed your wedding ceremony, he grew ill enough to end up in an emergency room. His family had lost track of him a couple of years before. His daughter was notified, as his next of kin. He was suffering from cirrhosis of the liver. The damage was extensive, from what I understand. He only lived for a few days after his daughter’s arrival.”

“That’s sad.”

“His daughter went through his RV and all his belongings. She discovered a few signed marriage certificates.”

“Including mine, I’m guessing?”

“Yes.” John cleared his throat. “Mr. Dowl really *was* a minister once.

His daughter and her husband had taken over his church, once his drinking became too severe to hide. That's when he disappeared. His wife had left him for another man, and the poor guy turned to alcohol. He stopped contacting his daughter after a while. She was shocked to discover that he'd ended up working the rodeo circuit."

"As a clown. Not a minister," Summer specified, to be clear.

John hesitated. "Brenda—Mr. Dowl's daughter—figured he'd also been performing the marriage ceremonies for a little extra cash. She just assumed he wasn't able to file those certificates before falling ill."

"We didn't have a license to marry, though."

John actually blushed slightly. "Brenda thought her father may have overlooked that part of the process due to his heavy drinking. It seems she had a close friend in the clerk's office, and, well...she somehow managed to get the lack of licensing waved after she explained the situation. Brenda assumed those couples were living as husband and wife, unaware of the invalidity of their unions."

He gave Summer a sympathetic look. "She truly sounded like an extremely nice lady, who just wanted to honor her father by covering up his mistakes." When Summer started to speak, he held up a hand. "*But*, she's aware of the actual situation now and has promised to help me reverse this. Brenda wanted me to tell you how sorry she is for any suffering this has caused. She meant well."

"Do I still need to obtain an annulment?"

"I don't believe so. It's just going to take a little time for Brenda to clear things up without getting her friend in the clerk's office into trouble. She promised to get right on it next week. Her friend is currently on vacation."

"Okay." Summer breathed a little easier.

“Worse case, I’ll go before a judge with Brenda to explain the circumstances of the marriage. I’ll also assure him or her that you haven’t lived as a couple with Mr. Raine. There was no license. It’s technically not a legal marriage without one. That’s what it boils down to. We’ll win the case.”

“Good.”

John reached inside his desk. “I have some papers for you to sign today.”

Summer sighed as she took in the thick file he placed on the desk. “Great. That looks like a lot of reading.”

“I can summarize for you.” John pulled out a few pages clipped together after opening the file.

“You do that, but I’m still reading everything. I’m not the most trusting person. No offense, but I don’t know you, John.”

“Understood.” He nodded. “You could get to know me better if you let me take you to dinner tonight. I know our options are limited in Hailey, but we could—”

“No,” Summer cut him off gently. “Thank you.”

“You shouldn’t let anyone run you off. If the local police won’t help, I’ll talk to the sheriff.”

“From what I hear, he doesn’t give a damn.”

John frowned. “I was really hoping you’d stay.”

“Hope away, but it isn’t happening. I’m returning to my life in Nevada and getting out of here. I left Hailey for a lot of reasons and only one of them is no longer around.”

“One of them...?”

“Morris is dead.”

John appeared surprised by her answer and quickly dropped his attention

to the pages in his hand. It didn't bother Summer if the attorney thought badly of her lack of love for the man who'd raised her. He probably never had to survive the kind of upbringing she did.

"But there's the matter of arranging your father's funeral. You're not going to stay for it?"

It was her turn to stare at John in surprise. "Morris didn't plan ahead for that?"

"No."

"Why don't you call Marvin Woods and ask him to do it? That jerk was his best friend."

"You're legally the one who needs to make those decisions. Your father's remains have been at the mortuary since his death. They're awaiting a decision for either burial or cremation. I haven't done anything, since we were awaiting your instructions. It was one of the things I planned to discuss yesterday, but you got upset before I could bring it up."

A little guilt surfaced. Anger, too. Morris had spent most of her life since her mother's death hanging out with his so-called church buddies. He'd prioritized them over his own daughter. Yet, Marvin and his son probably stopped caring about what happened to Morris the second they realized they weren't going to inherit anything.

"Have Morris cremated and hire someone to spread his ashes over one of the pastures on the ranch. That's what Morris did with my mother. He used to say visiting a grave is too depressing."

"You don't want to spread his ashes yourself?"

She didn't even pause to consider it. "I'm going to be in Nevada. Have the trust pay for that. I'm assuming that's allowed?"

"Yes."

“Okay then.” She looked back down at the papers, reading quickly. One of them informed her that the ranch had employees still being paid monthly wages. “Why are there ranch hands working the property? Didn’t you say the livestock was sold?”

“Yes, but four employees stayed on. Your father claimed he still needed those men to help with the upkeep of the ranch.”

Summer’s head snapped up. “What four men?”

John got out of his chair and opened a filing cabinet across the room. “I have their payroll information here.”

Summer had a bad feeling. Morris used to hire people from the church when she’d still lived at the house. She doubted he’d changed that.

“Here we are. Dillon Miller, Becker Follis, Bill Grams, and, of course, Able Woods.” John closed the cabinet, turning to her with another folder in hand. “Do you wish for me to keep them on until the ranch is placed on the market?”

“No way in hell! Two of those men are ones who tried to hurt me yesterday. Dillon Miller and Bill Grams are friends of Marvin Woods and members of his church. Fire them immediately.”

He raised a brow, as if asking if she was sure.

“I mean it, John. Fire them. You can do that, correct?”

“Of course. We legally have to give them two weeks’ pay with termination.”

That pissed her off, but she nodded. “Fine. Do it.”

John retook his seat and fired up his computer, getting to work. “You want them fired today?”

“Yes.”

He nodded, typing. “I’m on it.”

“I’ve got a lot more papers to read,” she said. It felt good to take control of her mother’s land—and Summer’s legacy.

* * * * *

Ryder woke up, showered, and went outside to relieve Trip of guard duty. The porch was empty and his brother’s truck was gone. A bad feeling hit his gut, and he spun, rushing down the hallway to the closed door of Summer’s borrowed bedroom. He gripped the knob and it turned easily in his hand.

Her bed had been made and her things were gone.

“Son of a bitch! I’m going to kill him.”

He whipped out his cell phone, calling Trip. His brother answered on the second ring. “Where’s Summer?”

“In town. She wanted to see her lawyer.”

“You left her alone?”

“No. I’m sitting in my truck about twenty feet from the office door. I haven’t seen any sign of trouble yet. It’s dead at this time of morning. Everyone is probably still doing chores at home before running errands.”

“I’m on my way.”

“I’d rethink that.”

“Why?” Ryder grabbed his keys off the table and locked Trip’s front door, storming down the porch steps to his own truck.

“I wanted *you* to take her into town, but Summer was adamant about not waking you. What did you expect me to do?”

“Get my ass up to let me deal with her.”

Trip sighed. “I think you need to let it go. You had your talk with her last night, and you should feel lucky she didn’t try to take your head off.

Summer's made it clear she's leaving today. I'm running her to Jessie's garage next to find out about her SUV. I got the impression she's leaving immediately after, whether or not her vehicle's fixed."

"Don't let that happen." Ryder used his shoulder to keep the phone against his ear as he climbed into his truck and started the engine. "Stall her. She isn't leaving yet. Got it?"

"You can't force her to stay."

"Bet me. Don't let her leave, Trip. I'll be there in fifteen minutes." He hung up before he lost his temper with his brother.

Summer planned to run out on him—*again*. He wasn't going to let that happen.

Ryder threw his truck in reverse and twisted his head to back down the driveway.

Summer might think everything had been said between them, but Ryder didn't agree. He'd spent years looking for her, then resenting her. An hour or two of talking to Summer wasn't going to heal all the bad feelings he'd suffered over the past eleven years. He had a host of unanswered questions, and she wasn't leaving until he found closure.

Her comment about band groupies the evening before disturbed him. Yes, he'd slept with women on tour. He was single, after all. But there was a huge difference between his past habits and his present.

"Son of a bitch," he grumbled. Summer probably assumed he was still some kind of man slut. His brothers had teased him about it often enough. It wasn't all that funny at that moment.

As he raced toward town, he kept his speed under seventy, which was still well over the limit. If the deputies couldn't be bothered to arrest actual bad guys, they sure as fuck better not give him a speeding ticket.

Ryder slowed when houses along the highway came into view, a sign he was getting close. He finally reached the center of town and spotted Trip's truck in front of the only small business center, which housed four offices. He parked behind his brother's truck and got out.

Trip rolled down his window when Ryder stopped next to the driver's door. "She's still inside."

Ryder felt relief over hearing that. "Take off. I'll wait here for Summer and give her a ride to Jessie's to see what's going on with her vehicle."

"Are you sure that's a good idea? You still look pissed and she wants to avoid you."

"Too bad for her."

"What are you going to do?" When Ryder didn't answer, Trip narrowed his gaze. "You don't even know, do you?"

When he still didn't respond, Trip gave him a look.

"You were in love with the woman, Ryder. I know how much it messed you up when Summer left. Now she's home. Are you set on getting a little revenge for the hell she caused you, or are you trying to win her back?"

He hesitated. "I just want to get answers."

"What's left to find out? She told you why she left. You screwed up by lying to her, and her father tried to marry her off to a vicious asshole. I can't say I blame her for taking off. Why would she have stayed? The two main men in her life let her down. She must have felt betrayed."

"What about how *I* felt when Summer was just gone and didn't even tell me why she was leaving?"

"I know you're angry, but get over it. Don't play your usual head games with her, Ryder. She doesn't deserve it."

"What the hell does *that* mean?"

“Bro.” Trip sighed. He reached up and rubbed his jaw. “You never let *anyone* get close to you except family. You thought Summer did you wrong. Now you know better, or at least I hope you do. Just let her get on with her life. Don’t treat her like you do other women.”

“Jesus! You make me sound as if I’m some abusive asshole who gets off on hurting women.”

“No. You just fuck them and walk away. Cold as you please.” When he scowled, Trip continued. “You’re hard inside, Ryder. And I get it, because I understand what made you that way. Your mom abandoned you, just the way my biological father abandoned Adam and me. It’s tough to feel as if we deserve to be loved when one of our parents can’t even stick around.” Trip paused. “It makes us harden our hearts to avoid getting hurt again. I was always willing to give love a shot because I had a glimmer of hope that it could work out, but you? You avoid it at all costs.”

“I didn’t always.”

“Sure, you tried it once, but you weren’t honest with Summer when you really should have been. You claimed to love Summer, and you wouldn’t even let *her* in. Now she’s back—briefly—and I know she seems tougher, but I think deep down, she’s hanging by a thread. Summer didn’t have brothers to help her get through everything the way we did. Plus, she has Marvin and Able hell-bent on taking her money and that ranch. Don’t forget about that. This isn’t just about you, how *you* feel, and what *you* want.”

“I didn’t say it was.” Some of Ryder’s anger receded, making him feel defeated.

“She’s not one of your groupies or a bar fly, Ryder. That’s all I’m saying. She isn’t the type you can just nail and walk away from without causing her pain. Tell me that you realize that.”

“I don’t know *what* type she is anymore,” he muttered. “She’s been

gone for eleven years.”

Trip uttered a curse and his arm shot out the window, snatching him by the front of his shirt. “Don’t make me get out of this cab and beat you in the middle of the damn street. We won’t do Summer any good being locked up in jail. She’s in danger. *That’s* the priority. You think Marvin or Able are just going to let this go? They were smooching old man Decon’s ass for a long time to get everything he owned. What do you think they’d do to Summer if they got her alone? You’ve heard the same shit I have about Able. He’d hurt her—bad.”

“What shit?” Ryder gripped Trip’s fist and pulled it off his shirt.

Trip pulled his arm back inside the truck, glancing out the windshield. “I guess you’re gone more than you’re home these days. And we don’t exactly talk about those assholes when we can avoid the topic.”

He glanced back at Ryder, keeping his voice low. “There are rumors that Able likes to knock around his women. None of them stick around for long. We even heard a rumor that he sexually assaulted a woman last summer, but his father paid her off to keep Able out of prison. They probably just threatened her, but the point is, I wouldn’t want him anywhere near Summer. Hell, *any* woman, for that matter. Especially if she has something he desperately wants. You saw what they did to her SUV. They’ve killed before, despite there not being enough evidence to get them arrested. Everyone knows who set that fire.”

Ryder stared at the lawyer’s office, his gut churning. “You’re right.”

Trip nodded. “They already tried to force her to marry Able once. They could succeed this time, and then silence her for good. Focus on that instead of the past.”

“Shit. I’m going in there. Stay put. Do you have a gun?”

“Under my seat.”

“Good”

“Ryder? One more thing.”

He paused, holding Trip’s gaze. “What?”

“Tell me that you know she’s different from other women.”

He glared back, not willing to say the words.

Trip gave him a look of disgust. “You’re going to be stupid about this, aren’t you? Like maybe hit her up for one last fuck for old times’ sake. That would be a huge mistake. It would hurt her and ruin any possibility of making all of this right. You got a second chance, Ryder. A chance at the kind of happiness River has, bro. Don’t screw it up.”

“I need to go in there.”

Ryder rounded the truck and headed to the first door. It had the lawyer’s name on it, and he walked in without knocking. The office wasn’t big, and it didn’t even have a reception area. John Barnes frowned when he looked up from behind a desk. Summer turned her in seat across from the lawyer. Papers were spread out on the surface between them.

“What are you doing here, Ryder?” Summer didn’t look pleased to see him.

“I thought you might want breakfast when you’re done.” He took a seat next to her. “That’s a lot of paperwork.”

“Hello, Mr. Raine.” John cleared his throat. “May I help you?”

“Nope.” Ryder leaned back and got comfortable in the chair. “I’m just here to keep Summer company.”

She looked a little flustered. It was cute.

“I’m fine. You can leave.”

“That’s not going to happen, Summer. Did you forget about yesterday? I

bet those guys who needed to patch up their trucks haven't." Ryder wasn't above reminding her of the danger. "Trip is waiting outside, and I'm sticking close to make sure they don't take another run at you."

Summer paled. Ryder hated to see the fear in her eyes, but the threat was real.

"I'm in the middle of town. I'm sure it's fine."

"It's a real hive of activity out there. Mitzy was sweeping the porch in front of the diner and I think I saw two birds fly overhead."

"This is kind of private, Ryder. Can you at least wait outside?"

"No." He glanced around the office and pointedly stared at the small hallway at the back of the office. "Where does that go to?"

"A bathroom, storage room, and the back door," the lawyer answered.

"Someone could kick it in and come through there to grab her." Ryder didn't really believe that would happen...but it *could*. He gave Summer a grim look. "I'll stay right here. Just ignore me."

"As if I could," she muttered.

"This is confidential information, Mr. Raine—" John started.

Summer turned a little in her chair and leaned forward, pen in hand, and interrupted. "It's fine. Go on, John. Let's just finish this."

John Barnes leaned forward, too, and picked up one of the papers. He whispered something. Summer leaned even closer to hear him, until their heads almost touched. Ryder didn't like it one bit. Especially when he was pretty sure the lawyer's gaze kept dipping down the front of Summer's V-neck shirt.

He wished his hearing was better. Years of playing in bars and concert venues with his band had taken their toll. He was only a few feet away, but he couldn't hear their whispers. And he refused to scoot forward to catch

what they were saying.

He may have sustained a little hearing damage, but there was nothing wrong with his fighting abilities. It'd been a long time since he'd wanted to kick another man's ass over a woman.

The lawyer was definitely checking out Summer's assets.

Ryder fisted his hands and rested them on the arms of the chair. The pencil pusher would get his ass handed to him if he thought he had a chance in hell of nailing Summer.

He did his own surveillance of Summer as he watched them. She wore tight jeans, and he got a decent look at her denim-encased ass, what with her sitting so far forward in the chair. She'd always had a nice backside, but it is now plusher than it used to be. A memory of her sitting naked on his lap flashed in his head. She'd been riding his dick, bent forward and facing away from him. He'd loved the sight of those soft, round cheeks.

He shifted in his seat to ease the slight pinching sensation of his jeans when his dick grew semi-hard. His gaze darted to John, catching the bastard taking another peek down her top. "Son of a bitch."

Summer paused their conversation and turned her head, giving Ryder a curious look. "What?"

"Nothing. Carry on." He glared at Barnes, catching his eye. "I'm watching you. Knock it off."

Barnes had the decency to blanch. They both knew exactly what Ryder was referring to. He shook his head at the lawyer. "Not a chance, buddy. Got it?"

"What are you talking about?" Summer frowned at him.

"Nothing. Go ahead." Ryder kept glaring at Barnes. "Man talk."

"Whatever." Summer turned back to the lawyer. "Sorry."

“It’s fine,” Barnes muttered, but he kept his gaze on her face instead of her boobs.

Ryder relaxed. The situation was handled and he wouldn’t have to kick the jerk’s ass. Barnes had gone to law school. That meant he had enough smarts to realize Ryder wasn’t fooling around when he made threats.

One thing became clear to him as he watched Summer confidently converse with the lawyer—he wasn’t willing to let her leave town without discovering just how much she’d changed. He’d loved her once...and he had to know if any parts of the girl he’d adored remained.

He planned to find out.

Ryder reached into his pocket and slid out his phone, texting Mitzy at the diner, getting a reply in seconds. He glanced up at Summer, trying to remember what she liked to eat.

Chapter Eight

Summer gripped the seat belt a little too tightly. Ryder was acting really strange. He'd barely spoken to her when he'd escorted her out of John's office. They'd made a stop at the diner, but he'd ordered her to stay put. He'd entered and come out a few minutes later with a big bag of food and a cardboard holder with four drinks in his hands.

"Where are we going?" She glanced at the food between them on the seat. "Why couldn't we eat in town? Where did Trip go? He's got all my stuff, including my cell."

"You don't want another run-in with Able or Marvin, do you?"

"No." She turned her head, staring out the window. "What about my SUV?"

"Trip is going to look into it for you. It's safer that way. We'll meet up with him later to get your belongings."

"I need to leave town, Ryder."

"Not on an empty stomach."

"Why four drinks? Who's going to join us?"

"Do you always ask so many questions?"

"I'm trying to remain calm. I almost feel kidnapped. First you refused to take me to Jessie's repair shop, and now you're driving me back to Trip's house."

"We're not going there."

"We're going to *your* house? I didn't agree to that."

"I'm taking you somewhere to eat breakfast and to have a little conversation."

“We have nothing else to talk about. We did all our talking last night.”

“I’m not done.”

“I am.”

He remained silent and refused to turn his truck around on the two-lane highway. A short time passed, and Summer finally spotted the driveway that led to the Raine Ranch. A queasy sensation pitted inside her stomach. She’d never wanted to see his childhood home again. It brought back too many memories of when she’d gotten her heart broken.

“You said we weren’t going to your house.”

“We’re not.” Ryder turned off onto an overgrown dirt path, only slowing because it was in such bad shape. She didn’t spot any structures, only dense trees growing in the area.

“Where are we going? I don’t remember this road.”

“The other one washed out after we had a bad storm. I’m taking you to the old cabin.”

Memories instantly flooded her. Enough for Summer to have a harsh reaction. “No!”

“Yes. It’s private, and nobody outside of the family knows where it is.”

She’d made love to Ryder inside that old cabin. Many times. It used to be their special place to escape to when they’d dated. It was close enough to her home to be able to disappear for hours without raising suspicion. Her father always assumed she was out checking fences. No one from town ever spotted her riding a horse to the cabin.

“Please, Ryder. Just stop. We’ll have a picnic in the shade, under these trees. Anywhere you’d like. But I’m not comfortable going to the cabin.”

“Too bad.” He sounded angry.

She stared at him, verifying that Ryder was indeed mad. His mouth was

set in a firm line and a few wrinkles showed on his brow. “Is that your go-to spot to take women?” It hurt tossing that out there, but Summer had wondered for years if she’d just been one of many he’d shared the rustic cabin with.

“No. *Don’t*, Summer.”

“I don’t want to go to the cabin! We only went there in the past to have sex. *That’s* sure not happening. I refuse to revisit your fucking love nest.”

“The only woman I’ve ever taken there is you.”

That appeased her a little...but not much.

Ryder slowed even more and she wondered if she’d get hurt if she shoved open the door and tried to just jump out. Summer even reached for the belt clip. Walking back to town sounded better than having to stare at the painful past.

Ryder seemed to read her mind and clamped his hand on the seat belt. “Don’t you dare.”

“Let go.”

“Not a chance.”

“You’re being an ass.”

He struggled a little to control the wheel with one hand on the uneven dirt path but didn’t release the clip of her seat belt. “It’s just a cabin. The place is remote and nobody can find you there.”

“Please don’t do this,” she pleaded.

Ryder hit the brakes. He released her belt and shut off the engine, taking the keys out of the ignition. He twisted in the seat to face her. “What’s wrong, Summer?”

