



Accidentally on Purpose

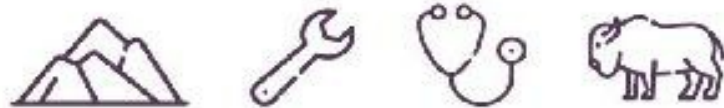


BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DR. REBECCA SHARP



Accidentally on Purpose



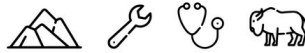
A COUNTRY LOVE STORY

DR. REBECCA SHARP

Accidentally on Purpose (A Country Love Story)
Published by Dr. Rebecca Sharp
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CHAPTER

One

REESE

TWO SPEED LIMITS.

Two speeds.

The small signs flew by in my rear view as I headed toward Jackson from the Jackson Hole airport. I wondered if all the visitors to this neck of the woods, nestled in the Wyoming wilderness, noticed how every speed limit sign had two numbers: a higher one for daytime and a lower one for at night.

It made sense. At night, the vast darkness seemed to stretch into new galaxies sooner than it reached the lit streets of the town. The trees and Grand Tetons that rose up during the day like natural monuments along the skyline would evaporate later tonight into the deep dark abyss...along with the road and any wildlife trekking across it.

So, two speed limits.

Two speeds.

Just like my life.

One speed in the city and one speed when I came back home.

In New York, I was an ER doctor at one of the busiest hospitals in Manhattan. If I stayed the course, all of the Chinese takeout, sleepless nights, and nonexistent personal life for the next five years would pay off; I would have a shot at becoming chief of medicine.

But here...the speed was much slower.

As if to prove my point, the Tahoe in front of me slowed down well below the speed limit.

“Seriously?” I muttered under my breath and hit the brakes of the Cherokee I’d rented through Turo.

I’d had to explain to Mom that it was like an Airbnb but for cars, assuring her it wasn’t a big deal for me to just rent something. Obviously, there was no way she could come pick me up from the airport being only a day out from her knee replacement surgery. I’d wanted to be here for the surgery—I was supposed to be, but they’d moved it up to yesterday. Thankfully, Mom’s good friend and neighbor, Cheryl, had taken her to the hospital and brought her home this morning, staying with her until I got there.

Which would be a lot sooner if the people in the Tahoe weren’t standing

through their freaking sunroof to take photos of the Tetons.

I wasn't in a rush. I shouldn't be in a rush. Still, I couldn't stop myself from driving like a New Yorker and riding the guy's ass. Even if I dreaded where I was headed, I still had to get there faster.

If that wasn't East Coast mentality, I didn't know what was.

It took everything I had not to blare the horn.

To be fair, I didn't dread everything about coming home to visit. Just some things. Mainly, the fact that I had to come clean to her that the boyfriend I claimed to have for the last year was a figment of my desperate imagination. An excuse I'd used to not come home for Thanksgiving or Christmas, instead claiming I'd spent it with said boyfriend's family. The truth? I'd picked up extra rotations because Dr. Okon was on staff, and if I stayed his favorite, he'd recommend me to take his place as chief of medicine in five years when he retired.

Mom had been beside herself. *As expected.* She worried too much about my personal life. Three Christmases ago, I'd come home only to be treated to a Santa speed-dating spectacular. Two Christmases ago, I'd flown her out to New York, thinking it was safer to have her on my turf. I was wrong. Arlene Barker might not know how to work an iPhone, but she sure knew how to create an eHarmony profile.

"I just want you to find someone, Reese. You can't work your life away."

I wasn't trying to work my life away, I just never wanted to have to depend on anyone else. My past was a common one—raised by a single mom because dad was nonexistent. I had no memories of him. I had plenty of memories of all the ways Mom had struggled and scraped by to support us. She never complained, and I never told her I could hear her crying in the shower because the bathroom shared a wall with my bedroom.

It wasn't that I didn't believe in love, I just believed in security and independence first. But I couldn't explain that to her—that her silent struggle led to my obsession with self-sufficiency. So, I'd made up a boyfriend. It was a bad move. I blamed the Hallmark channel and the ridiculously predictable, yet seriously addictive, movies I'd been bingeing at the time. But now I had to figure out how I was going to lie to her face about him for four weeks or confess that he was a lie and endure her guilt-tripped matchmaking for a month.

I let out a groan. *Yeah, the latter wasn't an option.* With Mom being immobile, there was no telling the line of Wyoming cowboys she'd

have traipsing through the front door to ‘*help her.*’

The Tahoe hit its blinker and turned into a pull-off. *Thank God.*

My foot dropped to the floor, and the gauge on my dash swung to the right...only, it wasn't the speedometer. My eyes bulged, and I let off the gas just as the engine temperature reached the red line. I knew nothing about cars, but in my mind, anything above the red line meant the car risked spontaneous combustion.

Shit. I coasted off to the side of the road, put the Jeep in park, and immediately reached for my cell. I opened the Turo app and messaged the owner of the car. After about thirty seconds of no response, I fiddled under the wheel. *There was a button under here somewhere to pop the hood, right?* The latch released in answer.

There was no puff of smoke when I lifted the hood, but there was a smell...a sweet smell.

I checked my cell again. Still, no response from the owner.

Double shit.

I couldn't call Mom; she was drugged up on pain meds, and it wasn't like she could come for me anyway. And Cheryl...Cheryl had to go to work in forty minutes.

Shit double shit.

I pulled up Google and searched for a local auto shop. I needed someone who could get here fast—faster than AAA. Christmas could get here before AAA sent a tow truck.

TLC Auto Body. The first name that came up was the only name in a thirty-mile radius.

I tapped on the number, and it rang. And rang. And went to voicemail.

“Hi, my name is Reese Barker. I'm not sure if you can help me, but I was driving into Jackson from the airport, and the temperature gauge in my Jeep went up to the red line. I pulled over and popped the hood. I'm not sure what's wrong, but I smell something sweet. I'm at the third pull-off directly after the entrance to the park. If you could call me back on this number, that would be great.”

I ended the voicemail and dropped my head back with a long groan.

All the shits.

I walked around to the other side of the engine, but still didn't see anything. Next, I crouched, scanning underneath for anything that looked off. Still nothing.

Had someone put the wrong kind of gas in the Jeep? Maybe whoever rented the car last had filled it with the cheap stuff, and now it was causing engine trouble.

Who was I kidding? I had no freaking clue. If this were a person—a body—I could diagnose the problem easily. I could triage, perform surgery, and repair the person back to health. But this was a car. And while the nuts and bolts of an engine might be more predictable than the anatomy of a human, it was still out of my wheelhouse.

No pun intended.

I rounded back to the front of the engine and got another strong whiff of something sweet.

There was still nothing coming through on my phone, so I opened up another search and typed in *sweet smell from engine*. The only man I could count on for reliable answers was Mr. Google.

Coolant.

The Jeep was leaking coolant.

Before I could even process what that meant—*except for the fact that despite its name, this wasn't cool at all*—a newer Bronco turned into the pullout and parked in front of me.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek, watching the SUV shut off and the driver's door open. If this was some creeper trying to “help” me in the way that all serial killers in movies tried to do, he was going to be in for a rude awakening.

The driver got out and faced me.

Oh my.

He might be a creeper...but he was the handsomest creeper I'd ever seen.

Muscled chest, tapered waist, and a mop of warm brown hair. The license plate said Wyoming, but it was his attire that gave him away as a local. Distressed jeans, worn tee, and muddied boots were the standard cowboy attire for these parts.

“Are you alright?” His tone oozed concern.

“Fine, thanks.” I brushed off the handsome stranger. I needed help, but I'd figure it out on my own terms.

His brow furrowed. “Okay.” His eyes swung to the open hood and then back to me. “But didn't you just call because you're having car trouble?”

My jaw dropped. “How did you know that?” I folded my arms defensively.

“Shit. Sorry.” Handsome creeper dragged his fingers through his hair, tousling the waves and only adding to his attractiveness. “I’m usually out in my work truck”—he wiped his hand on his jeans and then extended it—“I’m Decker Conolly. I own TLC Auto Body, and I just got your voicemail.”

“Oh.” My shoulders slumped. “Then yeah. I think it’s leaking coolant.”

He stepped up to the engine bay and took a good whiff. “Oh yeah. That’s definitely coolant you’re smelling.” He reached in with surgical precision and opened up one of the many caps, tipping forward to peer into the container. “Damn. It’s almost completely out. It was a good thing you pulled over when you did. Another mile or two, and the engine would’ve seized.”

Awesome.

I snagged my bottom lip between my teeth. While I was glad he was here, I wasn’t exactly sure what help he could be since he clearly didn’t have a tow truck or any tools.

“I take it you don’t have any coolant with you that you could just top it up?” It was an unrealistically hopeful question.

“No.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “What I’ll do is head back to my shop, grab my tow truck, and come back for your Jeep. Then I can take a look and see where the leak is coming from and fix it.”

My chest deflated with my exhale.

“Okay.” But that wasn’t going to help me now. “I really have to get going, so I’ll just give you my number and call an Uber. Actually, I’ll give you the number of the owner of the car, so you can call him directly about the problem—”

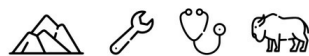
“Where do you need to go?”

My mouth opened and shut. “Just on the other side of Jackson.”

“Don’t call an Uber. I’ll take you,” he said. “I go through town on the way to my shop anyway.”

I was about to protest—the first syllable of refusal actually escaped my lips before I clamped them shut. It would take an Uber at least fifteen minutes to get here and then another twenty to Mom’s. I couldn’t risk it.

“Okay, yeah.” My head bobbed. “That would actually be really great.”



Within minutes, Decker had moved my luggage into the back of his Bronco, and I was climbing into the passenger seat, the very *uncool* Jeep parked and locked up in the rearview. I'd left a voicemail and sent the owner of the Jeep a message about the problems with the car and that I was having it towed to a local garage.

"Okay, where to?"

"Just head through Jackson, and I'll tell you when to turn." I slumped into the seat and chewed on my bottom lip.

"Okay." He put the car in drive and turned back onto the highway.

We rode in silence for several minutes, my gaze locked on the mountains rolling by. Every time I came home, I wondered how I could've forgotten how beautiful *home* really was. Sure, New York City had its own staggering skyline but here...Wyoming was Big Sky country, and every breath felt like it reached just a little deeper inside my lungs.

"Where'd you come in from?" Decker broke my trance.

"New York," I said, letting myself steal a glance at his profile. Straight nose. Strong jawline. And something about the way he drove with only one hand on the wheel and the other on his thigh...almost like how you'd ride a horse. I'd bet he was good at riding with those muscled thighs and—*shit*. I cleared my throat and offered, "But I'm from Jackson originally."

I'd sunk to a new low—ogling the mechanic who was giving me a ride home. Maybe taking all those extra night shifts at the hospital before I left hadn't been the best idea.

"Ahh...home for a visit." He flashed that crooked smile, and something fluttered in my stomach.

I nodded and folded my arms; *I was just hungry, that's all*.

"My mom had her knee replaced yesterday, so I'm on nursing duty for the next four weeks." I wasn't sure why I was telling him this except that I was grateful for his help, and I was preparing myself to be Mom's only company.

The National Elk Refuge passed by on the left. Now, the vast plains seemed almost empty, but during the winter, it would be filled with one of the largest elk herds on earth. The sight was something to behold.

"Oh, that's rough," Decker replied with a grimace. "My dad had both of his done last year at the same time. Something about insurance. He's doing good now, but those first few weeks were tough. She'll be fine. She's just gotta keep pushing."

“Well, she’s good at that,” I muttered under my breath.

Pushing me to find a boyfriend. Pushing me to get married. Have kids.

Pushing me toward a life I had no control over—a life I could lose.

Our eyes collided, his stare questioning my comment.

“She’s stubborn,” I tacked on with a quick smile. “Her doctor told me she should’ve had this knee done five years ago, and she put it off because she didn’t want to have to bother anyone to take care of her.” I pointed at the window. “At the second light, turn right.”

Decker hummed and slowed as we approached the intersection.

“Sometimes a little dependency is a good thing.”

I bit back my quick refute and said instead, “You say that, but you’re not the one stuck with her for four weeks.”

“That bad?” He chuckled and followed my series of finger-pointing directions.

“I love her to death, but she is stubborn and smothering. I’m worried I might not make it out alive.”

“Well, if you need someone to come do a well-check for you, just let me know.”

For an instant, I daydreamed about what seeing Decker for more than... my car repair...might mean—and it was all the wrong things. It was every reason why I’d left Jackson. Everything here was slow and steady, salt-of-the-earth lifestyle. And if I went slow, I’d have time to think about wanting other things that could hurt me—that could completely break apart my life like they’d done to Mom’s.

So, I beelined for the city that never sleeps and hospitals that were never quiet.

“Her house is the ranch up there off the cul-de-sac.” Seeing the small, single-story home brought back a wash of memories—all good but bittersweet. I loved this place so much, but I feared it more.

“Seriously?” Decker rumbled, and I thought he was talking about her house for a second before he pointed at the stop sign.

My shoulders dropped, and I laughed. “Yeah, really.”

All the stop signs in the development said *whoa* instead of *stop*. It was kind of cheesy...but it was the kind of cheesy that felt like coming home.

Decker pulled up out front. Cheryl’s truck was still in the driveway, and I exhaled with a whoosh of relief.

“I’ll be right back to get my things. I just want to let her know I’m here,”

I said, letting myself out and rushing to the front door without a glance back.

I didn't bother to knock because they were expecting me...and Mom never locked her doors.

"Mom? Cheryl? I'm here!"

"Hey, Reese." Cheryl appeared in the small entryway from the living room, which was immediately off to the right. There was the usual pep to her step. Her short gray hair spiked up in the front. And her smile was the widest part about her. She was pushing seventy—I *think*—but she'd never admit to it.

She reached me in a couple of strides and pulled me into a hug. "So good to see you, dear. I hate to rush out, but I've really gotta jet—"

"Don't worry about it." I hugged her tight. "Thank you so much for taking her and bringing her home."

"She's just went to the bathroom with her walker and everything the doctor sent home with her on the counter. She also has a couple Dilaudid in her."

"A couple?" My eyebrows lifted. Dilaudid was no joke, but, of course, Mom was allergic to almost every other kind of pain medication on the planet.

Cheryl gave me a sheepish shrug. "The doctor said to make sure she's comfortable. Plus, you know your mom. She was getting feisty...wanting to do things..."

"So, you drugged her?" I frowned.

"No." She wagged her finger. "The bottle said take one to two tabs. I just rounded up."

So, she drugged her.

"Alright, gotta run! I'll check in—whoa there, cowboy." Cheryl stopped with a start, and I'd been to enough rodeos with her to know there was only one thing that could bring *that* look of appreciation to her face.

I spun and gaped at Decker who stood in the doorway with my red suitcase in his hand. "Figured I'd bring these in for you."

Had his tee been partially tucked into the waist of his jeans before? Had it clung to his abs like that before?

Was that Jeep the only thing that needed some coolant added to it, Dr. Barker?

I forced a smile, about to thank him when there was another voice in my ear.

“Well done, Reese. Well done,” Cheryl muttered not so discreetly, and strode straight up to Decker—her assumption hitting me with all the subtle news of a wrecking ball. “Hi there. I’m Cheryl, a good friend of the family.”

“Decker.” He tipped his chin. “Pleasure.”

“Oh, it most certainly will be.” She patted his shoulder with a devious grin. “Now, I’ve got to scoot, but I can’t wait to hear all about how you and Reese met. Don’t give Arlene all the good stuff before I get back.”

He blinked once and then it clicked. Our gazes connected over Cheryl’s head, and I mouthed an apology as Mom’s best friend rushed past him and out the door.

“I’m so sorry,” I repeated the words out loud as soon as she was gone.

He laughed, and I almost got a full sigh of relief before I heard my name.

“Reese? Is that you?” I spun just as Mom shuffled into the living room with her walker. She was in black stretch pants and a massive sweater, and if she saw what her hair looked like, she’d have a heart attack. As soon as she saw me, her shoulders slumped and her lip quivered, tears instantly pooling in her eyes. “Oh, Reese. Thank God. I was afraid you weren’t going to make it—”

Oh boy. I closed my eyes and stifled a groan. *Mom was knee-deep...or maybe it was sky-high...in those pain meds.*

“It’s me, safe and sound.” I managed to give Decker the *one-minute* finger before jogging over to my mom and pulling her in for a big hug. “I’m here, ready to wait on you hand and foot.”

“I’m just so glad you’re here. I thought I’d never see you again.” Her shoulders shook underneath me.

Dammit, Cheryl. I huffed but held my mom tighter.

“You know you can’t get rid of me that easily,” I joked, trying to get her to snap out of this delusional crying fit. “Now, let’s get you back to your lounge so you can rest.”

I tried to guide her to her new recliner waiting in the corner of the room, but she wouldn’t budge, holding on to me like her life depended on it.

“You already left me once for New York. You rarely come home...”

My head dropped back, and I exhaled slowly. Of course, she’d been upset when I told her I was moving to New York for my residency, but this...this was the drugs talking.

“Mom, you know I went there for work—for my career—”

“Who’s that?” *And...squirrel.* Or, in this case, dreamboat Decker.

I waved my hand in Decker's direction to stop him from coming closer, but he'd already stepped into the living room instead of waiting in the hall like I'd asked.

"Mom, this is Decker. He's the—"

"He's the one."

No.

She beamed, her eyes dancing and her tears switching teams from sad to happy. "You have a boyfriend, and you brought him here. To meet me. To your home."

She practically gurgled with glee, and I found myself speechless to try and correct her. *This couldn't be happening. What kind of world did we live in that a man walks through the front door with me and that must mean he's my boyfriend?* Sure, my need for independence was renowned, especially with Mom. Which was why I'd told Decker to leave my stuff in his car and that I'd come back out for it.

He was the one who hadn't listened.

He was the one who put me in this position.

"No, Mom, wait—"

"You have no idea, Reese. I didn't think I would make it out of surgery." She framed my face between her hands, smushing my cheeks so hard because suddenly, my head was the replacement support for her walker.

"Mom, no—oww." I winced as she squeezed harder.

"I thought they'd put me under, and I'd never wake up. Never wake up to know you'd found someone—to know you'd found love. That I'd never see you happy."

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.

Mom hated anything having to do with the surgery and anesthesia. It didn't matter that her daughter was an ER doctor. She avoided it like the plague. *One too many hospital dramas where everything always goes wrong.* Case in point? Her knee replacement should've happened five years ago. I swear the only reason she agreed to do it now was because she knew it would get me to come home.

"Okay, but Mom, he's not—"

"I'm so happy, honey. So so happy." And then she started to cry again.

This couldn't get any worse—

"Well, hello there, young lady." The easy rumble of his voice came from right beside me. "You must be Reese's...sister?"

My eyes flung wide, and I whipped my head out of Mom's hold and over my shoulder with a horrified stare. *What was he doing? Why did he come over here?*

No, no, no.

"Oh, my goodness, no." Mom giggled—*giggled*. It was official, I was going to sue the makers of Dilaudid for making Mom delusional. I didn't care if it was a side effect. I didn't care if it was dose dependent. *This. Was. Ridiculous.* "I'm Arlene, Reese's mom."

"Decker Conolly." He extended his hand. "It's a pleasure, Arlene. I've heard so much about you."

"Decker." She practically fainted as she reached for his outstretched hand like she was meeting Jesus himself. "I'm so happy you're here. So happy you're with Reese. She deserves to be with someone who takes care of her —"

"*Mom,*" I hissed, my cheeks flaming.

I couldn't believe this was happening. I'd had explicit conversations with patients about the kinds of things that could not safely be inserted into an anus that were more comfortable than this moment.

"It's true, honey. You deserve a good man." Tears overwhelmed her again, and I was pretty sure I was going to need medical attention from this emotional whiplash. "You work too hard—too much. Try to do everything yourself. It's all my fault you've been alone for so long—"

"You raised a strong daughter, Arlene," Decker broke in and patted her hand gently. *Of course, she stopped blubbing for him.* But even I found myself caught up in the kindness in his eyes. The warmth. "I promise I'll take good care of her."

I stared at him, blinking once and then twice. *Of course, he wasn't serious. Not in the way she meant. Obviously.* But good grief if the sincerity in his voice didn't have me believing him for a second, too.

His eyes lifted to mine, and my breath caught. I hadn't looked at a man... had him look at me...like this in...*so long*, as Mom would say. Between the hospital and home, the only regards I got were as a doctor or a colleague. Maybe there was a patient every once in a while who checked me out—I was *the only female doctor in the department*—but those never registered through my professional filter.

But Decker...he didn't even know I was a doctor. I was just some woman he'd given a ride to when her car overheated...but he looked at me like I

could be everything.

I quickly turned away. “Let’s get you to your chair, okay?” I cleared my throat, hoping he hadn’t heard the hoarseness in my voice.

She didn’t budge, still staring at Decker like he was a walking miracle.

The doctor in me knew it was because of the pain meds. That her mind was floating between distorted clouds of reality. But that didn’t make it any less frustrating.

“Time to put your feet up and relax.” Decker flashed her a smile and slid his arm around her back, his hand brushing over mine.

I pulled back, reminding myself it was not physically possible for a spark of electricity to occur from a touch.

I stood there, helpless—*useless*, as my *mechanic* helped my recovering mother to her recliner. He stabilized her and then her walker as she turned and carefully sank into the chair with an oomph.

“Don’t leave,” she murmured, her eyelids already fluttering shut.

“I’m not going anywhere, Mom.” I refused to assume she was talking to anyone but me.

I turned on the TV, the white noise of HGTV filling the background. After a minute, her eyes stayed shut, and I immediately motioned to Decker to follow me back to the hallway.

As soon as I reached the doorway, I spun, and Decker collided right into me.

“Shit—” he broke off and grabbed my arms before I went tumbling back. Unfortunately, that also meant he steadied me flush to him.

Our eyes collided, and there was no mistaking the lust in his.

Later, I’d convince myself that wasn’t really anatomically possible, but right now, it seemed impossible to deny.

My breath knotted in my lungs, and a different kind of heat diffused into my cheeks. I didn’t need to be a doctor to declare that Decker Conolly was a specimen of masculine health and physique. My hands were flat against hard, sculpted pecs. My unsteady breaths mapped the ridges of his abdomen with each inhale. And lower—

I stepped back so quickly I almost stumbled.

“What were you thinking?” I hissed and pointed an accusing finger at him and then toward my mom.

His brow furrowed, and he folded his arms, distracting my attention for a moment with the swell of his biceps. “She seemed upset, so I figured I’d try

to help.”

“*Help?*” I choked out. “You let her think you were my...”

“Boyfriend?” He finished for me, arching a brow.

I gritted my teeth, refusing to unpack the psychology of my hesitation to say the word right now. *With him.*

“It’s fine. She’s just on heavy pain meds right now. Come tomorrow, she probably won’t even remember this—or you—happened.” I wasn’t sure who I was trying to comfort, him or myself. “And if she does, the Dilaudid will be out of her system, and I can just tell her the truth.”

No big deal.

Decker cocked his head. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Fine. Perfectly fine.” My head bobbed, and then I exhaled in a whoosh. “Sorry, it’s just been a long day. Thank you. For the ride. For the help. Even...for her.” My gaze bounced to Mom, comfortably snoozing in her chair.

“Don’t worry about it.” He flashed that tipped smile that kept tilting my insides off-kilter. “My dad thought he’d come out of surgery in the middle of the zombie apocalypse. I forget what pain meds he was on, but trust me, pretending to be your boyfriend is nothing compared to having to pretend with my mom that the world is ending but also that everything is okay.”