She dropped her gaze to the food. “It’s not just a cabin. It was *our* place. Can’t you see why I wouldn’t want to go back there?”

The silence between them stretched until she dared look up.

Ryder's features had softened. "You still care about me, don't you?"

She refused to answer.

He leaned closer, studying her way too intently for comfort. "What are you afraid of? That you might remember how good we were together?"

She had to break eye contact. "That was years ago."

"I never forgot."

"We're not the same people anymore."

"Are you sure?"

Bitterness rose. "Yes."

"You used to be less judgmental, Summer. Can you really sum me up so fast after not knowing me for years?"

"I'm talking about myself." She looked at him then, staring into his beautiful eyes. It hurt because she *could* see some of the man she'd once loved in them. "I'm drastically different."

"How so?" He glanced down. "You let your hair grow and you put on a few pounds. I like it." He held her gaze again.

"Inside."

"How?"

"What is it with you and playing a hundred questions?"

"I told you everything about me, Summer. You owe me the same."

"I don't know much at all about who you've become. You explained who you *used* to be and why."

"Damn it," Ryder rasped. He inched even closer but the bag of food and drinks prevented him from touching her. "You used to not shut me out. You're avoiding questions."

“I’m good at it. I had to learn to do that.”

“Tell me why.”

Something inside Summer snapped. Younger Ryder hadn’t been pushy but the older version of him certainly was. He had her on his family ranch, far from everything, and he was being unreasonably stubborn. He didn’t seem willing to quit until she spelled it all out.

“Why? I had to leave here to start my entire life over! I was alone. I had *nobody*, Ryder. Do you know how terrified I was? I came from a small town and suddenly I was in Southern California. Have you ever been there?”

He nodded. “I travel with the band.”

“Right.” She couldn’t forget that. “I assume the band members are your friends and you’re close to them? I was alone with only a few thousand dollars. I had to find a cheap place to stay and get my first real job. I found this dive of a motel that gave deals to rent rooms by the week. My neighbors were mostly hookers, drug users, or worse. I might as well have stuck a victim sign around my neck.”

That muscle in his jaw clenched. “What do you mean by that?”

“I mean I lived in fear all the time. I didn’t have anything to steal except my mom’s jewelry and my cash, but that didn’t matter to assholes in that place. I unscrewed the ceiling light plate, hiding everything up there, and my room was broken into twice but they didn’t find my hiding spot.”

She sighed, suddenly feeling exhausted even though it was barely noon. “I didn’t have a car, since I had to ditch the ranch truck. I used the city buses, and I can’t tell you how many times I got lost at first, getting off at the wrong stops in sketchy areas when I was looking for work. I got hired part-time at the motel I lived in, cleaning rooms—which was terrifying when people were in their rooms, watching me work. I also found a job doing phone sales. I

sucked at it, but they didn't ask many questions.”

“It sounds like hell,” Ryder said quietly.

“It was. The owner of the motel gave me a break on rent, since I was working there. I managed to save up enough to buy myself a used car within six months. It was a piece of junk, but it ran okay. I tried to make friends, but I told you who my neighbors were. They either tried to talk me into turning tricks or using drugs.”

Ryder paled. “You—”

“No!” Summer quickly interrupted. “I didn't. They were just shitty friends, is all. That's what I'm saying. I'm guessing the users only offered me drugs to get access to the few belongings I had. As for the other thing...no way. I saw the men going in and out of those rooms. *Yuck.*”

Ryder leaned back, resting his arm on the steering wheel. “Yuck?”

“The men who visited the hookers were mostly other drug users. They didn't seem to bathe often, some had scabs on their faces and arms. Disease central, you know?” She shook her head. “I wasn't exposed to *any* of that growing up here in Hailey. But I learned more than I wanted to know about the side effects of drug abuse from watching my neighbors. Rhonda didn't have any teeth. She said they rotted and fell out. Wayne did this weird thing with his mouth and jaw, like he couldn't stop moving it. Flower—that's what she called herself—was always carrying on conversations with someone who wasn't there. Just a few examples.”

“Got it.” He didn't look pleased.

“I moved to Arizona after about a year and a half. It was better. I got an actual apartment there. It wasn't so expensive on the rent. I found a job waiting tables at a truck stop.” Summer reached down to grab one of the drinks from the diner, sticking a straw into it. She took a sip, discovering it

was her favorite soda. “I was still afraid that I might have an arrest warrant out for me because of the ranch truck I’d taken when I left. So I kept a low profile.”

She took another sip of the drink, reluctant to share the next part. “Almost a year later, Morris finally caught up with me. I was grabbed from behind while walking to my car after my shift...this strange guy who told me I was going with him. He was huge, someone I’d never seen before in my life. I didn’t realize he was sent by Morris at first, so I was terrified I was about to be sexually assaulted and murdered. I fought and screamed, trying to get away. Two truckers saw it go down and stopped him from taking me. The cops came, and the guy said Morris had hired him to retrieve me. The cops ran us both but didn’t arrest me. That’s when I figured out that I didn’t have an arrest warrant. They took Morris’s goon away.

“I was stupid enough to think that was the end of it...until the next day. A second man showed up at my job and threatened me. Said to get my ass home or he’d toss me in the trunk of his car and drive me to Morris.”

“That bastard.” Ryder’s anger was clear in his voice.

“That was pretty much my thought too. These weren’t exactly upstanding guys. No sane person would have entrusted their daughter to them. I said I’d get my things and return to Texas. Total lie. I packed all right, but I headed to Oregon instead. That’s where I met Lorna.”

“Your friend, right?”

“The only friend I have. She actually lives in Nevada, but she was there spending time with her dying grandmother. I’d gotten a janitorial job at a convalescent hospital. I’d see Lorna outside crying and we started talking. We got close in the few months that she was there, until her grandma passed away. Best friends, actually. I went with her to the funeral. Both of us were alone in the world, so it made sense that we leaned on each other. I moved

home with her when she returned to Nevada. She got me an office job at her work and everything. Then Morris found me again.”

“What happened?”

“Two huge brutes showed up and said they were members of the Woods Church.” Summer sighed, looking out the window at the trees, not really seeing them. “They threatened me, basically telling me to go home or they’d force the issue. I had to move out of Lorna’s and switch jobs. I didn’t want to put her in danger. Those men were scary. I was afraid she’d get hurt if they *did* try to take me by force.”

“Why didn’t you go to the police?”

She looked at Ryder. “What makes you think I didn’t?”

He scowled.

“The police can’t do anything unless a crime has actually been committed. Other than that first guy, everything else was just threats. One of the cops was even sympathetic toward Morris. He’d contacted him to see what was going on, and he gave the guy some sob story about how worried he was about his baby girl being so far from home. Fooled him into thinking he’d just sent people to check on me, for my own safety, since I wasn’t responding to his calls.”

“Damn.”

“I stopped going to the police since there seemed to be no point after the first few times. I just moved every time Morris found me, but I stuck to Nevada since Lorna was there. She makes sure she isn’t followed when we go see a movie together or share a meal.”

“Why do you think your old man sent people after you?”

“I wasn’t sure until I spoke to John Barnes. Thinking about it now, after learning the truth, I have to guess Morris was probably terrified that I’d find

out my mom left me everything, and that I'd kick him off the ranch and expose his lies. He'd have been left homeless, friendless, and no longer getting a paycheck to run the ranch. That wouldn't have been a risk if he married me off to Able. Marvin basically teaches his followers to treat their wives like prisoners. The women aren't allowed jobs, friends, opinions... they're kept at home, where they can be completely controlled. Morris tried to force that marriage because he didn't want to lose what wasn't even his."

Ryder nodded. "He probably wanted to punish you for defying him by running away, too."

Summer held his gaze again. "He succeeded. Morris managed to destroy every bit of happiness I managed to find, each time he sent those goons after me. I've stayed in so many places that I've lost track. I don't let anyone get close to me anymore except Lorna. It hurts too much when you have to say goodbye. I've done it too many times. Coworkers. Neighbors. Hell, even guys I'd dated. I thought all of that was finally over when I heard that he'd died, but...I was wrong."

"You don't have to keep running. You can stay here."

"Do you think Able or Marvin are just going to forget what Morris did, or the money they were expecting to receive when he died? They almost *killed* me yesterday. I'm going to have to go into hiding like never before, Ryder. At least Morris wanted me alive. His guys didn't come to kill me. I doubt that'll be the case with the Woods after they realize they aren't going to get a cent from me."

"I can keep you safe, Summer."

She shook her head. "Do you need to go look at my SUV as a reminder of how nuts the Woods are, Ryder? I just want to go back to Nevada. It's easier to stay under the radar in a big city. John contacted me through Lorna. He doesn't even know where I live. That means no one can scare him into

giving up my location. I'm hoping I'll be safe in my current apartment, but I already have my next one picked out. *That's* what my life has become. I'm always planning ahead for the next time I need to disappear and lying to everyone about why I live that way."

"You said boyfriends." Ryder straightened and his look intensified. "Didn't you tell them the truth?"

"I said *guys I dated*. What was I supposed to tell them? That my father was nuts and a mean drunk? That he had it set in his head to marry me off to the son of his best friend, regardless of my wishes? No. I didn't tell them anything. At least, not after Brandon."

"Who's Brandon?" His voice deepened and his eyes narrowed.

"Someone I met shortly after moving to Nevada. I dated Brandon long enough for him to ask me to marry him. I wanted him to know exactly what he was getting into, so I told him the truth. All of it."

Ryder placed both hands on the steering wheel, and Summer noticed his knuckles whitening from his tight grip. "You got *married*?"

"Engaged. It didn't last long enough for us to walk down the aisle. Brandon thought I was being overly dramatic about Morris. He went behind my back and called him. Brandon thought we could miraculously patch things up if he played mediator. Boy, was he wrong."

"What happened?"

"Morris gave Brandon the same sob story he'd told the cops. That I'd given him parental troubles since I'd left diapers behind and was screwed up from having a dead mother. He told him I'd run away from a happy family that loved me because I was a spoiled brat. He talked Brandon into planning a trip to visit the ranch. I flat-out refused to go back, because of course I knew it wasn't safe. We got into a huge argument over it and I ended our

relationship.”

“You were in love with him?”

She saw emotion flicker in Ryder’s eyes. “I think I was more in love with the *idea* of being in love. Of having someone. Brandon was everything I thought I wanted.”

“What was that?”

“Funny. Sweet. Stable.”

“Rich?”

“No!” She shot Ryder a dirty look. “He worked for the city in the sanitation department. He made good money compared to me, though.”

“You slept with him?”

She studied Ryder. He looked angry and tense. “That’s personal.”

“Just answer me,” he snapped.

“We dated for seven months before he asked me to marry him. What do you think?”

He clenched his teeth and glared at her.

That pissed her off. “What’s that look for?”

“How many guys did you sleep with?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“Tell me.” Ryder squeezed the steering wheel tighter. “How many?”

“A few.”

“How many is that? Two? Ten? What’s your idea of a few?”

“Why do you care? We weren’t together.”

“Stop avoiding my questions!”

“How many *women* have you slept with since we broke up? How many groupies?”

He jerked back, obviously surprised by her question, even though he shouldn't have been.

“Exactly.” Summer looked away, wanting to change the subject before things grew worse between them. “We should eat before whatever you bought us goes bad.”

“I’ve lost my appetite.”

“You started this, Ryder.”

He yanked on the driver’s-side handle and threw open the door, climbing out of the cab. Summer watched him stomp over to a tree, where he kept his back to her. She hesitated for a moment, then softly cursed, getting out of the truck. Ryder seemed really upset, and despite everything, it bothered her.

“Ryder?”

“What?”

“Turn around.”

He spun, glaring at her. “Better?”

“No. Why are you so mad?”

“You were engaged.”

“I was.”

“*Engaged!*” he yelled. “You loved that guy.”

“I said I thought I did.”

“What the hell does that mean? You were going to marry the asshole. I may have nailed my share of women but none of them meant a goddamn thing!”

Summer gaped at him a little but quickly recovered. It sank in that this wasn't about male pride...his feelings were hurt.

She could understand that. The thought of Ryder loving someone to the

point of almost getting married was painful enough for her to sympathize. “I was with Brandon for all the wrong reasons.”

His expression was skeptical.

“I was lonely, and he was nice to me. He made me laugh.” She paused, trying to find the right words. “Brandon was sweet. He owned a house, and he’d worked at the same job since graduating from high school. He was reliable. You know?”

“No. I don’t.”

“He offered me *security*, Ryder. Do you know how wonderful that felt after everything I’d been through? I was desperate to connect to someone, *anyone*, and he was there. Brandon didn’t let me push him away. He made me feel safe for once, like he’d stick around regardless of what happened. I tried to keep him distanced at first but he was determined. I could move in with him and not be alone anymore if we got married. He wanted kids and talked about growing old together. Brandon was an open book. He told me everything about his life, including all the boring stuff about his job and family.”

Summer paused, taking a few deep breaths. “Brandon urged me to do the same. I expected him to dump me when I told him about my daddy issues...and about *you*. He didn’t. He handed me tissues for my tears, told me everything would be okay. Then he called Morris. We got into that fight when he told me he’d arranged for us to visit Texas. Said I needed to fix things with my dad before we got married. He was close to his parents, and he thought everyone should be.

“That’s when I knew it was over. Brandon would never understand that sometimes people hurt you so deeply, there’s no coming back from it. My ex *really* believed it would all magically work out, like Morris would suddenly become father of the year if he could just get us in the same room together.”

Ryder stepped closer. “So he just let you go?”

“Yes.”

“This Brandon hurt you.”

“I was more pissed than hurt. That’s when I realized I’d probably *wanted* to love him more than I actually did.” Summer shrugged. “Brandon offered me the kind of life I dreamed about, but it didn’t work out. I gave back his ring and we never spoke again.”

“You were willing to marry someone because he offered you a house, kids, and stability?”

Her temper flared. “You lose as much as I have and *then* judge me, Ryder Raine! It’s been so tough just—” Her voice broke and she looked away, swallowing hard.

“I’m not judging you, baby. I’m trying to understand.”

“Fine. Yes, I was willing to marry Brandon because he was there for me. He was safe. I craved stability enough to overlook the fact that I knew things were missing in the relationship.”

“Like passion?”

“Discussion over.” Summer turned her back on him and started back toward the truck. “I’m going to eat whatever’s in that bag. I need something in my stomach.”

She made it about four feet before Ryder grabbed her arm. She hadn’t expected it, and she gasped. He jerked her against his tall frame and she stared up at him with wide eyes.

“What—”

Ryder’s fingers slid into her hair and jerked her head back. His mouth descended, cutting off her question. His lips sealed over hers and his tongue invaded.

Shock held her still for several long moments. Ryder released her arm and wrapped his own around her waist, holding her against him tightly.

Summer pressed against his chest and shoved. She tried to turn her head away but Ryder refused to let her go. He rested his forehead against hers, giving her time to let the situation sink in. Then he started kissing her again, gentler. He teased her bottom lip with the tip of his tongue, coaxing her to open for him.

His scent invaded her nose, and the warmth of his body made memories of the past swamp her mind, strong as the arm around her.

This was *Ryder* holding her. Ryder kissing her...

She stopped struggling and gave in, clutching at his shirt instead of trying to push him away. It had been so long, and she'd spent countless nights dreaming about being with him again.

The reality was a thousand times better.

Ryder hadn't planned to kiss Summer, but he couldn't resist any longer. Her response wasn't instant but she eventually wrapped her arms around his neck. He deepened the kiss when she moaned, caressing her tongue with his. He *still* couldn't get enough of this woman.

She was just as sweet and felt just as right in his arms as he remembered.

He lifted her off her feet, releasing her hair. He palmed her ass instead, giving one cheek a firm squeeze. It urged her to wrap her legs around his waist. Ryder hoisted her a little higher and turned, backing her up against the tree trunk he'd blindly held on to moments ago.

He'd kissed a lot of women, but *none* of them made him feel the way Summer Decon did. She was the only woman he'd ever loved. He could

barely think when he was around her. There was no detachment between his brain and dick. It was all about the need to get as close as possible.

He shoved his hips forward, rubbing his trapped erection against the seam of her jeans. Their clothes irritated the hell out of him, and he wished they were naked. He'd be inside Summer already if they were.

He broke the kiss, panting. Ryder opened his eyes and loved the way her face was flushed. Summer's heavy breathing assured him she was as turned on as he was. She opened *her* eyes then, and he saw the girl he'd fallen in love with staring back. Her defenses were down.

"There you are."

"What?"

"I've missed you so much."

Ryder could see her mentally struggling when she looked away from him, probably trying to shut him out again.

"Don't you dare."

She looked back at Ryder. "You need to put me down."

She tried to release his hips by loosening the grip of her thighs, but he had her pinned against the tree. "I'm not letting you go this time."

"Ryder, this—"

He kissed her again. She gave in faster than the first time, meeting his passion with her own. Her legs locked tight around his hips. Ryder massaged her ass and rocked his hips, easily remembering all the little things about his Summer that he'd tried so hard to forget. She used to grow hotter than hell when he rubbed up against her until she was ready to come. She always had a super-sensitive clit, and he knew it wouldn't take long.

Her moans spurred Ryder on until she tried to break the kiss. That was always the sign that Summer was close to coming. She'd worried about biting

him. He pulled his mouth away and went for her exposed throat. He brushed his lips and tongue just under her ear. She clutched at his back, digging her nails into his shirt.

“So hot,” he whispered. “Feel how much I want you, baby? How damn hard you make me?”

“Ryder,” she moaned.

He stilled his hips and ran the tip of his tongue along the lobe of her ear. “Let me in.”

“I can’t.”

He heard the pain in her voice, and it leveled him. The first true hope that she was still in love with him sprang forth, and with it, he felt alive for the first time in years.

Everything Trip had said repeated in Ryder’s head. He was going to lose the only woman he’d ever loved for a second time if he didn’t do something to stop it from happening.

“I never got over you. I couldn’t,” he admitted. Ryder lifted his head, holding her gaze. The tears that shimmered in her eyes tore at his heart. “I’ve always loved you, Summer. I always will.”

She rapidly blinked but didn’t look away. “This can’t work.”

“Says who? I don’t want to lose you again. I *can*’t.”

“Too much has happened.”

“It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters but us being together.” He felt a frantic need to make her understand that. “Together, we’ll learn the differences between who we used to be and who we’ve become...but you still love me. I feel it. And I still love you. We can make this work. Stay with me. *I’ll* be your home.”

She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against his shoulder. “Don’t

do this, Ryder. Please? Just stop if you ever cared about me at all.”

“I’ll quit the band. You want stability? I can give you that.”

She gasped and jerked back, gawking at him.

“I mean it. I haven’t been happy for a few years with all the traveling around on tour, being away from home, and after all the trouble with our singer, I’ve considered retiring. The ranch is doing great and my brothers would love it if I were here all the time to help. I still enjoy writing music, but the band doesn’t need me to tour with them to still use my songs. I’ve had interest from others for me to write for them, too. I’ll work from home. *Our* home.”

Her mouth parted but she didn’t say anything.

Ryder had plenty to say. “You mentioned kids. I can give you those. As many as you want. I used to be terrified of what kind of father I’d be but Nav will be an excellent one. He can teach me.”

“Ryder…”

He didn’t like the way Summer was trying to shut him down. He could see her emotionally pulling away. “No. You just admitted you were willing to marry some guy who offered you stability and kids. I’ll marry you and give you those things, plus love and passion. I am not going to lose you again, damn it! I can’t say that enough.”

“I—”

“Need time? Stick around. You want to leave? I’ll go with you. Whatever you want. I can live in Nevada. Just don’t shut me out by walking away from me again.”

“This is insane.”

“Maybe,” he conceded. “But I never stopped loving you, even when I thought you’d abandoned me for all the wrong reasons. I fucked up in the

past. I admit that. Come to the cabin with me. Give me a shot, Summer. Give *us* a shot. I'm tired of regrets. Aren't you?"

She closed her eyes and bit her lower lip.

"Let us get to know each other again. I don't expect you to agree to getting married right off the bat but I'm asking that you stay with me for a little while. You'll learn that I'm serious. Be totally honest, Summer. Did you really get over me? Can you look me in the eye with total sincerity and tell me that you don't love me still?"

More tears glimmered in her beautiful eyes when they opened. "I can't let you break my heart again. I barely survived last time."

The tightness of his chest eased. Summer wasn't willing to admit she still loved him verbally, but her words were enough to convince Ryder that she did.

"I'm not going to let you down this time. Give me one more chance. No more lies or secrets between us. I swear. Ask me anything and I'll tell you. I'll bare my soul. The worst thing already happened once—I lost you. I won't let that happen again."

Chapter Nine

Ryder *was* breaking her heart, even if he just said he wouldn't. His dark eyes were wet, as if he were about to cry too. Summer fought the urge to just sob. He was offering her everything she'd ever wanted. The future she'd always dreamed of with him was almost too good to resist.