I let out a strained laugh. I couldn’t help myself. This was all ridiculous—a silly fib to calm a drug-induced emotional fit, but it was also going to be okay.

“Alright, well, I’m going to go grab my tow truck and get the Jeep. I’ll text you when I have it back at the shop, and I know what’s going on.”

I bit my lip, rolling it through my teeth and then murmured again, “Thank you.”

“Just here to help. Whatever you need.”

Not a boyfriend—real or fake—that was for sure.

I smiled and saw him out the door, sagging my back against it as my gaze drifted back to the living room. *It’s my fault she’s been alone...* In spite of her condition, her words gutted me. I closed my eyes. *I needed a drink.*

My mom assumed my mechanic was my new boyfriend...and I’d agreed. *At least she had the excuse of being high on Dilaudid.*

CHAPTER

Two

REESE

IT WAS GOING *to be okay.*

Last night had passed in a calm stupor. Mom dozed on and off in her chair. I napped on the couch and then made myself a frozen pizza for dinner. She didn't mention Decker or my boyfriend again, though to be fair, she hadn't mentioned much before falling asleep for the night.

But even though she seemed to already be forgetting him, I wasn't.

He'd texted me when he had the Jeep back at his shop. He said he was going to fill it with coolant and then determine where the leak was coming from, and that he should have an answer for me by tomorrow. The answer wasn't really for me, but I still hadn't received any response from the owner of the car, so for right now, it was in my care.

Of course, the conversation hadn't ended there; he'd asked how Mom was doing, and I'd felt too guilty to not answer.

He'd settled her mind, and I knew how big of a difference that could make at a time like this, so I gave him the rundown, and he'd shared how he'd had to cover the doorways in aluminum foil, convincing his dad it was a special kind of zombie-proof metal that would keep him safe.

It made me smile, and that was when I let the conversation fizzle—*when I started enjoying it too much.*

I'd watched a couple of episodes of some crime drama that was always on and then grabbed the comforter from my childhood bedroom and slept on the living room couch even though my room was just a couple feet down the hall; I couldn't leave her alone.

In all—in spite of the eventful day—the night had ended peacefully.

“Oh, Reese, you shouldn't have slept on the couch,” I was greeted by Mom's sleepy voice as I walked back into the living room with a cup of coffee in my hand.

“I'm not going to let you sleep in here by yourself after surgery.” I went to her and bent down to give her a good hug and kiss. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired.” She looked groggy.

“Pain?” I questioned, pulling over the ottoman so I could sit by her chair.

“A little, but I don't want more of that hard stuff they gave me.” She

shuddered in disgust, and I fought a laugh.

I didn't want her to have more of it either. Any more Dilaudid, and next thing I knew, I'd be married with twins on the way.

"How does some Tylenol sound?" I pulled the bottle from my pocket and tapped out two pills into my palm.

"Do I—"

"Yes," I said in warning. "Doctor's orders."

She harrumphed but took the pills and her water bottle and downed the medication.

"Are you hungry?" I asked when she was finished.

She shook her head and then reached for my hand, clasping it to her chest. "I'm so glad to see you, Reese."

Oh boy. She probably didn't remember the first round of her emotional outburst, so now I was going to be treated to round two.

"Of course, I'd be here, Mom. You know I can't trust you to follow instructions and not overdo it," I teased gently.

"Yeah, yeah, but that's not what I meant." Her hands squeezed, and it sent a shot of dread straight to my chest—dread that grew into a ball of lead when her eyes glazed over with unshed tears. "I mean, I'm so happy to see you with someone. I know I only just met him, but Decker seems like a wonderful man to come out here with you, to be by your side like that..."

The floor seemed to tip and tilt underneath me. *This was a nightmare.* I had to still be sleeping because this was my worst fear—*she'd remembered everything.*

I stared at her like a deer in headlights, frozen in shock.

"I know I don't talk about it very much because I don't like to think I failed you, but when you went to New York and then were alone for so long...I thought it was my fault." Her soft voice and sad smile broke my heart. "I thought because I never found someone that you were shutting yourself out."

"Mom..." I wanted to tell her she was wrong—that none of this was her fault. But to do that, I'd have to tell her Decker wasn't my boyfriend, and the way she was looking at me...

"I know I'm being silly." She swiped a tear from her eye and smiled. "Now, I realize you were just waiting for your perfect match."

Five minutes, and she knew he was the perfect one?

Had the doctor replaced her brain along with her knee?

“Where is Decker?” Her brow creased. “Did he not stay here last night? Had I known, I would’ve gotten a new bed for your room. Oh, I feel so terrible—”

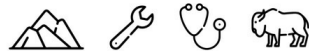
“No, Mom. Please don’t worry about it. Decker is perfectly fine,” I assured her, my head nodding in slow motion as all my good, truthful intentions unraveled.

I was a horrible person—an official diagnosis for lying to my mother after her surgery about something like this. But as much as I hated to disappoint her, the only thing worse was disappointing her and knowing she’d blame herself for it. My mother was so strong, so caring...she was simply my inspiration.

The truth was strong medicine...but so was the placebo effect. And in this case, that fake relationship was going to make her feel better, so that was the pill she was going to get.

I patted her hand lovingly and proceeded to lie through my smiling teeth. “He’s...at the hotel. He’s going to pick up breakfast and then come over.”

*As soon as I called him and told him what he was supposed to be doing.
And that he was still my fake boyfriend.*



With Mom settled and nursing her cup of green tea, I grabbed my cell and closed myself in my childhood bedroom to call Decker.

My heart thudded in my throat with each ring.

“Hey, Reese,” he answered after the third tone, and it was strange, but I could hear that tipped smile in his voice. *And it was stupid that it made my stomach flutter.* “I found the leak in the line. I actually just finished patching it”—*already?*—”so then I’ll top off the coolant, and it should be good to go.”

“Great. Thank you,” I blurted out in a rush. “But that’s not why I’m calling.”

“Oh.” He started. “Is Mom okay?”

It didn’t slip my notice that he called her mom. I mean, she’d told him to but in all fairness, she also thought he was something that he wasn’t.

“Yeah, she’s fine...doing good.” I steeled myself and pretended like I

was in the ER and had to break bad news to a patient. “Unfortunately, she remembers you and still thinks you’re my boyfriend.”

He chuckled. “Bet she got a kick out of learning that I’m just your mechanic.”

“About that.” I let out a weak laugh. “I didn’t exactly correct her.”

There was a brief pause. “What?”

“Look, Decker, I can’t correct her right now. Between the surgery and the drugs and our...own stuff...I just...she needs to believe you’re my boyfriend.”

His low hum vibrated through the phone, doing things to my body that no sound should have the power to do.

“You were the one who let her think it in the first place,” I reminded him, refusing to wholly take the blame for this situation.

“So, you want me to continue to pretend to be your boyfriend while you’re in town?” he drawled.

My heart beat harder. “Will you?”

There was a low pause, and suddenly, my biggest fear wasn’t having to confess the truth to Mom...it was that Decker wasn’t going to agree to the lie.

“Okay...”

“Great.” I sank onto the bed. “I’m so sorry about this. It’ll just be for a few weeks, I promise. I just...I can’t tell her the truth right now.”

“It’s fine, Reese. Whatever you need.”

Whatever I needed.

I gritted my teeth. It was annoying to be reminded how I needed him right now, but it was the unfortunate reality.

“Speaking of that...” I swallowed hard. “I kind of told her you were at the hotel but that you were picking up breakfast and coming over here this morning.”

“Oh.”

“If you can’t, it’s not a big deal,” I said in a rush. Of all people, I knew that work came first, and I didn’t want to put him behind for a stupid charade. “I can tell her something came up. Maybe with work or something—oh, I’ll tell her you work remotely for the hospital and have to take a meeting—”

Who the hell was I—able to fabricate a backstory faster than a speeding bullet?

“Reese,” he stopped me with a low growl. “It’s fine. I don’t have anything else going on today. I can come by.”

My shoulders slumped. “Thank you, Decker. Really, thank you.”



“I’m just so glad you’re here.” I forced my smile even wider while Mom gushed her gratitude to Decker like he was God’s gift to her daughter.

She wasn’t far off base. He was my gift—the kind, handsome mechanic who’d agreed to my harebrained plan with barely any hesitation. But he wasn’t *that* kind of gift. Not for me, at least. But a girl could fantasize...I might be a doctor who hadn’t had a date in a decade, but I wasn’t dead. With those well-worn clothes that seemed like they’d grown into him rather than the other way around and that easily tipped smile just waiting for the slightest breeze to lift up one side...

It was my fault I was stuck ogling him—the *very* kind mechanic who’d agreed to humor me and pretend to be my boyfriend. With nothing else to focus on—no shifts, no patients, no emergencies, no long nights and early mornings—there was only the present. And if there was one thing I didn’t know how to handle, it was not having a million things to focus on.

“I couldn’t turn down the chance to meet you...to spend some time out here,” he said, and I noticed how he took care to answer in ways that weren’t technically lies.

Within thirty minutes of my phone call, he’d arrived with a box of Vanilla Chai muffins and a travel container of coffee from Brilliant Brews, a local coffee shop and bakery in Wisdom, the next town over from Jackson. I’d met him outside, both to thank him profusely and so that I wouldn’t have to greet him in front of Mom.

Did one kiss a fake boyfriend on seeing him?

Did I pretend like I was in middle school again and secretly sneak my hand between our mouths and fake kiss?

“It was such a wonderful surprise. Are you originally from New York?”

I winced, and when Mom looked at me, I pretended the tag on my T-shirt was itching me.

“Yeah. I lived in Manhattan until I was fifteen; then Dad retired from the force, and we moved down to Texas.”

Manhattan? Really? I’d just assumed he was born out here. I swallowed

down my surprise because there was no reason for it; he could be from Mars for all I knew about him.

“And then you ended up back in the city...to meet Reese...what are the chances?” Mom sighed, her eyes practically turning to hearts. “I’ve been so worried about her...alone in the city,” she went on, glancing at me where I sat in the chair in the opposite corner of the room. Meanwhile, she’d made Decker sit on an ottoman right next to her recliner. “Working all the time at the hospital.”

“Mom...” I warned and then shoved another bite of the muffin in my hand into my mouth. *Hiding behind food...this was going great.*

“When you enjoy what you do, work can take over before you realize it,” Decker replied smoothly, and my breath caught.

How did he know? He didn’t. He didn’t know me. But it felt like he did.

“Now what do you think of those muffins?”

I appreciated his change of topic, but oddly enough, it was everything else that unsettled me. Not only was he managing to deftly navigate this strange situation, the things he said...they resonated.

I rose and walked into the kitchen to refill my coffee, suddenly feeling like there wasn’t enough air in the room.

I loved my job, but I let it consume me. I begged for it to consume me. And I told myself it was okay because I loved it—because I was helping people. But being here...I was having time to sit back and see just how much of the world I missed while it flew by.

“Reese?”

I spun at Decker’s voice, hot coffee sloshing over the edge of my mug and landing on my hand.

“Shit.” The mug clattered onto the counter where I quickly set it down, rushing to the sink which was closer to him. Decker had the water turned on by the time I got there, the cold soothing the irritated skin. “Sorry.” I huffed.

This was a mess. What was I thinking, deciding it was better to pretend I had a boyfriend than just tell Mom she was drugged up and delusional yesterday?

Because I felt like I was letting her down...and the last thing I ever wanted to do to the woman who was so strong and raised me on her own was let her down.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” I turned off the water. “Fine.”

I went to reach for a towel, but it was right there, *in his hand*. I took it and muttered my thanks, the whole time feeling the disbelief in his gaze. I needed him to pretend, not to actually worry about me.

“Yoohoo.” A loud voice from the front door called. “Look at you, Arlene, making it through the first night. How was your little medication vacation?”

Cheryl. I squeezed my eyes shut. Mom might have blinders on when it came to Decker and his tipped smile, but Cheryl wouldn’t. As soon as she was done thoroughly examining his very fine backside, she’d pick apart our interactions, and it wouldn’t take much to realize there was something missing. *Namely an entire relationship*.

“Stay here,” I ordered and beelined for the living room.

Seconds. It took me seconds to get there, and by that time, Mom was already regaling Cheryl about my new boyfriend.

“I told you she was just waiting for a good one,” Cheryl teased and greeted me with a hug. “More than a good one if you ask me. You picked a fine one, Reese. A very fine one.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, more heat ricocheting into my cheeks.

“It’s his first time out here,” Mom said, her head bobbing.

That wasn’t exactly what he’d said.

“Oh.” Cheryl clapped her hands together. “Well what are you doing here? Take the boy out, and give him a tour of Jackson. It’s a beautiful day out there.”

“Oh, no.” I shook my head wildly. “I can’t do that. We have to do your exercises—”

“Oh, phooey.” Cheryl swatted me. “That’s why I’m here.”

At that moment, Decker chose to stop listening to my instructions and returned to the living room with a muffin and a cup of coffee for Cheryl.

“Welcome back. We weren’t properly introduced yesterday. I’m Decker.” He smiled and handed her the refreshment.

My eyes narrowed. He was kissing ass. *Which was exactly what a boyfriend would be doing*, a snarky voice inside my head reminded me.

“Oh my word.” Cheryl gaped at the offering. “Reese, honey, if you don’t marry this man, I’m going to have that very smart brain of yours examined.”

I choked and then coughed. *Less than a day*. It had taken less than a day for someone to bring up my wedding to my fake boyfriend.

“Decker, Reese is going to take you out and show you around her hometown,” Mom determined with an enthusiastic nod, and if I didn’t know

better, it was like she was trying to make me stew in my own very poor choices.

“No, Mom. I’m here for you—to help you with your therapy—”

“And I’ll be doing therapy every day for the next several weeks, you’ll get your chance to help.”

“Mom, no—”

“Reese, when was the last day you didn’t treat a patient?” Mom leveled me with a hard stare.

My mouth opened and shut. *I couldn’t remember.*

“Exactly. You need a day off. Decker, please, get her out of the house. Enjoy the beautiful day, and I can’t wait to hear all about it at dinner.”

Slowly...painfully slowly...I turned my head to Decker and found his gaze waiting for mine.

I swallowed down the lump of all my last protests. I didn’t have much choice. Mom wasn’t going to be satisfied until we left...and if we stayed...it was only a matter of time until Cheryl realized there was something fishy about my new boyfriend.

“Okay. You win.” I lifted my hands in mock defeat as Decker approached me. “Let me just grab my jacket, and we can go.”

“Can’t wait.” *Why did he sound excited? He already lived here. There was nothing new to see.*

“No more pain meds,” I pointed a finger at Cheryl and warned.

I turned to lead the way out of the room and felt Decker’s hand on the small of my back. I shivered at the burst of heat along my spine and bit into my cheek. I couldn’t be attracted to my fake boyfriend, that would only spell disaster. He was a temporary solution. My own version of pain medication to mask the discomfort of letting Mom down again.

But my physical attraction to him was strong. *Schedule-C narcotic strong.* And if I wasn’t very careful about how and when and what doses I took of Decker Conolly, I was going to wind up addicted.

CHAPTER

Three

DECKER

“DO you mind if we stop at my shop real quick? There’s a part coming for Mr. Nixon’s tractor, and I told him I’d call him to pick it up as soon as it’s delivered.” I held the passenger door of my Bronco open as she climbed inside for the second time in just as many days.

My fake girlfriend.

What the fuck was I thinking?

Honestly, part of me thought it was a joke when she called. The other part knew it wasn’t. I’d only just met the woman, I had no place agreeing to be her fake boyfriend, but for some reason, all I could see were her big brown eyes staring at me in the doorway yesterday, *needing me*. I wasn’t the kind of guy who got off on wanting a weak woman just so she would need me...but I was the kind of guy whose interest was piqued when a woman who clearly didn’t want to need anyone...needed something from me.

To be her boyfriend.

I rounded my car and got in. “It’ll only take a few minutes. and then we can go for that tour.”

“We don’t need to go for a tour. You live here, so you obviously don’t need one,” Reese replied, her frustration radiating off her in waves. Not at me. At least, I hoped not at me. “We can do whatever you need to do. We can even stay at your shop if you want. I can log into my charts on my phone.”

I glanced at her profile, her focus locked on her phone, and I had a feeling she already had those charts pulled up.

“We’re not staying at my shop. I’m checking on this part, and then we’ll figure out something from there.” Something that didn’t involve working.

Reese was silent all the way through Jackson and then Wisdom.

“I haven’t been here in forever.” Her gaze sponged up the roadside icons along Main Street. “Oh, the Worth Hotel is still here. I went to a birthday party there once for my friend Gwen.”

“Gwen Reynolds?”

Her head spun. “Yeah. Do you know her?”

“Her older brothers,” I told her, slowing at the stoplight. “The four of them own a private security firm just outside of town.”

“Oh wow. I remember them vaguely. Not really the oldest but the younger two. The youngest I remember being shy, but the other one...he and Gwen were like two peas in a pod.”

My smile topped my lips. “Gunner. His wife manages the Worth Hotel now.”

“Wow.”

I shouldn't have been as mesmerized by the movement of her mouth around that word as I was...but there were certain things a man couldn't fake. And certain things a man couldn't pretend weren't real. And the ripple of her full lips over the syllable, the soft swells mimicking a motion my dick immediately craved, made my blood heat and the crotch of my jeans tighten.

“Yeah.” I cleared my throat, but lust still cluttered my senses, clogging up the very friendly but still fake filter between us.

It was only another minute before I pulled into the lot in front of my shop. It wasn't much to look at. I'd purchased the old garage from a guy who'd only used it as a junkyard for the last decade. Talk about elbow grease...I'd needed elbow, shoulder, knee, and heel grease to clean this place up. And I didn't mean clean by a mechanic's standard. I meant by an engine builder's standard.

“This is yours?” Reese sat forward, taking it all in.

“Yeah.” I shut off the car.

“And that?” She pointed to the large black trailer parked on the side of the building.

TLC Motorsports.

I gave her a wolfish grin. “The trailer for my race car.”

“You tow cars, fix tractors, and drive race cars? Is there anything you don't do?”

I laughed. “Well, if you'd asked me that yesterday, I would've said I do everything but fake relationships. But as of this morning, yeah, I guess I do everything,” I teased her, watching her smile appear like a candle flickering to life, and without even thinking, I winked.

It was a subconscious thing. A subconscious mistake, I realized as soon as her breath caught.

“Let me see if that part is here. Be right back,” I excused myself quickly.

Was it a good thing that it was so damn easy to flirt with her? A good thing that I enjoyed making her smile?

Or was it a bad thing?

Hell if I knew.

The package with the tractor part was right inside the door. I pulled out my cell to call Pat, the first ring going through just as the door opened again, and Reese walked inside.

While the line rang, my eyes tracked her movements through my shop.

“Hey, Pat. It’s Decker. I’ve got that part for you if you want to swing by,” I left him a message, not expecting him to answer.

Tucking my phone back into my pocket, I joined Reese over by the Camaro I had pulled apart.

“Been working on this one for a while.” I scratched the back of my head.

“Giving you problems?” She tipped forward and peered into the engine bay.

Before I could catch myself, my eyes strayed to the curve of her ass. Damn, she had a nice ass. *A nice, off-limits ass.*

Reese turned, and I quickly dropped my gaze. She folded her arms as she straightened, arching her eyebrow. *Busted.*

“Not problems,” I answered and cleared my throat. “But to do it right, it takes time.”

“Like a surgery.”

I chuckled. “Kind of. But I guess you would know more about that than me.”

She hummed and strolled around the other side of the Camaro, peering into the front seat.

“What kind of doctor are you?”

“Emergency medicine.”

I grunted. No wonder she was in a state of constant reaction. Every moment needed to be filled with something. Even on the drive over here, she’d checked her email on her phone. I was pretty sure she’d checked some patient charts. Her schedule. And then settled on picking at her fingernails until we’d pulled into my lot.

In the span of seconds, her mom’s comment brought Reese Barker into crystal-clear focus. This woman never stopped working—never stopped moving. I wondered when the last time something had been strong enough to hold her still...and what it was.

“So what made you go all the way to the East Coast for an emergency room? Or are you a city mouse?”

It was clear she loved her mom—her home. And that made me wonder

why she'd chosen to build her life on the opposite side of the country.

She looked at me from underneath her eyelashes. "Better programs. Better opportunities."

There was no doubt about that. Wisdom was a small town with only an urgent care center; the closest hospital was in Jackson, but even that wasn't much compared to a major city. *But there were plenty of those between here and New York...*

"Ever think about coming back home?"

Her hesitation before she answered was all I needed to know the next word was a lie. "No," she clipped. "How about you? Texas to Wyoming. Trying out a different breed of cowboy?"

I laughed. "Not quite. Too hot in Texas. Plus I like the mountains."

Her smile blossomed just for a second, and it felt as bright as the midday sun. "Me, too." And then it clouded over once more as she reached for her phone. "I'm going to call Mom. This is ridiculous. I never should've left."

I closed the space between us and gently covered her phone with my hand. "She's going to be fine, Reese."

"That's not the point." Her defeat was obvious. "She's more concerned about my dating life than she is with me being there to take care of her."

My gaze pinned hers. "Because she sees that you need more of a break than she does."

Her head whipped to me, sparks flying in her stare. "I don't need a break, especially when I could be helping her."

There was nothing worse than stubbornness validated by altruism.

The door to the shop opened, putting a stop to the conversation as Pat walked in and yelled for me.

"Decker?"

"Comin', Pat!" I called over my shoulder, holding Reese's fiery stare for another second before I turned and headed for the door.

It only took a minute to give Pat the part for his tractor. He'd replaced the belt plenty of times on his own and wasn't one for chitchat, so within a couple minutes, the older rancher was on his way.

I looked for Reese, but she wasn't inside anymore. She must've slipped out when I went to my office to give Pat a receipt.

Sure enough, she was pacing the gravel lot when I walked outside, her phone to her ear. I gritted my teeth and quickly locked up.

"Reese."

She held up her finger. “Thanks for letting me know, Tonya.” She ended the call and moved right into a text message. “Sorry, I just wanted to follow up on a patient of mine who was in for surgery this morning—”

“Reese.” This time, I plucked her phone right out of her hands. The look on her face, you’d think I’d just grabbed her ass.

A thought far more tempting but much less necessary.

“What are you doing? Give me my phone back.” She went to reach for it, so I hoisted my hand above my head.

“Forcing you to take a break.”

She reached higher, so I stepped back.

“Decker,” she ground out, determined as she jumped to reach her phone without thinking twice—“You can’t—omph”—and crashed into me instead.

My free arm locked around her, pulling all her soft curves hard against me as I stumbled into the side of my car, using it to stop the both of us from crashing to the ground.

Damn, she felt good. Our breaths collided in a fast, heavy rush. My dick swelled and pressed to the front of my jeans. This relationship might be fake, but the way my body responded to her was as real as it gets.

Our eyes locked, and for a second...she stilled. Truly stilled.

“What are you doing?” Her voice was breathless.

“There’s nothing for you to do—that you can do out here,” I rasped. “So, I’m starting you on PT.”

She flattened her palms to my chest. I wondered if she could feel my heart pumping. Carefully, she pushed back and created a safe distance between us.

My eyes dropped to her chest. I could see the outline of her nipples through her shirt, and as quickly as I realized it, so did she. Her arms folded tightly over her front.

“I don’t need physical ther—”

“Not physical. Phone therapy.” I made sure she was watching as I tucked her phone into my back pocket. “We’re weaning you off of work.”

“You can’t be serious.” Her incredulous look was so damn adorable.

My lips cocked into a crooked smile. “Just call me Dr. Decker.”

Her eyes rolled. “Unbelievable.”

“Think of it this way, when we get back tonight, I get to tell your mom about how you relaxed *all* day and didn’t look at your phone once.”

Reese glowered, smart enough to realize where I was going with my

offer. If her mom was convinced she could relax, then she'd be more inclined to let Reese helicopter over her.

“Plus, I don't know about you, but if I'm going to be convincing about this whole thing, I should probably know a little more about you than the fact that you're married to your work.”

“I'm not—” She broke off with a huff, her lips pursing into a tight smile. “Fine. No phone for today.”

CHAPTER

Four

REESE

“PLEASE STEP INTO MY OFFICE.” Decker extended his arm, his other hand resting on the side of the canoe, his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows.

The clear water rippled underneath the wooden frame bobbing on the surface. The afternoon sun glistened off the top of the water like sprays of diamonds. Meanwhile, the patchwork of rocks shimmered in an array of burnt browns underneath Decker’s toes.

Like his shirt, he’d rolled his jeans up so the water just missed them.

“Really?” I arched an eyebrow, wondering how I’d gotten roped into this.

Momentary dementia from being pressed up against him.

When he said we were going to Jenny Lake, I thought he meant the ferry boat that carried passengers to the other side of the lake, where there were hiking trails and waterfalls. But no, he meant we were going out on the lake...in a canoe.

He grinned, that crooked smile sinking its teeth into the ache between my legs. *Why did I have to pick a hot fake boyfriend?* This would be so much easier if I wasn’t actually attracted to him.

I kicked off my shoes, tossing them into the center of the canoe along with his. The cold water was a welcome bite on my skin, tempering the heat in the rest of my body.

Decker wiggled his fingers. I stared at them and then climbed into the canoe on my own. Hearing his low, hoarse chuckle next to me was just as bad as it would’ve been to touch him again.

“When was the last time you were out on Jenny Lake?”

I shrugged. “It’s been a while.” *Middle school*, I thought.

He gripped the end of the canoe with both his hands in order to push off, and my attention dropped like an anchor to his forearms, veins stretching over layers of muscle. He had to have more veins than the normal person. *No, not anatomically possible*, I chided myself and snapped my eyes out across the lake.

The cool breeze kissed my cheek as Decker pushed us off. The canoe wobbled as Decker hopped in. He grabbed one of the oars but made no move

to use it, instead just letting us drift out into the lake. Water sluiced like sliding silk along the sides, and my eyes fluttered shut.

I tried to think about my patient—the one who'd had a triple bypass this morning after coming to the ER last week with chest pains. Tried to recall his pre-op readings and what meds Dr. Williams, the surgeon, put him on. But the breeze just kept blowing the threads of my thoughts away. Cool and clean and clear.

This was the danger of coming back here—back home. *Back where I could lose my focus.* It was like leaving solid ground for the unstable surface of the lake. In New York, I was on a firm, unyielding path, but here...I could float. Tip and drift on things that could change with the day. *Here, I could be susceptible to something that could drown me.*

“So, why do you need a fake boyfriend?”

My gaze snapped back to Decker. “Seriously? You met my mom.”

“I did, but she already seemed under the impression that you *had* a boyfriend.”

I pressed my hands to the seat on either side of me, my head dipping as I watched the canoe forge ripples through the surface of the still lake.

“I might have told her a couple months ago that I had one so she'd stop bugging me,” I confessed, and when Decker laughed, I added, “It's not funny.”

“It is funny,” he countered and lifted the oar.

Guess we weren't just going to float. I didn't care either way until those vein-wrapped arms began flexing with each row, paddling us out farther into deeper water.

“She just needs to let it go. It's not like she didn't raise me as a single mom. She should know a relationship isn't everything.”

And how much it could cost.

He hummed. “That's how parents are. They always want more for you than they had, right?”

Our eyes locked across the narrow plank separating us.

Mom wanted my happiness, and to her, that came in the form of a man to love and to love me because it was the root of it all.

Why did I have to pick the hot, intuitive mechanic for a fake boyfriend?

“Alright, Yoda.” I stretched out my legs in front of me and tucked my arms to my chest. I was done being the subject here. “So, what's your story? The SparkNotes version, so I have all the answers to the questions that

Mom's eventually going to ask."

He chuckled, eyes twinkling while I waited for an answer.

"Come on. Family first. You mentioned your dad because he'd had a knee replacement. Tell me about him. Your mom. Siblings?" I counted off of my fingers.

"Dad had a knee replacement. Mom died when I was five. "

"Shit." I grimaced. "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry for. I don't remember her. She had a rare form of brain cancer. Dad remarried when I was eighteen and had three more kids with Maureen, so I have three half brothers. Joey, Andrew, and Tyler."

"Close with them or not so much since you live here and they live in Texas?"

"Close with them but at a different point in life. I became an adult the year Dad started over, basically, with kids." He rowed farther out onto the lake. "I love my dad. Maureen's great. I love my brothers." He shrugged. "Just needed to venture out on my own."

"Fair." I nodded. *I'd done the same thing.* "Favorite guilty pleasure."

He grinned. "Romance novels."

"Seriously?" I wasn't sure if I swayed back or if it was water rolling underneath us.

"Why would I be joking?" His eyes twinkled.

"Because...well...you work on cars, so I thought..." My cheeks heated, and his smile widened; he enjoyed watching me squirm. "I don't know. I don't know what I thought."

"One of my friends—Ranger Reynolds, actually—is married to Sydney Ward. She's a famous romance novelist—"

"I know who Sydney Ward is." You had to be living under a rock to not know Sydney Ward, especially with the new movie they were making of one of her books.

"Well, I enjoy her books," he said, his expression more serious now.

Of course, all I could picture was him sitting on the edge of an engine bay, dirty jeans molded to his thighs, dirty shirt clinging to his broad shoulders, and his dirty hands thumbing through a dirty book.

Dirty thoughts.

"Me, too," I blurted out and quickly changed topics. "So, did you always want to be a mechanic?"

This was great. Why couldn't all dating be like this? Just jump right into

the important details without all the tiptoeing.

“Pretty much. I love cars. Fixing them. Making them faster. I’ve been tinkering with them since I was a teen and never stopped.”

“You like getting your hands dirty,” I teased.

Our eyes connected, the joke instantly losing its luster in favor of...lust.

“Yeah,” his deep voice rumbled.

I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth, wondering if his mouth was as dirty as his hands. *Oh my god, Reese.*

Decker was literally doing me the hugest, most ridiculous favor ever known to man, and here I was, fantasizing about him every chance I got.

“Okay, your turn,” I declared, hoping he didn’t notice when my voice cracked as I waved my hands and motioned for him to return to the interrogation. “Do your worst.”

Decker sat back and regarded me, cocking his head to one side and then the other. It was only a couple of seconds that he paused and then asked, his voice subtly smooth, “What is your most annoying personality trait?”

My jaw hung. “Seriously.”

“Most annoying. I want to know.”

I snapped my mouth shut and wrinkled my nose. “I wash the dishes before I put them in the dishwasher.”

He snorted. “Seriously? Okay, I’m going to have to try harder.”

“Harder? For what?”

“The bad stuff.”

“Why do you want to know the bad stuff?” *And why couldn’t I keep my eyes off his flexing forearms?*

The oars lifted out of the water, letting the canoe drift.

“Because if I’m supposed to be in love with you, then I need to know more than the perfect ER doctor facade. I need to know all the imperfections.”

I stared. *Was he for real? Was it possible for a man to be this hot and generous and...sincere?* Maybe he was a serial killer. The Ted Bundy of Jackson, Wyoming.

“I kill plants,” I blurted out and then shook my head. “Not on purpose. I mean, I’m just terrible at keeping them alive.”

He nodded slowly. “Plant murderer. Got it. Anything else? What about your family? Your dad...”

I answered quickly because there was nothing to tell, and I didn’t want

him to think it was a touchy subject; it wasn't.

"He's never been in the picture. Left when my mom was pregnant. I've never met him and don't care to."

"So it's always been you and your mom?"

"Yup." I smiled. "She worked two, sometimes three, jobs when I was younger to support us. She did anything—everything—she had to to make sure I was taken care of. A real hero."

I could save lives all day, every day, but I wasn't sure if there'd ever come a time where I'd see all my hard work as the equivalent of the sacrifices Mom made for me. For us.

"Seems like it," he said with a slow nod of admiration and agreed. "Must be where you get it from."

I blushed instantly as though his words were an on switch for the vasodilation in my cheeks. *When was the last time I'd let a compliment affect me?*

I shook it off and redirected the conversation. "We should come up with a story about how we met."

That was the next step in this, right? At least, it was in all those damn Hallmark movies.

Decker chuckled. "They say close to the truth is always the best, so did your car break down in the city, and I—"

"I don't have a car in the city," I interrupted. "No. How about you injured yourself while working on a car and came into the ER when I was working?"

"I asked you out?" He arched a brow. "I think you should've asked me out."

"I wouldn't do that because you're a patient, and it's inappropriate."

"So I have to be the inappropriate one?" His brows lifted. "When you're the one who asked me to be your fake boyfriend?"

I huffed and pursed my lips. "Right, but there is a hard line I'd never cross with a patient—"

"Oh, I have a way with words," he assured me with a wink, and I had to look down and confirm there wasn't any water in the boat because it was definitely wet between my thighs. "It was just a cut that needed a couple of stitches. You told me it would heal up nicely. I said I'd feel more comfortable if you checked on it in a day or two. Maybe over dinner."

"Ah-ha," I exclaimed and smiled. "So you were the one who asked me out." *Like it mattered in this fake scenario.*

“And you ignored me—”

“Because I would never—”

“Let me finish,” he demanded, the sternness in his voice definitely a turn-on. Dirty and demanding. The combination made me shiver. As much as I embraced my independence—maybe to the point of detriment—the fantasy of being dominated was enticing.

“Okay,” I answered docilely, biting the inside of my cheek to curb the sensations tearing me up inside

He pulled both oars out of the water and rested them on the sides of the canoe so that we were floating. “You ignored my subtle suggestion while you stitched me up and when you were done, you told me I was all taken care of, and I asked who takes care of you?”

My eyes snapped to his, the rumble of his voice lingering on my skin, oozing heat into my blood, long after he’d finished speaking. *Who took care of me?*

“I take care of myself,” I mumbled truthfully, suddenly feeling like I was reliving a scenario that hadn’t actually happened.

He nodded. “That was what you said. Then you paused and added that you always take care of yourself at the end of your shift by treating yourself to a croissant at the coffee shop next door.”

“I do love a good croissant.” Fake me sounded far too close to real me.

“I asked every night? And you looked me in the eye and confirmed by very suggestively repeating the words.”

“How clever of me.” I chuckled.

“You didn’t mention what time you were getting off, so I went to the coffee shop and waited for two and a half hours, and I’ll never forget the look on your face when you walked in and saw me.”

“I never expected you to actually be there,” I said, knowing exactly how I would feel because I only ever counted on myself. *That was the safest way to never be let down.*

“And I would’ve waited another two and a half more for a chance to share a croissant with you.”

At some point, my gaze had become tangled in his, I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to break away. We were in the middle of unknown territory—a fake relationship between veritable strangers—but somehow, we were floating. Like the canoe in the middle of the lake. Far from the shore where our story would have no legs to stand on, but we weren’t sinking. Far from it. There

was something powerful and buoyant, keeping us afloat and drawing us closer.

A small yelp from a kayak several feet to the side of us broke the moment and claimed our attention. A young girl squealed and laughed as she tried to out-paddle her dad, who was pretending to chase her.

“So, does our first date pass muster?” Decker drawled, sliding the oars back into the water.

With flying colors. And if I wasn’t careful, I’d be waving a white flag of surrender for a man I wasn’t actually dating. A man who didn’t even live on the same side of the country as I did. *Talk about the most irresponsible thing I could do.*

I let my head fall from side to side, pretending to think about it for a moment before I shrugged and answered nonchalantly, “I guess.”

“Oh, you guess?” He rocked back, both affronted yet smiling.

“It’ll do,” I teased and reached for my phone out of habit; he’d trusted it back to my care when we reached the parking lot closest to the lake.

All of a sudden, his arm moved quickly, the oar flicking the surface of the lake and sending a gentle spray of water in my direction. I yelped and ducked to the side, cautiously straightening a moment later when I was sure he wasn’t going to send another wave in my direction.

“Did you...did you just splash me?” I shoved my phone back into the safety of my pocket.

“I stopped you from working.”

“Yeah? Well, another thing you should know about me is that I’m very competitive.” I notched my chin higher. “So, it’s only fair that I even the score.”

I reached for the side of the canoe, determined to send a spray of water back at him. Except I was too exuberant with my movement, forgetting the ground underneath me wasn’t solid.

The canoe dipped, dunking my hand into the cold lake.

“Shit—” I panicked and reared back in the opposite direction which only made the situation worse. The canoe rocked to the other side. I slid off my seat as water sloshed over the edge.

Oh my god. I was going to send us into the lake. All for the sake of getting back at him.

I started to reach back for the other side. *Make it stop. Make it stop. Make it stop.*

“Reese—”

I barely heard my name before I was covered—pressed against something much harder and more stable than solid ground. Something hot and breathing. Something that instantly claimed all of my attention.

Him.

Decker was pinned above me. His arms spread wide, gripping each side of the canoe and forcing it to steady. My gaze dragged slowly from the center of his chest, up the cords of his neck, his pulse thumping just as wildly as mine, up to the noticeable flex of his jaw, the proximity of his lips, and finally reaching his eyes.

If he'd been concerned at all, I didn't see it. Instead, the only thing in his gaze was hunger. Strong and potent like gasoline the way it affected the fire churning low in my body.

I felt all of him. Chest to hips pressing me into the canoe. His straining arms were the only thing keeping his head from drifting those barely-there inches to bring his mouth to mine.

My lips parted. *I didn't want to have to make up what our first kiss was like. I wanted to know.* My eyelids fluttered shut, one more invitation I hoped he accepted.

His warm breath brushed over my mouth.

As soon as my eyes shut, an unfamiliar voice called, “You okay over there?”

I gasped, reality spearing through the hot tension. And then his weight was gone, and even though the canoe was now floating calmly, I felt more unstable than when it had been about to capsize.

“We're fine,” Decker called and returned to his seat, grabbing the oars that had slid into the metal clamps that prevented them from falling off the canoe.

As I sat up, I saw it was the dad from earlier who'd coasted close to check on us.

Smiling, I gave him a small wave of gratitude and then murmured, “I'm sorry.”

“Don't be sorry.” A steady smile crept back into his cheeks. “Like I told you that first night at the coffee shop, if we were going to start dating, I was going to be the man who takes care of you.”

I laughed because I had to. Because he was trying to lighten the situation that had found us pressed together, our lips barely inches from touching. I

laughed because I'd never let a man take care of me. I'd never risk that vulnerability.

Especially not a man who wasn't really mine to begin with.

CHAPTER

Five

DECKER

I WORKED OUT REGULARLY, but I wasn't sure the last time my arms burned like they did as I rowed us back to shore. Anything to get out of that confined space. *Anything to put some distance between me and Reese.*

Once we were back on land, Reese immediately dove into her phone, responding to texts and emails, and even a phone call while we worked our way out of the park and back to the car.

"You remember our story?" she asked as we got close to her mom's house again.

"I'd never forget it." I said it to reassure her, but it seemed like the words had a different effect. One that made her breath catch and her cheeks heat.

And then she was gone—out of the car, into the house, and excusing herself to change while Arlene called me back to the kitchen.

Cheryl was at the stove, stirring a large pot, while Arlene watched from her chair that Cheryl must've rolled into the room, her leg propped up straight.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Oh, she's just as stubborn as ever," Cheryl replied, tapping the spoon on the edge of the pot to drip the sauce from it. "I left for an hour—*one hour*—and I find her in here trying to cook."

I folded my arms, looking back at Arlene, who showed no trace of guilt.

"What else did you expect me to do, Cheryl? I have guests for dinner." She sounded like she would've gone on except a cough caught her off guard.

"Order food to the house like everyone else nowadays."

"Absolutely not," she huffed and coughed again, offended by even the suggestion.

Not only was she cooking homemade tomato sauce, but the dining table was set carefully with a checkered tablecloth and a bouquet of fresh flowers—one of Arlene's *get-well* bouquets—in a vase in the center.

"You really didn't have to," I encouraged gently. "Reese and I...we'll make anything work." *If that wasn't the truth, I didn't know what was.*

Her head tipped, and she regarded me with something that felt too

perceptive for a second before it was gone. “Tell me about your day.” She motioned for me to sit.

I took one step toward the table when she coughed again. “Let me get you some water.” I veered into the kitchen to pour her and myself a glass. “We started with a drive through town—through Wisdom. Passed by the Worth Hotel. And then we decided to go to Jenny Lake.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful,” she gushed, her smile growing as I brought her the water. She took the drink with one hand and placed her other on my wrist, holding it tight and smiling at me. “Thank you so much.”

I had a feeling she wasn’t talking about the water.

“Hey, Mom.”

I turned as Reese walked into the room. It couldn’t have been more than twenty steps between her bedroom and the dining room, but she looked flushed. Like she’d sprinted those twenty steps even though there was no rush.

“Oh, honey, there you are,” Arlene cooed, giving her daughter a once-over.

Reese had on yoga pants and a loose sweater that fell just long enough to make my fingers itch to want to lift it. To want to skim over the sides of her hips and the curve of her ass underneath. *Damn*. I brought my glass to my mouth and took a healthy gulp of water, and that was when she looked at me. Her full lips parted with the slight catch of her breath. *Double damn*. She was gorgeous.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, giving Cheryl a side hug on her way over to us. “Are you okay? How’s your knee?”

“It’s fine. Brand new as a matter of fact—”

“Mom,” Reese scolded.

“I’m fine, honey.”

“Did you take your medicine?”

“Of course, she did. Only Dilaudid would make her think she could come in here and cook dinner tonight—”

“You didn’t.” Reese folded her arms.

“Don’t listen to her. I put some sausage and tomatoes in a pot and told her to stir them.”

“Mom—”

“But I did all my exercises today. My physical therapist is lucky he’s got a nice face because he’s a sadist.”

“Oh my god—”

“Pasta’s done. Reese, can you help—”

“I’ve got it,” I chimed in, grateful to put a few steps between Reese and me to let the heat dissipate.

“I like you,” Cheryl said with a twinkle in her eye, and then we worked to plate the spaghetti and add the sauce.

The three of us took seats at the table closest to Arlene’s chair, Cheryl on one side, Reese and I on the far side. I felt the tension ripple off of Reese from the moment we sat down. It didn’t matter how well-rehearsed our story was. Reese sat as still as a board, afraid one wrong word would send the whole thing crumbling.

“So, Decker tells me you ended up at Jenny Lake,” Arlene prompted.

“Yeah.” Reese relaxed a little when the conversation steered clear of our past. “We went out on a canoe.”

“Oh, you did? That was your favorite place when you were younger. Remember the time you lost your lunch in the lake?” Arlene beamed and then proceeded to share a story from Reese’s childhood and a trip to Jenny Lake, a twinkle in her eye as she looked at her daughter and then to me.

I wished I could just tell Reese how obvious it was her mom loved her no matter what. I understood expectations. I understood people-pleasing. I understood not wanting to let someone you loved down, but my fake girlfriend was missing the forest for the trees. Her mom only wanted her happy—boyfriend or not.

We spent most of the meal on that topic, but when Cheryl stood and declared she was going to make some hot toddies, that was the moment Arlene turned to me and asked, “So, Decker, how did you and my daughter meet?”

Reese went stock still. *This was the moment we’d prepared for.* And it was the moment her knee began to bounce wildly, bumping her leg into mine.

I smiled even though my teeth locked at the friction her movement created. Being attracted to my fake girlfriend was an unforeseen complication of my offer to help.

“Well, it all started in the emergency room,” I began slowly, sliding my hand onto Reese’s knee under the table. As soon as I touched her, I swore I heard her breath catch. I gave her knee a gentle squeeze of reassurance...and her leg stopped shaking.

Relax, baby, I wanted to tell her, but all I could do was keep stroking her

knee.

“Oh, boy.” Arlene chuckled, pure joy twinkling in her eyes.

“I had a small mishap at the shop which brought me to the hospital the night Reese was working...” The story we’d concocted earlier tumbled as easily as the truth from my lips. Hell, it came out so easily, I was almost convinced by the time I was done.

The fake stuff was easy—but the real heat radiating from Reese’s skin underneath my fingertips was the hard part. The way I still wanted to kiss her as damn bad as I had this afternoon was the hard part. I should’ve pulled my hand back, but goddamn, her skin was so soft and warm. My thumb started to trace slow circles.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me any of this, Reese,” Arlene chided when I finished, her eyes glistening with happy tears.

“And that’s the drugs talking,” Reese murmured firmly, brushing my hand away and standing to clear the table. “I’ll get them,” she added when I went to help, her message clear: *stay here*.

“Alright, babe.”

Pink rose to her cheeks, and damn, if my dick didn’t harden. This woman was all business, all the time. But that blush right there—there was nothing business about that blush. That blush was all pleasure, and I wanted to make it happen again. *And again and again*.

As soon as Reese walked into the kitchen with the plates, Arlene turned her focus back to me. “I’m glad Reese took you around town today,” she said with a hushed voice. “She works so hard taking care of everyone else, and I’m just—” She broke off and shook her head, a heartfelt smile tugging on her cheeks. “I’m glad she found you. Or you found her, I guess.”

I wondered if she’d be glad if she knew I found her daughter on the side of the road.

Like she knew we were talking about her, Reese returned with the chocolate cream pie, and Arlene declared quickly, “Now, I know better than to talk about Reese’s work, but what’s your favorite project you’ve worked on recently, Decker?”

I grinned. “I’ve got a sixty-nine Camaro that I’m bringing back to life.”

I watched Reese cut the pie, waiting for her gaze to find mine. I could still see her there, running her hand along the side of my car, her interest in my work making my blood hum.

“Oh, that sounds intriguing.” Arlene took her plate and fork. “Is it

difficult?”

“Not if you know what you’re doing,” I said, my fingers brushing Reese’s when she handed me a slice. “The key is patience. When something’s been left...alone...for so long, you’ve got to take the time to restore every single piece carefully. Methodically. Let her know it’s okay to come back to life. But if I do that, when I finally go to start her up, she’ll purr.”

Reese’s fork clattered on her plate, and she quickly steadied it with a mumbled apology.

“You okay, dear?” Cheryl asked. “You look flushed.” The woman then blatantly turned and winked at me.

“Just fine,” Reese said with a tight smile. “So, I’m taking you to your doctor’s appointment tomorrow, Mom—”

“Oh, that’s no fun for you—”

“Mom, I’m not here for me or for fun. I’m here for you. Are you really going to try and kick me out of the house every day for the short time I’m here?” she asked, the catch in her voice softening Arlene’s expression.

“No, of course not, but you’re already not staying with Decker at the hotel—”

“*Mom.*”

“Alright, alright.” Arlene sighed. “I just don’t like to be reminded what an invalid I am.”

“You’re not an invalid, Mom. You had your knee replaced—”

“And you brought your boyfriend to Wyoming to meet me. I don’t want to waste this time cooped up in a chair.”

Reese folded her arms. “Well, it’s not like you can go for a hike—”

“But we could go for a drive!” Arlene clapped her hands together, an idea clearly having struck. “Let’s do the lower loop at Yellowstone. Decker can see Old Faithful. And the bison—”

“I’m sure he’s—”

“Never been,” I chimed in and reached for her hand.

She tensed but didn’t pull away. “Decker...” she warned and then looked at her mom. “You just had surgery, you have a doctor’s appointment tomorrow, and if that wasn’t enough, Yellowstone is a whole day event. Between the follow-up appointments and physical therapy—”

“A different day then,” Arlene said, compromise characterizing her tone.