"Come on, Summer," he urged, his voice husky. "Give me a chance."

A memory surfaced of when he'd first started asking her out. He'd used those same words. It seemed like forever ago, and so much had happened since then...but she still wanted to take the risk. In this moment, he reminded her of the person she'd fallen in love with. There were changes in his face where he'd aged over the years, but did the man she'd known really still exist?

"You could always talk me into anything."

He smiled. "Good to know. Because I want to make love to you."

She wanted him too. Her body ached, and the hard length of his erection was still pressed against the vee of her pants, a reminder of where she ached the most.

But a jolt of fear coursed through her in the next instant. He could hurt her again, and she'd have to try to patch her broken heart for a second time. And it had never fully healed to begin with.

No. She couldn't risk it. She *couldn't*. He needed to let her go, stop saying all the things she wanted to hear.

"I can prove I'm not anything like I used to be," she said quietly.

"You're still my Summer."

"Would the old Summer fail to tell you about a secret marriage? John, my attorney...he found out that I'm married, Ryder. It was a huge surprise. I

had no idea.”

His hold on her tightened. “That son of a bitch! Marvin claimed that you married Able? Did Morris have that bastard forge documents declaring you Able’s wife so they could get your inheritance?”

“Not quite.” She almost regretted bringing it up, seeing how enraged he’d become. At least he wasn’t trying to kiss her anymore. If the rest of the story didn’t get him to stop playing with her heart, nothing would. “Remember that rodeo clown? Drunk Bob? It turns out he used to be a real minister. When he died, his daughter thought he’d just forgotten to file the signed marriage certificates she’d found in his old trailer...the one he used to hitch behind his truck. She filed the papers with some clerk friend of hers who overlooked the missing licenses.” She swallowed hard. “You forgot to take your copy, Ryder. That’s one of the certificates she filed.”

His arms went slack and she slid down his body, standing on shaking legs. His mouth opened, shock painting his features.

“Yeah. That’s about how I felt yesterday when John asked me where we’d filed for divorce. He assumed we had, since you lived here in Hailey when you’re not on the road with your band, and I live under my maiden name in Nevada. I planned on taking off and not even telling you, Ryder. I mean, how do you break that kind of news?” She paused. “Guess what? We’re legally married. Surprise.”

He let her go and stumbled back a step.

She hugged her waist, not giving him time to let it fully sink in before she continued.

“John is working on having this mess cleared up. I explained to him that it was just a hoax marriage performed by a drunk rodeo clown, so he contacted Bob’s daughter to try to reverse it. That’s how I learned what happened and why a marriage without a license was legally documented.”

When he said nothing, she frowned. “Did you hear me? I *wasn't* going to tell you. I hoped you never needed to know, or if you had to sign anything, at least I'd be long gone by the time you were informed. *That's* how much I've changed. Look at me again, Ryder. Do you *still* see the girl you used to know?”

He compressed his lips into a tight line and put his hands on his hips, taking several deep breaths. His emotions ranged from surprise to disbelief—then finally anger. “Let me get this straight. We—”

“Are married, and I didn't want you to know until after I was gone. It's legal, at least until my lawyer can get it annulled. You left your copy in ex-minister Bob's trailer when Nav got hurt. His *actual* minister daughter found it. She wanted to make things right by the couples, so she filed with the county. Sounds like something out of a nightmare, right? Well...welcome to ours.”

He closed his eyes.

She barked a bitter laugh. “How ironic is that? You were a married guy having all kinds of sex, but never with his own wife.” She sighed. “I *can't* sleep with you, Ryder. It'll ruin our chances if we have to go before a judge to swear we haven't had sex since we signed those papers at the rodeo all those years ago. I'm hoping it can just be removed from the records since we didn't apply for a license, and this was just a big screw-up, but I'm not chancing it.”

Ryder opened his eyes. “Are you lying to me?”

She actually flinched. He looked killing mad. “No. I refused to believe it at first, too, but John assured me the paperwork was filed.”

“We're *married*?”

“At least until this can be fixed.” She eased the tight hold she had on her

waist, waving her hand between them. “So this can’t happen. John’s going to do everything he can so we don’t have to go before a judge.”

A muscle in his jaw flexed when he clamped his lips together. Ryder was furious, and she didn’t blame him.

She leaned back against the tree trunk. Despite feeling miserable, Summer could at least breathe easier now that the truth was out. There was no fear of Ryder sweet-talking her into going to the cabin with him now. No second chance for him to shred her heart.

Ryder reached into his back pocket and yanked out his cell phone. She bit her lip, wondering what he planned to do. Maybe try to access a website about their marriage? Sometimes legal documents were accessible online. They could have a way to verify what she’d said if their public records were searchable via the internet.

He used his index finger to tap on the screen, then he lifted the cell to his ear. His dark gaze fixed on her, clearly showing his anger. Seconds passed before he spoke.

“Hi, Mr. Barnes. This is Ryder Raine. Summer just informed me that we’re legally married.” He paused.

Summer’s mouth opened but no words came out. Ryder was using her own attorney to verify the truth. His lack of trust hurt a little, but she didn’t protest. It was understandable that he’d want to hear it from someone else.

“Summer’s right here. She knows I’m calling you. Say hello.” Ryder turned the phone in her direction.

She blew out her breath. “It’s fine, John. Go ahead and tell Ryder what you told me.”

Ryder put the phone against his ear. “I want to know everything.”

She glanced around, not wanting to meet Ryder’s angry stare anymore.

He was quiet, listening to whatever John had to say. The glimpse of the cabin farther up the dirt path was a sobering view. She had come *that* close to being taken to the place where she'd shared so many intimate moments with Ryder. Just a short walking distance away. The trees hid most of the structure, but she saw the roof peeking out from behind thick leaves where the branches parted.

"I see," Ryder finally stated. Then he pinned her with his gaze once more. "Hold off on all that. Summer and I are trying to work on saving our marriage. Call that Brenda lady again and tell her not to do a damn thing." He hung up the phone.

Summer gawked at him. "What did you just do?"

He shoved his phone into his pocket and stormed forward. "I'd be more concerned with what I'm *about* to do."

He bent and grabbed Summer's waist, jerking her forward. She gasped when her hip slammed into his shoulder. She frantically placed her open palms on his back, trying to push off him. He just tightened his hold, and she cried out when he spun so fast it made her dizzy.

"Put me down!"

He locked his arms around the back of her thighs. "I'm done talking."

She felt the first trickles of real fear when Ryder quickly strode down the dirt path. She twisted, her hands fisting his shirt as she lifted enough to toss her hair. They passed the truck without stopping—and she knew where he was carrying her.

"Put me down, Ryder! I know you're mad but you're acting crazy."

"Shut up, Summer. Anything you have to say is only going to piss me off more."

"I didn't do this! *You're* the one who forgot your damn copy. Bob's

daughter wouldn't have filed the stupid thing if she hadn't found it in his trailer."

"I know."

"Then put me down. You're scaring me!"

"I'm not going to hurt you." He sounded furious again. "Is that what you think? That I'm going to take you to the creek and drown you or something? Just stop talking."

"I'm sorry I just slapped you with the truth, but you were making me all confused, making me want things, and I *couldn't* sleep with you."

"Who said anything about sleeping?"

His boots stomped on wood as he climbed the three steps to the cabin porch and crossed to the front door. It creaked loudly when it opened, and he slammed it behind them when he entered the dark interior. A few feet more and he stopped.

Summer gasped when she was tossed off his shoulder. She hit the bed and bounced. Ryder spun away and crossed the room to the old fireplace. She sat up, scooting forward on the mattress.

"Get off that bed and I'll tie you to it," he warned. "I'm lighting a fire. We keep it maintained and ready at all times in case any of my brothers are ever caught out in a storm and need shelter."

Summer froze, watching him grab something off the old mantel. He crouched and, moments later, small flames sparked in the hearth. They slowly grew larger as the wood stacked inside started to catch from the kindling underneath. Ryder stood and replaced the lighter before turning. With his back to the brightening light of the fireplace, his face remained in shadows.

"You're my wife."

“Not really. It was a crazy error, and it’s about to be resolved. Give me your phone so I can call John back.” She slid closer to the side of the bed.

“I *said*, don’t do it unless you want to be tied down. Ever tried a little bondage, Summer? You’re about to if you get off that damn bed.”

She held still, staring at him. “I know you’re mad. I was shocked too. But it’s just a mistake.”

“Actually, it’s a blessing. We don’t have to worry about Able trying to marry you anymore. You already have a husband.” He stalked closer, stopping at the end of the bed. It was just an old metal frame with a thick mattress, set against the far wall of the one-room cabin. “We should have a honeymoon.”

“I told you so you *wouldn’t* want to sleep with me.”

“I figured. I must terrify you.”

She glanced away, avoiding that dark, knowing stare of his.

“Is the thought of me touching you so damn scary? Are you afraid it’s going to tear down those walls you’ve spent years building to keep me out?”

She lifted her chin, glaring at him. “Yes. Is that what you want to hear? Yes. This is a no-win situation, Ryder. Don’t you get that?”

“Nope. Tell me about it.” He crossed his arms over his chest.

“It’s you...me. It’s this damn town. It’s what happened in the past. Hell, it’s everything that’s happened to us since! It can’t work. Why can’t you see that?”

“I want you.”

“It’s not about what you want!” She closed her eyes and dropped her chin with a sigh. “It’s all bad, Ryder. We were doomed from the start and too much has happened in the years since. There’s no going back.”

“Says who? We’re married. That’s got to mean something. It changes

things.”

She jerked her head up to look at him. “Are you kidding?”

“No. I’m your husband. That changes *everything*, Summer.”

She snorted. “Yeah, it changes things, alright. It’s proof that we were destined to be a disaster from the beginning. I mean, a legal marriage from a drunken rodeo clown?! Our fathers hated each other. I knew from the moment I started to fall in love with you that it couldn’t end well. But I was young and naive back then. I had hope we could beat the odds and somehow have a happy ever after. Instead, I found out you’d lied to me about everything and that ripped my heart out.”

She took a deep breath. “I swore to *never* come back here, but stupid me decided to risk it, thinking I’d be in and out of town before anyone was the wiser. I just wanted to steal some of my mother’s belongings before they were thrown out when the Woods inherited the ranch.”

He rounded the end of the bed.

She threw out her hand and pointed at him. “Stay back!”

He froze but scowled at her.

“Everything went to hell the second I stepped foot in this town, Ryder. I returned and was almost *killed* within the first hour by Able and his father. Minutes before that, I was informed our phony marriage by a drunken rodeo clown was somehow legalized by his well-meaning daughter. Then I find *you* at Trip’s, instead of Alabama where you were supposed to be. Oh yeah,” she said, when his eyebrow quirked up, “I checked your tour schedule to make sure there was zero chance we’d run into each other. But nope—here you are. It’s like some cosmic joke...and it’s *not funny!*”

“Calm down,” he said in a softened tone.

“Fuck you, Ryder! I don’t want to calm down.”

He lowered his arms to his sides.

“You’re not my husband. You’re a musician who screws a ton of women while on tour. I looked you up on the internet every time I found myself sad and missing you. It was a foolproof way to remind me of why I’d fled in the first place. I read all the comments those women posted on your band’s socials. It was pretty clear you’d slept with lots of them. Can you even count the number? And you had the *nerve* to act upset that I’d slept with two men since you. *Two*.”

“I didn’t know we were married.” Anger glinted in his eyes.

“Neither did I. That’s beside the point.” She took another few breaths, just trying to calm down. “We don’t have a marriage, and I’m sure as hell not going to act as if we do. It’s a *mistake*. Call John back to tell him you were out of line.”

“No.”

“Then give me your phone. I’ll call him myself.” She opened her hand and held it out. “Now.”

“You can’t just ignore that we’re married.”

“I can. Especially when my so-called *husband* has taken his dick on tour for all these years, nailing any woman with a pretty face and figure. I’m not going to be just another in a long list of women you take to your bed. I deserve better than that.” Tears filled her eyes just thinking about how busy he’d been all these years. “It makes this alleged marriage something dirty and terrible. Don’t you see that?”

Ryder closed his eyes. He didn’t withdraw his phone. She waited, her heart aching as long seconds ticked by and several emotions crossed his face. She could identify a few of them. Regret, sadness, weariness...at one point a grimace, as if he were in pain. But once again, anger won out by the time

he'd opened his eyes.

She gasped when he lunged, wrapping one of his arms around her waist. His weight landed on top of her when they hit the bed, stealing her breath. She struggled after the initial shock, but Ryder had already managed to snag her wrists and yank them above her head. He pinned her legs with his own.

"You found out we were married yesterday, right?"

"Get off me! What are you doing?"

"Yesterday, yes? Answer me."

"Yes." She tried to wiggle away, but he was too strong.

"I found out today. And I say it didn't count until we both knew about it. The past is done. There's no changing that. It's what happens from this moment on that matters."

"You're nuts! *No.*"

He arched an eyebrow. "I'm not letting you go, Summer. I've told you already and I'll keep telling you—I won't lose you again."

"Did you hear anything that I said?"

"Yes. I also heard what you *didn't* say. Fate keeps throwing us together."

"It's called doom, Ryder, not Fate. D.O.O.M. Every time we get too close, nothing good happens."

"I don't agree with that."

"Do you do drugs these days?"

"No." He scowled.

"So you're just into forcing yourself on women then?"

"You know I'd never do that."

"Pay attention to what you're doing right now." She tried to twist out of

his hold but he held her tighter. “What do you call this?”

“Talking to someone who’s determined to run away because she’s afraid. Listen to me, baby.”

She didn’t want to hear what he had to say. Ryder could always talk her into anything when she was younger. Some things hadn’t changed in that regard. He had been, and would always be, her one weakness.

“I love you.”

She held his gaze, unable to look away. The ragged way he spoke tore her up inside.

“I’ve always loved you, and that’s never going to change. I don’t want to be bitter and carry around all this pain anymore. Do you? You’re the one who’s haunted me when I tried to fall asleep at night, for eleven goddamn years. I’ve missed you so much, Summer. Now you’re here, and I can’t let you go. Everything that happened for us to end up married *has* to be fate.”

“It was a drunken rodeo clown and a daughter who didn’t realize her estranged father was performing mock marriages to gain booze money.”

“I don’t care. You’re my wife, and I don’t want a divorce.”

“Annulment. Maybe not even that. The daughter told John she’ll erase this mess if her friend at the courthouse can pull it off. It will be as if that document was never filed. And it won’t hold up in court if we need to bring this mess before a judge. We didn’t have a license for a ceremony.”

“I don’t care about that, either. We’ll get remarried then, through the proper channels, and make it totally legit.”

“You *are* crazy,” she accused.

“About you. I have been since you came into my life, and I always will be, where you’re concerned.”

She bit her lip, trying to think of what to say to make him see reason.

“New start. Right here and now. You and I, Summer. I’ll quit touring with the band and just write songs. We can live in the main house on the ranch until we get our own place built. I have plenty of money saved. I don’t blow what I make. I was raised ass poor, so I made good investments and have more than one savings accounts. I’m not rich or anything, but I can support us.”

He went on before she could speak. “And I have an idea about how to deal with those assholes after you. Do you want to hear it?”

“They aren’t going to give up.”

“Donate your ranch to the Federal government.”

That surprised her. “What?”

“Give it away to someone the Woods can’t intimidate. Hell, give it to the FBI and maybe they can turn the ranch into a training center. That would fix the Woods family, wouldn’t it? We’d have a town full of Feds. We can look into different options of course, but that one just popped into my head. Drake has some friends we could reach out to for guidance. And I don’t want you thinking I’m interested in you for your money, either, so we’ll have paperwork drawn up to ensure I don’t get a dime from you.”

She hadn’t even considered he’d be interested in her money. He might have more money than *she* did, actually, since she wasn’t even sure how much she’d inherited. His band seemed pretty popular.

“I just want *you*, Summer.”

She shook her head. “So, what? You’re just going to keep me pinned down on this bed until I agree? Is that your actual plan?”

“We’re talking, so yes. For as long as it takes.”

“You’re honestly crazy.”

He smiled. “Guilty as charged when it comes to you.” His expression

sobered. "I missed you so much. You have no idea."

"We're not the same people, Ryder."

"I'm willing to risk it. I think you're still the woman I fell in love with. You just grew pricklier, but I'm willing to work through any problems that arise. You want stable? I'm going to give it to you. I'm here for the long haul. We'll build a house, have kids. I remember you wanted rocking chairs on our porch for when we grow old. I'll buy us a matching pair."

She closed her eyes and sighed.

Ryder shifted his body a little and released her wrists, getting more comfortable on top of her.

She looked at him again, taking in his handsome features. Then blurted, "Let's have sex."

His eyes widened. It was clear that she'd surprised him—but it didn't last long. "You just want me off you so you can make a run for the door."

"Tempting," she admitted. "But no. Let's have sex. I think once you get that out of your system, you'll realize that staying in a marriage you didn't even know about is crazy."

He grinned. "Challenge accepted." He suddenly rolled, climbing off the bed. "Strip naked. Let's do this right, baby."

Summer sat up and swallowed hard. *What in the hell did I just get myself into?*

Ryder bent, tearing off his boots. He kept his body in the path to the only way out of the cabin. Summer looked like a woman ready to bolt. It amused him that she believed he just wanted sex from her. He'd show her otherwise.

Summer scooted off the bed and stood. She didn't undress.

“Naked,” he reminded her.

“Um, we don’t have condoms.”

“I keep some in my wallet, just like my brothers always ordered me to do. Not to mention, you want kids. No rubber is fine with me.” He could see her mind working, already trying to back out. “I just saw a doctor two weeks ago. I always get my yearly physical when I take a break from touring, just to get it out of the way. Our insurance premiums are lower for the band if we do that. Disease-free and healthy. Have you been tested?”

She nodded.

“And?”

“I’ve only slept with two men.”

“It only takes one.”

“I’m clean. I had to go to a doctor about six months after Brandon and I split. It was time for my, um...annual girl checkup.”

“When’s the last time you had sex?”

“I haven’t slept with anyone since Brandon.”

He let it go, not wanting to know exactly when that breakup occurred, since the answer might piss him off. He hated the idea of anyone touching her. “On any form of birth control?”

She shook her head.

“That’s going to help us get you pregnant faster.”

“I’m not ready for that.”

He had to admit, he wasn’t either but he wouldn’t admit it. Summer would probably use that fact to cock block him and get away. They needed to work on their relationship before they added a baby into the mix.

“I’ll use a condom. I just wish I’d brought an entire box.” Ryder ran his gaze down Summer’s body. “I’m going to need at least that many by the time

I feel I've properly made love to you and reminded you why we belong together. We'll have to make do with the two I have. Take off your clothes, Summer."

He expected her to try to bolt now—but she reached up, gripped her shirt at the waist, and tugged. She revealed her stomach slowly. In contrast, he unbuttoned his shirt, taking it off quickly. His undershirt went next. Summer watched him, her gaze taking in his bare chest. She paused.

"What?" He looked down.

"How do you stay so in shape still?"

"I work around the ranch when I'm home, and I help the roadies with the band equipment. That's a lot of heavy lifting when you're setting up a stage and tearing it down."

Her gaze lifted. "I'm nervous. It's a good thing I took a shower this morning, but I haven't shaved in days."

"Stop worrying. Just take off everything. I've got you."

"You said that the first time you ever touched me."

"I remember. You look just as skittish now as you did that day, spread out on a blanket. It all worked out, didn't it?"

She blushed. "You shocked me a bit."

He chuckled, remembering that, too. "You were so shy and innocent. You tried to stop me from going down on you. I didn't lie when I promised you'd enjoy my mouth, did I?"

"It was just so personal."

"But you loved it."

She broke eye contact and began to remove her clothing. Summer didn't hurry, but he didn't care how long it took as long as she ended up bare on the bed.

She was his *wife*. That news still shocked him. The how and why didn't matter so much as the end result.

He grinned, his cock aching. She was his Summer Raine. And he planned to make her really wet.

Chapter Ten

The way Ryder looked at her made Summer feel even more nervous. He followed her every movement as if he expected her to rush toward the door. It was tempting. She took a deep breath and blew it out. He'd see her naked body, older and a bit heavier. Maybe it would turn him off the crazy idea of staying married.

She stopped watching him when she bent to shove down her jeans and panties stepping out of both. The fire burning across the room warmed up the cabin, besides giving the dark place some light. She straightened and stiffened her spine, staring right at him.

Ryder studied her as he threw his belt on the floor and unfastened his jeans, opening the button. His gaze roamed up and down her body.

“Beautiful,” he rasped.

She held her ground. They'd have sex, it would probably be awkward after all these years, and he'd learn too much time had passed. Intimate memories haunted them both, but reality would snap them out of the past.

She turned around and climbed on the bed, letting him see her new flaws and flashing her bigger ass. She crawled to the center of the bed and sat, crossing her arms over her chest.