I felt Reese’s sharp inhale, so I gave her fingers a squeeze. Now her eyes flicked to mine. *Not tonight.* There was no point in arguing.

“We’ll see,” she said softly and stood again, pulling her hand back to her side. “I’m going to walk Decker out. It’s been a long day, and I know he has some things to catch up on for the shop.”

Her stare left me no option but to comply.

“She’s right,” I agreed and flashed them a smile that smoothed over the transition. “Dinner was delicious. Good night, Arlene. Cheryl.” I bent down and hugged the older woman and then turned to Cheryl who’d stood to embrace me. “I’ll see you soon.”

Behind us, I heard Arlene’s loud whisper, “*Follow them. Make sure she kisses him.*”

“*Oh, for Pete’s sake,*” Cheryl huffed.

I didn’t know whether to laugh for obvious reasons or cry because I wanted to kiss her so damn bad after this afternoon, and that ache had only gotten worse with every blush. With every tremble of her knee. With every stolen glance.

We reached the door, and Reese spun, one hand on the doorknob.

“Thank you, and I’m sorry. I’ll find a way to pay you back for this, and I’m going to do my best to not waste too much of your time—” she broke off when I moved closer.

Yeah, I had a feeling we were being watched—that later I could claim this was part of the show. But it was a flimsy excuse. The reason I crowded her against the door was because I wanted her. Because I knew she wanted me, too.

I reached up and cupped the side of her face, sliding my hand around the nape of her neck and angling her head to mine.

“Decker...” Her eyes dropped to my mouth.

“What if I want to waste my time with you?” I muttered low as my mouth covered hers.

I knew I’d have to go back to pretending, but for a moment—for a heartbeat—I kissed her like she was mine.

She stiffened the moment our lips touched, her sharp inhale taken from my own breath, and I waited for her to push on my chest—push me away. Except the hand that landed on my chest didn’t push—it pulled.

She pulled me to her and let her lips peel apart—let my tongue slide between them. God, she tasted so warm and sweet. The faintest hint of chocolate lingering in her heat. My hand tightened on the back of her scalp as I slanted my mouth, deepening the kiss.

I groaned when her tongue began to stroke mine, hesitant at first and then demanding. She wanted this. She wanted to let her walls come down. But she needed time. Patience. *She needed to know it wasn't weakness to let go and let someone else take care of her.*

And I wanted to be that someone. I wanted to be the someone who gave her a reason to stop working. Who gave her a reason to think of herself for just a few minutes rather than everyone else.

I drove my tongue deep into her mouth, mimicking what other parts of my body would do to her other lips, and she was here for it. Her body bowed flush to mine, the press of her stomach right at my waist where my dick throbbed. Desire seared through my veins. Having wants was one thing, but the way I felt, this was more than want, it was a need.

Her hand curled into my shirt, and I let her pull me closer, half-tempted to haul her over my shoulder and leave with the promise that I'd return her in the morning.

"Is Reese still out there?" Arlene called to Cheryl, but it was just loud enough to pierce our bubble.

Reese broke away with a small cry, covering her mouth with her hand and scrambling to pull the door open. "Good night, Decker," she said, her voice husky, though she tried to wipe away every other trace of desire from her face.

I tipped closer and put my mouth right next to her ear. "Make sure you finish yourself off tonight nice and slow for me. The kind of orgasm that leaves you soaked and trembling." Her loud gasp was everything I'd hoped for. "You deserve it."

And more, I wanted to add but refrained. When I drew back, her cheeks were flaming and her jaw slack. *Beautiful*. I managed a tipped smile, even though my dick was so fucking hard, it hurt. "Good night, Reese."

CHAPTER

Six

REESE

NICE AND SLOW.

My nostrils flared. *How presumptuous.* My knee bobbed as I sat in the crowded waiting room next to Mom, waiting to be called back for her appointment. All morning I'd had to listen to her drone on about Decker. How handsome he was. How kind. How thoughtful. *How presumptuous.*

To kiss me. And then to...*instruct* me to orgasm.

Goddammit, Decker.

I'd had a glass of wine when he left. A cold shower to try to control the mess. And then I'd climbed in bed, determined not to cave to his plea, but in the end, my fingers worked between my thighs, and I searched for release... but it never came.

I wasn't ashamed about pleasuring myself. God knows, between school and work and bad dates, it was the only thing I'd survived on for years. But I hated the thought of how easily my body wanted him. I barely knew the man and one touch of his lips had me clinging to him like life support.

I knew why, I reminded myself. I tried to turn off this part of me—to focus on other things that were important—and it was like holding my breath underwater. I was fine—convinced I could survive like that, until one kiss made me come up for air, and I realized just how desperately I wanted to breathe.

But frustration and desperation made my orgasm elusive. Wanting him—not wanting to want him—trying to pretend I didn't want him—in the end, my mind was too torn up to let my body take what it needed, and I fell asleep out of exhaustion rather than blissful satisfaction.

“Reese?”

“Yeah?” I blinked and focused on Mom's face.

“Did you hear what I said?”

No. I swallowed hard. “No, sorry. Thinking about work,” I said because it was so believable no one would ever suspect it was a lie.

“I asked how Decker was doing. If you'd heard from him.”

I gritted my teeth. I'd ignored his call this morning, and when he'd followed up with a text asking how I'd slept last night, I fumed. He wasn't

even in front of me, and I could see the tempting glint in his eyes—could tell his next question would be one that I didn't want to answer. The only thing worse than having to reveal I'd done exactly as he instructed was having to admit I'd tried and failed. So, I answered 'fine' and then turned off my notifications.

But of course, Mom's third degree over breakfast—*"Where's Decker? Is he stopping by this morning before my appointment?"*—pushed me over the edge. I needed space. I needed to regroup. So, I fibbed—*again*—and told her Decker had woken up not feeling well and wanted to stay at the hotel so he didn't risk getting her sick.

"I haven't, but it's only been a few hours. I'll check on him when you're done—"

"We could stop so you can see him on our way home. Maybe bring him some soup. I just feel terrible if it was something from dinner—"

"It wasn't, Mom. I promise." I reached over and squeezed her hand. "And he'll be just fine. He doesn't like soup."

"He doesn't like soup?" Her eyebrows rose.

What kind of person didn't like soup? The kind of person I shouldn't be attracted to, that's who.

I held back a grin of victory. Minus one for the reigning perfect boyfriend.

"Ms. Barker?" a nurse called, and I stood immediately, grateful for the interruption.

"We're here." I steadied Mom's walker as she stood up from her chair, clinging to it for support until she was stable.

I kept to her slow pace as we made our way through the waiting room and followed the nurse down the hall.

"So sorry for the wait, we're so busy today," the nurse said, but the circles under her eyes hinted that it wasn't only today that was busy.

I understood. The overutilized and understaffed realities of healthcare were pervasive throughout the country, but it did seem worse here.

"That's okay, Gabby," Mom replied, clearly knowing the young girl. "I'm going nowhere fast."

Gabby laughed, but her smile was too tired to reach her eyes.

"Gabby, this is my daughter, Reese," Mom went on. "She's an ER doctor in New York."

"Oh, really?" The girl's eyes popped wide.

I let out a deep sigh. *Thanks, Mom.* “Yeah.”

“That’s amazing. It must be so fun to work there.”

My mouth opened and shut, suddenly lacking a convincing answer. “It’s busy,” I managed with a rueful laugh.

“I’d love to work in the city,” she gushed, angling toward the second room on the right.

“Absolutely not, missy,” Mom chimed in. “We need you right here.”

“I know, Mrs. Barker.” She held the door for both of us to enter. “I was going to say that I’d love to do it, but I don’t think I ever could leave. I’d miss home too much.”

I tensed, feeling Mom look over at me, but thankfully, Gabby started to run through her checklist of vitals and post-operative questions, noting down answers in shorthand as she went, and then declared, “The doctor will be right in to check on you.”

“Oh, I hope she doesn’t leave,” Mom said. “Cheryl heard her talking to another nurse at my last appointment about how short-staffed they are.”

The door opened a few minutes later with a booming, “Good morning, Arlene.”

My jaw dropped. “Dr. Kay?”

I stared at the man who felt like he should be a hundred years old since I remembered him from when I was a kid. Obviously, he wasn’t a hundred; he was closer to Mom’s age, but his white hair and the creases worn into his face were much different than the young doctor I remembered.

“Oh my word. Well, if it isn’t little Reese.” He smiled and reached out to give me a hug. “It’s great to see you.”

“Good to see you, too.”

“How’s the big city doctor life treating you?” he asked, reviewing Gabby’s notes. “Your mom tells me every time I see her how well you’re doing.”

My face heated, and when I looked at Mom, I swore I saw a little color in her cheeks, too. It was nice to hear she was only focused on my relationship deficiency when she was around me.

“It’s good.”

He smiled and nodded, and I could tell his focus wasn’t all there. “Well, if there’s anything we can do to tempt you back home. We sure could use some good hands—”

“Jim,” Mom scolded him, surprising me by using his first name. Then

again, she'd known him practically my entire life.

"I know, I know." He lifted his hands in surrender and approached her. "But I had to. I know how much you miss her," he added, his voice just a hair lower as he bent and examined her knee. "Alright, young lady, let's see how this is looking."

I watched silently as he examined and questioned her for the next fifteen minutes. At the end of the appointment, he'd said she'd get her stitches out next week and then her physical therapy would start and be every other day.

"So, I'll have a few days off," Mom repeated, looking at me as she did so. "Wonderful."

"Dr. Kay, please tell my mother that it's not advisable for her to go on a car ride all the way up to Yellowstone so soon after surgery."

"Reese!"

I ignored her, keeping my attention focused on Dr. Kay who straightened and then sheepishly scratched his beard. "Well, I can't really say..." He looked back and forth between us, clearly recognizing that no matter what side he picked, it would be a losing one. "I think you should listen to your daughter, Arlene. She's a doctor, and she's going to be here every step of your recovery, so I'm comfortable leaving that to her judgment."

Mom gasped. "*Et tu, Brute?*" Her mock anger faded into a laugh.

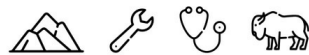
I smiled triumphantly.

"I wish I could stay and chat more—hear about your experiences in the city, Reese, but I'm the only one on the floor on Fridays right now, so I've got to run," he said, sending me one last hopeful look.

No. Not a chance. I steeled with the thought. *I was not coming back here.*

"Looks like you have to listen to me," I said to Mom once he was gone. "Doctor's orders."

"We'll see," she huffed as I rolled her out of the room.



"Two pair." I laid down my cards with a grin, swiping my hand out and pulling all the jelly beans from the pot in the middle of the table to me.

After Mom's appointment, we'd come back to the house, and then I'd left with the excuse of going to visit Decker.

Lies on top of lies on top of lies. *Who was I?* I was the woman trying not to disappoint her mom while simultaneously trying not to fall for my fake boyfriend. *Admirable or pathetic?*

What I'd really done was spend the afternoon running errands. First, the grocery store. Then the drug store. And then to the library where I'd borrowed their internet to log into the hospital and check on my patients' charts.

For some reason, I kept thinking about the hospital here. The waiting room filled with people. Nurses scrambling around. And Dr. Kay. The only one on the floor.

It was wild.

Granted, this hospital was smaller than where I worked in the city, but still. I was sure they were searching for more providers, but I knew they were hard to come by. Everyone knew. And as I'd scanned over the chart notes for the patients in my unit, I felt grateful they were in good hands while I was gone...which made me wonder whose hands my mom would be in if Dr. Kay wasn't there. If he was sick for a day. When he went to retire.

"Goddammit," Cheryl huffed and flattened her cards on the table. "Are you cheating, Reese?"

"Me?" I balked and then laughed. "You know I could never."

"I can tell—I can always tell when she's lying," Mom said and then tapped on the table. "Look at me."

I smiled and complied, staring into her eyes. I wasn't worried. One, I wasn't cheating; Cheryl was just a sore loser. And two, Mom wasn't that perceptive. *Obviously.*

"Are you hiding something from us?"

My smile faltered. She didn't ask if I was cheating at cards. She asked if I was hiding something. And for a second, I had to wonder if maybe she did realize—if somehow, she knew I was keeping something from her.

Decker.

I'd replied to him in one-word answers all day except for the message where I'd told him he was "sick." That earned me some silence for a while. Long enough that it really started to eat at me. Here I was, practically forcing this man into a farce of a relationship, and then the second he got too close, I inflicted him with an unknown illness to keep him away.

Nice, Reese.

"I'm not cheating," I answered, firming my smile as I popped a pink jelly

bean into my mouth.

The phone rang, putting an end to the conversation.

“Who’s calling this late?” Cheryl grumbled and rose to pick it up.

I checked my watch. It was only a little past ten. We’d done Chinese food for dinner, reruns of *Friends* during dessert, and then Mom wanted some poker. Something with sense and strategy so she didn’t feel as helpless as she was.

As long as she didn’t ask for Decker, I didn’t care.

I reached for the stack of cards to shuffle them. “I’ll deal.”

“Reese, it’s for you.”

I looked over, my brow scrunched.

“It’s Decker, honey,” Cheryl added, motioning for me to hurry up like he’d disappear if I didn’t speak to him instantly.

“Why is he calling the house? Where’s your phone? Have you checked on him recently?”

“Mom,” I warned and then shrugged. “I must’ve left my phone in my room. And I’m sure he’s fine.”

In fact, I was very, very sure.

“Hello?” I took the phone from Cheryl and answered.

“I’m not sorry about the kiss, Reese, but if you want to break up, I understand.”

I quickly turned so Mom and Cheryl couldn’t see my face. “No. I mean, that’s not—”

“Reese, is he okay?” Mom called.

I took a deep breath and muttered, “Hold on.” Turning, I answered her. “He’s doing okay. Just getting ready for bed.”

“Oh, am I?” His voice rumbled low in my ear, and that was all it took to bring me back to last night—to the things he’d actually whispered to me.

“Let me call you back on my cell,” I squeaked and hung up the phone abruptly. “I’m just going to call him back and go to bed.”

“You can go take care of him if you need to, honey—”

“Nope, he’s okay. Doing a little better, actually.” *Dammit. There was no winning.*

I spun and padded down the hallway, tripping over my own feet when I heard Mom sigh, “Young love.”

Absolutely definitely not.

I shut my door and pulled my phone off the charger, tapping on Decker’s

missed call.

“You shouldn’t have called the house,” I said as soon as he answered.

“What kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn’t check on you?”

Fair. I was punishing him for keeping up the facade I’d begged him to maintain.

“The fake kind,” I retorted, sinking onto the edge of the bed and falling backward.

It shouldn’t feel this good to hear his voice. Shouldn’t feel like I enjoyed the fact that we were in this together.

“How’s Arlene?”

I relaxed a little. “Fine. Good. Angling to do more than she should.”

“Like mother, like daughter.”

I let out a small laugh. “I guess.”

Silence poked a hole in the conversation, but it felt like something else was being said between the heat of our breaths.

“I meant what I said, Reese.”

“That you’d break up with me?”

“That I don’t regret the kiss.”

I swallowed hard. “Okay.”

“Do you?”

My heart thudded, heat starting to ooze through my body. “It doesn’t matter—”

“You don’t have to keep up a show for me,” he interrupted with that deep, commanding tone that made me shiver. “Be honest. In a few weeks, you’ll be back in New York, and you can go back to not opening up to anyone—”

“I do open up to people,” I protested weakly. *Falsely.*

“Prove it.”

My breath pushed through my lips in a steady stream. I wanted to fight. To keep up my barriers and stay protected. But I also wanted to give in...just for a little. And he was right. In a few weeks, none of this would matter.

“No, I don’t regret it,” I confessed breathlessly.

He liked my answer, judging by the low noise he made.

“And did you do what I told you?”

I bit into my lip hard, staring up at the ceiling and wishing. “I tried.”

“Tried?” His voice hardened.

“Yeah. But I couldn’t...” I pushed all the air from my lungs and shook

my head. “I should go to bed—”

“Don’t you dare hang up this phone.”

“Decker—”

“Do you want to come or not?” He growled. “Because if you do, you’re going to listen and do exactly as I say.”

I sucked in a breath. *Oh my god*. It was suddenly a thousand degrees in my room, and my heart pumped wildly.

“First, you have to answer me,” he said. “Do you want to come or not?”

My tongue felt like lead in my throat—the kind that would write its own answer. “Yes.”

My answer detonated into the call. Heat pooled between my legs, the unquenched ache churning back to life.

“Yes what?”

“Yes, please,” I said like I knew exactly what he wanted.

“Good girl,” he rasped. “Because I’ve thought of nothing except hearing how you come all damn day.”

Goose bumps lifted over my skin, and my hand rested on my fluttering stomach.

“I don’t care what you’re wearing, I want it off,” he said next, and I used one hand to remove my sweats and underwear and T-shirt. My other hand clutched my phone like it was a dead man’s switch to a bomb.

“O-okay.”

“Good, now spread your legs. Nice and wide so they’d fit my shoulders.”

Oh god. My knees fell to my sides, and I felt the rush of air on my center.

“Are they spread? You have to tell me, Reese.”

“Yes,” I blurted out, needing his next instruction like I needed my next breath. “They’re spread.”

“Wide enough for my shoulders?”

“Mhmm.”

“You know where that would put my face right?”

Heat charred my veins. He was incinerating me with just his words.

“Yeah.”

“Tell me.”

“In my pussy.”

His strangled groan of appreciation made my core clench, and my hand drifted toward my sex, needing relief.

“That’s right. In your pretty little pussy.”

I bit into my bottom lip hard.

“But since my mouth can’t be there right now, you have to tell me how she feels,” he coaxed. “Slide your fingers through her for me, Reese. The way that makes her feel good.”

My hand sank between my legs like an anchor waiting to be dropped. I let out a small whimper as my fingers glided through my folds, my body trembling with anticipation and want.

“Use your words, Doctor,” he ordered.

I shivered as my fingers coasted over the bud of my clit. “Wet,” I breathed out. “I’m so wet, Deck.” *Was that even a nickname? Did I say Deck or dick? I couldn’t even remember I was so turned on.*

“Just wet?”

“And hot,” I panted. “Give me more.”

His laugh made my core ripple. “Rub your clit.”

Thank god. My fingers pressed over the aching bud, drawing instant pleasure through my body.

“Is she swollen?”

“Yeah.” I tried to swallow. “So swollen.”

“Good. Keep rubbing her, slow, hard strokes for me, Reese.” I could hear his breathing grow labored—or maybe that was my own.

I let out a soft moan, circling my clit with my fingers, each brush bringing me closer to the edge.

“Now imagine it’s my fingers on you,” he ordered. “Rubbing and pulling, making you slick and ready for my cock.”

My head tipped back into the bed, my body spiraling out of control with need.

“I want to hear you say it,” he ground out. “Tell me why your pussy is so wet and swollen. Tell me what you want.”

“Your cock,” I said without hesitation, a burst of pleasure exploding from the tips of my fingers.

“Prove it,” he repeated, his voice much rougher now. “Rub harder. Faster. Right where it’s going to send you flying, so you can show me how good you can come.”

The world tipped and tilted and then began to swim as his words spiraled me toward the peak. Everything I’d searched for last night suddenly right in front of me—right where he was leading.

“I know you want to come, Reese. I can hear it, and I’m going to let you.

But I need you to put me on speaker first.”

My eyes flung wide open, the room swirling into place. “No—”

“Do it,” he ordered, and I scrambled to tap the right spot on my screen.

“Okay. You’re on speaker.” I breathed heavily.

“Good,” his voice rumbled right next to my ear. “Now, I want you to bite into your bicep. Up where it meets your shoulder.”

“Decker—”

“You’re going to scream, Reese. You want to worry your mom with how loudly you come? You want to have to explain how turned on you are by your fake boyfriend? How you let the man who’s not your boyfriend talk you into an orgasm?”

“No,” I whimpered, half-sobbing.

“I didn’t think so,” he said gently. “Now bite into your arm. Hard, Reese. I want to see those fucking teeth marks when I see you next.”

Oh god, I shouldn’t. I shouldn’t leave any trace of what was happening right now, but I couldn’t stop myself. I was too far gone, and it was too easy to give into him. To want to give in to him.

I brought my arm over my face and sank my teeth into my skin with a little moan.

“That’s it. Now you can rub faster,” he said, my fingers like marionettes on the strings of his words. “Rub all that cream over your needy clit and give her what she needs.”

My eyes screwed shut. All that was left to my world was the feel of my fingers and the sound of his voice.

“Give me those moans, baby. Let me hear you.”

Baby. That was enough to draw one from the depths of my chest as pleasure knotted tighter and tighter in my core.

“There you go. Let me hear how good it feels. Let me hear you let go.”

I gasped, and then sound collided with skin as a scream tore from my chest. My body spiraled like a firework into release, bursting into a million pieces as my body clenched over and over again.

I knew anatomy and chemistry and all of the scientific explanations for what happened to my body just then, but none of them felt sufficient to describe the experience. None of them felt enough to describe what he did to me.

“Oh my god,” I breathed out, too weak to care how satisfied I sounded.

Decker chuckled huskily. “Better?”

I inhaled and then exhaled slowly, a happy shiver running through my body. “Yes.”

“Good.”

My eyes popped open, picking up the thread of strain in his voice. “What about you?”

I hadn’t heard him...join me...on the phone. Not that I was aware enough to hear that, but I was pretty confident he hadn’t been masturbating at the same time, though I was sure he needed to now.

He let out a ragged laugh. “I’m not afraid to open up to you, Reese, but it won’t be over the phone,” he replied, and I was about to argue something about fairness and equality when he added, “I want you. Fake relationship or not. And if I’m going to come to the sound of your voice, it’s going to be with my cock buried inside you. Anything short of that is a kind of torture I don’t deserve.”

My jaw snapped shut, and I swallowed everything I’d been about to say.

“Good night, Reese.”

“Good night, Decker.”

The call ended, and I stared up at the ceiling. The only question that should’ve been running through my mind was *what had I just done?* But I didn’t think that at all. Instead, all I wondered was, *how do I make it happen again?*

Maybe in the morning, I’d wake up with more sense than to want anything real with my very fake boyfriend.

CHAPTER

Seven

DECKER

“ARE YOU STILL DOING OKAY, MOM?”

My eyes flicked to the rearview, meeting Reese’s from the back seat. Her chocolate irises swirled with hunger for an instant before they snapped back to her mom who was riding shotgun in my truck.

“Of course, honey. How else would I be doing? I haven’t moved from the front seat in the last hour and a half,” Arlene replied sweetly, shooting me a wink as she chuckled.

“We’re almost there,” I added.

Arlene was in good spirits this morning for obvious reasons. One, Reese had caved on the road trip up to Yellowstone. And two, I was here. Recovered from the mysterious illness that had kept me away from the house for almost a whole week.

I was pretty certain Reese gave her mom a story or two when she would leave the house that she was coming to visit me. She hadn’t though, but she also hadn’t completely pushed me away. At first, she called because she said her mom insisted she check on me. Then I’d call to check on her—to ask if I was feeling better yet. Every call, we’d talk for a while about our days. What I was working on. How her mom was doing. She talked a lot about seeing the hospital here compared to where she worked in the city. But inevitably, the conversation ended with the same set of questions.

“And how am I doing, Reese? Am I feeling better yet?”

She’d hum and answer, “Not better enough. Not yet.”

“And how about you?” I’d pause and ask. “Do you want to feel better?”

“Yes.”