Ryder shoved his jeans and underwear down, got rid of them, and tossed his wallet on the bed as he came after her. Summer swallowed hard when the bed dipped. His grin wasn't expected as he raised his head and came closer.

He surprised her when he lunged and took her down flat, same as before. The bed bounced from his weight shift, then one of his knees nudged hers, and she spread them open to allow him to slide his hips between her thighs to settle down more firmly on top of her.

“Easy, baby. Don’t let me spook you.”

She stared into his beautiful eyes. “Doomed,” she whispered.

“Wrong.” He immediately went for her mouth. His lips were firm and demanding as they covered hers. She opened to him when he ran the tip of his tongue over her bottom lip.

Ryder could *kiss*. He’d always been skilled in that department. She wrapped her arms around his neck and loved feeling his hot skin pressed against hers as he explored her with his mouth, teasing her with his tongue. She began to relax and enjoy it.

One of his hands cupped her rib cage and slid lower. The feel of his roughened fingertips very gently caressing her sensitive skin made her shiver in a good way. He trailed that hand lower to her hip, then the inside of her thigh. Ryder got a firm grip and shoved it higher, spreading her legs farther apart. He used his other arm to brace his weight as he lifted his hips a little and put space between their stomachs.

Summer tensed when Ryder inched his hand closer to her sex and brushed his thumb over her mound, almost petting her there. He lowered it more, traced over the seam of her pussy, then teased her clit with light taps.

She moaned. It had been a long time since a man had touched her, and the fact that it was Ryder made it more exciting. He’d been the love of her life.

She broke the kiss and turned her head to the side.

Ryder buried his face against her neck and gave open-mouthed kisses to the column of her throat and the top of her shoulder. She explored his back with her fingertips, lightly raking her nails across his skin. He lowered his thumb to the entrance of her pussy and found her wet. He spread it upward to her clit, rubbing with a little more pressure.

“Oh God,” Summer moaned. It felt amazing. Her muscles tensed, and she spread her legs wider, despite the urge to close them. He made her ache so good.

Ryder stopped kissing her and moved his lips to her ear, his voice sexy and a bit gruff. “I’m going to make you come before I fuck you. I want inside you so bad, I hurt. Remember how it used to be? How good it felt to have me go in slow? Once I’m all in, I’m gonna lose control. I want you too much to play the first time. I’m going to fuck you *hard*.”

He strummed her clit faster, right on the spot that drove her insane. She couldn’t think. Summer arched her back, feeling her nipples tighten and bead. Her breaths came out choppy and harsh, and she knew she wouldn’t last. It really had been too long. She had a hair-trigger response to Ryder’s touch.

“That’s my Summer,” he whispered. “Cry out my name and explode for me. Let me hear it.”

He applied a little more pressure—and that was it. Summer did exactly as he demanded. “Ryder!”

Her nails dug into his back, and she tried to close her legs as pleasure brutally gripped muscles. His body kept her spread open and at the mercy of his thumb, still playing hell on her senses. She bucked under him, and he finally stopped tormenting her. He shifted his weight and lifted a little, grabbing his wallet to fish out a condom.

There was no warning before the broad tip of his cock pressed against her slit. He found the right spot, and she gasped as he began to fill her, entering her slowly, just the way he’d promised.

Ryder’s cock felt bigger than she remembered, thicker, and steel-hard. She kept hold of him and wrapped her legs around his waist, bringing her knees up higher to give him easier access. His eyes closed for a split second, and he hissed out a soft curse before holding her gaze again.

“You’re perfect.”

He made her believe it. The intense look he gave her, the reverent tone of his voice. His mouth found hers again as he worked his cock inside her, still going slow. She tore her mouth away when he was all the way in. His gaze locked with hers...and then he started to thrust hard and deep.

Pleasure hit instantly, and Summer wanted to close her eyes but she didn’t. Ryder was joined with her, taking her. Their bodies linked once again after so many years.

He moved faster. Then faster still, taking her harder, until he suddenly buried his face against her throat. His entire body shook, and he gasped her name. She knew he’d come.

“Fuck,” he panted. “I’m sorry, baby. I knew I wouldn’t last. I’ve wanted you for too damn long to hang on. Just being inside you made me wanna blow.”

She stroked his back. “It’s okay.”

He lifted his head and adjusted his body a little. “It’s not, but I’m going to make it up to you.”

She slid her fingers into his hair, loosening the hair tie and freeing his ponytail. It fell past his shoulders. “I like your hair longer.”

He smiled. “I do too.” Then his features sobered. “My old man used to give us hell if any of us let it grow out, calling us girl names. He was such an asshole.” He moved his arm and suddenly grasped her ass cheek in one of his big hands. “I like being here, but I need to take care of this condom. Unless you’ve changed your mind about getting pregnant right now.”

That made her release his hair. Summer shook her head.

He slowly separated their bodies. Summer hated the loss but didn’t complain as he lifted and she had to release him with her legs. Ryder turned,

got out of bed, and her gaze landed on his bare ass. He had a great one. He always had.

He removed the condom and walked over to a small trash can with a lid in the corner of the cabin. She sat up, finally taking the time to look around the place. It hadn't changed much, but the mattress wasn't the same. It was nicer, obviously more expensive. And there was a small table with cabinets under it near the door.

Ryder turned and stalked back to the bed, climbing in. He scooted closer and held her gaze. "You're thinking. I could always see the wheels in your brain turning. Ready for round two?"

"This is a new mattress. Or newer. The old one was lumpier." She met his gaze. "Did you lie about bringing women here?"

He didn't get mad. "I burned the original one about a year after you left. I couldn't look at it without thinking about you. I was so mad that day. I'd paid two private investigators that I couldn't really afford at the time to try to find you. I'd run out of money, and I came out here."

She felt bad hearing about the lengths he'd gone to, attempting to find her. "I'm sorry."

"I picked up the mattress, dragged it outside, and set it on fire. I was that pissed and hurt. Several months later, Nav got stuck out in a flash flood while cutting back some of the branches over the trail, and he made his way here. My brother was pissed to discover he had no bed to sleep on and I hadn't restocked the firewood. I got an earful. So I came out here and restocked the wood when the weather dried everything out, then I bought a new mattress." He jerked his thumb toward the table with cabinets. "I bought that a few years ago, when I was feeling nostalgic and spent a night here thinking about you. Inside is water and some emergency food."

She didn't know what to say.

Ryder inched closer. “About five years ago, Nav told me that he was thinking about having this place torn down, since it was going to hell. None of us were keeping up on repairs. He was just going to put a trailer here, so we’d still have an emergency shelter. I couldn’t let him do that. This was *our* place. I patched the damn roof myself, replaced the sagging porch, and cleared out the chimney. Some critters had made it a home and were using this place as a nest. I scrubbed it all out and patched the floors where needed.”

She blinked back tears. “I remember us talking about adding on to this place. Is the outhouse you built me still around back?”

“Yes. I can’t say what kind of shape it’s in. I haven’t entered it since you left. You were the only one to use it. Men just piss outside. We aren’t shy enough to need walls around us.”

She smiled at the memories. “You were really sweet to build it for me.”

He snorted. “It was digging a hole and building a small shed around it with a bench—and the lid cover you insisted on.”

“I didn’t want something to crawl inside the hole and bite my ass while I had to pee.”

“Do you need to use it?”

“Not right now.”

He stretched out a hand and dug his fingers into her hair. She closed her eyes as he kissed her. It was tender at first but quickly grew more passionate. Summer could admit to herself that she really missed Ryder and how he made her feel. The entire world didn’t matter when they were making love.

He used his hand to play with her clit again, until she was almost begging him to make her come. Ryder donned on another condom and entered her. The second time was slower, longer, and he kept fucking her

deep until she climaxed, crying his name.

“So fucking good!” Ryder groaned, following her.

They were both breathing heavily as they clung to each other. Summer’s stomach suddenly growled loud enough for them to hear. Ryder chuckled and slowly untangled their sweaty bodies. He returned to the trash to get rid of the condom and on his way back, grabbed a bottle of water from the cabinet, unsealed it, and took a drink. He used the rest to wash up with.

He held up another bottle. “Want one? Or maybe your soda?”

“Soda, please.”

“Okay. I’ll go grab the food from my truck, too. I’m sure it’s still okay to eat. Don’t move.”

Summer watched him pull on his boots and chuckled as he stalked naked out of the cabin. It was a sight to see. She sat up and bit her lip, waiting for panic to hit. She’d just slept with Ryder. Twice. But...that emotion didn’t come. Instead, she just felt a little stunned and a lot satisfied.

Ryder returned, carrying the sealed bag from the diner and the tray of drinks. He kicked the cabin door closed and strode to the bed. He placed everything down before removing his boots again.

“I can’t believe you just did that.” Summer smiled, still amused.

“Who was going to see me? I just didn’t want to step on anything that would cut my feet.” He took a seat and opened the bag, pulling out two food containers. Each were marked with writing on the lids.

Summer read the one he pushed toward her...and tears filled her eyes that she had to blink to keep back. It was the chicken-fried steak breakfast special with scrambled eggs, extra country gravy, and biscuits. “You remembered.”

“I even had Mitzy include a to-go packet for you.” He handed her a

baggie that contained a plastic knife, fork, spoon, and a thick paper napkin.

She glanced at Ryder's box, reading the writing upside down. He'd gotten two bacon, egg, and salsa burritos. He'd always loved those. It reminded her that despite all her protests and dire warnings, some things *hadn't* changed.

They both started to eat, Summer thinking about the picnics they'd had in the past. Most had been inside this rustic cabin.

"It's still lukewarm," she verified as she cut a piece of chicken-fried steak and dipped it in the white gravy. She chewed, then closed her eyes with a moan.

"Mitzy is still an amazing cook."

"I missed this," Summer admitted after swallowing. She took a sip of the soda he'd brought inside.

"I'm sure you've had a lot of chicken-fried steak over the years."

"None as good as this. Most gravy I've tried was too runny or didn't have the right spices."

"It's best when Mitzy delivers it hot right to the table. We'll have breakfast at the diner tomorrow."

His words had Summer tensing up. "I didn't say I was staying, Ryder."

"Baby, you are." He didn't get mad. On the contrary, he smiled. Trouble twinkled in his dark brown eyes. "I'm not letting you go, remember? What we just did only cemented that we're *definitely* not over. We're too damn good together, Summer. Your terrible plan to turn me off with sex has backfired."

Summer rolled her eyes and took another sip of her soda. "Did you notice my ass?"

"It's burned into my memory. It's that fantastic."

“You’re being ridiculous. I’ve seen some of your fans. They’re super-hot.”

“Not a single one of them are you.”

She opened her mouth, but Ryder cut her off before she could get a word out.

“I am *not* arguing with you about this. Don’t put yourself down. *Ever*. No other woman could possibly compare to you, where I’m concerned. You’re the one I want, Summer. The *only* one. I’m stepping away from the band. All I want is to build a life with you. I’m done with touring.”

“You’d miss it and probably grow to resent me.”

He snorted. “Wrong. So wrong. I’ve grown tired of traveling around with the guys to perform gigs. It’s not as glamorous as you’d think. Some people are built for that lifestyle, but I’ve learned I’m not one of them. I’ve been thinking about just writing songs for a while now. I’m looking forward to staying home with you, helping on the ranch, and having babies as soon as you’re ready to have them.”

She frowned.

“You’ve always been it for me, Summer. Now I know that will never change.”

“We’re still not the same people anymore, Ryder.”

“We’re not totally different, either.” He put a straw in one of the drinks and took a drink. “We’re older, wiser, and know what’s really important. The years we’ve been apart never dulled what we feel together. You can argue with me all you want, but I’m not giving up on us. I love you, baby.”

Summer had to break eye contact with him.

“You love me back.”

She returned her gaze to his, surprised that he always sounded so

confident about her feelings for him.

“We’ll handle whatever obstacles come our way together. You’re my wife. I’m your husband. Fate, baby. I’m a big believer in that.”

“Fate had nothing to do with this. Only a drunk rodeo clown and his overly sentimental daughter.”

He chuckled. “Whatever works. I like the end result.”

She sighed. “Be serious, Ryder.”

“I am.” He watched her. “I’m not letting you take off again. And if you manage to escape, I’ll follow. We’ll handle that damn church and we’ll get to know the parts of each other that have changed.”

“Ryder—”

His cell phone rang from his jeans on the floor. He slid off the bed to retrieve it, looking at the screen. “I have to take this. It’s River.” He answered. “I told you not to call unless it’s important.” He paused, listening.

Something was wrong. Summer could tell by the way his body immediately tensed. “Okay. I’ll be home in about twenty minutes. Keep me updated. Is she doing okay?” He listened more before saying goodbye and disconnecting.

“Trina’s having contractions. Nav is driving her to the hospital. I told him that when the time comes, I’d hang at the ranch and help while he’s away.”

“Trina?”

“Nav’s wife. She’s eight and a half months pregnant. They’d planned to check into a hotel near the hospital next week, before her due date, but it seems their son is impatient to be born.”

Summer climbed off the bed. “I’ll get dressed. Do you have time to drop me off at Jessie’s so I can ask him about my SUV?”

“I’m taking you home with me.”

“Damn it, Ryder! That’s not a good idea,” she said as she quickly dressed.

“Now isn’t the time to argue.” He put on his clothes and boots. “There’s one more thing we need to discuss. I don’t want you finding out from someone else and thinking I lied to you again.”

Summer faced him, feeling dread already. The somber expression on his face told her whatever he wanted to share was something she might not like. “Spit it out.”

“I’m just going to be blunt. Nav was damn near castrated by a bull. It’s what forced him into retirement from the rodeo. He was in real bad shape for months, but thankfully the doctors were able to piece him back together enough to save his ability to have sex. So his dick works just fine...but he’s shooting blanks.”

Summer’s mouth dropped open but she quickly closed it. That wasn’t what she expected to hear. Sympathy came next. That had to have been really hard for Navarro to endure.

“The doctors couldn’t reverse the damage enough to allow him to have kids. Nav really wanted to be a dad, and Trina was desperate to be a mom. They asked Drake, Dusty, River and me to donate our sperm, so biologically, the baby would be half Raine. There was no way in hell one of us would deny our brother that opportunity. The kid is one hundred percent Nav’s, so it doesn’t matter whose sperm was used.” He paused. “But you should know that there’s a one in four chance it might have been my swimmers. Again, though, that kid is one hundred percent Nav’s. My brothers and I would have given him a kidney if he needed it, so jacking off into a cup was nothing.”

She let that information digest for a good minute. “That was really nice of you.”

Ryder watched her, his gaze locked on her face. “He’s my brother. I’d do anything for him.”

“You’re a good man.”

He looked surprised at her words.

Summer stepped closer and put her hands on his chest. “Really. That was a very loving thing to do.”

Ryder cupped her face and brushed a kiss over her mouth. Then he grinned. “I’m glad you aren’t upset about it. Some women would be.”

“I’d do the same if I had a sister in that situation. Donate my eggs, that is. You know what I mean. It would be her baby. I totally get it, and I understand. I’m glad Navarro has a chance to be a father.”

“Thank you. Now, we need to get to the house. I’m going to have to cover all the chores for Nav while he’s gone, so everything’s not totally on River and Adam. They’re the ones who help run the ranch.”

“You should drop me off in town.”

“I’m not letting you go, Summer. We’ll talk more about this later.”

Chapter Eleven

Ryder parked in front of the house and turned off his truck. Summer didn't appear happy to be there, but he wasn't letting her out of his sight. He didn't trust that she wouldn't disappear again. Nav's truck was already gone. They must have left in a hurry. River stood on the porch. The shock on his twin's face was priceless as he got out, rounded the hood, and opened the passenger door.

"Fuck," River muttered, coming down the stairs. "Is that Summer?"

A grin broke from Ryder as he helped her get out. She didn't put up much resistance. He met his twin's stare, silently daring him to say anything bad. "She came back, and we're happy about that." He wanted his feelings to be clear up front.

River gave a nod, showing that he understood. "Welcome back to Hailey...I guess."

"Thanks." Summer kept close to Ryder.

"Damn." River was obviously stunned. "Brit and I went camping, but we had cell reception. Nobody called us to mention *this*."

"Only Trip knew about Summer returning. We stayed at his place last night. It's a long story, but she's home. And I'm going to make sure she stays. How was Trina? Did Nav freak when she started having contractions?" Ryder winked at Summer. "We had a bet going that our big brother would completely lose his shit."

"You lost. I won. Nav kept his cool but hustled her out of here super-fast," River informed him. "Trina was sure her contractions might be those Braxton hicks, but Nav wasn't taking any chances since it's a good twenty-minute drive to the hospital."

“As it should be. I know he doesn’t want Kent delivering his son.”

“Is that a new doctor in the area?” Summer glanced between them.

“Kent Arles is the local vet. He took over for Doc Willie four years ago, after he retired,” River informed her. He stepped closer and opened his arms. “We don’t call him Doc because he’s our age, so we just use his first name. Can I get a hug, Summer?”

Summer stepped into his twin’s arms and they hugged for a few seconds. Ryder liked that the two had always gotten along. He was also thankful that his twin wasn’t being a dick to her. His twin knew better than anyone how much he’d suffered after she left.

River released her. “I’m sorry about your father’s death.”

“Thank you.” Summer moved back to Ryder.

He put his arm around her waist and pulled her against his side. “I’m going to take Summer inside to get her settled. What chores still need to be done? I’m here to help.”

“We’ve done all the morning stuff. Adam and I are about to meet up at barn two. We’re working with a group of colts and fillies to saddle train them. We could use a hand.” River studied Summer. “Do you still ride? Brit is going out soon to check on a herd with two pregnant mamas. Nav was going to go with her. I’d feel better if she didn’t go out alone. We only check on them by horseback, since they tend to get spooked if they hear engines.”

“Sure,” Summer nodded. “I haven’t been near a horse since I left, but it’s like riding a bike.”

“It is not,” Ryder argued. “Bikes don’t buck you off if they startle or step on you if you fall near their hooves.”

Her blue eyes narrowed as she glared at him. “I practically grew up on the backs of horses. I feel confident that I haven’t forgotten.”

The screen door opened and Brit came out. She paused for a second when she saw Summer, a look of curiosity on her face, then came to stand next to her husband. “Hi. I’m Brit. And you are?”

“I’m Summer Decon. It’s good to meet you.” Summer held out a hand.

“Good to meet you too,” Brit said, shaking her hand politely.

“Summer Raine,” Ryder corrected. “We’re married.”

His twin’s eyes widened and his mouth dropped open.

Ryder grinned and gave River a nod. “*Legally* married.”

“It’s a mistake.” Summer glared at him. “I can’t believe you just blurted that out!”

“This is our family. They should know. You’re Summer Raine, my wife.”

“You didn’t come home last night, and you’re telling me that you two ran off to get married? What the fuck?” River’s mood turned quickly. “How could you get married without me being there? We’re twins, man! Not cool!”

“It wasn’t like that,” Ryder clarified. “And you *were* at our wedding. It happened eleven years ago by Drunk Bob. It turns out he was a real minister, and my forgotten copy of the certificate legalized our ‘mock’ marriage. Summer just found out yesterday and told me this morning. She planned to get it annulled or whatever, but that’s a big hell no. I’m keeping her.”

The anger faded from River’s face. Now he just appeared confused. “How the hell does that even happen?”

Ryder shrugged. “It doesn’t matter as long as it’s legal, and the lawyer says it is.”

“Long story short, Bob’s daughter found the certificate in his trailer, after he died, and she pulled some strings to get our wedding recorded, thinking her father had just forgotten or didn’t have time before falling ill.”

Summer sighed. “My attorney was going to fix it, but Ryder told John to leave it alone.” She glared up at him. “Which you shouldn’t have done.”

“Don’t mess with fate, baby. We were meant to be married.”

“Shit!” River muttered.

“Wow.” Brit leaned into her husband, hugging his waist. “That’s wild.”

Ryder met his sister-in-law’s gaze. “Do me a favor. Call Missy and let it slip that Summer and I are married.”

Summer gasped as she whirled to face him.

“We want word to spread, and Missy is the biggest gossip in town. Remember her? She talks to everyone, since we all pick up mail and packages delivered to the post office. She still works there. We want Marvin and Able to know you already have a husband.”

“Why would they care?” River asked.

Ryder quickly broke it down for him and Brit, including Summer’s surprise inheritance, the reason she fled Hailey all those years ago, and the dramatic race to Trip’s mobile home yesterday, culminating in all the damage to Summer’s vehicle and him and Trip using the church members’ trucks for target practice.

His brother was suitably shocked.

“Holy *fuck!*” River gaped at his twin. “No shit? And Able is *still* trying to force her into a marriage?”

“No shit. And that’s not happening.” Ryder held Brit’s gaze. “Whip out your cell and make sure word spreads that Summer’s a Rainie now.”

“They might try to kill you,” Brit pointed out. “To make her a widow. Then she’d be free to marry again.”

Summer paled. “She’s right. That’s a possibility. I need to go back to Nevada, Ryder. You’re being reckless, and that could get us *both* killed.”

“You’re not leaving me.” Ryder gently gripped her arms and leaned in, holding her gaze. “We’ll think of something else if you aren’t okay with my plan.”

“I second that,” River interjected. “I want to hear everything before we decide on a plan of action. We should hold a family meeting. The Woods are dangerous.”

“Fine. Nav’s out, since he needs to focus on Trina and the baby. We’ll invite Trip, Adam, and Drake. Even if we just phone him in, so he can be a part of the brainstorming,” Ryder agreed.

“Dusty too,” River said. “He’s had some dealings with the church and knows more about what’s up with them.”

That news surprised Ryder. “Why in the hell would Dusty know anything about Woods Church?”

“They targeted him quite a bit, since local gossip said we weren’t close to him. Guess they figured he didn’t have the strength-in-numbers advantage.” River glanced at his wife. “We’ll want his insight into those assholes.”

Brit nodded. “You also don’t want him to feel left out.” She held Ryder’s stare. “He’s trying so hard to show everyone that this time he’s finally gotten his shit together. We need to include him more.”

“Otherwise, we could cause him to backslide and start drinking again,” Ryder added, voicing everyone’s fear. “I don’t want to fuck up his sobriety.”

“He’ll be hurt if we exclude him.” Brit sounded certain. “I talk to Dusty the most. Trina was watching out for him but as her pregnancy advanced, well...I took on the role. Dusty is smarter than you all give him credit for. I’m going to call him.”

“Fine.” Ryder just hoped none of them regretted it. He really wanted his

brother to stay sober, and he guessed stress wasn't the way to do it.

“How about if we hold this meeting tonight here during dinner?”

Ryder nodded at Brit's suggestion. “I'll call Drake to see if he can get away from his practice, or if we'll just phone him in.”

“I'll call him.” River pulled out his cell. “You take Summer inside and get her settled.” He glanced at the truck. “Do you need help taking her stuff in?”

“Trip has her things. He can bring them by later when he comes for dinner.” Ryder tugged Summer toward the house.

She'd been surprisingly quiet as he talked to his brother and sister-in-law, and now he felt her tense up as they walked. He kept his arm around her waist as they went up the porch steps. “Trina and Nav have made a lot of upgrades since she moved in. It's much nicer than the last time you were here.”

“I'm still not sure this is such a good idea. You're actually bullying me a bit.”

Ryder hid a grin, knowing it was partially true. He wasn't going to allow Summer to disappear on him for a second time. “It's going to all work out. We're both older and wiser now.”

“Older, yes,” Summer whispered. “I'm not so sure about the wiser part, since I should know better than to trust you.”

Her words hurt him a little, but he pushed that emotion back. Summer just needed time to learn that he wasn't about to screw up again. He had his second chance. No way was he about to blow it.

Summer's heart pounded as Ryder led her into his childhood home. The interior changes were instant. Fresh, brighter paint and new furniture

showcased the large living room to its full potential. The dark brick fireplace had been refaced with a pale gray stone. The chair where old man Raine had once sat wasn't there anymore.

“The place looks good, doesn't it?” Ryder sounded proud. “Trina has good taste, and she really brightened up the place. Let's take a tour.”

The house was really nice. Ryder showed her the dining room, with a large table that seated twelve. She'd never seen the kitchen, but it had obviously been modernized. Unlike what her father had done to her childhood home, the Raine kitchen had a welcoming homey feel, with blond wood cabinets, white counters, and pale blue backsplash tiles. There was nothing sterile or cold about it.

“The den is the only place that hasn't been touched on this floor,” Ryder told her, giving her a quick show of wood paneling and built-in bookshelves. The first-floor bath was done in white and pale blues that matched the kitchen. “We'll skip the basement. That's a big project we haven't taken on yet. It's also why I'm not suggesting we move down there. It's got a two-bedroom suite with a full bathroom, but nothing has been updated. Trip and Adam's bedrooms were down there while we were growing up. They left a lot of stuff they didn't want as each of them moved out to get their own places.”

“Teenage boy rooms?” she guessed.

Ryder chuckled. “Right down to the mostly naked posters taped on the walls and the faint linger of unwashed socks. The attic belongs to Drake. He had it remodeled into an apartment a few years ago, so he has some privacy when he's home. Let's go upstairs.”

Summer felt nervous when memories surfaced of the last time she'd gone to the second floor of the Raine home. To verify that Ryder had lied to her.

He seemed to sense that she was having difficulty, and he took her hand, gripping it tight. “We don’t have any rodents in the house, if you’re worried.”

“No.” Summer grimaced. “Did that used to be an issue?”

He shot her a smile. “Part of the remodel was finding all the ways for critters to get inside the house and seal them off. Let’s just say that Trina wasn’t happy to find a racoon in the kitchen one morning right after she moved in. A mama had made her way into the basement and birthed her babies down there. The food lured her upstairs.”

Summer had lived in some bad places over the years, but none with wildlife. “My last apartment had cockroaches. At least racoons are cute. What happened to them?”

“River and Nav trapped them all and relocated them near the creek. All five were safely moved without incident. Trina is from California.” He laughed. “She made Nav build them a wood nesting box and she left food out for them until the babies were older.”

“Nice.”

“Trina is super soft-hearted. I can’t wait for you to meet her. She’s good people. You’ll like her.”

“I take it that she moved here after I left? I don’t remember anyone named Trina.”

They reached the top of the stairs. “Yes. Her first husband died, and she wanted a fresh start. She bought the Verns’ farmhouse.”

“So many people have moved away,” she mused. “Like Trip buying the Johnson place.”

“The Cribbles left, too, after their kids got married to people they met in college and none of them wanted to come back to Hailey to raise their growing families. Adam bought their place.”

Summer remembered them. They'd been a nice family of five who lived closer to town on a small three-acre spread. "They used to have a ton of beehives."

"Not anymore. Adam sold all the hives, since he wanted no part of that." Ryder led her to a closed bedroom door.

Summer frowned. "This isn't your bedroom." She'd entered this one eleven years before. It had been River's room.

"It is now. River and I switched." He opened the door. "I paid for a crew to come in and do a fast remodel. They got it done in a day and a half. New paint, and I had them sand down and stain the floor a lighter shade."

The dark walls had been painted a light tan. The huge four-poster bed was gone, replaced with a leather sleigh bed. The heavy cowboy theme was also gone. It looked like a nice guest room instead.

A guitar on a stand and chair took up one corner, with a small desk against one wall. Dark drapes no longer covered the two windows. Sunlight streamed in from outside, making the room bright and cheerful.

"This is drastically different."

"I used to call this River's dungeon. He's into some mild bondage." Ryder chuckled. "I'm not into chaining anyone."

Her mouth dropped open but Summer closed it fast. "Did you switch because he got married? I can see how his wife might have wanted something less dark, and the large, oversized furniture made it appear like a smaller space."

"Brit didn't want to stay in here after..." He cleared his throat. "Hell, I guess I should tell you. You accused me of not trusting you to be able to handle things, so I'm trying to learn my lesson. Brit's ex-husband was crazy, and he came after her. He broke into the house and there was a gun battle in

here. I figured the faster we erased any signs of that shitshow, the better.”

“Oh my...” Summer was at a loss for words.

Ryder shrugged. “Kyle was a really bad guy who deserved what he got. But it’s not like the house is haunted or anything. I switched rooms with River so Brit wouldn’t have to live with the memory of that prick attacking them in here.”

Summer glanced around the bright, cheery room. River’s words replayed in her head. He’d said something about the house not being haunted... “He died?”

“My brother was thankfully a better shot. I’m glad it was Kyle who was hit instead of River or Brit.”

She mutely nodded as she let that information sink in. Someone had died inside this bedroom.

“We can stay in the basement if you want.”

“Was everything changed out in here?”

“Yes.”

Summer took a deep breath and blew it out. “It’s not the first time I’ve slept where someone has died. This is a lot nicer than the motel I used to live in. I don’t have a problem staying here.”

It was Ryder’s turn to gape. He stared at her with questioning eyes.

Macabre amusement surfaced. It was nice to know she could shock him after he’d done that so many times to her. “I was told that at least six people had died in the room I’d rented, by one of the prostitutes who’d lived there for a few years. Three overdoses. One heart attack.” She paused. “A suicide, and one guy was stabbed to death by his girlfriend. It wasn’t like I could afford to move, and it was the only room available for long-term rental. I never had a ghostly experience.”

“Fuck.” Ryder’s featured harshened. “I’m glad you’re home.”

She rolled her eyes. “Because it’s so much safer here with Marvin and Able after my inheritance.”

“We’re going to make it safe for you to stay.”

Summer studied his face. “I don’t remember you being so unrealistic. They aren’t going to let this go, Ryder. Brit made a good point. They could kill you if they hear that we’re legally married, just to get you out of the way.”

“Let me worry about that. Right now, let’s focus on getting to know each other and patching up our relationship. That’s the priority. The Woods aren’t going to come after you here on the ranch.”

“You hope.” Summer wouldn’t put anything past Marvin and Able.

“We’ll figure out how to deal with them at dinner tonight. This is our room for the time being. One day soon, we’ll tour the ranch and I’ll show you a few spots I have in mind for us to build our dream home. We’ll need to figure out a good combination of what we both want to make that happen. And we will.”

A sigh escaped her. “If I stay.”

“You’re staying.” He suddenly invaded her space, cupped her face, and leaned in. “I love you, Summer. Always have. Always will.”

He kissed her, deepened it, and Summer grabbed hold of his arms when her knees went weak. One thing hadn’t changed. Ryder Raines knew how to make her forget everything else when his mouth was on hers. She forgot to protest and instead got lost in him.

Passion burned her up as he moved them, walking her backward until her legs hit the side of the bed. Ryder broke the kiss and suddenly spun her around. Summer’s back hit his front.

“You are so fucking sexy.” Ryder’s arms wrapped around her, and he unfastened her jeans, shoving them down. Her underwear went with them.

Summer twisted her head, peering up at him. She moaned when Ryder pressed tighter against her back and cupped her pussy, rubbing against her clit. His other arm locked around her waist to hold her in place.

Ryder nuzzled her head out of the way and started using his teeth, lips, and tongue to explore and tease her throat. It heightened her pleasure as he rubbed against her swelling clit.

“I’m going to come.”

He bit her neck. It wasn’t hard enough to hurt but that jolt was all it took to send Summer over the edge. A powerful climax hit, and she cried out his name. Ryder tore his hand away from her pussy and released her waist.

Summer’s knees wanted to buckle but she bent forward instead, panting as she used the bed to brace her upper body while trying to catch her breath. Ryder gripped her hip with one hand...and suddenly his cock pressed against her pussy. He pushed against her slit, entering her in one stroke.

“Oh fuck!” she moaned.

“You’re about to be.” He pushed himself deeper, gripped her other hip, and started to ride her. “Baby, you take me so damn good. Pure fucking heaven.”

Ryder increased the pace, fucking her hard and deep. He slid one of his hands from her hip to cup her pussy, his finger pressing against her clit. Her inner muscles clenched as the ecstasy built until she climaxed again. It triggered Ryder to follow her.

They both collapsed onto the bed. Ryder rolled so they were sprawled on their sides. Ryder made it impossible to think when he was making love to her...but slowly, her mind started to clear.

She voiced the question that needed to be answered. “You didn’t use a condom, did you?”

“Nope. We’re married, and we always talked about having kids. I want you bound to me in every way, Summer.”

She squeezed her eyes closed, battling emotions ranging from fear that he might have just gotten her pregnant, to anger at herself for not reminding him to use protection. It was half her responsibility. “We could have made a baby just now.”

He had the nerve to chuckle as he nuzzled her head with his, brushing a closed-mouth kiss on her throat. “I, for one, would be happy about that.”

She tried to wiggle away from him to put some distance between their bodies. It was impossible for her to think clearly when he was touching her. Ryder wasn’t having it, as usual. He curled tighter around her from behind and put his lips against her ear.

“I love you, Summer. I’m gonna keep telling you until you believe it. I know you’re afraid and a little freaked out.” He paused. “Give us a chance. *Please*. I can’t lose you again. I won’t survive it. Stay with me. We can have all the things we always dreamed of together.”

Tears filled her eyes, and she gripped the arm wrapped around her.

“For the record, I didn’t ride you bare on purpose. I just wanted you so much that it didn’t cross my mind until afterward. I refuse to apologize though, because no one else was *ever* going to be the mother of my children. Just you.”

“You’re determined to break my heart again.”

“No.” He rested his head against hers. “We’re going to heal all the hurts from the past and move forward. Everything is going to be different this time. We’ll be happy. I know you still love me. Can you deny that? Be honest.

Meet me halfway. I'm spilling my heart out here."

Summer had to swallow because emotion choked her up.

"We need absolute honesty between us if we stand a real chance, and I want that. Talk to me."

"I still care," she admitted.

"Thank fuck." He nuzzled her again. "I can work with that. We're going to make it this time, baby."

She wasn't so certain. "We should get dressed. Your brother expects your help, and I offered to go riding with his wife."

He signed. "You're still freaked out. That's understandable...but please promise that you won't disappear on me again."

It was asking a lot—because she was freaked out—but she owed him that much. "I promise I won't leave without telling you first."

Chapter Twelve

“I’ve heard about you.”

Summer tore her attention off the horses grazing in an open meadow by the creek. They were all healthy and fine, no foals had been born yet. She looked at Brit Raine. The other woman had blonde hair with blue eyes, tan skin, and a fit body. “I’m sure it wasn’t anything good.”

“That’s not true. River told me all about the girl that Ryder was madly in love with, and how losing her made him cold and distant. My husband told me it was like watching the life slowly fade from his soul after you were gone. He said you were everything light and good in Ryder’s life.”

Those were things that Summer didn’t want to hear. She changed the subject. “How did you and River meet? I am pretty sure I’d remember you if you’d grown up in Hailey.”

“I wasn’t raised near here, but I did grow up around horses. My dad ran a boarding stable in Northern California. River and I met this year, and it was kind of a whirlwind romance.” Brit smiled. “I was the physical therapist sent to help him when he got injured after being flung from a bull.”

“Is that what you do for a living?”

“Not currently. I help around the ranch now. River and I are trying to have a baby. We’d planned to wait a few years but I’m worried we might put it off too long. I’m thirty-five. My clock is ticking down. We recently decided to just go for it.”

That surprised Summer. “You look younger.”

“Bless you for saying that. I’m still a little self-conscious about being a few years older than my husband. River thinks that’s hysterical. Good thing I love him so much or I’d have to strangle him for being annoying.”

Summer could relate. “Ryder is pushier than I remember. Maybe he grew that way with age.”

“I’ve decided it’s a Raine trait, after spending time with all the brothers. They use humor to soften their strong-willed personalities, but yeah...” Brit chuckled. “I never win an argument with River for long. I can’t even complain since he takes me to bed when he’s losing. I forget what we were even fighting about. Trina says Nav uses those same tactics with her.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing here. I should be on my way back to Nevada,” Summer admitted. “That would be the smart thing to do.”

Brit shot her a sympathetic look. “Ryder got you into bed, didn’t he? I mean, I know he did, since you guys were upstairs for a while. Do you want my advice?”

Summer wasn’t sure, since she didn’t know much about Brit and they’d just met. But she had no one else to talk to. “What would that be?”

“Life is too damn short for regrets. I know you and Ryder have some issues from the past to resolve, but it’s worth the work you put in. I’ve seen the way he looks at you, and it’s exactly how River looks at me. Ryder loves you, Summer.”

Brit paused, gazing at the horses. “I used to be miserable and alone. I had to hide from my ex-husband’s father and all his friends while he was in prison. I’ll share the entire sordid tale with you soon, but the point is, I tried to run from River. Tried so hard, he started calling me ‘fuck and run’.” She snorted, rolling her eyes. “He refused to let me keep him at a distance or flee. I wanted to choke him with my bare hands at times. But I’m so glad that he persisted, and that I’m with him. Raine men might be strong-willed and stubborn, but they also really know how to love once you stop trying to build emotional walls between you.”

Summer decided to be completely honest, even though it was tough for

her to admit the truth to a stranger. “I don’t want my heart broken again.”

“I get that. I was once married to a nightmare of a man.” Brit turned her horse, leading them both back toward the ranch house. “I swore I’d never trust anyone ever again with my heart. Then River came along and changed everything. You really should give Ryder a chance. I hate to break this to you, but I saw the way you look at *him*, too. You’re going to break your *own* heart if you just walk away.”

That wasn’t exactly an earth-shattering revelation for Summer. She already suspected that her heart had been compromised once again. It was impossible not to feel when it came to Ryder Raine. The love she’d felt for him in the past hadn’t died. Every moment she’d spent with him since coming back to Hailey had only verified how strongly her feelings still ran.

“Marvin and Able are dangerous. They have their church members backing them. I grew up around them and sometimes overheard way too much during their meetings. Every single one of those men are mindless idiots who allow Marvin to manipulate them into doing whatever he wants. He uses fear and whatever weaknesses they have to gain their loyalty. My father wasn’t a good man, and being a part of that church just made him worse. They thrive on bullying and being dicks. I don’t think Ryder really understands how far they’ll go to get what they feel entitled to—which happens to be everything I now own.”

“You’re worried that Ryder and his family will get hurt trying to protect you. It makes you feel sick inside.”

Summer stared at Brit, surprised that the other woman understood the situation so well.

“I’ve been there and felt that same way. My ex-husband came from a very wealthy, powerful family. Destroying lives was a regular pastime for those bastards, and they got off on it. I put Kyle in prison for the crimes he

committed against me. His father and friends didn't care that he was guilty or the fact that he was a monster capable of doing horrible things. They blamed *me* for everything I suffered, because people like me didn't matter to people like them. I was terrified for River and his family when we got together. I knew they'd become targets just for being around me."

"Ryder told me why he and River switched bedrooms. I'm really sorry that happened."

"My worst fears came true." Brit's eyes filled with tears. "I wish that my ex-husband hadn't attacked us...but I wouldn't have this wonderful life with the man I love if I'd kept running away. You should take a chance, Summer. Life always comes with risks, but some things are worth fighting for. I know. We're all aware of the danger you're in, but you're family. I'm willing to risk it. So are Ryder and his brothers."

"You don't know that for sure."

A smile broke out on Brit's face and humor glinted in her eyes. "Do you see me riding next to you? There's your proof. River didn't toss me over his shoulder and take us back to our favorite camping spot to hide when he learned what you're dealing with. And I didn't ask him to. Raine men stick by their family. That's what you are, even if you haven't fully accepted it yet. You heard Ryder. You're Summer Raine, his wife. We're in everything together, and that includes dealing with another bunch of assholes who think they're entitled to make the lives of others hellish. We've got you."

It was Summer's turn to blink back tears. "I just don't want anyone to get hurt because of me."

"I hope no one does either, but sometimes you have to fight and stand your ground to keep the crucial things in life. What's more important than being with someone you love and wanting to be happy?"

She had no response to that, instead silently contemplating everything

they'd talked about.

After a moment, Brit nodded. "I'm with Ryder. You're a Raine now. That's some serious fate action going on there. Now—tell me more about how this marriage happened."

That was a subject Summer didn't mind talking about. She took a deep breath, blew it out, and shared everything John had told her.

* * * * *

"Married? *You*?" Adam stared at him with wide eyes. "Unbelievable."

"It's not that shocking." Ryder almost felt insulted.

His twin snorted. "Yes, it is. We gave up on you settling down with a wife."

"He means ever since you lost Summer." Adam shrugged. "You turned into a total dick after she was gone."

"Too true." River hung up the last saddle they'd carried back inside the barn from the training pen. "How do you think Summer's going to get along with your band? I wouldn't trust any of them not to hit on her."

"I'm retiring and plan to become a songwriter full time."

Both his brothers gawked at Ryder.

"I've had other bands ask me to write for them. I feel secure that I can make a good living still. Hell, I might even do better going freelance."

"The band is your life." Adam locked up the tack room and pocketed the key. "You'll go stir crazy staying home."

"Not true. I've thought about this for a while, even before Summer returned. There's just been a lot of bad shit to deal with over the past few years, and I'm not loving what I do anymore."

River stepped closer. "Was it having to change agents, the reason *why* it

happened, or Jimmy damn near killing himself again with booze?”

“It might have been Rex beating up the bastard he caught banging his wife and getting arrested,” Adam added. “That wasn’t exactly good publicity, and you’re the one they usually guilt into dealing with interviews. Then Billy—”

“All of the above,” Ryder cut in. “It’s just been a bunch of stress and bullshit to deal with for a while. I’m ready for a quieter, less stressful life.”

His twin nodded. “I’m glad you’re retiring, to tell you the truth. I didn’t want to say anything, but the band has shoved way too much on your shoulders. It wasn’t fair or right.”

“I didn’t think you noticed.”