And then I’d close out my night by talking my girl—my *fake* girlfriend—through an orgasm. Every time I heard her come, I felt like a goddamn king. This woman was so strong, so independent, so unwilling to let her guard down. But she did it for me. Well, at least, for my voice. And damn, that felt so good.

It also felt pretty fucking terrible for my dick. My right hand was a poor man’s Reese. And replaying the sounds she made and imagining the way she touched herself wasn’t nearly enough, but it would have to be. For now.

Finally, yesterday, when I'd texted and teased if I should be going to the hospital for my mysterious illness that was keeping me away for so long, I watched those typing bubbles appear and disappear several times before her message came through.

Dinner at the house. 6pm.

After five days away, the dinner conversation and subsequent card games were enough entertainment and distraction, especially when Arlene argued her way into taking this Yellowstone trip today, that there was no time to talk about us and what parts of us were real or fake. I was ready for that conversation, but Reese wasn't. I was ready to admit that this started out fake, but this thing we had going felt good. Felt real. And I wanted to see where it would go.

But Reese would take some convincing.

So, last night, when she'd walked me to the door, I could practically feel the vibration of her nerves. Wondering what I was going to do. If I was going to kiss her. What I was going to say. When I faced her, she'd had her lip pinned between her teeth with equal parts worry and want. I'd smiled and dipped my head, and at the last second, veered to the side of her face and pressed a kiss on her cheek.

"I don't want to get you sick," I murmured.

Her exhale had rushed out. *"Good night, Decker."*

"You don't say good night to me until you've come, gorgeous." And then I left.

Sure enough, fourteen minutes later, as soon as I was back at my house, my phone rang.

"The turn's right up here," Reese said, bringing me back to the moment.

I hit my blinker and turned into the parking lot for Old Faithful. Our first stop on the South Loop.

The parking lots were decently filled for it being the middle of the week, and I managed to find a spot close to the start of the small shops that led toward the information center and the geyser.

"Hold on, Mom, let me help," Reese insisted as soon as the car was in park, rushing around the other side of the truck with the walker.

Within a few minutes, we were meandering down the sidewalk toward the main building and Old Faithful just beyond.

"I can't remember the last time we were here. It's been years," Arlene said, breaking up the silence. *"Wait until you see it, Decker. What a wonder."*

“I can’t wait,” I said, catching Reese’s gaze for a second before she looked away.

We made our way to the information center and checked the eruption schedule. Fifteen minutes until Old Faithful was expected to put on a show.

“Old Faithful was named during the Washburn Expedition in the 1870s because of how regularly it erupted,” Reese read from the brochure she’d plucked from the desk.

“There’s something to be said for stability. Consistency.” Arlene nodded.

“For a hundred and fifty years. Probably more. Imagine how many millions of people have counted on it to be on schedule,” I mused quietly, our pace leisurely bringing us closer to the rows of white wooden benches that rimmed the perimeter of the geyser.

“If only people were as predictable,” Reese murmured under her breath.

“The good ones are,” Arlene replied, looking at her daughter with concern.

I folded my arms, keeping my expression straight as we filed along one of the benches in the first row. Reese helped Arlene take a seat, but when she went to sit next to her, Arlene shooed her away.

“Go sit next to Decker.”

Reese hesitated for a beat but then complied, taking a seat next to me.

“Hi.”

Pink dusted her cheeks. “Hi.”

I tipped closer to her. “The Jeep is fixed, by the way,” I said, keeping my voice low.

“Oh, great. Can you take me to pick it up when we get back tonight?”

“Sure.”

“Thank you.” She paused.

“Of course.”

“Thank you for everything.”

I gritted my teeth. “Don’t thank me for that, Reese.”

She gasped, the pink turning to red. “That’s not what I—I meant for this. For coming today,” she blurted out, and if it was possible, turned even redder.

My eyes snagged hers. “I haven’t done that,” I said in a low voice. “Not yet.”

Her eyes widened, lust clouding their depths, but before I could say anything else, Arlene patted my knee, directing my attention to the geyser that had started to steam and froth. “It’s almost time.”

I nodded and smiled. Another family came to sit on the same bench, and Reese scooted down to accommodate them, her movement pressing her leg up against mine. A low noise bubbled up from my chest.

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” I grunted, trying my damndest to control my erection.

I focused on the geyser. The steam. The small sprays of water that burst out every few minutes, getting larger every time. But it was pretty damn impossible to look at something that was about to erupt and not think about how I felt the same every time I was around her. Five days, and you’d think I’d have my attraction to her better under control. But those phone calls every night...the vulnerability she trusted me with when it was damn clear she didn’t let most people in...it made being next to her like this a thousand times worse.

“Oh, I can’t wait for you to see it erupt,” Arlene chortled.

I tensed again. Couldn’t help it.

“Are you sure?” Reese murmured.

I gritted my teeth and turned, dipping my head right next to her ear where only she could hear.

“I want you, Reese. And if all I can have is a fake relationship and phone sex, then that’s what I’ll take, but I’m not going to pretend it’s easy to be next to you and not think about all the sounds you make when you come,” I rasped, and her breath hitched. “So, no, if you really want to know. I’m not fine because having a constant hard-on around you is the kind of thing that makes a man perpetually uncomfortable. They say to see a doctor for an erection lasting longer than four hours, but seeing you is the problem. Seeing you only makes it worse.”

Her gasp was swallowed up by Old Faithful’s predictable performance. Water shooting almost a hundred and fifty feet in the air to the oohs and ahhs of the crowd. It was a good distraction for a handful of minutes, but when it was done, I was the one still left with desire punching holes in my veins.

“Wasn’t that incredible?” Arlene looked at me once the geyser settled.

“Yeah,” I said and stood.

“Decker—”

“Why don’t I grab us some sandwiches from the Old Faithful Inn and meet you guys back at the car?” I suggested, trying hard to ignore the way Reese’s eyes lingered at my waist before lifting to my face.

“That sounds wonderful—”

“Perfect.” I turned and started down the path, needing some distance.

The ten minutes it took to pick up some lunches to go was enough to take the edge off—and make sure Reese was in the back seat by the time I reached the Bronco.

“What did you think, Decker? Wasn’t it incredible?”

I nodded and passed Reese the food. “It was something.”

“Hard to believe all that builds underneath the surface with only a little bit of steam until it blows.”

I choked and quickly disguised it with a cough. “Yeah,” I agreed tightly, catching Reese’s gaze in the back seat. “Hard to believe.”

We drove for another twenty minutes through the wild tapestry of the national park. The entire time, all I could think about was that this had evolved into something more—something far more than fake. Something that was as real as the mountains, as vibrant as the meadows, and as...explosive as the damn geysers.

Our next stop was the Grand Prismatic Spring, but when I pulled into the parking lot, Arlene insisted that Reese and I take the path up to the overlook while she ate her lunch and waited in the car. There really was no arguing with her, and Reese was starting to see that. So, we headed from the lot over a small bridge and found our way to the Fairy Falls trail that led to the overlook.

“I don’t know—” Reese stopped at the trail sign and looked back toward the car.

“We’re going.” I framed her hips with my hands and propelled her up the start of the path.

Heat prickled from my fingertips where they rested on the fabric of her leggings, itching to slide down and grip her perfect ass.

Thank god, she’d started walking without protest because I couldn’t trust myself to keep my hands off her.

The trail picked up a pretty steep grade almost immediately, the sides of the path lined with trees that obscured the view out over the plains as we hiked higher. The only wildlife on the path were the other tourists who were making the same trek we were. There weren’t that many since it was the middle of the week, but enough.

“I’m sorry,” she said a few minutes into the hike.

“Do you think you need to worry about her like you do?” I knew I’d asked her that before, but now...things had changed.

“She’s all I have,” Reese answered. “I want her to know I’m here for her. That she doesn’t have to be so independent all the time.”

I made a low noise of agreement but had to force my gaze to remain in front of me. I wondered if she realized the same could be said for her.

“Decker...about the calls...” She trailed off, and I tensed. “I don’t want to make things complicated.”

I swallowed over the lump in my throat. “Okay, then make them clear,” I charged.

I felt her eyes flick to me, but I didn’t meet her gaze. I wanted to know her terms. I wanted to know just how much I’d have to sacrifice to have her.

“This—our relationship—it’s fake,” she started as though she were trying to figure out exactly what those terms were. “And I’m leaving to go back to the city in two weeks.”

“I know.”

“So...that’s it. I’m not really your girlfriend, and I’m leaving.”

A pang shot through my chest. It made no sense because those were both facts that I knew, yet it was still there.

“Okay.” My head bobbed. “So, are you saying you want to continue to orgasm every night or not?”

“I do—I don’t want it to get complicated.”

“Okay, then I won’t let it get complicated,” I looked at her and said.

Her jaw slackened, her lips parting in a way that made me want to kiss her to seal the promise, but then a group of teens came barreling down the path from the opposite direction, their laughter breaking the moment.

Reese charged ahead to where the path narrowed, forcing me to walk behind her as it zigzagged to the overlook. The trees started to break, birds appearing in the clearings through the leaves. Slowly, the open plains came into view. Mountains. Trees. Grass. *And the sway of her ass in front of me.*

“Look, over there!” Reese stopped suddenly to point to small black dots—*bison*—where they grazed in the distance. And I didn’t stop fast enough.

I grabbed her hips as I bumped her from behind. She was a step higher than me on the path, which meant her ass pressed directly to my waist—directly on my dick that was about to go on strike for how I kept tormenting it.

“Fuck,” I wheezed, pleasure—pain—zinging through my veins as my body hardened.

“Sorry.” She half turned, putting her face right where it should be for me

to kiss her.

Instantly, all I saw was the face of the woman who'd come to the sound of my voice last night. Those eyes. That mouth. I wanted to see it—to see her let go. And I wanted to be the reason for it.

But not here.

“Keep going,” I grunted, giving her a little push forward and then sucking air into my lungs. If I kissed her now, I wouldn't be able to stop there. And we'd both end up seeing something *grand* and *prismatic*, but *overlook* wasn't the correct o-word for what it would be.

Her pace skipped forward a little quicker, almost as though I were a hunter following her, and she was my prey. But it was only for another minute or two before we reached the top of the path, the overlook opening to a clear, panoramic view of the surroundings, including the giant basin below.

A brilliant turquoise center rimmed with green, then yellow, and then orange that trailed out like loose strings. A colorful *Eye of Sauron* stamped into the crust of the earth.

I looked over at Reese. She held her phone up over the railing, snapping photos for Arlene. But that wasn't what caught my eye. At some point after we'd reached the overlook, she'd taken off her jacket. Made sense. The hike was steep, and at our pace, we'd both broken a sweat. But with her arms lifted to take pictures, I could see her teeth marks notched into the inside of her bicep.

Where I'd told her to bite herself to keep her screams quiet.

I stared, my cock starting to pulse, heavy and angry.

“Decker?” Her voice drew me from my trance. Our eyes connected and then hers shifted to where mine had been—to her arm. Color bloomed in her cheeks and spread to her neck before dusting the top of her chest.

“Reese...”

“Yeah?”

“I want to be clear,” I muttered huskily. “I'm going to kiss you now.” A mistake. But I wasn't going to make it another minute without the taste of her lips.

“Yes,” she breathed the word—pleaded.

I cupped her face and crushed my mouth to hers. There was no teasing this time. No slow play. I'd listened to this woman orgasm every night for the last five nights. I had no patience left, only raw need.

My tongue drove deep in her mouth as she locked her arms around my

neck. I grabbed her hips and turned her back to the railing, pinning her there with my whole body. Warm and soft and lush. *And mine and mine and mine.*

The kiss erupted into something hot and powerful. I had no idea if this was going to get complicated or not, all I knew was that neither of us could stop it.

Our tongues dueled, stroking and licking. I slid my hands from her waist to her ass, gripping the flesh hard and pulling her tight to me so she could feel exactly what she did to me—exactly how fucking hard she made me. She whimpered, her hips rocking forward and sending stars into my vision.

I broke off the kiss with a groan of pain, my cock throbbing for release.

“I thought doctors were supposed to do no harm.” I nipped at her bottom lip.

“This is harming you?” she taunted, a thread of mock offense in her voice.

“Leaving a man this hard is all kinds of harm,” I growled deeply and claimed her mouth again.

This kiss was harder and rougher. Raw with feral need. And just when I started to think about how I was going to manage fucking her in the middle of a national park, a branch cracked and a child squealed.

Fuck.

We broke apart with a gasp, staring at each other long enough to realize we’d both been about to forgo the reality of where we were for the desire we couldn’t deny.

“We should get back,” she murmured, unfolding her jacket and trying to find the sleeves.

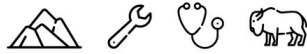
“Let me.” I took it and moved behind her, finding the openings and positioning them for her arms.

“Thank you,” she said and slid one in and then the other as the family of hikers reached the overlook.

“Stay still for a minute,” I said quietly once her jacket was back on and quickly reached down to adjust my cock.

“Why?”

“You should know how the male body functions, Dr. Barker. But I doubt these kids do, so unless you want them to get a lesson in a different kind of beast, don’t move,” I drawled and then grunted, forcing my stiff dick up and tucking it under my waistband. *Fuck, the drive around the loop was going to be torture.* “Okay, let’s go.”



“Oh, slow down!” Arlene grabbed my arm and pointed out the window. “Look at the bison!”

I was already cruising slowly as we drove through the park, making it easy for both Reese and her mom to take photos of the majestic surroundings. But at her insistence, I slowed even more and then pulled to the side of the road behind another car.

“Reese, can you take a closer photo for me?” Arlene turned and handed her phone to her daughter in the back seat. “Don’t get too close, though.”

“I’ll be careful.” Reese took the phone and let herself out of the car.

Gritting my teeth, I followed a beat behind her. The herd of bison were strewn across the meadow, peacefully enjoying their grassy dinner a decent distance from the car. Even though I knew Reese would never get too close, the bison were in heat this time of year, so I wasn’t going to take any chances.

I followed her determined stride until she stopped about forty yards from the closest beast and began snapping pictures.

Not my girlfriend. Her *clarification* replayed over and over again in my mind.

Maybe it wasn’t real, and maybe it wouldn’t last, but while it did, I was determined to show Reese that it was okay to be vulnerable. That it was okay to rely on someone—*on me*.

I folded my arms, waiting for her to finish up when I heard Arlene cry out from the car. Instantly, we both turned and froze.

A bull, with his piercing horns and glittering black eyes, lazily crossed the road behind our car. He was the size of a tank and must’ve been grazing in the field on the other side and now decided to join the rest of the herd. *Which meant he’d have to walk right by us.*

“Decker—”

“Don’t move,” I told her in a low voice, slowly angling myself so that Reese was positioned entirely behind my body. “Trust me?”

“Yeah,” she whispered, her fingers curling into the back of my shirt.

I breathed slowly, my eyes locked on the massive beast. I’d been around enough big, irritable bulls in Texas to have a decent plan on how to handle

the situation, which was *don't fucking move*. That was Plan A. Assuming the bison bull only cared about rejoining his friends, he'd walk right by, and we could inch away.

If he cared about us...then Plan B was me distracting him so Reese could safely get back to the car.

"We're going to stay right here, okay. Nice and still," I muttered quietly, almost like I did when I called her at night, coaxing her to trust me.

The massive animal meandered toward us—toward its herd—with a little mocking snort that made Reese tremble.

"Just going to let him strut on by, nice and easy," I continued to talk, hoping she'd focus on my voice and not the two-thousand-pound terror lumbering closer to us.

Twenty feet. Fifteen feet.

"It's going to be okay. Trust me."

Ten feet. I felt her shallow breaths against my back.

"Move back slowly when I say," I murmured, watching the bison until he walked parallel to us. "Now." I gave her a little nudge with my hand, and she stepped back, and I followed. "Again." One step at a time, the bison moved forward, and we moved back. Again and again. "Get in the car," I ordered when we were close enough that she could make a break for it.

I kept moving slowly in case something this way caught his attention, and when the car door shut, it did.

He looked at me with his beady black eyes, and my heart slammed into the front of my chest, my body prepared to sprint for the driver's side. And then he looked away, the swish of his tail like a soft *screw you*.

Still, I didn't give the animal my back until I reached the bumper, at which point I jogged back to the driver's seat and climbed in.

"Oh my heavens, Decker! I was going to have a heart attack." Arlene pressed her hand to her chest, her face flushed with worry.

"Did not see that guy coming," I said with a low chuckle, searching for Reese's gaze in the rearview. "You okay?"

She nodded silently.

"You were so brave—and so calm. How were you so calm?" Arlene reached for my hand and squeezed as I pulled back onto the road.

"Because you're supposed to stay calm, Mom," Reese chimed in. "Panicking is the worst idea."

"Well, I know that, but he just looked like he knew what he was doing out

there, that's all."

"I've dealt with bulls before. Not bison. Cattle, but their temperaments are similar."

"Really?"

I nodded. "I worked on a few ranches in Texas when I was younger. They can get violent, but not usually if you're steady. Slow and steady."

"But the way you protected Reese—"

"Mom..."

"Honey, the way he stepped in front of you out of instinct, it was like out of a fairy tale," Arlene went on, giving me another wink when Reese groaned from the back seat. I fought to hide my chuckle. "So, if you want to stay at the hotel tonight, I fully understand—"

"Mom!" Reese shook her head.

Arlene heaved a sigh, fanning herself with her hand. "You think about it on the way home. You don't have to decide now."

I watched Reese open and then promptly shut her mouth. Maybe she didn't want to argue with Arlene. *Or maybe she was considering it—considering spending the night with me.*

CHAPTER

Eight

REESE

“THANKS FOR BRINGING me to get the Jeep tonight,” I said as Decker pulled to a stop in front of his shop.

Did I need my rental back tonight? No. Did Decker need it moved from his shop? No. Was I looking for some excuse to be alone with him again? *Guilty.*

That kiss on the trail stayed with me like a loose string, one my mind kept on tugging and tugging and tugging, wondering just how far I could take things with Decker before everything unraveled.

No relationship. No complications.

I made my position clear...and he still wanted whatever I was willing to give.

And it was more than sex. More than him looking for an easy score with zero strings. If that were the case, he wouldn't have been content to coax me to pleasure for the last five nights with zero demands in return.

And then the bison...I'd never felt fear like I did in that moment. How many stories had I read—heard—about tourists getting too close to the unpredictable beasts and being mauled? Far too many. But all I could think as I stood there and clutched Decker's shirt, soaking in the warmth of his protection, was what if this was it? *What if I never got the chance to know what it would be like with him?*

Even if that chance only lasted two weeks and was relegated to complication-free sex.

I had to know.

For years, my only focus had been achieving. Goals. Progress. Success. Maybe for these next two weeks—weeks I was technically on vacation, maybe I could be on vacation from that, too. From needing to *prove* anything.

“No problem.” He held the door open for me and then hit the first light switch when we walked into his shop, illuminating the farthest bay. “Keys are in my office. I'll be right back.”

I stopped and watched him go. The broad stretch of his back. It had felt so strong—so solid—earlier. Like even if that bison had decided to charge, it wouldn't have mattered; nothing was getting through Decker to get to me.

Heat coiled like a knot in my stomach.

I was always my own best defense. The princess and the knight. But around him...around him, I wanted to hand over my shield and sword for just a little and give my soul a few moments without the weight. *A few moments to slow down. To savor. To be taken care of.*

I shivered, but before the warning sirens could go off in my head, Decker was heading back toward me. His eyes dark. His hand clasped tight around the keys, muscles flexing all the way up his arm.

My lips parted, and I inhaled, pure desire running like oxygen through my blood. I wasn't here for the keys or the Jeep; I was here for him.

He stopped only inches in front of me like it took all his restraint to keep that distance.

"Here you go."

I looked at his hand and then lifted my gaze to meet his, lust sparking when they connected. My throat bobbed as I tried to swallow, but I couldn't—the words I had to say were too big. Too heavy to try and hide any longer.

"I'm not here for the keys, Decker."

His nostrils flared, the words sending a quake through his big body. "Then what are you here for?"

Use your words. How many times had he said that to me over the last few nights? Enough for me to know exactly what he wanted.

"You." I lifted my chin.

"Reese..." *Are you sure?* Was written clear as day in his eyes.

"No complications," I murmured, reminding him—reminding myself.

His arm lowered, and his other hand lifted, his palm splaying over the side of my face before sliding around the back of my neck. My breath lodged in my chest as he moved closer, eliminating all space between us.

He held my eyes as his head lowered, his mouth inches from mine before he whispered, "Say yes."

Nothing had ever felt so right. "Yes."

With a low groan, his mouth claimed mine. Hard. Possessive. To the tune of the keys falling onto the floor.

Our tongues tangled wildly, everything from the hike earlier coming back a thousand-fold now. I latched my arms around his neck, pulling my body flush to his as he gripped my ass and hauled me to him. Seconds later, my back hit the door.

The kiss exploded. Teeth and tongues, we couldn't get enough of each

other. Forget two weeks, we kissed like we only had tonight.

His body pinned mine, and I didn't know when my hips started to move. All I knew was the moment I couldn't ignore how big he felt. I shivered, my core clenching with want. I didn't know how I'd convinced myself I could go without sex for as long as I had... *Maybe because I'd never been tempted like this before.*

"Fuck, Reese," he growled, his mouth finding its way along my jaw to my ear and then to my neck, leaving fire in its wake. "Is it possible to die from wanting someone?"

My jaw went slack. "From an erection?" I asked and then whimpered when his hand slid under my shirt and claimed my breast, my nipple begging for attention.

"From all of it. From wanting to see you. Hear you. Touch you. Hold you," he growled again, his fingers plucking and rolling the sensitive bud until I was squirming. "And yeah, fuck you." I trembled. "But all the other things, too."

Every touch was like pure electricity shooting to my core. Had they always been this sensitive? I couldn't even remember. Maybe because they hadn't been touched in so long...maybe because when I pleased myself, my fingers or vibrator went straight between my thighs and left all my other erogenous areas untouched and wanting.

And now, it was sensory overload.

"I don't...I don't know." My brain scrambled to find any facts the years of medical training should've planted in my brain.

"Because that's what it's felt like all day—all week." He fisted my sweater and tugged it over my head. It fell to the floor on top of the keys, and I didn't care.

His head dipped, my lace bra pulled to the side as his mouth suctioned around my breast.

"Decker..." I moaned, my hands spearing through his hair and clutching his scalp.

He lapped and licked and sucked. His left hand palmed my other breast while that devastating mouth of his shredded all of my senses. Another lick. Another flick of his tongue. I squirmed, each sensation more intense than the last. I held tight to him and tried to breathe. Tried to control the way my body so easily whipped out of control for this man. But it was impossible.

"Tell me," he said against my skin, and without the door behind me, I

would've been in a puddle on the floor. *A puddle of my own want.*

"I need you."

"Where?"

I bit my lip. "Inside me."

"Should I see if you're wet enough for me?" His hand that had been kneading my other breast lowered over my stomach, making it tense, and then gently stroked along the waist of my leggings.

"I am." I had to be. I was practically shaking.

With a deep groan, he grabbed my leggings and thong in one shot and peeled them down my legs. By the time I shivered at the rush of cool air on my bare skin, my shoes and the fabric were gone.

And then he was there, his lips back on my breast as his fingers skated up the inside of my thigh. Higher and higher, they teased a slow path straight to where I ached for him until they found my core.

Oh god. One finger—one delicious finger—slid through my folds, bringing with it an electric fire that made me vibrate with pleasure. I'd never wanted anything more than I wanted to be with him right now.

"Fuck, baby, you're soaked." He groaned deep, stroking the wet heat of my core with two fingers now. Up and down. Firm. Excruciating. But when he pushed the two of them inside me, my jaw went slack, and my body moved on its own. I couldn't help myself. I rocked against his hand, craving more of him. Deeper.