“Idiot. We shared a womb.” River lightly punched his arm. “I just didn’t think you’d appreciate me sticking my nose into your business, since we always try to give each other some space. I was grateful when you didn’t bust my balls for some of the things I’ve done.”

“Like riding bulls. Seeing what that gig did to Nav should have been lesson enough for all of us to not follow in his footsteps.” Adam shuddered. “Gored in the nuts. Hell no.”

That was a memory that Ryder didn’t want to relive. Nav could have died and it had taken a long time for him to recover. The severe injury had also ended his career earlier than he’d planned. “Did you get ahold of Drake? Is he on his way home?”

“He couldn’t take the time away because he’s due in court tomorrow morning, but he’ll be available for a conference call with us. I filled him in as best as I could. Dusty will be at dinner.” River held his gaze. “I want all the details that you didn’t want to mention around Summer.”

“I’m not keeping any more secrets from her. That’s why I lost Summer

eleven years ago.” Ryder led both of his brothers to the first stall inside the open barn doors and opened the refrigerator they kept there. He passed out bottled water, taking a long drink.

“I heard about that, and I know what happened to Summer’s SUV. Trip called to fill me in this morning, since we’ve got a target on our backs after yesterday’s confrontation with those Woods Church members.” Adam took a seat on one of the stools they kept in the makeshift break room. “We might have to kill some of those idiots to keep your woman safe. The situation is pretty grim.”

“That doesn’t mean we’re not all in,” River added. “Because we are. Your fight is—” River’s cell rang, interrupted their conversation. “It’s Nav,” he said, answering.

Ryder watched his twin’s face for any clue of what might be going on. A huge grin split his face and their gazes locked. “I’m putting you on speaker now. It’s me, Ryder, and Adam here.” He did so.

“Our son was born nineteen minutes ago.” Nav sounded ecstatically happy and proud. “Trina did an amazing job. She’s tired but everything went great. Chance Navarro Raine weighs seven pounds, six ounces, and he has a hell of a set of lungs. He came into this world howling after he took his first breath and didn’t quiet down until he was at his mother’s breast for his first feeding.”

“Congratulations!” Adam lifted his water into the air like as a toast, despite Nav not being able to see it.

“Awesome fucking news. The best, bro!” Ryder felt extreme relief that both mother and baby were fine.

“Boobs make all of us happy. He’s definitely a Raine.”

Ryder shook his head at his twin.

Nav laughed. “Too true. We’ll be home tomorrow morning. Make sure the house is clean, and someone thaw out steaks, please. I promised Trina a big ribeye since the hospital food isn’t the best. We’ll celebrate with a cookout.”

“I’m on it,” River promised. “And we’ll all be there. I’m sure Drake will make the time to come home.”

Adam nodded. “I can’t wait to meet little Chance. We’ll take care of all the details. You just concentrate on being a daddy.”

“I love you guys. I’m going to call Trip, Dusty, and Drake now to share the news.” Nav disconnected the call.

“You know what this means.” Adam looked at both of his brothers. “We’ve got a lot more to lose if we don’t take care of the Woods Church. No fucking way are those assholes getting the opportunity to screw with our family.”

“I might have gotten Summer pregnant,” Ryder blurted. “Those fuckers are going down, one way or another.”

“I want to start a family with Brit. We’re trying to get pregnant,” River shared. “Yeah. Those fuckers need to be dealt with sooner than later.”

“I’m not even getting laid right now, but that’s okay since I’m not ready to be a dad. I’ll make a hell of an uncle though. Let’s go clean up. I’m staying at the homestead tonight.” Adam walked away. “Come on, slowpokes. We have a lot of shit to do.”

Ryder and River followed.

His twin bumped into his side, causing Ryder to turn his head to meet his gaze. “What?”

“It would be cool if we had kids super close in age. I want my son or daughter to be as close to someone as we were growing up.”

“True.” Ryder nodded. “What if we have twins? I mean, we’re twins. It could happen.”

River laughed. “That’s a terrifying thought. Remember what Mary used to say?”

Grief still existed in Ryder’s heart over her loss. Mary had been the closest thing they’d had to a mother. She’d also brought Trip and Adam into their lives, giving them two more brothers. They weren’t blood but that didn’t matter. The bond was just as strong. Her death had devastated all the Raine boys. “You’re double the trouble but make my life twice as interesting.” He smiled at the memory of her telling them that often. “Damn, I miss her.”

“Dad was an asshole for never allowing us to call her ‘mom’.”

Ryder agreed. “Our old man was usually too drunk to make much sense. He was probably jealous because she was a much better parent and he knew we loved her more.”

Adam had stopped at the truck and turned toward them. “Are we talking about Mom?”

They both nodded.

“I miss her.” Adam gave them a sad smile. “She’d have been over-the-moon thrilled to have a grandbaby. That’s exactly how she’d think of Nav’s son. You guys were her kids just as much as Trip and me.”

“We know, and we feel the same.” Ryder pointed at Adam. “We need to find you a woman, so you can have kids close in age to ours.”

“No way. I’ll find a woman on my own. I love you both but you’d be the worst matchmakers ever. We’ve never been attracted to the same kinds of women. Big pass.”

Ryder figured that was fair. “Well, get on it. We do everything together. It’s your turn to get married and have kids.”

Chapter Thirteen

Summer sat next to Ryder at the long dining room table with a plate of food in front of her. They were having pork chops with several side dishes. She felt a little overwhelmed being with so many of his family members, as she forced a smile at the man across the table.

Dusty Raine wasn't someone she knew very well, only having seen him around town as a teenager. He'd arrived minutes before as they'd all carried their plates and drinks to the table. He looked the most like the twins, with his dark eyes and longer black hair. They also shared the same nose and mouth. He wasn't much of a talker so far, barely speaking two words. Those had been "hi" and "thanks".

"All set up," Trip announced, waving his hand at the open laptop at the head of the table. "Connecting now." He tapped something on the keyboard.

A live feed opened on the screen. Drake Raine stared at them from where he sat behind a large desk. He had short black hair, blue eyes, and wore a white dress shirt. The top few buttons were undone and he'd rolled the cuffs of his sleeves midway up his forearms. A large brown paper delivery bag stamped with the name of an Italian restaurant sat to the left of the camera.

"Hello, family. Give me a minute." Drake pulled out to-go containers from the bag and placed them in front of him. "I was hoping to be set up a little earlier, but my client meeting ran a few minutes long. We're preparing for court in the morning."

"Who are you taking down this time? Some company that screwed over one of their employees?" That question came from Adam.

Drake shook his head, opening the containers and ripping open a sealed

packet of plastic silverware. “It’s a nasty divorce with a spouse who thought they could hide millions of dollars from my client.” He suddenly looked directly at the camera, seeming to study everyone at the table. His gaze locked on Summer. “It’s good to see you again, Summer. I’m sorry that your homecoming wasn’t what you expected.”

Trip took a seat nearest to the laptop. “I filled him in about what happened yesterday.”

Drake’s expression turned into a grimace. “I made some calls to a friend.”

“Your FBI friend?” That came from Dusty.

“Yes.” Drake turned his attention to his brother. “It’s good to see you, Dusty. I’m driving home tomorrow after court and plan to stay for a few days. Make time for me. We’ll catch up.”

Dusty didn’t appear thrilled. “I’m still sober.”

“I didn’t think otherwise. I just miss talking to you and wanna look at your ugly mug in person. Sue me—I dare you.” Drake smirked.

That seemed to take the tension out of Dusty. He grinned. “Your lawyer jokes aren’t funny. I’ll let you buy me dinner at the diner. I want to see *your* ugly mug eat something that wasn’t prepared by a fancy chef. Mitzy will kick your ass if you complain about her food. That would make it dinner and a show.”

“Can you two be serious?” Ryder leaned forward to stare at the laptop screen. “Why call Dean? How can he help?”

“He technically can’t.” Drake paused, taking a sip from his bottled water. “But Dean reached out to some people who owed him favors. They’re on their way to Hailey as we speak to do recon, and they’ve already started background checks on everyone involved with Marvin.”

“What’s *that* going to do?” Ryder asked. “It sounds like not much.”

“Wrong,” Dusty said. “A lot of them have criminal records. Some, I suspect, are still on probation from being in prison or have active arrest warrants from wherever they came from. Two of those losers are avoiding paying court-ordered child support. I heard them boasting about it at the diner last time I was home.” He looked directly at Ryder. “One of them was Becker Follis. He mentioned the judge threatening to send him to jail and bragged about how his ex-wife wouldn’t get a penny since they couldn’t find him. I’m betting there’s a warrant out for him. It’ll cripple Marvin’s organization to lose his right-hand man. Becker acts like his enforcer and keeps everyone in line.”

Summer swallowed the bite of food in her mouth. “There’s one problem. I spoke with Mark Hayes. He admitted that no one will arrest them out of fear of retaliation, and knowing the charges won’t stick. It’s why he basically talked me out of filing charges for what happened to my SUV. I don’t think that’s going to change, even if it turns out every single one of those men are wanted by the police somewhere.”

“That won’t be an issue.” Drake seemed confident in his reply. “The team sent by Dean are seasoned bounty hunters used to dealing with hardcore criminals. They’ll grab the ones they can and earn plenty of money while doing it. I figure that will be enough—”

“To scare the piss out of the others,” Dusty interrupted. “That could work. It’ll also undermine everything Marvin promised them. A few of those assholes will likely turn on him once they realize they aren’t untouchable anymore. And Becker won’t be there to protect him.”

“Why do you think they’d turn on him?” Trip frowned. “It seems to me that all those assholes love their so-called minister. They kiss Marvin’s ass.”

“Marvin’s a dick, and Able’s just like him. I overheard a lot while

lurking in the bar, when I was still drinking.” Dusty sipped his soda. “Some of those pricks go there often, basically to get away from other members and air their grievances. Their little commune isn’t as happy as they like everyone to believe. They *need* Marvin, but that doesn’t mean they all like him.”

“That’s what we’re counting on.” Drake cleared his throat. “Summer, I’d like your permission to speak with John Barnes about your trust. You really had no idea that your mother had set that up for you?”

His request surprised her. “I thought the ranch and my grandfather’s money went to my father after Mom died. Why do you want to talk to John?”

“Knowledge is power, and you shouldn’t blindly trust *any* law firm to look after your best interests, especially one you didn’t choose yourself. We’re family now. I’m not asking to take over conservatorship, which I’m certain your current law firm has, but I’d like to gain access to your files. That would include the terms of the trust and how they’ve dispersed any funds after your mom’s death. I’ll have my auditor go over their records to make certain every dime is accounted for, and that they haven’t taken advantage in any way.”

Summer bit her lip, contemplating.

“You should trust him,” Ryder whispered, leaning in. “Drake won’t fuck you over. He also won’t charge you.”

“I’m mostly worried because Hershel Gregor was involved with your trust, and he was also one of your father’s closest friends. I never liked that asshole. He had no problem twisting the law. I have a bad feeling that he abused his position.” Drake held her gaze. “It’s up to you. I’m just offering my services. I’m familiar with the firm he worked for. They’ll want to avoid a lawsuit and any bad publicity by cutting a check if your trust was defrauded of any money by one of their associates. We probably won’t be able to recover every penny, in that case, but most of it.”

She decided it couldn't hurt. "Okay. Thank you."

Drake nodded. "Call John. Let him know that I'm representing you. I'll get on it right away. He'll have you sign some releases to cover his ass, so make sure you have Ryder take you to see him first thing in the morning."

"Done," Ryder said for her, squeezing her hand and released it before going back to eating. "I just hope he's still in town."

"I already spoke to him by phone," Drake informed them. "He's staying in town for the entirety of the week to be available for anything Summer needs. The higher priority right now is dealing with the Woods Church. They pose a big threat."

"Too bad Dean can't just arrest them all," Trip muttered.

"There are these things called laws," Drake deadpanned. "The bounty hunters coming to Hailey will take away the worst of them. That's a good start."

"Where are they staying? The motel is okay, but the gossips will be watching their every move. Word will spread to the church. I have spare bedrooms if they want to crash at my place," Adam offered. "I'm closest to town without actually being in it."

"Or they can stay at my house. It's got a better defensive position if the Woods decide to try to get some payback." Trip leaned forward to glance at Summer. "Not only am I on that hill that no one can sneak up on, but I've got a storm bunker hidden under my home. It's technically for tornados but it makes a hell of a safe room."

Dusty laughed. "Are you serious?"

Trip didn't appear amused as he answered, "I have a mobile home in Texas. And money wasn't an issue. Of *course* I had a storm bunker added while the foundation was being poured. I also grew up living in a basement. I

didn't want to wait a year to have a house built, so that was my solution. You'd know that if you'd accept a dinner invitation from me once in a while. I'd have shown it to you."

"Fine. I'll drop by soon." Dusty gave a nod.

"I'll forward the bounty team your contact information and addresses." Drake pulled out his cell phone and started to text. "They should be arriving in Hailey at some point tonight. Keep your phones on and close."

Ryder leaned in close to Summer, whispering in her ear. "See? We're going to take care of everything. You're going to be safe here."

Summer hoped he was right.

* * * * *

Dinner had gone better than Ryder had hoped. He was grateful to Drake and his many contacts. His oldest brother had brought his friend Dean home for Thanksgiving several years before. He'd overheard enough of their conversations to know that Dean was a kick-ass FBI agent, and he and Drake had worked together at some point.

Ryder had always been nosey, so he pressed Drake for details. His brother had shut him down fast, telling him to forget everything he'd heard. River suspected Drake might have done some off-the-books lawyering for the bureau, since he'd suddenly come into enough money to open his own practice shortly after law school. It was possible that his twin was correct.

"I like how close you and your brothers are."

He led Summer into his bedroom. "I wish Drake didn't live so far away and that Dusty would stop avoiding us most of the time."

Summer turned to watch him as he closed and locked the bedroom door, shutting them inside.

“But Drake needs to live in a large city for work. His wealthy clients sure as hell don’t live in Hailey. And I know Dusty is just embarrassed about all the trouble he’s been in or caused over the years. He also still feels responsible for the old man’s death, but that’s bullshit.”

“I thought it was a car accident?”

“It was. The old man used to guilt Dusty into going drinking with him, since the rest of us refused. Being at home with his drunk ass was bad enough. I sure as hell didn’t want to be out in public with him.” Ryder sat on his bed and removed his boots. “They went to a bar over in Bait. One of the few the old man hadn’t been banned from yet. Key word is *yet*. Dad tended to get belligerent when bartenders tried to cut him off. Thomas wouldn’t let him step foot in his bar in Hailey.”

Summer removed her shoes and took a seat next to him, peering at Ryder with her pretty blue eyes. He loved staring into them.

“Dusty couldn’t drink near as much as the old man. No one could. He passed out at some point, and our dad dumped him into the bed of his truck.” Anger surfaced just thinking about the details. The police had pieced it all together after the fact from witness statements. “The bastard didn’t even care enough to buckle his son into a seat, but that turned out to be a good thing. Dad lost control and wrecked. Dusty was thrown clear, thankfully, and his injuries were minor. Dad died.”

“I’m sorry.” Summer reached out and put her hand on his arm.

“It wasn’t unexpected that he’d kill himself while drunk driving. Our biggest fear was that he’d hurt someone else. We always hid his keys, but he made so many damn copies, we could never find them all. We should have disabled the truck, but Adam and Dusty were driving it too. The old man died instantly when the cab was obliterated after it rolled a few times and slammed into a tree. So yeah, it was a good thing he’d tossed Dusty into the back. But

my brother has survivor's guilt. We've all talked to him, assured him that none of us blame him for the old man dying, and begged him to see a therapist. That's huge for a Raine. The old man said therapy was for pussies."

Summer opened her mouth, but Ryder continued before she could speak.

"He said *everything* was for pussies. Crying. Feeling and showing emotions that were anything other than anger. Apologizing. He was so messed up. We've been assured he wasn't always like that, but apparently he changed drastically after his wife died. He should have held his shit together since he had sons depending on him, but no." Ryder shook his head, feeling sad. "Anyway...that's the kind of mindset he repeatedly shared with his sons. Most of us knew he was the last person to take advice from. Dusty let him influence him too much."

"I'm so sorry, Ryder. I wish you'd felt comfortable enough to share that with me years ago."

"It is what it is. The rest of us have spent years trying to undo the damage our old man caused." Ryder turned on the bed to cup her face in his hands. "I'm going to make love to you now. Any objections this time?"

Summer stared at him with those beautiful eyes of hers. "I'm done fighting what I feel for you."

"Good. I'm fucking stubborn and wasn't going to let you go anyway." He leaned in and brushed his lips over her softer ones. He knew he'd never get enough of her. Summer Raine was all his.

She opened her mouth, allowing him to deepen the kiss. Her hands came up and gripped his arms, clinging instead of pushing him away. He was relieved she was finally admitting that what they had was worth hanging onto.

He broke the kiss to tear off his shirt, then helped her undress. It didn't

take them long before both were naked. He kissed her again, taking her down to the bed. Nothing had ever felt so damn right as having Summer under him, in his bedroom, both of them touching and caressing.

He always kept boxes of condoms in his nightstand drawer. Not that he ever brought women home. Ryder didn't want them invading his personal space. He just stored them there to grab a few for his wallet if he was going out, looking to get laid. It crossed his mind to grab one, but he quickly discarded the notion. The idea of becoming a father terrified him deep down, but Summer made him feel brave enough to face anything. That included fatherhood. She gave him the ability to dream and want so much more out of life.

Her nails lightly raked his back as he kissed her deeply, rubbing his body against her skin as he rocked between her thighs. He reached down and played with her clit. His Summer was wet and ready for him, and she ground her pussy against his hand to prove it. Her moans were muffled by their kiss.

He pulled his hand back, gripping her hip to hold her still. His dick was so hard he didn't have to grip to aim. He entered her slowly, sinking into her pussy. Sheer ecstasy hit as she sheathed every swollen inch of him.

Ryder drove in farther, angled his hips to grind his pelvis against her clit with every thrust, and fucked his woman hard and deep. Summer broke the kiss, crying out his name and urging him on as he picked up the pace. He knew what would send her over the edge.

He leaned in and locked his mouth on her exposed throat, lightly biting the sensitive area just under her ear that had always made her shiver. He also used one hand to grip her breast, pinching her nipple.

Her pussy clamped around him tight as she came, milking his dick and sending him over the edge. He groaned as rapture slammed into him like a freight train and his cum filled his woman. He braced to avoid collapsing on

top of Summer, rolled a little, and hauled her onto her side with him.

“Fuck,” he panted, recovering and already planning on taking her again as soon as he caught his breath. “I love you.”

Summer still clung to him, her hold tight. “Love you too.”

Chapter Fourteen

Summer actively avoided thinking about the night before that she'd spent in Ryder's bed. It was tough, since every movement made her aware of her aching muscles. Even sitting at the table in the kitchen was a reminder, since she was a little tender between the legs. They'd had a lot of hot, incredible sex. He'd woken her at least five times during the night.

One thing she couldn't avoid thinking about was the fact that he hadn't used a condom. The first time, she hadn't remembered because she was too caught up in the moment. The second time, she'd reminded Ryder that she wasn't on birth control and he should use condoms.

"We're married and have lost eleven fucking years. You're almost thirty, and I've just turned thirty-two. It's a good age for both of us to chase rug rats," had been his response, right before he'd kissed her until she couldn't think anymore.

"Don't," Ryder suddenly murmured.

She looked up from a plate of scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and fried potatoes to meet his gaze. "Don't what?"

"You're overthinking everything. It's going to work out fine. Finish your breakfast so we can head into town to meet with your lawyer. He should have that paperwork ready, so Drake can make sure the law firm handling your trust hasn't fucked you over."

Summer nodded, taking a bite of bacon. She was definitely curious to know if Hershel and her father had stolen money. If they had, it was just a shame neither would ever be prosecuted for what they'd done.

"I'm also having Drake write a prenup...or whatever the hell it's called when we're already married. I'm signing away any possible rights I might

have to your money as your husband. It'll only go to our kids."

She frowned at him, not expecting that.

"Nav did the same with Trina. I just don't want that to become an issue between us in the future, or for you to ever have to wonder or worry when people say shit like I must have married you for your money. And they will. This town loves to gossip and accuse us Raine brothers of every low-ass thing possible."

"It will protect your assets too," Summer finally answered.

"Only the ranch. I made that clear to Drake. Everything I've earned from the band is half yours as my wife. I only asked that the ranch be kept separate since it doesn't solely belong to me. It will go to our kids, and the children born to my brothers. I hope that's okay with you. Not that I ever see us divorcing. I don't. You're my forever."

She was stunned, but part of her felt relieved. Not that she thought Ryder wanted to be with her for money. He must have met a lot of wealthy women over the years, some of whom would have been easy marks if he'd wanted to prey on them.

"I'm coming with you guys when you go into town," River let them know. "Trip and Adam are already there, having breakfast with the bounty hunters. The team arrived late last night."

Ryder nodded. "Where did they decide to stay?"

"Adam's. Why do you think they're having breakfast in town?" River chuckled. "I don't think the team appreciated how much he loves frozen premade meals that you pop into a microwave."

Ryder finished his orange juice and looked at Summer. "Are you about ready to go?"

"Sure." Summer drank the rest of her milk and carried her dishes to the

sink.

“I’ll wash them. You guys head on out. I have a few things to do before Nav and Trina come home with the baby.” Brit gave River a kiss on the lips.

The three of them exited the house and climbed into River’s extended-cab truck. Ryder had Summer sit in the front passenger seat, while he sat behind his brother. The drive into town mostly had the twins discussing how excited they were to meet their new nephew. Summer listened with half an ear, her mind firmly occupied with wondering if she’d already gotten pregnant herself.

It was a terrifying thought...but she had to admit, part of her was excited. She’d always wanted to become a mom. One of the reasons she’d considered marrying Brandon was to finally be able to start a family.

“Are you okay?” Ryder gently gripped her shoulder.

She twisted her head to look back and gave him a smile. “I’m fine. I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Things are going to work out. We’ll deal with each problem as it comes along. One step at a time.”

Summer stared into his compelling chocolate-brown eyes, seeing sincerity and concern there. “I’m scared,” she softly admitted.

“I’m not going to let anyone hurt you.”

“I meant about us.”

He gently squeezed her shoulder. “Feelings can be terrifying, but I’m all in, baby. Failure isn’t an option. We’re keeping no secrets between us this time around. I love you, and I always have.”

“I hate to interrupt you two, but we’re here.” River pulled to the curb and shut off the engine.

Ryder released her and leaned back in his seat, unhooking his belt.

“Don’t move. I’ll come around.” Ryder got out of the back, circling the cab.

“I’ll stay out here to keep watch.” River jerked his head toward the diner. “We’ve got backup right down the street if anyone shows up to cause trouble.”

Ryder opened the passenger door and helped Summer climb out. John Barnes must have heard them arrive, since he’d stepped outside of his office, watching them.

“I have everything ready for you to read over and sign,” he said as they approached. “Come right in.”

Ryder took her hand and walked beside her as they entered the office.

John took a seat behind his desk. “I’m sorry that you don’t fully trust my firm, but I do understand wanting to have your own attorney. Though, I’d suggest finding one that isn’t a relative to your husband.”

“Drake isn’t going to fuck over Summer in any way. He’s motivated to look after her best interests, now that she’s family.” Ryder seemed more than a little mad as he ground out the words.

“Drake Raine is one of your brothers, and therefore, Summer isn’t his priority—you are. I would call that a conflict of interest.”

Summer saw trouble brewing as the tension rose in the small room. “Stop. I appreciate you looking out for me, John. I do. Thank you. Drake mainly wants to make sure that Hershel Gregor didn’t steal money from me. He’s the one we don’t trust, and with good reason, since he’s already made false claims on my behalf. This isn’t about you or your work.”

John’s features slightly softened. “I see.” His gaze shifted to Ryder. “I’d like to speak with Summer alone for a moment, if you don’t mind.”

“I do.” Ryder tightened his grip on her hand as they both took seats.

That had John stiffening. “I have to make sure she’s not under duress.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Summer muttered. “Ryder isn’t forcing me to do anything. Hershel Gregor was one of my father’s longtime friends—as you well know. He didn’t tell me about the trust, nor did he share that I was supposed to start getting money when I turned eighteen. He even helped my father hide the fact that the ranch was mine. No offense, but I’ve just met you, John, and you work for the same firm Hershel did. I would feel better having another attorney take a look at the trust, what’s been done with it over the years, and *no one* is forcing me to pick Drake Raine. It’s just common sense. He’s someone I used to know, and the brother of the man I married.”

Both men were silent for a moment...but Ryder squeezed her hand when she acknowledged their marriage out loud for the first time.

John cleared his throat. “Fine.” He opened a folder on his desk and pulled out a paperclipped packet of printed pages. “This allows Drake Raine access to all our records and files on the estate.”

Summer released Ryder’s hand and leaned forward in her seat as John started to explain every page. She read each one before signing. Ryder leaned in, pressed against her side, and also scanned everything. She even glanced at him before adding her signatures, arching her eyebrows each time, waiting for his nod of approval.

“Are you certain you’re not under duress?”

Now she glared at John. “I’m sure. Ryder is in a successful band. He’s got a lot more experience with legal documents than I do, and plenty of his own money. Most importantly, I find it comforting to have him with me. I want his opinion before I sign anything. He *is* my husband.”

“One you didn’t even know about until I told you,” John muttered.

“Your concern is coming across more like bitterness.”

Summer frowned, looking at Ryder. He didn’t tear his attention off

John, staring the man down.

“I get it. You saw her, knew how much she was worth, and thought you’d hit the jackpot when she walked in your door. I get it. My Summer is gorgeous. I’m guessing a part of you instantly hoped you could snatch her up and put a ring on it. Not happening. She’s mine, and she always has been.”

“Ryder!” Summer felt her cheeks heat with a blush. “Stop.”

“It’s true.” Ryder glanced at her then. “John here is a smart man. You’re beautiful, sexy, and a hell of a catch. Fortunately for me, I fell in love with you when you didn’t have anything. Your money doesn’t matter to me. We both know that.”

“Would you be willing to put that in writing?”

Summer gave John a warning look but he ignored her.

“Prove you don’t want Summer for her money.”

“Already on it,” Ryder shared. “Drake should arrive home later today after he’s finished in court. He’ll have the agreement with him. I’m signing away all rights to Summer’s money. He’ll be sending you a copy, since you represent the trust.”

The two silently watched each other. Summer leaned back in her seat and sighed. “Will you two stop acting like this? Please? It’s getting annoying.”

The two men broke eye contact, and Ryder gave her a smile. “I’m just protecting what’s mine.”

She rolled her eyes, but couldn’t resist a tiny smile of her own.

Ryder’s phone vibrated and he withdrew it, glancing at the screen. He instantly tensed and stood, rushing toward the door. He moved the blinds over the upper portion of the glass to peer out.

Summer was instantly alarmed. “What is it?”

“We have company. Able, Marvin, and five of his goons just pulled up in three trucks.” Ryder released the blind, gripped the handle, and yanked open the door. “Lock this behind me and stay inside.”

He was outside, slamming the door behind him before Summer could react. John cursed, taking out his own cell phone. “I’m calling the police.”

“They won’t help.” Summer rose, rushing toward the door. “Lock the door behind me. This isn’t your fight.”

She yanked open the door and exited the office. Ryder stood a few feet in front of her. River had gotten out of his truck, rifle in hand. He’d moved to the passenger side of the vehicle, probably to use it as a barricade if bullets started flying.

“That’s close enough,” River yelled. “Don’t pull your weapons.”

Summer took in the seven men who’d exited the three trucks. Two held rifles, one a shotgun, and the rest had holstered handguns either on their hips or, in Able’s case, at his shoulder.

“This is none of your business.” Marvin put his hand on the weapon strapped to his hip. “We’ve come to talk to Summer about what’s rightfully ours.”

Summer moved closer to Ryder, stopping at his side. He didn’t spare her a glance, but she could feel his body tense. “I told you to stay inside,” he hissed.

“I’ve got some things to say to these assholes.” Summer raised her voice, glaring at Marvin Woods. “Rightfully yours? You mean the ranch my grandfather bought and paid for? The money he earned and left to his only daughter? My mom left everything to *me*. Not one penny went to Morris. You were lied to if he said otherwise.”

“He made promises to us, and you need to keep ’em.” Marvin glared

back.

“No, I don’t. Morris Decon was an alcoholic and a shit father. I don’t owe him or you anything but contempt for making my life a living hell when I was younger.”

Able moved to stand next to his father. “You’re either gonna sign it over or we’re getting married. Then it’ll all belong to me anyway.” Malice flashed in his eyes as his gaze slid down her body. “You’ve gotten a little fat, but it won’t be a hardship to work some pounds off you in my bed.”

Summer grimaced. “Gross. That’s never going to happen. I—”

“She’s already married,” Ryder cut in. “To me. We’ve been married for years. She just refused to come home until Morris was dead.”

She saw shock, then rage twist both father and son’s faces as she watched the Woods for their reactions. “That’s a fucking lie,” Able spit out.

“No, it’s not.” Ryder sounded smug. “Summer and I married right before she left Hailey. Why do you think I spend so much time on tour? My wife wouldn’t come back here. But that ends *now*. You could pull your weapons and kill me—”

Summer instantly stepped forward and put her body in front of his. “Don’t you dare!”

“Damn it, baby,” Ryder growled low. He wrapped an arm around her waist and attempted to move her. “Get behind me.”

Summer leaned back against his front and kept a death grip on his arm. She wasn’t moving. They’d have to shoot through her to get to Ryder. “Making me a widow won’t change a damn thing, so don’t you dare think about hurting my husband. Morris lied to you, Marvin. Go to the mortuary if you want your pound of flesh. Apparently, you didn’t care enough about your *best friend* to have him buried or cremated, so his body is still there.”

The door behind them was jerked open and John Barnes strode out. Summer glanced back at him. “Get back inside.”

The attorney ignored her and stopped a few feet away. John loudly cleared his throat. “Summer and Ryder are legally married and have been for eleven years. I feel the need to share certain facts that I’m privy to about Summer’s trust.” His gaze slid to her. “With your permission. It’s relevant, and I think it’ll help.”

“Fine,” Summer agreed, hoping he was right.

John reached up and adjusted his tie. His hands shook. “I’ll explain this in layman’s terms. Summer can’t give you any money or sign over the ranch, since the trust is essentially locked. Nor can she change certain things that her grandfather and mother set into motion. Even Ryder, despite being her husband, has no legal right to any part of the trust.”

He cleared his throat again, sounding more nervous than ever. “If Summer were to die, even while married, her husband wouldn’t inherit her estate. Patrick and Patricia Horner left a list of charities the money would be divided between in the event of Summer’s death. The only person or persons who can inherit are any children Summer has in the future. At no time did Morris Decon ever have legal right to any part of the Horner estate—not the money, the house, or the land.”

“That’s bullshit!” Marvin shouted. “Morris had a lot of money.”

“He was paid a salary to be the ranch foreman,” John explained. “Trust me, he spent every penny of that salary while he was alive. And just in case you’re thinking you can force Summer to marry your son and make *him* foreman, you should know that position died with Morris. Patricia created that position solely for her husband after she realized she wouldn’t survive to see Summer reach adulthood, when she could run the ranch herself.

“Is all of that clear enough? There’s no point to all of this.” John waved

his arms to encompass all of Marvin's brutes. "Summer literally can't give you anything, and forcing her to marry your son won't get you any money, either. Even if they were to have children, you and your son wouldn't profit. Every penny for their care—same as every penny spent on the ranch all these years—would be closely monitored. Which is a moot point, since I promise you that my law firm would go to court to strip you and your son of all parental or custodial rights...since it's not in a minor's best interest to be raised within a cult."

"We're not a cult," Marvin growled—then yanked his gun free, pointing it at John. "You're going to do your fancy lawyer bullshit and give us everything we want, or die."

The rest of Marvin's men and his son also pointed their guns at River, Ryder, Summer, and John.

"Drop your weapons or we start shooting," a deep male voice boomed.

Summer startled as she heard the distinctive sound of guns cocking and a few shotguns being racked. Her gaze lifted to the feed store across the street. There were three strangers on the roof, weapons aimed at the Woods members. Two men and a woman, though she couldn't really make out their features. She very slowly turned her head to look over her shoulder, toward the direction the loud voice had come from. She couldn't spot a man, but a woman took aim on the roof of the business center housing John's office.

Two more men stepped out from the sides of the building. All six strangers wore tactical vests stamped with "recovery agent" in white lettering.

"I'm Fugitive Recovery Agent Brason Zane," the same mystery voice shouted. "I'm with Alliance Bounty and Bonds. My team has you surrounded and will happily put bullets in the chests of all seven of you if you don't comply. And in case you're wondering, we're all excellent shots who don't

miss. Drop your weapons or die. It's that fucking simple."

Most of Marvin's men dropped their weapons onto the street and put their hands in the air without being asked again. Becker Follis put space between himself and his friends, hands held high, and inched closer to his truck.

A third woman wearing the same tactical vest suddenly raced out from the side of the feed store and tackled Becker. He went down hard under the smaller woman. Even Summer flinched from the hard impact and Becker's resulting grunt of pain.

Everyone watched, stunned, as the woman grabbed a handful of hair at the back of his head and slammed his face to the pavement when he attempted to throw her off. Becker screamed in pain as she straddled his ass, withdrew cuffs, and released his hair to yank his arms behind his back.

"Becker Follis, also known as Becker Willis, you have three active arrest warrants. I'm taking you in."

"Fuck, Gracie. You couldn't wait?" the bounty hunter team leader shouted.

"He was going for his truck," the woman called back. "Seemed like a good time, since I didn't want to chase his ass."

The two men from the feed store roof disappeared. The woman kept her weapon trained on the Woods group. Less than a minute later, those same two men rushed around the side of the building, pulling handcuffs from their utility belts. One of them grabbed a beefy blond guy standing next to Marvin and cuffed him.

"Norton Barlow, we're taking you in on an active warrant issued in New Mexico."

"You've got the wrong guy!" he protested.

“Tell it to the judge,” the bounty hunter responded. “Your neck tattoo is pretty distinct, and so is that scar on your ugly mug.”

The second bounty hunter went for Able—who stupidly threw a punch. The bounty hunter dodged his fist and tackled him, taking him to the ground and slapping on handcuffs.

“Let my son go!” Marvin took a threatening step forward, gun raised—and that’s when a large, buff bounty hunter with a shaved head stepped out from beside the small office park and stormed toward the elder man, gun aimed at his head.

“Don’t even think about attacking one of my agents. Marvin Ellen Woods...” Brason Zane, Summer guessed, based on the voice, strode right up to Marvin, disarmed him with one hand, tossed his gun aside, and grabbed his arm. He twisted the stunned man around, holstered his own weapon, and slapped handcuffs on the minister’s wrists. “You’re wanted for murder in the state of California.”

Summer knew her mouth had dropped open. She just wasn’t sure which surprised her more. Marvin’s middle name or that he’d murdered someone in another state.

“Fuck,” Ryder muttered. “Didn’t see *that* one coming. Not that I’m shocked.”

The bounty hunters handcuffed everyone else, making them sit on the curb. Then Brason Zane walked over, giving Summer a smile. He nodded at her before his gaze locked on Ryder.

“We’re going to run the rest of them to see if they’re wanted anywhere, then head out to the property later to pick up some other skips. I have a bus heading this way to drive them into Dallas.” His gaze went to John. “No offense to your town, but I’m not handing them over to the local cops. I met one of them this morning at the diner.” He scowled. “He’s using the name

Paul Chip, but I'm running him too, since he seems like an asshole who's probably wanted *somewhere*. Our facial recognition program hasn't gotten a hit though. Sadly. I really wanted to cuff the fucker after he tried to order us to leave town."

"Thank you for coming." Ryder put his arm around Summer, drawing her closer. "We appreciate it."

Brason chuckled. "Naw. Thank *you*. We've earned over a hundred grand and counting. This was a worthwhile trip."

The woman who'd been on the feedstore roof joined them and bumped Brason's hip. "Told you we should leave the city more, babe."

"Anna," Brason introduced her. "My wife."

"Hello." The woman stared at Ryder with narrowed eyes. "I know you from somewhere." She glanced at River. "You both look familiar, but I'd remember identical twins if you were a skip. That's info we always get, so we don't grab the wrong sibling. To avoid lawsuits and all that."

"He's in a band," Summer proudly shared, giving her the name.

The woman grinned. "I love your music! That's where I know you from. I saw you perform in Dallas about five years ago. When are you coming back?"

"Unfortunately, I'm retiring." Ryder turned his head, staring at something to his right.

Summer followed his gaze. Adam and Trip were walking down the street from the diner. Neither appeared happy.

"They wanted to help," Brason muttered. "But I asked them to keep the people inside the diner. Mitzy, the woman who owns the place, grabbed a shotgun from under the counter and started ranted about how she was going to kill them all." His gaze turned to John. "You the hot lawyer she was so

eager to protect?”

John’s face turned a little red. “Um, yes? I guess I am.”

“That woman can *cook*. You should marry her,” Anna suggest with a grin. “She might have a few years on you but that just means she’s hitting her prime.” That advice was followed by a wink.

A red car came tearing down the street. The bounty hunters all pulled weapons, some moving behind vehicles to use them as shields. As it came closer, Summer frowned, identifying the driver.

Paul Chip stopped in the middle of the street and jumped out of his car.

“What in the hell is going on here? I told you all to leave.” He gawked at Marvin’s group, all handcuffed and seated on the curb. “You can’t arrest anyone. I’m the deputy here. I demand you release them right now!”

A familiar SUV came from the other direction. Summer recognized that driver, too. It was Mark Hayes. He also parked and got out.

“Help me,” Paul demanded. “They’re making illegal arrests! They’re a bunch of wannabe cops. Go to the station and grab a stack of handcuffs. I’m arresting them all for obstruction.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Mark snapped, putting his hands on his hips. “They’re doing what *we* haven’t been able to do.” His gaze locked on Brason Zane. “Thank you. You’re welcome to use our holding cells if you need them. Our station is at your disposal.”

“What the fuck?” Paul fumed. “These are our neighbors!”

“They’re violent bullies and criminals,” Mark retorted. “Good riddance.”

“We have a bus coming,” the bounty hunter leader told Mark. “It should arrive within the hour. Thanks for the offer, but they’re good right where they are.” The huge man glared at Paul Chip. “No offense, but I don’t trust one of

your deputies not to release them.”

“They can’t *all* be wanted.” Paul wasn’t willing to let it go.

“We’re running the others to see if they have warrants,” Anna explained. “Once they’re cleared and the bus arrives, the ones who aren’t skips will be released.”

Paul opened his mouth.

“Shut the hell up,” Mark ordered again. “It would be stupid to let any of them go before Marvin and Able are gone. The last thing we need is any remaining members returning with guns to defend their cult leader. We don’t want a shootout in the middle of town. Stop being a goddamn moron.”

“We’re law enforcement. Not them,” Paul still quarreled.

“You’re a fucking *joke*—and everyone knows it. You only got the job because no one else wanted it. You’re an idiot who was able to pass a basic background check. My *dog* is more qualified to do your job. So *shut. Up!*” Mark looked ready to physically attack the other deputy.

“I’ll make every last one of you pay for this,” Marvin seethed.

Anna walked over to stand in front of him, pointing at something on her vest. “Keep making threats. We all wear body cams to avoid frivolous lawsuits. I’m hoping whatever judge you end up facing completely denies future bail. The video will be added to the evidence against you. Would you like to say anything else?”

Marvin fumed where he sat on the curb, but he sealed his lips.

Anna then turned to look at Paul Chip. “I’ll be sending a copy of this video to whoever hired *you*, as well. I’m sure someone would love to know a deputy is threatening bounty hunters for catching actual criminals.”

Paul paled. He hurried back to his car and backed up, did a U-turn, and drove off fast.

Mark walked over to Brason. “I really do want to thank you and your people for coming out here and dealing with some of our problem citizens. You’re welcome to come back anytime.”

The team leader smirked at the men sitting on the curb. “I’d like that.”

Summer suddenly had an idea. “I own a ranch. It’s huge.” Her gaze lifted to John. “I assume I’m allowed to let people stay there as my guests?”

“It’s your ranch,” he responded.

Summer smiled, turning to Brason. “There are six bedrooms, six and a half baths in the main house. There’s also a bunkhouse that sleeps twelve, with three shower stalls and two toilets, and a kitchen that shares a big living space. You and your team are welcome to vacation there anytime you like, rent free. It would be a great place to hold retreats or training exercises.”

Interest sparked in his eyes. “Would anyone mind if we did target practice out there?”

She shook her head. “It’s over five hundred acres. There are no neighbors close enough to complain.”

“That would be amazing!” Anna had returned to her husband’s side, and she squeezed his arm in excitement.

Ryder grinned. “Yes, it would. I doubt many of the Woods Church members would stick around with bounty hunters regularly visiting Hailey.”

That was Summer’s thought exactly.

Chapter Fifteen

Summer felt a huge weight off her shoulders as they drove back to the Raine Ranch. Five out of the seven men had been taken away. Marvin and Able were both currently on a bus headed far from Hailey. She really did hope the rest of Marvin's followers fled the area as soon as they learned about what happened. The town would be much safer for everyone.

"A penny for your thoughts."

Summer twisted in the passenger seat to smile at Ryder sitting in the back of River's truck cab. "I'm just happy that we have less to worry about now. I'm hoping Marvin and Able are put away for a long time for the stuff they're wanted for."

"Me too."

"Me three," River added.

"Are you upset that I offered the bounty hunters use of my ranch?"