When he added his thumb, the pad of it rubbing circles over my clit, I let out a cry and then a gasp and then a sigh. It was everything. All at once. And still I wanted more.

"You're so wet. And soft."

"More," I begged, grabbing for his shoulders and digging into the muscle to try and steady myself.

He groaned low, his mouth marking its possession all over my chest as his fingers worked in a glorious rhythm, in and circle and out, again and again.

"Is this how you are in bed every night? Soaked and squirming for release?"

"Yes." I panted, wondering if something was slowly sucking all the oxygen from the room.

"Imagining this...my fingers on your pussy...making her so wet."

"Decker, please," I whispered, my eyes screwing tight. "I can't...I

need...”

“What? What do you need, baby?”

Oh god. There was that *baby* again. It shouldn’t do anything. It was just a word from a man I hardly knew. But somehow, it felt like everything when he said it.

“You.”

“*More,*” he ordered low.

“Your cock,” I said with a moan, rewarded with another rub of his thumb on my clit.

“Fuck yes,” he growled, pulling his fingers from my body and straightening in front of me.

Lust bore dark hollows in his eyes, a hunger that only I was able to fill.

As he stood in front of me, his hands going to the waist of his pants, it registered for a second that we were in his auto shop. That I was completely naked against the front door of his business, begging to be fucked.

Almost immediately after that, it registered that I didn’t care. In a shop. On a hike. I wanted Decker wherever I could have him. And then, thoughts vanished when he shoved his pants past his waist, the hard length of his cock bobbing free.

My jaw dropped.

I shouldn’t be fazed. I was a doctor. I’d seen penises before in all sizes and shapes. But this...his...*why did I want to say he was beautiful?* Long and thick. Veins wrapped around the shaft and pulsing straight to the reddened tip.

“Reese...” he groaned and wrapped his hand around his length, stroking it like if he didn’t, he might die. “Do I need a condom?”

“No,” I blurted out. *Who was I?* I should’ve been all about protection, but instead, all that mattered was that I was on birth control, and I didn’t want anything between us.

“Fuck,” he swore deeply and came for me.

He reached around and gripped my ass, and then next thing I knew, I was pinned to the door with nothing more than his warm weight. Like clingy vines, my arms wound back around his neck and my legs wrapped around his hips, and the hot length of him rested right where I needed him.

I shimmied my hips, but he wouldn’t let them budge.

His gaze found mine. “You want to torture me, don’t you?” he growled, tilting my hips until I felt his tip nestled at my entrance. “Wet my cock with

that hot cream of yours.”

“Yes,” I breathed the word, losing myself in the safety of his gaze as he pushed inside me, slowly impaling me with his massive length.

I felt my jaw slowly drop, all the air leaking from my lungs. I was wet. Prepared. But he was so big.

“Breathe for me, baby,” he said, and by now, I was trained to listen to that voice. To obey. “That’s it. Keep breathing, and take all of me.”

In and out. I did what he said, and so did he. I breathed through the stretch until it was only pleasure that I felt. Wanting—needing—more. I held right around his neck, our faces drawing closer until our hot breaths crashed into one another.

“Fuck, you feel incredible,” he ground out. “I can’t go slow, Reese. Want you too fucking bad.”

“Don’t,” I panted. “Don’t stop.”

He groaned and with a hard flex of his hips, buried all the way inside me.

I cried out. Fullness. Pleasure. And something even more intense than that when he was in all the way. *Oh god, could it be...*

He slid partway out and rumbled, “So hot.” And then pushed forward. “Wet.” Back again. “So fucking tight.” Forward again, but deeper, hitting a spot that made my vision blur with pleasure and my body clench around him.

“More, Deck,” I begged, but somehow my strangled voice made it sound like I’d begged for *more dick*.

It didn’t matter. The result was the same.

“Fuck.” He groaned roughly, and I swore I felt him swell even bigger.

And then he was moving. Faster. Harder. Over and over again, and with each thrust, hitting that same electrifying spot.

My eyes went wide, pleasure ricocheting through my body like I’d never felt before. *Because I’d never felt it like this.* I’d only ever come from clitoral stimulation, never because anyone—or anything—had been able to pleasure my G-spot. But this...him...my head rolled back against the door as he fucked me.

Hard. Possessively. With deep, demanding drives that his body pushed into mine.

“You going to come, Reese? Going to scream for me?”

“Yes,” I purred, my body moving to absorb every inch of him.

The door jostled and clanged at my back, but I didn’t care if it gave way. I didn’t care if the whole world gave way, as long as he didn’t stop.

“That’s it,” he growled. “Let that wet little pussy come all over me.”

I whimpered, my nails scoring his skin. Pleasure arced and zinged through me. Wild and unrestrained. Like a hurricane I was trying to control. But there was no controlling it. No controlling the way I wanted him.

I clawed at him, my body—my hips trying to angle to take more of his big cock. I wasn’t even sure I was breathing anymore as he drove into me, the door banging wildly in the frame.

“Come for me, baby. Come for me right now.” It was his voice. It was the word *baby*. It was the way he’d trained my body to come on his command for the last five nights.

It was everything about Decker Connolly that made me lose control—and *give it all to him*.

I screamed his name as my body shattered, convulsing around him like I needed him to survive. My vision blurred, and every muscle in my body both tensed and went weak. I pulled him to me so hard, though I wouldn’t have the strength to stand. He buried his head against my neck and drove his cock through my clenching muscles once, twice more before he held himself there—buried against my womb—and came.

Heat filled me. Heat from my own orgasm. Heat from his.

And it seeped into every inch of me from my marrow to my pores, filling me with something that I’d fought for so long not to need.

Minutes after our cries of pleasure had subsided and the shop only resonated with the heavy stretch of our breaths, Decker carefully tucked himself back into his pants and then walked to a shelf, ripping open a brand new bag of microfiber cloths.

I tried to take the cloth from his hand, but he pulled it away with a growl and a warning, “Fucking you is more than the minutes I’m inside you. It’s every moment between when I kiss you to when I button the last button of your clothes. And that includes this.”

I inhaled a warm burst of pleasure and then let my arm fall. I couldn’t argue with that. And honestly, I didn’t want to. Tomorrow, I could put back on my armor of independence. Tonight, I was going to let this gorgeous, dirty-talking, protective man take care of me in every way he wanted.

And that’s what he did as he reached his hand between my legs and gently wiped my tender flesh clean before returning my clothes to my body piece by piece.

“You okay to drive?” he asked as he handed me my keys.

My mouth quirked into a smile as I looked up at him. “That confident in how good that orgasm was?”

His gaze flashed and then he laughed as he cupped my face, bringing his head to mine with a coarse whisper, “Confident that we’ve both had a long day of driving, hiking, and almost getting attacked by a bison. Now, if you give me the whole night with your sweet pussy, and I’ll make it so you’re not okay to walk, let alone drive.”

I sucked in a breath, my body rioting for the offer. Because that was what it wanted—an offer to spend the night with him. *No, what it was, was dangerous.* Fear as sharp as a needle pricked my blissful bubble, letting in the cold wisps of reality.

I’d spent a lifetime avoiding this—*this feeling.* The way it made me want. The way it made me weak. Vulnerable. *Out of control.* And I wasn’t going to let it catch me now. Not for a man who was never meant to be mine.

“I should go,” I said, my voice cracking.

He nodded easily, as though I wasn’t able to see the disappointment in his eyes. He reached behind me and opened the door, and we walked in silence over to the Jeep.

“Decker...” I paused with my hand on the driver’s door.

“I just want you to know, I normally wouldn’t fuck a woman against my shop door.”

I hid my small smile. “I’m not complaining.”

“Doesn’t mean it shouldn’t have been in a bed.”

My stomach tightened. “I promise, I’m not holding it against you,” I said, the words like the tip of a knife pressed to my chest, and then I shoved it deep. “You can save your bed for your real girlfriend.”

I tried to make it sound light. Easy. Carefree. Like he didn’t have to worry about making that kind of effort with me because it didn’t matter.

Decker’s eyes glittered with something intense. Something that made me tremble and my heart flutter. *Something I refused to acknowledge because it was the kind of thing that led to complications.*

“Good night, Decker,” I said, wanting suddenly to climb into the Jeep and drive away as fast as I could.

His head dipped, and he pressed a kiss to my cheek. Soft. Tender. *Devastating.* And then he whispered, “Good night, baby.”

And somehow, no matter how hard I tried to keep him at arm’s length, with one word, he inched just a little closer to my heart.

CHAPTER

Nine

REESE

“DECKER...”

His dark head looked up from between my legs, his grin slick with my desire. “You better hurry up and come if you want my cock.”

My back bowed as his mouth set on me again, devouring me like I was the only meal he needed each day. *A meal he'd made sure to savor every day for the last week.* In his car. In my car. On his desk in his shop. And now, in my childhood bed while Mom was at therapy.

I clutched his head, my hips rocking against his lips and tongue, demanding more. But sex wasn't the only thing I was starting to want more of. Pleasure coiled as he sucked on my clit, flicking it with his tongue in the way he knew would send me shooting straight over the edge.

“Decker!” I cried out, my orgasm claiming me with a swift explosion.

His low, hungry growl accompanied the ravenous way he savored my release for a few blissful seconds before the heat of his mouth was gone. I opened my eyes just in time to see him draw back before the hands he'd had framed on my hips flipped me over and hauled me onto my knees, my chest heaving into the mattress.

The air hit my wet core with a chill, but it was the sound of his zipper that made me shiver.

“Tell me,” he ordered, notching his cock into my swollen folds.

I curled my hands into the blankets, the rush of release transforming into an ebb of ache. I wanted more. I wanted him.

“I need your cock.”

His deep groan accompanied the swift, deep drive of his cock. He buried himself to the root, his hips pressed to my ass, and groaned low.

“Tell me.”

“I need it,” I begged again. “Please, Decker. I need more.”

With every plea, he gave what I asked—anything I asked. Harder. Faster. More and more and more. Until the slap of our hips was echoed by way my bed banged against the wall.

“You gotta come, baby,” he rasped deeply.

It shouldn't feel forbidden—fucking the man who was supposed to be my

boyfriend. Sneaking moments with him when we were out of the house or when Cheryl took Mom to physical therapy. Trying to hide all the very real things that were happening behind the scenes of our very fake relationship.

“You gotta come again for me before we run out of time.”

I held onto his voice. The tenor. The texture. The way it wrapped around me in a hold I never wanted to let go.

I whimpered, chasing the peak of another release as he drove into me from behind. With each day that passed, the way we fucked grew more raw. More feral. *It grew risky*. Like today. Mom left for therapy, and we were supposed to go to the store, but as soon as they pulled out of the drive, our hands were on each other. Mouths locked in a kiss that not even a scalpel could sever.

We grew wilder for each other the closer it got to the day I was scheduled to leave. A day we both were eager to ignore.

“Decker...” I panted, my orgasm started to sink its teeth into me.

“Fuck, baby, you’re so fucking wet. I’m going to come.” He thrust deep, filling my body to the brink with his thick cock, and then snaked one hand around my front to find my clit.

“Yes!” I came apart at the first squeeze of his fingers on my swollen flesh, my hips jerking with the force of my orgasm.

His rough shout followed me over the edge as he held himself buried, his cock pulsing heavily as he filled me.

In one instant, the room had gone from filled with sounds of slapping skin and banging headboards to quiet except for the sounds of our breaths.

“Fuck, Reese,” he muttered in a low rumble, his thumbs tracing slow circles on the swell of my ass.

I swallowed down my agreement, a shiver running down my body instead.

Slowly, I felt him slide out of me, and I bit my lip to hold back my small sound of sadness—of emptiness. Because that was what it was. Emptiness when he was gone. Not just from my body but from me.

I let out a soft sigh as I felt him clean me, his tenderness just as breathtaking as his roughness.

I’d given up on trying to hold back the dangerous thoughts. The ones that teased how easy it was to change reality—to change what we were—to let it be more. I let the thoughts do their worst, and then after they were weak with effort, pushed them away.

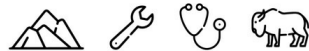
I was leaving in just under a week. Back to New York. Without Decker. And the only choice I allowed myself was just how much of him I wanted to enjoy until then.

He gave my hip a little tap. “Your mom’s back, baby.”

Gasping, I shot up from where I was bent over on the bed. God, if Mom walked in and saw me like that...I bit back a groan. She’d be uncomfortably thrilled. And somehow, knowing that was worse than believing she’d be horrified.

“Don’t rush.” Decker grabbed my shoulders as I fought to get my shirt on. He pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I’ll keep her entertained,” he said with a wink and then let himself out of the room.

My throat tightened, staring at the door for a second after he was gone. If this was how he treated a fake girlfriend, imagine how he would treat—*no*. I shoved my legs into my jeans. It was too risky. No matter how right it felt now.



“How was therapy?” I asked, a little breathless when I joined everyone in the living room a few minutes later.

“Marco is a sadist,” Mom declared with a shake of her head. “I gave him a piece of my mind earlier today—”

“Mom—”

“And I said it’s a good thing he’s got a nice smile, or I never would’ve come back after that first day,” she finished, and Decker fought to control his laugh as he brought her a glass of water from the kitchen. “How’s your head?”

My head?

Decker glanced at me. “I told her you had a headache and wanted to lie down for a little bit before going to the store.”

“Right, yeah.” My chin bobbed, but my mind immediately went back to yesterday.

Yesterday, I did have a headache, and Decker noticed—he also noticed how I didn’t want to say anything to Mom, so he’d suggested another drive, claiming he wanted to see Mormon Row. There was nothing Mom agreed to

more readily than me showing him the local sights.

Decker pulled into the parking lot next to the line of old homes and barns from the early nineteen-hundreds and then told me to get in the back seat. At that point, I wasn't in any condition to argue. He had me lay in his lap and then began to massage my head. I didn't even know for how long because it felt so incredible. But the better it felt, the more I moaned, and the more I moaned, the harder he turned underneath me.

At some point, there was a brief discussion on how orgasms can help with headaches before we put the theory to the test.

By the time we got back to the house, my headache was cured.

"Why didn't you tell me? Cheryl and I could've stopped," Mom said, worried. *Exactly why I didn't tell her yesterday.*

"I was going to send Decker, but he was rubbing my head and made it feel so much better," I blurted out the threadbare excuse.

Mom stared at me, looked at Decker, and then when her gaze returned, it was glistening. *Oh no.* Whatever she was going to say, it was going to be bad. The doctor had instructed her to take her pain medication before going to therapy, but even at a minimal dose, it lowered her filter. *Or maybe it just gave her an excuse.*

"He's good at taking care of you, honey."

"Mom..." I stepped closer.

"How do you feel about kids, Decker?"

"Oh my god, Mom." My cheeks flamed, but of course, Decker took the question in stride.

"I like kids—I'd like to have kids," he answered with a smile that made my insides tingle.

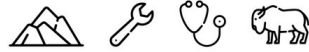
Kids with Decker. All I could think of was how he'd be as a father. Kind. Patient. *Indulgent.* Loving. All these things I'd learned within mere weeks of meeting the man because there were just some kinds of knowledge—some lessons—that were instantaneous. Like touching a hot stove would burn. Or going out in the middle of winter without a coat would be freezing. And in this case, that Decker Connolly was exactly the kind of man I'd convinced myself didn't exist so my hopes were never hurt.

"Reese always wanted kids. Three of them, she'd tell me when she was younger—"

"Mom, enough," I interrupted, my tone hard, though I suddenly felt the urge to cry.

And she saw it. “Reese...”

“I have to go to the store. I’ll be back in a little,” I said and walked out of the room, hoping neither of them caught the way I swiped my hands over my cheeks to make sure no tears skated by.



“Reese, is that you?”

I stilled in front of the fridge that I’d just closed the door of. *Damn.*

Mom had been asleep in her chair when I got back from the store. I tried to be quiet as I unpacked all the groceries, but apparently, not quiet enough.

I’d spent the last hour roaming the aisles, simultaneously shopping and trying to decompress. I shouldn’t have been angry, I told myself. She could ask what she wanted, that was the whole point of having Decker—so he could give her the answers she desperately wanted. But in the moment, it hadn’t felt like one more faked conversation.

For the first half hour, I tried to blame it on the sex. Blame it on myself for knowing better—knowing that it would complicate things. I’d gone from being putty in that man’s hands, the way he made me feel a very real phenomenon, to having to step back into the role of fake girlfriend, where I didn’t wonder nor care about what our fake future looked like—where I didn’t crave the fantasy.

But I did.

I did, and it had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with Decker.

“Yeah, it’s me,” I called, hoping she’d leave it at that.

She didn’t.

“Can you come here?”

I inhaled deeply and rolled my shoulders back. *Just apologize. Blame the headache. And move on,* I coached myself as I walked into the living room, meeting my mother’s concerned stare.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Fine.” I folded my arms.

“Bullshit.”

I huffed and shook my head. “Really, I’m fine.”

“But you were upset earlier when I asked Decker about kids,” she

declared, her pain medication apparently not strong enough to make her delusional about that.

“I just wasn’t feeling well. It’s fine.”

“I wouldn’t have said anything if I didn’t see the way you look at him—the way he looks at you,” she went on, her attempt at compassion nothing short of a hot knife straight to my stomach. “He wants a future with you, Reese. I see that plain as day.”

Could she see the way I wanted to vomit? Because that felt plain as day, too.

“It’s not that,” I said lamely, the urge to just tell her the truth lingering on the tip of my tongue.

It would fix everything—fix the problem I’d created. First by fabricating a boyfriend and then by fucking him. But something held me back. Something stupid and vulnerable and...not as weak as I’d thought.

“Then what is it?” she pressed, each question twisting the knife. “The kids? Tell him how many—”

“I don’t want kids, Mom,” I blurted out, pain overwhelming me. “I don’t want kids, and I don’t even know if I want Decker.” *Liar.*

She gasped.

“I said I wanted kids when I was young and naive. When I didn’t realize how much love could hurt. How vulnerable and alone it could leave you,” I babbled on, the lines in her face etching deeper with every word. “I wanted kids before I saw how much you sacrificed for me. How hard it was for you to do it all on your own. And I won’t”—I sucked in a hot breath, hating the prick of tears.

“Reese, honey—”

“I’ve worked so hard to put myself in a position where I never need to rely on anyone else. Where I can live and provide for myself without having to worry. And I don’t understand how you of all people can sit there, see that, and still want me to be weak. Still want me to fall in love...be vulnerable...when that almost destroyed you.”

The last word was out of my mouth when the door opened, and Cheryl called, “Hello hello!” She entered along with one of Mom’s other friends, Lydia Reynolds, the mayor of Wisdom. “Lydia brought her famous chili, and I’ve got jelly beans.” She jiggled the bag. “Who’s ready for some poker?”

I spun, quickly trying to reel in my emotions that spilled like marbles across the floor. I walked over and greeted the two women, Lydia giving me

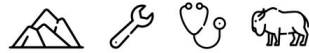
an extra-tight hug and telling me how good it was to see me.

“I’m skipping poker tonight. I have some things I have to do,” I told Cheryl.

“Like that handsome boyfriend of yours?”

“Boyfriend?” Lydia’s brows rose.

“I’ll be back later,” was all I could manage as I backpedaled out of the room, grabbed my keys off the counter, and headed for the Jeep.



What was I doing here?

I parked in front of Decker’s shop with no clue if he was here or not.

I knew he had plans tonight with friends—Lydia’s four sons and their wives, no less. A sunset cowboy trail ride that he’d invited me on, and in one of my last-ditch efforts to not let the intimacy we had during sex spill out into the rest of our interactions, I’d politely declined, using Mom’s poker night as an excuse.

He’d played it off like it wasn’t a big deal, but it felt like it was. For the both of us.

I let out a groan, hung my head, and then reached for the key in the ignition once more. *This was the last place I should be.* But it felt like the only place left to go. I’d driven away from Mom’s, desperate for any distraction. Naturally, the first one I’d tried was work. I pulled into a coffee shop in town and logged in remotely to the hospital system. I checked on my patients. My upcoming schedule. And after ten minutes, I couldn’t focus on it any longer.

What had happened to me?

So I drove. I drove by Mormon Row. I drove through the park. And after another hour, my hands had steered me here.

I shouldn’t have blown up at Mom like that, but thinking about the future had hurt so unexpectedly in a way I’d never felt before. *Because I’d never had to consider my future without Decker in it.*

“Yeah, I shouldn’t be here,” I muttered to myself, and just when I went to turn on the ignition, his shop door opened, and Decker stepped outside.

He took one look at me, confusion morphing into something fierce and

protective before he was stalking to the car.

“Everything okay?” He opened my door and asked, his gaze sliding over me.

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I just...” *Just what? Needed a break? Needed to get out of the house? Needed a reason to not want him the way that I did?* “I changed my mind about tonight—about the ride. If it’s still okay for me to come.”

His eyes went wide. “Absolutely. It’s absolutely still okay,” he said without question. “I was just locking up, and then we’ll go.” He extended his hand, the keys to his Bronco in his palm. “Here. Wait in my truck.”

With every step, I knew I was digging myself a deeper hole I’d have to climb out of. But one more night wouldn’t make a difference, I promised myself. One more night wouldn’t change reality.

CHAPTER

Ten

DECKER

“DID you know that if you weighed all the living biological matter on the earth, one-quarter of that would be made up of ants?”

I glanced over at Ranger Reynolds, the youngest of the Reynolds brothers, as he engaged Reese in conversation. I hadn't heard the whole thing, but I was pretty sure Reese had mentioned something about the weight of the massive bison that eyed us down in Yellowstone last week to prompt one of Ranger's infamous facts.

Out of the four brothers—Archer, Hunter, Gunner, and Ranger—Ranger and I were the closest. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that we were both the only people under the age of seventy allowed to attend the Senior Bingo Night in Wisdom, but it was probably because the two of us wore our hearts on our sleeves. *What you see is what you get type of thing.* Not that the older brothers weren't honest and honorable...but their histories made them more reserved. Tougher nuts to crack. But Ranger—with his sweater vest and cowboy hat atop his painted horse—he was an open book.

Literally.

My friend was a genius of the highest magnitude which was why it was no surprise that when the guide instructed Ranger and Reese to ride side by side because their horses liked each other, he dove off the deep end with his encyclopedia of facts.

“More than a friend, isn't she?”

I looked over at Archer who I'd been paired with on the trail. I let out a deep sigh and admitted, “Something like that.”

I'd introduced Reese to the group as a friend who was in town for a visit; it was the story we'd come up with on the ride to the ranch. Given that the Reynolds brothers worked in private security, I wasn't surprised that Archer—probably the rest of them, too—had picked up on the lie.

“What's the holdup?” The oldest Reynolds brother never beat around the bush.

“She's leaving in a week.” *Less, actually.*

Fuck.

“So don't let her leave.”

I barked out a laugh. “Not that simple.” *But god, I wished it were.* I wished I could just tie her to my damn bed and tell her to fuck the fake, I wanted all the things that were real with her.

“Why not?”

“She doesn’t live here. Has a job in the city.”

“Okay, but I didn’t live here for a while. I had a job in Boston. I still moved back,” he offered in rebuttal.

“Not the same.”

“Isn’t it?”

“She’s not looking for a relationship.”

“And you think I was?” He chuckled, his eyes straying to his wife, Keira, where she led the group next to Ranger’s wife, Sydney.

I didn’t know what to say because I didn’t know exactly what was holding Reese back. Was it her job? Was it commitment? Was it something else? The way she’d gotten so upset earlier made me think it had to be. The mention of kids almost brought her to tears. Yeah, I wanted kids, and hell yeah, I’d imagined having them with her. It was damn hard not to when I was fucking her bare every goddamn day. But if she didn’t want them, my life wouldn’t miss a beat as long as she was still in it.