Ryder appeared confused. "No. Why would I? That was smart. I suggested you give it away to the FBI, remember? Bounty hunters are just as good. Even better, because you'll still own it."

"Okay. So you don't want to live there?"

"Hell no. No offense, baby, but I told you about how I wanted to build us a home. If the house had any sentimental value for you, I'd compromise... but I'm guessing it's not the house you remember from when your mom was alive."

The relief was instant for Summer. "You're right. It's not. I'd like to remove the rest of my mom's stuff, but other than that..." She sighed. "I don't have many happy memories there. Not since childhood. I'd like to sell it one day, which I'm allowed to do after my thirtieth birthday. I never want

to live there again.”

“I don’t blame you.” Ryder leaned forward and caressed her cheek. “We’re going to pick a spot and build our dream home on Raine land. We’ll take a ride out tomorrow if you want to find the perfect location that we both love.”

“I’d really like that.”

“Nav and Trina are home with the baby,” River announced, sounding excited. “I’m suddenly terrified. I don’t know jack shit about newborns. I don’t want to accidentally hurt little Chance.”

Ryder looked equally worried. “Shit. We’ll have to be super careful while we learn everything.” His gaze went to Summer. “But I want the practice for when we have our own rug rats.”

She thought of a tiny Ryder junior...and Summer really liked that idea.

“Yeah,” River agreed. “Me too. Okay. We’ve got this.”

Summer followed the twins inside the house when they arrived. Voices led them into the kitchen. Trina was sitting at the table, with Nav standing close to her. He cradled a blue bundle against his chest. Brit was cooking at the stove.

“Fuck,” Ryder rasped, keeping his voice low. “He’s beautiful! I mean, for a boy.”

Nav grinned. “I know. Chance is perfect and healthy.”

“Blue eyes,” River whispered. “He’s going to grow up and be swamped by women.”

Summer crept closer, getting a look at the baby that Nav turned enough to show off to his family. The baby was awake, with his big blue eyes staring intently at his father’s face. “He’s got a full head of black hair already.”

Trina chuckled. “The doctor and nurses said that’s not uncommon. Not

all babies are born bald.”

“He’s gorgeous,” Summer agreed.

Ryder stepped closer. “He’s so fucking tiny. Is it safe for me to hold him?”

“Just be gentle. You’ll do fine.” Nav carefully transferred his son into Ryder’s arms.

The sight had Summer’s stomach doing somersaults, and suddenly she wanted to have a child with him even more. The wonderful expression on Ryder’s face calmed any remaining doubts she had. New life was happening right in front of her, and she wanted that for herself and the man she loved.

“Hey, little man,” Ryder crooned. “I’m your uncle. Welcome to the family. You’re going to have an amazing life full of so much love from a whole bunch of uncles.”

River put his arm around his twin, pressing into Ryder to stare down at his nephew. “You don’t have double vision, little guy.” He grinned big. “I’m too afraid to hold you right now because you’re too damn tiny, but as soon as you get a little bigger, I’ll get one of those strap-on chest carrier things and take you all around and show you our ranch. I’m also gonna buy you a puppy to make sure I’m your favorite uncle.”

“Now wait a damn minute,” Nav muttered.

“Remember how we all wanted dogs but the old man wouldn’t allow it?” River reached out and gently ran his finger over the baby’s cheek. “We’re not him. Every little kid deserves a pet to grow up with. You’re getting everything we were denied.”

Nav sighed. “Fine. But a larger, gentler breed. Like a Labrador Retriever or a German Sheppard. I’ve heard they’re great with small children.”

Ryder snickered. “Someone’s done some research.”

“It was on my list of all the things my kid might want that I wouldn’t deny him or her,” Nav admitted.

“What are we talking about?”

Summer turned at the sound of Trip’s voice. He and Adam had arrived. Both brothers took turns holding the newest Raine member, then she got a turn. Holding a newborn baby was something Summer had rarely done before.

“That looks good on you,” Ryder told her. “I can’t wait until we have one of our own.”

She passed the baby back to Trina to help Brit serve a lunch of soup and sandwiches. They all moved into the dining room, since the table in there could accommodate all of them.

“I’m ready for a nap,” Trina announced after they were finished, yawning.

Nav hustled his wife and baby upstairs. All the brothers watched them go. Trip was the first to speak about a minute later, keeping his voice low.

“Dusty didn’t come home with us because he’s watching the Woods ranch. He called while we were driving over here.”

Adam added, “Paul Chip left town and headed right out there. He was probably pissed enough about Mark refusing to back him in town to go tattletale to the church. Ten minutes later, two RVs left, heading out of Hailey. Five minutes after that, three cars left with families inside. All of them were loaded up with belongings.”

“They’re fleeing.” Trip said. “Like rats on a sinking ship.”

“Dusty thinks some might have seen this as their chance to escape the Woods Church. Two of the cars contained women drivers with only kids as passengers. He identified one as a woman he’d seen with Becker Follis.”

That surprised Summer. “Isn’t he one of the ones wanted for not paying child support?”

Trip nodded. “He probably started another family. That’s what assholes like him do.”

Adam shook his head in disgust. “Our biological piece of shit abandoned his first family to run off with a much younger woman. Our mother tried to get child support from him. That’s how she found out he’d had another son with the woman he’d been cheating with. He’d taken off on her, too, by that time, and the courts were already looking for him to pay *that* woman child support.

“The bastard moved every time he got served to go to court. A judge eventually ordered him to pay, but he never did. Back then, all they could do was try to garnish his wages, but he switched jobs every time that happened. So yeah, long story short—I’m betting Becker started a new family.”

“I don’t know why any woman would want to be married or in a relationship with that guy.” Summer shuddered.

“Maybe that’s why Dusty saw her leaving. She was fleeing while he’s on his way to jail.” Ryder reached out and took Summer’s hand. “Why don’t we take a nap, too?”

Brit chuckled. “Is that what you kids are calling it these days?”

River cracked up. “That’s why I call you my old lady. You’re too close to our age to be saying things like that.”

“Fuck you.” Brit threw a napkin at him.

He dodged it. “I would be more than happy to take you upstairs to do just that.”

“Just stop.” Trip looked at his watch. “Does anyone know when Drake will arrive? I haven’t heard from him since early this morning, before he

headed off to court.”

“He said he’ll be here for dinner.” Brit stood, starting to clear the table.

Summer got up. “I’ll help you.”

Ryder sprang to his feet, grabbed her, and gently threw her over his shoulder. “My brothers will do that. I didn’t let you sleep much last night, since we were making up for lost time. You really do need a nap.”

Summer couldn’t believe Ryder was carrying her through the house. “You’re going to hurt yourself! Put me down!”

He swatted her ass, but not hard enough to hurt. “Don’t insult me, baby. I’m in good shape.”

“I’m not really tired.”

Ryder changed direction. “Okay. Then I have a better idea. Let’s not wait until tomorrow. I want to take you to a few of my favorite spots that would make great places for a custom-built home.”

* * * * *

Ryder parked his truck to the side of the wide path they used to travel to the creek. He got out and rounded the cab, opening the passenger door. Summer was learning to wait for him to help her out. He did, keeping hold of her hand as they walked.

“I’m taking you to my favorite spot first. I come here often.” He paused, debating on how much to say. They were past keeping secrets from each other, though, and he was a man who learned from mistakes. “This was my special place to go when I missed you the most, and when I felt torn up over not being in your life anymore.”

Summer gripped his hand a little tighter. “I missed you too.”

He led her through a stand of trees to a wide-open spot atop a small hill.

Below, on the other side, was a clearing with a creek making a winding path through the long grass. The river could be seen in the distance. “Did you?” he asked, feeling oddly vulnerable.

“I thought about you entirely too much,” she admitted, taking in the view. “It’s really beautiful here.”

He turned to face her. “Does it look familiar?”

She frowned, taking a moment to really study their surroundings. Her focus caught on the spot where he’d once dug a firepit, enclosing it with river rocks.

She stepped closer to him and lifted her chin, meeting his gaze. “We spent the night here together when my dad flew to New York for a funeral, after his uncle Charles died. I told him that Shelly and I wanted to camp out at her place, so I wouldn’t be alone with the ranch hands, and he agreed. You said you didn’t want me to have to completely lie. We slept under the stars.”

He smiled, happy that she remembered. “That was one of the best nights of my life. I got to fall asleep with you in my arms, and you were the first thing I saw when I woke in the morning.”

He released her hand and took a step back, dropped to his knees, and stared up at her.

“I knew then that you were my forever. I haven’t had time to get you a ring, and I want you there to help me pick it out. But I want you to have a memory of being asked properly. Will you marry me? Be my Summer Raine? Let me love you for the rest of our lives?”

Tears slid down her cheeks. She nodded. “Yes. I don’t even need a ring. You’re more than enough.”

He felt like the luckiest man alive as he rose to his feet. “You’re getting a ring so everyone knows you’re mine. I’d also like you to legally change

your last name to Raine.” Ryder cupped her face and kissed her. He regretted not bringing a blanket, wanting to make love to her in their special spot. He refused to take her on the bare ground.

He finally broke the kiss and ignored his stiff dick that made the front of his jeans too tight. “Do you want a ceremony? One that doesn’t involve a drunken clown?”

Summer laughed. “It does make for one heck of a story to tell our kids in the future. I’m going to need to go back to Nevada to get my stuff, and give a thirty-day notice that I’m moving out of my apartment. Do you know what Las Vegas has? Tons of places to get married. You could go with me.”

“That’s what you want?”

She nodded. “I’m still scared, but I want this. Us.”

“Me too. I’ll go with you to get your stuff.”

“Good.”

He put his arm around her and turned them to face the beautiful scenery below. “Do you want to see the other build sites?”

Summer leaned into him. “No. This is perfect. Will your family mind?”

“It’s kind of my place. None of my brothers will be surprised. We’ll need to sit down with an architect to figure out what we want. I’m thinking four bedrooms, at least two baths, and a wood-burning fireplace with river rock.”

She suddenly looked up at him.

“I remember what you like, baby.”

“I love you, Ryder.”

“I love you too. I’m so glad you finally came home.”

“Me too.” Sincerity shone in her eyes.

It warmed his heart. He took Summer’s hand, walking her back to his

truck. He had calls to make later. First, he'd break the news of his retirement to his bandmates. They'd be able to find his replacement before Jimmy got out. Pam, their agent, would be pissed. She always said Ryder was the most responsible of their group and the only one who didn't give her a headache. He smiled, knowing she would take the news the hardest.

His cell vibrated in his back pocket after he helped her into the passenger seat. He glanced at the screen and accepted the call. "Hey, Jessie. What's up?"

The mechanic sighed. "Your girl's SUV is trashed. Sorry it took me this long to get back to you. A refrigerator truck broke down off the highway and it was loaded with meat. That took priority. I mean, I could fix the SUV but to be honest, it would cost more in repairs than what it's worth. No insurance company will go for that. I wanted to tell you first before I broke the news to her."

"I'll tell her. Thank you." Ryder climbed into the driver's seat.

"Let me know what she wants me to do. I can give her a hundred bucks if she wants to sell it for spare parts. That's the best I can offer, considering the condition. It's going to cost almost four grand to make it drivable and look halfway decent if she has a sentimental attachment. That's *with* the friends and family discount. Insurance will probably max out at two grand, from my experience. They'll lowball the hell out of what the vehicle is worth."

"I'll call you back and let you know."

"Talk to you later."

Ryder hung up and met Summer's gaze. "Jessie could fix your vehicle, but it'll cost a lot and not be worth it."

She nodded. "I'm not surprised. I guess I'll drive a truck now."

“That’s a nice truck. I saw Morris driving it around town a few times.”

“It’ll be the nicest, newest vehicle I’ve ever owned or driven. John gave me the keys the day I arrived. I saw it when Mark drove me out to the ranch to pick up a few of my mother’s things.”

“We’ll go pick up the truck tomorrow so you have wheels.”

She nodded. “That sounds like a plan.”

His phone buzzed again. “It’s Drake.” He answered. “Are you going to make it to dinner?”

“I just left the courthouse and I’m on my way. I hired a driver to bring me so I can keep working. I may be about twenty minutes late, so my next call will be to Brit. Tell Summer that her attorney forwarded everything I wanted and I already have a trusted team of forensic accountants working on it. I should get a preliminary update from them by the time I arrive.”

“Thanks for doing this.”

“It’s what family’s for. I’m really looking forward to meeting Chance.”

“He’s perfect. See you soon.” He ended the call, telling Summer what his brother had said.

“I still don’t even know how much money was left to me.”

“It doesn’t really matter. I can support us both.”

Summer shook her head. “I’ll pay my own way. Even if I need to get a job.”

“I highly doubt you’ll need to.”

“I doubt it too. I really should have asked more questions when we were with John.”

“We can go see him again tomorrow, or call him.”

“I’ll worry about it later. Today, we’re celebrating that Marvin and Able were taken away and your new nephew is here.”

“Agreed.” He started the truck and drove them back to the Raine house.

Chapter Sixteen

Summer ate her delicious steak and watched Ryder's family interact. Drake had arrived right after six o'clock. Dusty had shown up five minutes later. The brothers had grilled steaks while she helped Brit with side dishes. Now, they all sat in the dining room.

The conversation had mostly revolved around how cute Chance was. He slept in a bassinet set up between Nav and Trina. The many voices didn't seem to disturb the baby's sleep.

Dusty finally changed the topic of conversation. "I counted four more vehicles leaving the Wood ranch by the time I left to come home. More will probably be leaving tonight. I was tempted to camp out there to watch, but I wasn't missing this dinner. It's rare that all of us are together."

"I'm sorry about that." Drake wore another dress shirt with black slacks, having come straight from the office. "I never want to turn work away."

"Workaholic," Nav accused.

"Guilty." Drake didn't deny it. "I like keeping busy, but I promise I'll schedule a week off soon."

"You said that six months ago," River reminded him.

"I've had a lot of high-profile clients. I'll start taking some time off every month to come home more. That's a promise." Drake glanced at the bassinet. "I want that baby to know all of us."

"I'm retiring from the band and living here full-time," Ryder announced. "I took Summer to my special place, and we've decided to build our house there."

Everyone looked at them. Summer took a sip of her soda. "Unless someone minds us taking that spot. The view is really beautiful."

Heads shook and a few of the brothers voiced their approval.

River was the only one who had anything to say to the contrary. “I was hoping you two would live in the house with us. God knows this place is big enough to support more than two couples, even with all of us having kids.”

“It will take a while for our home to be built, so we’ll be here in the meantime, but I’d like Summer and I have to have our own place.” Ryder held his twin’s gaze. “We’ll be close by, and we’ll spend time together every day.”

That seemed to be what River needed to hear. He smiled. “Okay. I’m just glad you won’t be traveling anymore.”

“I’m equally glad *you* gave up riding bulls,” Brit muttered to her husband.

They finished dinner, and Summer helped clear the table. She was in the kitchen when Drake approached her. “Can we talk?”

She glanced around, but Ryder wasn’t in the room. Nervousness filled her as she stared at the eldest Raine brother’s serious expression. “Sure.” She hoped he wasn’t going to warn her off being with Ryder. Not that she’d blame him, after all her father had done to their family over the years.

He motioned toward the mudroom. “This is something you need to hear alone. It should be your choice, what you share with the family.”

“Okay.”

Her nerves grew as he followed her inside and closed the door. He took a deep breath and blew it out.

“I had four messages from Sherman Putter when I turned on my phone after court this afternoon. He’s the son of your grandfather’s attorney, who originally set up the trust. He took over when his father retired and runs the family law firm now. Hershel was their attorney assigned to manage the trust,

and of course, you already know John took over after his retirement. Sherman and I had a long discussion. As you already know, I'm having a team of forensic accountants go over everything your father and Hershel did since your mother's death. That's going to take a while." He paused. "But there's already some good news."

She was relieved that Drake only wanted to talk to her as an attorney, and not a brother who thought Ryder could do much better than her. "I like good news."

"Sherman and his father never liked Hershel, even though they'd hired the guy. They thought he was an idiot when he sent invoices trying to gain extra payments for Morris, or made outlandish requests for funds. Now they're both aware that he was purposely doing so in an attempt to steal from the trust."

"So was my father. He was totally in on it."

"I'm sure he was." Drake gave her a sympathetic look. "They failed, of course. The last big request for money was for a remodel on the house. The law firm sent a trusted contractor and real estate agent from Dallas to assess the ranch when the request was made. Hershel had asked for three hundred and fifty thousand dollars. They only authorized a hundred and sixty-five thousand, and the Dallas contractor oversaw the work. Your father had some input, but overall, the contractor made certain only value-added changes were made to the property. I felt a lot better after hearing about their close watch over your estate."

"That is good."

"Sherman also wanted me to apologize to you for not personally coming here when you turned eighteen, to explain everything to you. He truly believed Hershel had done so."

"It's in the past." Summer refused to allow herself to feel bitter about it.

Her father was dead and Hershel was an ill man who probably wouldn't even remember what he'd done.

“You're currently entitled to a hundred and ten thousand dollars per year until your thirtieth birthday. The living expenses you were denied for the past eleven years, since you were unaware of them, were kept in a savings account by the firm. That's a little over one-point-two million dollars—but actually considerably more, thanks to the interest. And Sherman is eager for you to gain access to those funds.”

Summer's knees almost gave out from the shock. She swayed on her feet, and Drake gripped her arms and hauled her over to a bench by the back door. She sat heavily, and he crouched in front of her.

“Breathe, Summer. Don't pass out on me.” He grinned slightly.

“That's a lot of money.”

“It is. I suggest you open a bank account—or more than one—so they can transfer those funds to you. You can decide how to disperse the funds from there in terms of IRAs or whatever.”

“I can't believe it's so much!”

Drake held her gaze. “Your grandfather was extremely wealthy. He was worth almost a hundred million at the time of his death.”

The shocks kept coming.

“I'm still doing research, but I suspect it would be best if you didn't end the trust when you turn thirty. All that money is well invested, and you're basically living off the interest. John had mentioned to Sherman that you wish to sell the ranch. They can make that happen after your next birthday, while still keeping the trust intact. There's a provision in there so you wouldn't be forced to keep it for the rest of your life. The proceeds from that sale would go directly to you, and the funds allotted for the upkeep and care

of the ranch will transfer to your existing living arrangement. We'll go over this again after I've thoroughly researched everything, to make certain Sherman was correct on all the details, but that's my advice for now."

The door to the kitchen opened, and Ryder took one look at her before rushing over. He sat on the bench and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Baby, what's wrong?"

"She's fine. I just gave her some surprising news."

"What? Tell me what you said to her, asshole!"

Drake held up a hand. "We'll talk more later, Summer. I'll leave you alone with my brother." He looked at Ryder. "You asked me to represent Summer, so I was having a meeting with my client. She can choose what to tell you." He rose to his feet and left the mudroom.

"Did my brother upset you? Do I need to kick his ass?"

Summer leaned into him and chuckled. "No. He just told me how much money I'm owed from the years I wasn't paid by the trust, since I turned eighteen."

Ryder hugged her tighter. "Are you okay?"

She liked that he didn't ask her how much. "I'm fine. Just flabbergasted. It's over a million dollars, Ryder. I definitely don't need to worry about getting a job anytime soon."

He sucked in a sharp breath. "Holy shit. That's a lot. No wonder you look a little pale."

"I feel like I just won the lottery or something. I've been in a daze since I first learned the ranch and money was mine, but it's just sunk in that this is real."

"I bet."

Summer turned and reached up, cupping his face. "We're rich!"

“You’re rich. I don’t want your money. I just want you.”

“I believe you.”

“Good. Do you want me to bring Drake back in here so you can finish your conversation?”

“No. I’d rather you take me to bed and make love to me. That’s what’s really important. Us. Our future. Making up for lost time. Then we’ll figure out when to make a quick trip to Las Vegas to get my stuff.”

He kissed her. “And to get married.”

“Yes. Definitely. We’ll pick a cute chapel.”

“I love you, Summer Raine.”

“I love you, Ryder Raine.”

He stood, pulling her up with him. “Let’s go make a baby.”

She put her hand in his and they went upstairs together. They had eleven years to make up for, and she wasn’t wasting another second on wondering or worrying about anything else.

Summer was glad she’d finally come home. That’s where her heart was.

About the Author

NY Times and USA Today Bestselling Author

I'm a full-time wife, mother, and author. I've been lucky enough to have spent over two decades with the love of my life and look forward to many, many more years with Mr. Laurann. I'm addicted to iced coffee, the occasional candy bar (or two), and trying to get at least five hours of sleep at night.

I love to write all kinds of stories. I think the best part about writing is the fact that real life is always uncertain, always tossing things at us that we have no control over, but when writing you can make sure there's always a happy ending. I love that about being an author. My favorite part is when I sit down at my computer desk, put on my headphones to listen to loud music to block out everything around me, so I can create worlds in front of me.

For the most up to date information, please visit my
website. www.LaurannDohner.com