“We’ll see.”

“Never seen you hesitate before.” Archer glanced at me. “Whether it’s building engines or racing cars, you’re always full throttle into whatever adventure is ahead.”

I made a low noise, my eyes finding a way from the horizon back to Reese. He was right. I never hesitated before. Not moving here. Not opening my shop. Not racing on the track. I didn’t hesitate when I had nothing to lose. *But now I did.*

And fuck me, but I was afraid to push her. Afraid to push for more because it might push her away, and if all I had were a few days left, I wanted every goddamn minute of them.

“I can’t stop her from leaving,” I said like it was what everything boiled down to.

“But you can give her a reason to stay,” he rumbled deeply and gave me a wink.

Before the conversation could go any farther, the guide led us off the path to a small clearing where there was a fire pit, grill, and wooden benches. The sun dipped toward the horizon, glowing orange as the tips of the mountains

pierced its orb.

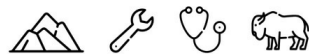
We tied up the horses and settled onto the benches, the girls collecting on one and the guys on the other, while the guide cooked up some burgers. While Archer and Gunner talked, my gaze continued to stray toward Reese.

Something was off. Wrong.

She hadn't planned on coming with me tonight; I knew she'd refuse before I even asked...but I couldn't stop myself from asking. Just like I couldn't stop myself from wanting her. And it was why walking out to see her parked in front of the garage made me do a double-take. There was no way she would've changed her mind if something didn't happen; something with her mom, I assumed after she'd fled the house earlier.

Maybe when the ride was over, she'd tell me, but for now, I was just happy to see laughter crease her face rather than worry. Keira, along with Hunter's wife, Zoey, Gunner's wife, Della, and Ranger's wife, Sydney, chatted and laughed with Reese like they were the oldest of friends. And once more, I felt myself falling into the trap of thinking it could always be like this.

If she just stayed.



The storm thundered in warning, holding back its fury until we'd returned to the barn, thanked our trail guide, and headed for the parking lot. Goodbyes were rushed and splashed with giant raindrops before Reese and I scrambled back into the Bronco, both of us sinking into the seat with an exhale and a laugh as the skies broke wide.

Rain poured from the dark clouds like nature opened up a fire hydrant. Within the span of minutes, it was a concert of rain and wind and lightning, beating and swirling around the car.

"I'll take you back to your mom's. Not letting you drive home in this," I declared, slowly turning out of the driveway onto the main road back to Jackson.

There wasn't even a tremor of protest as the rain beat down on the windshield so hard, it was almost impossible to see. I let off the gas and allowed our pace to slow. It wasn't a race.

“Thank you,” she said a few minutes into the drive, the rain pelting the car in furious sheets.

“Don’t, Reese.” I shook my head.

“Don’t what? Be grateful? You invited me, and I turned you down and then showed up at the last minute. Let me say thank you—”

“How about you thank me by telling me the truth? Why’d you change your mind? What happened when you got home from the store?”

My question was met with her deep inhale, but I wasn’t going to back down. Archer was right. I had to give her a reason to stay—and that reason was going to be that she could count on me always. For anything.

“My mom and I argued about what she said earlier.”

“About kids...”

She shifted in the seat. “More than that. Relationships in general.”

My hold on the steering wheel tightened, and I squinted. *Holy fuck, this sudden storm was bad.*

“Why don’t you want a relationship, Reese?”

“I’m leaving.”

I tensed. That wasn’t an answer. It was a shield.

“Bullshit,” I said. “You don’t want a relationship in the city either. Why? What happened?” I tensed, the unthinkable rolling through me. “Who hurt you?”

“Who—no one,” she exclaimed and let out a bitter laugh. “No one hurt me. That’s the point. No relationship means no one gets to hurt me, Decker. How hard is that for everyone to understand?”

The truth hit me like a wrecking ball. Her independence. Her distance. Her desire for no complications. *Her past.* Her admiration for her mother’s strength also made her determined to avoid her mother’s weakness, the thing that made her need to be strong in the first place: love.

“I’d never hurt you.” There were a lot of things I could’ve—should’ve—said, but that was the only one that came out. The only one that seemed right.

“Decker...”

I heard her inhale, and it felt like I couldn’t fucking breathe, waiting—needing to hear what she was going to say next.

“Decker, stop!”

I froze at the panic in her voice—and the finger she pointed out the window.

Fuck.

On the opposite side of the road, there was an accident. A bad one. One car was overturned on the embankment, the broken hum of its horn filtering through the sound of the storm. My only assumption was that the driver had lost control because of the rain and crashed.

“Shit. Hold on.” I hit my four-ways and turned my SUV in the road, angling so my lights beamed on the car.

“Oh my god, someone’s still in there.” Reese scrambled for her seat belt, her instinct going into overdrive.

“Reese, wait—”

I was too late. “Call 9-1-1!” she yelled and got out of the car, holding her jacket over her head as she rushed to the other car.

“Fuck.” I punched the emergency number in my phone, my hand on the door, ready to exit as soon as I gave our location. The operator picked up as I watched Reese try to pry open the car door. I quickly rattled off the emergency, giving our location on the highway. I hung up before she got through her *help is on the way* statement and barreled out into the rain.

“Reese!” I cursed as my foot slid on the muddy shoulder.

“We have to get the door open,” she yelled. “She’s trapped in there.”

Within seconds, I was soaked to the bone. Reese was the same as she tried to pull the door open, but it was wedged shut.

“Hang on.” I ran back to my truck, slipping twice as I grabbed my crowbar from the back.

When I returned, Reese was on the ground, covered in mud as she tried to pry the door open.

“Here let me—”

“It won’t open,” she said with a strangled cry, blindly struggling to help the unconscious driver.

“Reese.” I took her wrists in one hand and pried them off the door. I pinned her panic stare and ordered, “I’ll get it open. Trust me, baby.”

Her lips parted, something shifting in her eyes, before she nodded.

I instantly released her, letting her scramble back as I wedged the crowbar between the door and the frame. My feet slipped and slid. My heart pounded in my chest. And my muscles burned under the strain, but I was going to get the damn door open. *I had to.*

Just when it felt like my heart was going to burst from my chest, I felt the damn thing give way. It creaked and groaned and finally, I was able to pry it away from the car.

Reese rushed over, and I tossed the crowbar back onto the road so I could help her.

“Oh my god, Gabby.” Reese choked out a sob, recognizing the young driver.

She hung limp from the seat, blood dripping from a nasty gash in her forehead.

“I’ll unhook her seat belt. You pull,” she instructed, already partway into the car.

I reached for the girl’s shoulders, supporting as best I could when Reese let the restraint go.

“Careful,” she charged, the two of us pulling the unconscious girl from the vehicle. “Careful of her head.”

We pulled her out onto the ground slowly, the rain making it nearly impossible to see. But that didn’t stop her. I was pretty sure nothing stopped this woman. Reese checked Gabby’s pulse first, and I swore she was about to suggest we load her into the back of my car when the ambulance sirens broke through the rain.

Within seconds, two EMTs rushed onto the shoulder.

“She’s unconscious. Pulse is there but thready. We need something to stabilize her neck—” she broke off, seeing that the one EMT already had a neck brace with him and grabbed it.

“Ma’am, let us—”

“I’m a doctor,” she insisted. “Now help me get this on her.”

I moved back, letting the three of them work in sync to stabilize Gabby and get her onto the gurney and into the ambulance. But when Reese headed for the back of the emergency vehicle, too, I reached out and stopped her.

“Reese—”

“I have to go with her,” she declared, her bottom lip quivering. “I have to make sure she’s okay.”

I nodded slowly. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Behind her. Beside her. *With her*. I was with her—wanted to be with her. If she’d just give me a chance.

CHAPTER

Eleven

REESE

WATER DRIPPED from the ends of my clothes into a puddle at my feet. Around me, I heard the bustle of the hospital. Beepers and codes. Sounds that were familiar to me but felt foreign in this moment.

I rode in the ambulance with the paramedics—and it should've been the first indication at how short-staffed they were. I wasn't family or personnel. I shouldn't have been allowed, but they let me anyway.

When we got to the emergency room, a team of nurses rushed out to meet us along with a PA, and instinct took over. I ran down a list of stats. Pulse. BP. Oxygen. I told them my suspicions. Concussion. Possible bleeding in the skull. They told me they understood—that they'd wait for the ER doctor, and he'd take it from there.

Except there was no doctor in sight.

One look around the emergency room was all I needed to get a clear picture of the situation: this wasn't the first accident that had come in tonight because of the crazy storm, and it was all hands on deck.

I watched. I waited. I swore I waited. But no one was coming. *No one was available to help her.*

"*What can I do?*" Decker had found me by then, both of us covered in rain, mud, and blood.

I looked up at him and heard myself answer, "*Don't let them stop me.*"

I grabbed a disposable gown off a nearby cart and tugged it over my clothes. I pulled the sleeves up to my elbows and found the nearest sink, scrubbing furiously to get the mud and blood off my fingers. By the time I reached Gabby's side, they were still only monitoring her vitals and waiting for the doctor to arrive.

"*We need a CT scan right away.*" I needed to know if there was blood or swelling keeping her unconscious.

"*You don't work here,*" the head nurse protested.

"*That doesn't mean I can't help her.*" I held her worried stare for a long minute. "*I promise Dr. Kay will be okay with it.*"

I had no idea if he would be—if he was even here right now—but it was a Friday, and he had said he was the only one in the ER on Fridays.

Maybe it was enough. Or maybe she saw the writing on the wall—there were more patients coming in than they knew what to do with. If they waited for one of the hospital doctors, her chances of surviving significant trauma to the brain went down drastically.

The two other women looked at the nurse, and she nodded, instantly directing them to take Gabby for the scan. Then she brought me over to the nurse's station—to one of the computers—and logged in.

"I'm Tanya. What's your name?"

"Reese Barker."

"Well, Dr. Barker. The CT scan will show up here once it's done." She pointed at the screen and then looked over my shoulder.

"Go." I knew what she saw—more people who needed her when it was clear I didn't.

And then I waited. Waited and waited for what seemed like forever for the scan to show. And that was when Decker appeared by my side.

"You shouldn't be here," I murmured. Even though the nurse had set the computer to filter out personal details, neither of us really should be looking at the redacted information.

"There's not a goddamn thing on this earth that would stop me from being here right now."

I shivered, tears suddenly pooling in my eyes.

"She's going to be okay," Decker said quietly and pulled me into his arms.

"She's so young." I breathed deep to keep myself steady. "If we hadn't been going by..." *If he hadn't been with me...* There was no way I would've gotten the door off by myself.

"But we were," he rasped. "We were."

I shuddered, and he pulled me tighter for a second before the image appeared on the screen. Instantly, I was in front of it, scanning over the details and then searching for Tanya.

I didn't know where she was, and when they brought Gabby back up, the only one left to give the nurses instructions was me.

"Find an empty room. I need her on oxygen and IV fluids immediately, and I want dexamethasone prepped for injection." Their heads bobbed, and they scrambled to get her into an empty room.

"Reese!"

I spun, my shoulders heaving. "Dr. Kay." *Thank God.* "In here." I guided

him toward the room.

“What are you doing here?” he asked calmly, giving instructions to two PAs before we stepped through the door. “They told me about Gabby. I didn’t realize—”

“I brought her in.” I nodded to the bed. “We pulled her from a car about an hour ago. Vitals are stable. BP is a little high. She’s unconscious, so I had them get a CT scan. I don’t see any signs of bleeding, only swelling from the trauma. I have them getting her on oxygen, IV fluids, and steroids.”

He stared at me for a long second. A long grateful second before his mouth firmed, and he nodded. “Thank you.”

“Please tell me you have more people coming?” I asked quietly.

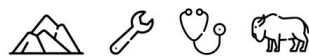
“Two docs are on their way, but with the storm, it’s taking them a little time.” His voice was calm right until the very end, when it cracked with concern.

Good thing time was something I could spare at the moment. “What can I do?”

He stared at me, gave me a tight smile, and then nodded. “Come with me.”

He led me out of the room, and as I passed by Decker in the hall, I slowed and said, “You don’t have to stay.”

His eyes glittered. “I know.” And then he went back to his position on the wall.



It was two hours later by the time I walked up to Decker, dirty, exhausted, and drained.

The other on-call doctors had arrived about an hour earlier, but everything was still in chaos. So much so that no one had even been able to call Gabby’s mom. So, I’d found her contact information. I’d stood next to her bed and told her mother what had happened—what condition Gabby was in and waited for her to get here. Seeing them—consoling them—it was the final drop out of my emotional well.

I had nothing left by the time I walked out of the room, pulled off the disposable gown, and made it to Decker. I didn’t say a word—didn’t have to.

He took my hand and led me out to his truck and helped me into the passenger seat.

He got in the driver's side, started the engine, and then stopped and looked at me. "You're amazing."

I laughed. It was all I had left. "I'm muddy and dirty and frazzled—"

"And stunning." He took my hand and brought it to his lips.

I sighed and turned my head away, far too tired and vulnerable right now to put up barriers to his compliments. It was the kind of thing Mom—I gasped.

"Reese—"

"My mom. I never told her where I was—" I swore and searched for my phone. I'd left angry earlier and didn't call or text. She was probably beside herself—

"I called her." He settled his hand over mine. "I called as soon as you jumped into action earlier and told her what happened."

I stared at him for a long moment and then nodded, my throat suddenly too thick for more than a weak *thank you*.

Decker released my hand and pulled out of the parking lot.

Now, the rain outside has slowed to a soft patter on the windshield, and it couldn't have taken more than two miles before my eyes fluttered shut, too heavy to keep open any longer.

The next thing I knew, Decker stood outside the passenger door and was carefully trying to wiggle his big arms underneath me.

"You don't have to—"

"I know," he grunted just like he had earlier. I was starting to understand its meaning; he knew he didn't have to, *but he was going to*.

And at this point, I was in no position to protest. I let him lift me from the seat and settled against his chest. He kicked the door shut, and that was when I realized—we weren't at Mom's house. We were parked out front of a simple ranch home that I could barely make out in the darkness. All I could see was the porch light illuminating the front door.

"Where are we?" I blamed exhaustion for my relatively foolish question. *Where else would we be?*

"My house."

My eyes closed again, and I exhaled slowly. *His home*. The idea shouldn't feel so settling. So right. So...needed. But it was. Later, I could blame energy deprivation. But for now, I wanted nothing more than to be

wrapped up in his arms all night.

“Decker?” I murmured I didn’t even know how much later, feeling a mattress dip underneath me and the hard weight of him settle by my side.

Instantly, I snuggled closer, wanting to melt into the heat of him. The warmth of his body ate away at the coldness in my clothes.

“Yeah, baby?” he rasped low, pulling me to his chest.

I savored the steady rise and fall of his chest, the strength of his arms wrapping around me, holding me tight. The thud of his heart so achingly familiar, I sighed and completely forgot whatever I’d wanted to ask and instead, blurted out the only thing at the forefront of my mind.

“I like when you call me baby.”

CHAPTER

Twelve

DECKER

“REESE.” I pulled her close to me and tried to stop her from shaking. Instead, she trembled worse and whimpered.

Dammit. She was having a nightmare.

“It’s okay, Reese,” I muttered in a low tone against her hair, trying to ignore how her body rocking affected mine. I jostled her shoulders a little and added, “It’s just a dream, baby. Wake up.”

She gasped and stilled next to me.

“You were having a nightmare,” I rumbled.

Her head tipped back slowly, our eyes finding each other in the haze of the midnight moon streaming through my bedroom windows. Normally I shut the blinds before going to bed, but the moment I’d laid down next to Reese, we’d both been out like lights. It was one helluva night, and all I wanted was to hold her after watching her run around for hours at the hospital.

I did what I could while I was there, mostly helping people who were struggling to move on their own or helping the staff lift patients from a gurney to a bed. I overheard one of the nurses say they had over fifty emergencies arrive at the hospital within the span of the first hour, and the number had only grown from there until the storm finally let up a little.

But Reese...she was like the goddamn North Star, bright and steady and guiding, trying to hold up the entire night sky.

“I dreamed I was trying to pull you from the car—trying to save your life.” Her body curled closer to mine, and I felt every inch of her softness.

I slid my hand to her cheek, stroking the silk of her skin. “I’m fine,” I rasped and before I could stop myself, I pressed a gentle kiss to her lips.

A mistake because I wasn’t fine. I was in pain. Tortured by having this woman next to me in my bed, knowing that in too few days she would be gone from my life forever.

My house had always been off-limits. For her, it threatened too many complications. For me, it promised too many memories.

It was one thing to have to think of her every goddamn time I opened the door to my shop; thankfully, work distractions were plenty once I was there. But here. At my house—a place I’d always imagined I’d one day turn into a

home—there was nothing that would wipe this memory away.

I pulled back and instantly felt the warm roam of her gaze over my face.

“Decker...”

I groaned. I knew that voice—that plea. I felt its desire all the way in the tip of my damn dick that was already hard and pressed to my stomach.

“You should go back to sleep,” I managed to choke out and then sank my lips onto her forehead in a weak attempt to hide from the want in her eyes.

“I don’t want to sleep right now,” she confessed softly. “I don’t want to waste another moment...” Her hoarse voice trailed off, but I knew exactly what she meant.

I didn’t want to waste a moment with her either. Moments were all we had. Moments were all that life was. And tonight, we’d seen just how quickly those moments could be taken.

Her arm moved from where it was slung over me, the press of her palm gliding from my side, over my abs, and then down lower until she reached—

“Fuck.” The word rushed out with my exhale as her hand closed over my hard cock, the damn thing pulsing and throbbing the instant she touched it.

“You’re not fine,” she murmured, stroking me through my boxer briefs.

After I put her in bed, I’d stripped off my jeans not because I cared about dirt at that point, but because they were stiff from all the mud caked on them.

“Are you doctoring me, Dr. Barker?” I drawled.

“I think I’m going to have to.” Her fingers expertly slipped under the elastic band and stroked my length from my tip all the way to my balls and then back up.

A groan ripped from my chest, and I covered her mouth with mine.

This kiss was different. Everything was different after tonight. The reality of not having her in my life hadn’t hit as hard as when we’d pulled that girl from her car. I wasn’t losing Reese in the same way, but I was still losing her. And fuck me, I didn’t want to lose her.

So, tonight, I kissed her like I intended to keep her. Deep and slow, marking every inch of her mouth with my tongue until she moaned into me. And for her part, she tortured me just as expertly. Her hand moved in firm strokes along my cock, until I was throbbing to be inside her.

“You’re killing me,” I rasped.

“I promise I’ll make it better,” she murmured, and before I could stop her, she bent over me, and all I felt was the brush of her hair over my stomach

before the heat of her mouth closed over me.

A strained sound tore a hole through the center of my chest, pleasure making my hips buck. *Fuck, she was so good at this.* I gripped the back of her head—her hair—but I was powerless to stop her. The suction of her mouth. The flick and drag of her tongue. The light score of her teeth. She made me fucking wild when she sucked me off.

And then the head of my cock kissed the back of her throat, and she swallowed, and I saw fucking stars. “*Fuck, Reese.*” I couldn’t fucking breathe—couldn’t fucking think about anything except how damn bad I needed to come.

And I wasn’t going to do it down her throat. Not tonight. Not in my bed. With a growl, I fisted her hair and pulled her off my cock.

“Decker—”

I covered her mouth—her protest—with mine, driving my tongue along hers as I moved on top of her.

“What are you doing?” she whimpered as I slid lower, my lips stealing kisses on her collarbone and then her nipple and then her stomach. Mud streaked her body, but I didn’t care. I wanted her coming all over my tongue.

I wedged myself between her thighs, lifting one leg and then the other over my shoulders as I eyed her slick pussy.

“Doctoring the fuck out of you,” I grunted and then set my mouth on her.

I feasted on her. Edging her to the brink and back so many times her body was covered in a sheen of sweat, and she clawed at the covers, begging me for more. *And I wanted to give it.* Not just more orgasms. Not just more sex. But more of everything we had together—could have—because fuck me, I’d fallen in love with her tonight.

I knew it—I knew the exact moment: when she walked into my arms when her work at the hospital was done. Like I was her safe place to land.

I wanted to be that place for more than one night. I wanted to be her haven for the rest of my life.

“Please, Deck,” she whimpered, sinking her hands into my hair and pulling me harder against her pussy. “*Please.*”

My eyes flicked up and found hers. Hooded and drunk on desire, but there was something more in their depths. Something that gave me hope... and that was all I needed.

Growling, I pushed two fingers inside her, hooking them into her G-spot as I sucked hard on her clit, and then I watched her come apart.

She screamed as her body began to convulse, and a feral sound erupted from my chest as her release drenched my tongue. God, I could do nothing but eat her all night, but as much as I wanted to do that, I needed to be inside her.

I lifted my head—my torso—but I kept her legs resting over my shoulders as I angled my cock at her entrance.

“Decker,” she whimpered, clutching my sheets as I pushed into her—pushed through her orgasming muscles to claim her.

To keep her.

I wanted to keep her.

It was my only thought as I gripped her hips and started to pound into her warm cunt. She was so fucking tight and slippery, I couldn't fucking see straight. Spots dotted my vision, and my heart felt like it was about to have an attack.

Reese clawed at the bed. At my arms. My hands. Her body had wanted to ride out her first orgasm, but instead of letting her coast down on those waves, I'd whipped them into a vortex. Her cries of pleasure every time I hit her G-spot fueled me, made me slam into her even harder. Like I wanted to reach places in her no one else had gone—*places no one else would go*. I wanted to bury myself in the deepest parts of her where she'd never be able to push me away.

“That's it, baby,” I growled, my cock leaking, it was so damn full and ready to explode. “You should see the way you're taking my cock. How fucking wet you made me.” I groaned. “How stretched you are to fit me.”

“Decker,” she panted. “Decker, please.”

“You're mine.” I drove into her over and over and over again. “Mine, Reese.”

“Yes,” she sobbed, her body trembling uncontrollably.

Just once, I wanted to hear it. Maybe I could let her go if I had the memory of one night when she was wholly mine.

“Say it, baby.” It was my turn to beg. “Tell me who you belong to.”

Her fingers dug into my wrists, holding tight as she started to fall apart.

“You,” she purred. “I'm yours.”

Something erupted in my chest. Something as strong as steel and as hot as lava.

She came, and this time, it was with a scream that reached the heavens. Her body clenched so tight around mine, I didn't get a chance to try and

prepare for my own release before it consumed me. The house rattled with my shout as I drove deep inside her. My cock pumped thick ropes of cum against her womb, and I held myself there until she'd taken every last drop.

I wanted her to have all of me.

It was as simple as that.

Give her a reason to stay.

Carefully, I peeled her legs from my shoulders and tipped forward, snaking one arm around her back.

“Decker...”

“We’re showering,” I rumbled low, hefting her with my cock still lodged in her warmth and carried her to the bathroom.

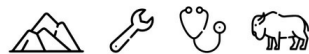
When the water was warm, I brought us under its stream, disentangling our limbs for long enough to wash before I fucked her again. Slower. Softer. And this time, after I lost myself in her body, my release carried me too far from the shores of reality to go back. Too far to do anything except hold on to hope that I wasn’t the only one who felt this way.

Who wanted more.

“Reese,” I murmured when we were back in bed, returning to our positions as though she curled against me every night rather than only this one.

“Yeah...” She let out a sleepy sigh, and I wondered if she was even really hearing me right now—or if she would remember.

“I’m falling in love with you.”



“The swelling is down, and she’s awake—well, sleeping now, but was awake earlier,” Reese said as soon as she reached me.

Of course, the first thing on her mind this morning was last night. Gabby. The hospital. *Work*. I didn’t know how I didn’t see it sooner. Caring for others was her excuse to not care for herself.

And I wanted to be the one to care for her.

“Because of you.”

Her jaw opened and shut, a flush tinting her cheeks. “I did everything I could,” she said slowly. “I’m glad it worked out.”

“Reese—”

“We should go pick up my car.”

I pulled into the parking lot at my shop and put my truck in park. Tension crackled in the space for an instant before she reached for the door.

My hand shot out and engulfed her. “Reese.” My voice was coarse. Lack of sleep and an overflow of emotion coursing through me. “How long are you going to pretend last night didn’t happen?”

“What?” She gaped. “Of course, last night happened. I’m not pretending —”

Screw it.

“I want you to stay,” I blurted out.

She stared at me speechless for so long I wondered if I broke her. But then her head dropped and turned, and right before my eyes, I watched myself lose her.

“I can’t stay, Decker,” she said thickly. “And I can’t love you.”

“Reese—”

“My job—my life is in New York, Decker. I can’t stay.” Her head shook wildly like if she just moved fast enough, the thought wouldn’t be able to stick.

“But your mom is here. Your family. A different life—different life with...” I swallowed over the lump in my throat. “Me.”

She exhaled tremulously. “I can’t.”

My heart clawed at the front of my chest. She looked like a wounded animal, clutching the side of my car like everything I said was physically hurting her.

“Then I’ll move.” That got her attention. “I’ll move to New York—”

“No, Decker, you can’t. Your business is here—your life is here.”

“None of that matters—”

“Of course, it does. How can you think of just up and moving—”

“You know how,” I interrupted her, my tone low and steady. “You know what I said last night, no matter how much you want to pretend you were sleeping.”

She shuddered. “Don’t, Decker. You promised no complications—”

I let out a strained laugh. “Life is complicated, but love is simple,” I rasped. “I love you, Reese, and I want you to stay.”

Her shoulders lowered, and her head hung, a tear staining her jeans.

“Why don’t you want me to love you, baby?” I pressed. “What are you

afraid of?”

“Love makes people weak,” she interrupted, her head starting to shake. “It makes people weak and vulnerable, and I won’t risk that—”

“I’d never hurt you.”

“And what if my dad said that, too?” she charged, and instantly everything became clear. “I saw what loving him did to her. The way it took and took until there was nothing left. Until we were staying with friends because we couldn’t afford an apartment. Until she was working all the time, trying to support us.”

“Reese...” I tried to reach for her, but she pulled back.

“Please,” she said, her voice strained. “I saw what love did to my mom, and I swore I’d never put myself in that position. I refuse to need anyone.”

“You can’t get through life without needing anyone, Reese.”

She blinked, and the single tear that rolled down her cheek was like the nail in the coffin.

“I can try.”

And then she was out of my truck—but I wasn’t letting her out of my life so easily.

CHAPTER

Thirteen

REESE

I WAS SUCH AN IDIOT.

My foot tapped on the linoleum floor of the waiting room. *Id-i-ot.*

It had been four days since the accident—three days since Decker parked in front of his shop and asked me to stay. Three days since the first time I was ever told I was loved by a man.

It didn't hit me until I'd driven away that no man had ever said those words to me. *Because I never let any of them get close.* Until Decker. Somehow, I'd let him in accidentally...*on purpose.*

It had been three days since he'd said those words...and in those three days, Decker had still shown up at Mom's every day. I hadn't even thought about the consequences of our conversation. I'd gotten home to a flurry of worry from Mom, asking for every detail about the accident and what happened at the hospital. Any spare moment, my mind replayed every sweetly tempting promise Decker had made outside his shop. It wasn't until there was a knock on Mom's door that I realized I might've ended our fling, but I hadn't ended our fake relationship.

I couldn't send him away. *I didn't want to send him away.* So, I let him stay and play the part. I let myself linger in the lies like an addict needing another fix of my fake boyfriend.

My throat constricted, thinking of his smile and warmth and the way he made Mom laugh. I'd broken his heart, and he'd kept up our charade. *Like he promised.* And I didn't stop him because I wasn't ready to let him go. I still wanted to feel his touch or the soft brush of his lips when he said good night; I greedily clung to any crumbs of what could be while trying to convince myself that I wasn't starving for him.

I wasn't supposed to be starving for him.

My attention snagged on Dr. Kay being led down the hall by a nurse I didn't recognize. I checked my watch; they'd brought Mom back for her appointment almost twenty minutes ago.

Don't worry about it, Reese. I huffed and turned away.

This was the reason I hadn't gone back to the room with her because it would gut me to see how badly they needed people, and I wanted to help. It

was in my blood—in my bones. It was why I became a doctor. And if I carried any more guilt back to New York with me, I'd have to check a whole other suitcase.

“Dr. Barker?”

My head spun and saw Gabby's mom heading toward me. *Crap.*

After the hospital that morning, I hadn't come back to check on her. I'd wanted to, but it wasn't my place—my responsibility. *And I was afraid of all the things I'd want coming back here.* So, I'd settled for calling and following up with Dr. Kay every day on her status. He didn't ask questions or try to offer me a job, he simply updated me on her status. *Which was quickly improving.*

“Hi, Mrs. Nixon, how are you?” I greeted her with a smile. “How's Gabby?”

She didn't even answer before she wrapped her arms around me in a massive hug.

“Oh...” It took me a second, but then I hugged her back. “Is everything —”

“Fine,” she said and pulled back with a nod. “Good. Gabby is good. I just signed her discharge papers.”

“Oh, wonderful.”

Her eyes glittered with tears. “Why didn't you tell me what you did for my daughter?”

My mouth opened and shut. That night at the hospital, I'd given her the facts. What had happened. What condition Gabby was in. What concerns there were and what potential problems we were monitoring for. But I hadn't mentioned the part where I'd been the one to pull her from the car. Where I'd forced my way onto the hospital staff that night to make sure she got treatment. *It wasn't relevant.*

“Oh, I didn't—”

“You did.” She took my hands in hers. “All week we've heard nothing from the other nurses except that Gabby had an angel looking out for her that night.” She squeezed my fingers. “That angel was you.”

Crap. My eyes fluttered, trying to stop my own tears from collecting. “I was just...” I couldn't finish. It wasn't my job. It was my code—my oath—but it wasn't my job. I didn't work here. I didn't have to stay and help.

“Well, whatever it was, you saved her life,” Mrs. Nixon continued with a small smile as she squeezed my hand. “She's all I have, my Gabby. And I

hope she grows up to be as strong and fearless as you.”

“Oh, I’m not fearless.” My breath exhaled in a rush.

The other woman’s head tipped. “What other word would you use?”

My jaw went slack, and I scrambled for a response before the call for ‘Mom!’ came down the hallway.

Mrs. Nixon turned. “Oh, here she is.” She released my hand and went to her daughter, and I saw the change in Gabby’s expression when her mom told her who I was.

Then I was engulfed in one more hug.

“Thank you,” she murmured.

I let my arms creep around to hug her back. “Of course.”

“Alright, Gabby.” Mrs. Nixon put a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “I’m sure Dr. Barker has things to do today, and we need to get you home.”

I said goodbye to the two of them, their gratitude steeping potently into my skin.

What other word would you use?

The question nagged at me. I wasn’t fearless. So, what was I?

Afraid.

The word whispered through my veins, sending a chill down my spine. It was uncomfortable. Painful, even. But it was true. My entire life, I’d been afraid. Afraid of being hurt. Afraid of being insufficient. Afraid of being on my own. Alone.

Maybe I had been fearless that night to save Gabby, but I wasn’t fearless enough to save myself.

“Reese!”

I blinked and saw Mom and Dr. Kay headed my way. I went to meet them, burying the interaction I’d had with Gabby and her mom down deep and covering it up with a smile.

“How’s the patient?” I teased.

“Doing better every time I see her.”

“Wonderful.” I smiled and bundled my arms over my chest.

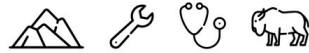
“Reese.” Dr. Kay held me back for a second with a weary smile. “There’s a place for you here. If you want it.”

I inhaled sharply. *If I wanted.*

If I wanted, there was Decker and a job and mom and...a life. *If I was fearless enough to take it.*

“Thanks for taking care of my mom,” I told him with a nod.

I walked out of the hospital feeling like I was leaving with an open wound. I didn't want to think about his offer any more than I wanted to think about Decker's, but it was getting harder and harder to stop.



“Is Decker on his way?”

I looked up from my phone, staring at the message I'd just sent him as though I'd sent a bullet through the text.

You don't have to come over tonight. I'm telling Mom the truth. Thank you for everything.

I had to cut it off—cut everything off. A clean break otherwise I was going to die from a slow bleed. *Death by a thousand cuts* according to Dr. Taylor Swift. My flight was tomorrow, and by the time we got home from Mom's appointment earlier, I knew I wouldn't make it.

I wouldn't make it if I had to see him one more time.

If I had to feel his hand brush mine or that smile of his coast my way.

I wouldn't survive if I had to kiss him one more time for fake's sake.

So, I was cutting all ties in the least harmful way I knew how.

I lowered my phone and walked from the kitchen into the living room where Mom was back in her chair, reruns of *Friends* playing on the screen. She smiled at me expectantly, and before I could talk myself out of it, I ripped the Band-Aid off.

“Decker's not coming over tonight.”

“Oh, is he—”

“We're not together, Mom.”

“What?” she cried out. “What happened? You two were so happy—”

The stricken look on her face mirrored the hollowness in my chest. “It wasn't real.”

“What are you talking about, Reese? Of course, it was real, I saw—”

“Decker's not really my boyfriend, Mom. He never was,” I blurted out, the whole sordid truth tumbling out. “He was just the mechanic who showed up when my rental started leaking coolant. He offered to bring me to the house, and when we got here and you thought he was my boyfriend...I didn't correct you. And then I asked him to pretend.” I inhaled raggedly. “I lied

about having a boyfriend in the city, and I thought it would be easier for Decker to play the part while I was here. You were recovering, and I didn't want to upset you, but I don't have a boyfriend. I don't want a boyfriend—don't need a man. I have enough in my life to be happy, I don't need love." I exhaled deeply. "I'm sorry."

Mom stared at me, her eyes glazing over with tears that I expected for a long moment before her shoulders slumped.

"Oh, Reese. This is all my fault," she said as the tears started to fall.

"No, Mom. Don't say that." I shook my head and went to her side, crouching down next to her chair. "It's not your fault. It was my stupid idea —"

"No, not that." She waved her hand at me. "I knew about that—"

I froze. "What?"

She reached for a tissue, and it was the longest second of my life waiting for her to explain.

"I'll admit, those drugs took me for quite a trip, but I knew that second day that Decker wasn't really your boyfriend," she admitted.

I reeled and reached for the wall, needing something to stabilize me. *All this time...she knew.*

"How?"

"You don't think I know when you're lying to me?" Mom let out a sad laugh. "Honey, it was just as transparent to me as that day on Jenny Lake when you told me your lunch fell overboard."

My jaw dropped.

"I know you gave it to that little boy in your class who didn't have a lunch."

I sucked in a breath, the memory coming back to me as vividly as if I'd gone back in time. We'd run into a boy from my class at the edge of the water. Timmy Fleming. Mom and I didn't have a lot, but I always went to school with a sandwich even if it was peanut butter and jelly most of the time; it was more than what some kids had—like Timmy. It wasn't until I was older that I learned about Timmy's mom's struggles with drugs and addiction; all I knew at that age was that Timmy rarely came to school with a lunch, so I would give him some of mine.

That day, I saw Timmy by the water and went to say hi while Mom rented our canoes. He said his mom was with him, but where she was and what she was doing, I had no idea. All he said was she wanted him to wait

here and count the canoes until she got back; he'd been counting them for hours—before and after lunch. So, I took my wrapped sandwich out of my bag and gave it to him, intending to let him eat half like I always did, but then I saw Mom coming back, and I didn't want her to know I was sharing the food she worked so hard for. So, I told him he could have the whole thing, but he needed to hide it until we were on the water.

He did. And Mom and I went canoeing for a little, and when we got back to shore, I told her I lost my lunch over the side of the canoe.

"You always had the biggest heart. Selfless. Generous." My chin dropped for a second before I felt her hand on my cheek. "And you've always been bad at lying when it's for my sake—when you're doing it to protect me."

I swallowed over the lump in my throat. "Then why didn't you say something? Why did you let it go on?"

Her soft eyes twinkled with something that made my chest tighten. "Because it wasn't a lie to you."

My breath rushed out. "Of course, it was. I just met Decker. By accident. He was never really my boyfriend—"

"The way you looked at him wasn't a lie. That's why I didn't say anything. Because I looked at the two of you together on that second day, and I realized that you'd let him in," she insisted. "Through the tiniest crack in your armor, Reese, you let him through because you felt safe—safe knowing you could pass it off as fake."

"No—"

"And I see the way he looks at you. The way he just stepped right into this charade without question or expectation when you sent him home every night."

The band around my chest tightened. "Mom—"

"The story about how you met was fake, but the emotion was real. The way he described seeing you for the first time. The way he looked at you when he talked about the future. He came when you called. He stayed away when you wanted him away. He didn't have to be here every day. He didn't have to play cards with me and Cheryl. He didn't have to call you every night after he'd gone home." With every word, my heart beat harder. More painfully as she forced me to acknowledge all the things I tried to stay blind to. "He didn't have to take us to Yellowstone. And honey, the way he stepped in between you and the bison, the look on his face—"

"Mom, stop!" I yelled. I had to make her stop. I couldn't take it anymore

—couldn't take the thought of what could be. I stood and backpedaled, crossing my arms like they could stop my heart from spilling out all over the floor.

“Reese—” She maneuvered in her chair, desperate to get out of it and reach me.

“Whatever it was...it doesn't matter. It's over,” I said brokenly. “I'm going back to New York tomorrow.”

“Of course, it matters.” Pain creased her brow. “You're in love with him.”

“No,” I scoffed quickly—too quickly. “No, I'm not. I can't.”

“I see—”

“And why can't you see me, Mom?” I interrupted her. “Why can't you see everything I've done—everything I've become and be happy with that?”

She rocked back, and I lurched forward to catch her, but she managed to stabilize herself.

Guilt burned inside me for lashing out, but I was tired of trying to hide it. “Why is it always about who I'm seeing or if it's serious? I work so hard—I literally save people's lives—but you don't care about that—”

“I do care about that, Reese. I do—”

I shook my head. “If you did—”

“Why do you think Dr. Kay offered you a job?”

I blinked. “Because the hospital needs doctors?”

“No.” She gave me a sad smile. “It's because I've talked to him about you for months. Your accomplishments. Your care.”

“Then why do you keep asking if I have someone?”

“Because you're alone, Reese. You have your accomplishments, but you're alone.”

“And if I'm happy alone?” *How could she not have considered that?*

“Are you?”

How could I not have considered that?

I gritted my teeth. “Weren't you?” I paused and then added, “Weren't you happy without my father?”

Her head fell once more, and her shoulders shook with a silent sob. “I'm so sorry, Reese,” she said when she looked up again, wringing her hands in front of her. “All this time, I wanted to be strong for you—to show you that I wasn't any less—that we weren't any less because your father wasn't in the picture.”

“We weren’t less—”

“But I made you think it was dangerous to want more.” A tear spilled down her cheek. “I didn’t talk about your father because he was my mistake. I fell for him knowing he didn’t want children, and when I got pregnant, I hoped it would change his mind—it didn’t,” she revealed. “I knew he wouldn’t stay if I had you, but I loved you. From that first moment I read the test and knew you were growing, I loved you, honey.”

“Mom...” I didn’t know what to say. I’d never felt like pieces were missing from my past, but with every word, she shaded in details that somehow mattered—that somehow changed everything.

“I know it wasn’t always easy for us, but I was never under any delusions about your father. I knew the risk of loving and losing, and I took it.” Tears slid down her cheeks. “I never wanted you to think you had less or were loved less because your father wasn’t around...but I see now that I went too far. I made you think love was the enemy of safety, and that’s just not the case.”

“It’s not a bad thing to be independent,” I croaked.

“It is when you use that independence to push away people who care about you—who love you and support you.”

“But what if they don’t? That’s the whole point, Mom. What if you trust someone, and they leave?”

“And what if you try to save someone’s life, and they don’t make it?” she countered sharp as a whip.

My tongue felt like a thousand pounds in my mouth. “That’s not the same.”

“What if that young girl decides to never get in a car again? What if she’s so afraid of what happened that she decides to never leave her house? To never see the world around her? To meet people?”

I hope my daughter grows up to be fearless like you.

Fearless.

I opened my mouth, but I couldn’t argue. She was right. I was so afraid of what happened that I never let my heart out. Never let it feel for someone else. Never let it want and ache and grow.

Until Decker.

Mom didn’t say anything. She just waited in that way she had that was both patience and understanding wrapped up in a warm bow, waiting for me to tell her what I tried so hard to hide.

“I’m afraid,” I heard myself whisper thickly.

“Oh, honey.” She shuffled to me and pulled me into her arms. “It’s okay to be afraid. We’re all afraid to go after the thing we really want, but you can’t let a little thing like fear stop you.”

My eyes shut, and all I could think about was Decker. After everything I’d told him—made him promise—he’d still looked me right in the eye and asked for more. He put his heart on the line...*for me*. And I was the one to walk away. I shuddered hard. *What had I done?*

“What am I going to do?” I asked thickly.

“What do you want to do?”

I let out a tremulous exhale and admitted the thing I’d buried the deepest inside me. “Tell him I want to stay.”

Her arms tightened around me. “So do it.”

“But I told him it was over.”

“Honey, that man stared down a bison bull in heat. I don’t care what you told him, I’d bet all my jelly beans he’s not giving up on you without a fight.”

I let out a watery laugh as we pulled apart. “All of them?”

She nodded. “And Cheryl’s, too.”

“You can’t bet someone else’s jelly beans.”

“Oh yes, I can,” she declared. “When love is on the line, you’ve got to risk it all.”

My heart thudded in agreement.

It wasn’t safe to be alone—not anymore. Not when I knew what I could have with Decker if I didn’t shut him out.

I’d fallen in love with my fake boyfriend, but the choice to want what we had was no mistake. And I was going to fight for it.

CHAPTER

Fourteen

DECKER

12B.

There was only one non-stop out of Jackson to New York today, and I was going to be on it.

I stared at the boarding pass I'd printed before folding it and putting it in my back pocket. Buying the one-way ticket was the first thing I'd done after getting Reese's text yesterday—after my heart dropped into my stomach when she'd told me to stay away.

I knew that warning. I knew it was a smoke show the same as every other way she tried to keep me at arm's length, and I wasn't going to back down. We both knew the night of the accident that this was it—we were it. And I was going to keep putting myself in her life until she finally realized that I wasn't going anywhere, that I'd never hurt her, and that all I wanted was the chance to spend the rest of my life with her.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Archer.

"Hey." He picked up on the second ring.

"Hey, I'm heading out of town for a little. Can you keep an eye on my shop?"

"Yeah, of course," he said instantly. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. I'm heading to New York."

"For work?"

"For Reese."

He hummed in understanding. "What's your plan?"

I didn't need a plan because I had a purpose. I was going to bring my woman home.

"To be there," I answered simply because it was the only answer.

Reese had never had a man just *be there* for her. To support. To cherish. To rely on. To love. So, I was going to give her that. I was going to be there until she realized I'd meant every word I said or until she told me she didn't feel the same.

"Good man," he rumbled. "We'll keep an eye on the shop and whatever else you need. Hell, I'll send Ranger over there to work on cars."

I chuckled. He was the only one of them who could learn quickly enough.

“Thanks.”

We hung up, and I went into my bedroom to pack. I had a single duffel bag—the one I’d moved here with—and I filled it with a handful of clothes along with my toothbrush. If I needed anything else, I’d buy it in New York. The only thing that mattered now was getting to the airport.

Within minutes, I’d loaded my bag into my truck and was pulling out of my driveway. I’d just reached the road when my phone rang, and the pit in my stomach opened.

Reese.

“Hello?” I answered immediately.

“Hi.” I could hear the edge in her voice. “I’m sorry to call you—”

“Never be sorry.” I swallowed hard.

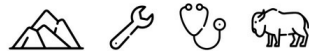
“My rental got a flat on the way to the airport.”

I gritted my teeth. *Shit.* The side of the road wasn’t exactly the place I wanted her to find out that I was going to New York with her, but I’d make it work. What choice did I have?

“Where are you?”

“I just crossed into the park.”

“I’ll be there in ten.”



I saw the Jeep parked to the side in the first pull-off inside Grand Tetons National Park. I squinted. Must be the passenger side that had the flat because the tires on the driver’s side looked fine.

I slowed and pulled in behind her, *déjà vu* bringing me back to the day we met.

Her door opened, and she got out, the breeze catching hair and blowing a strand across her face. The sight of her made my blood heat like it always did, but this time, the look in her eyes hit me straight in the gut.

No turning back now.

“You okay?” I went to her, and it took all my strength not to pull her into my arms.

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s just the tire...” She trailed off and led me around to the other side of the Jeep.

My brow creased, and I looked from the front tire to the back and then back to the front.

“Reese...” I stood up.

Neither of them were flat.

“I’m sorry,” she said and bit her lip. “I lied to you.”

“About the tire?” *I didn’t understand.*

“About not wanting to be with you.”

My heart seized. I couldn’t have heard her right. “What?” I croaked.

She took a step toward me, lifting her chin. “I said I didn’t want to be with you because I was afraid—afraid I couldn’t be independent and in love at the same time. Afraid of what I’d put at risk if I thought about staying.”

It was my turn to take a step closer. “And now?”

“Now, my biggest fear is letting you go.” Her throat bobbed, a single tear trickling down her cheek. “I want to stay, Decker. I want to stay with you.”

My jaw clenched, and I inhaled deeply, my chest straining with the swell of emotion. I’d come here prepared to fight for her—for us. But the fight was already won.

“Say something,” she pleaded softly.

I reached into my back pocket, pulled out the folded boarding pass, and handed it to her. Her eyes went wide when she opened it, her hand pressing to her mouth as a small cry escaped.

And then she was in my arms, her arms twined around my shoulders and her head buried in my neck.

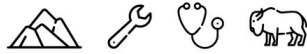
“You weren’t going to get rid of me that easily,” I muttered, pressing soft kisses to her skin.

“No?” she asked, her laugh watery as she drew back. “I thought it was supposed to be easy to get rid of a fake boyfriend.”

I pulled her hips a little tighter to mine so she could feel me—feel how I wanted her.

“Nothing fake about me, baby,” I said and claimed her mouth, kissing her long and deep until she sagged against me, and the little moans she made had me seriously considering laying her down in the back seat and having my way with her. “I love you, Reese.”

“I love you, too.”



Four weeks later...

Four weeks in New York was all I needed of city life to last a lifetime. We'd still flown out of Jackson that day—together—because moving back to Wyoming wasn't the kind of thing Reese could do in a day.

She had responsibilities. Her job. Her patients. And I didn't care if I had to wait four weeks or four months, I would do it if it meant bringing her home with me.

And today, that was what I did.

We flew back to Jackson, headed first to my place—our place—and then over to Arlene's for dinner and poker.

"Gosh darn it," Arlene griped when Cheryl won the hand again and scooped up all the jelly beans to her side of the table. "Are you cheating, Cheryl?"

Our first night back, and already we were back in a routine the both of us had missed: spending time with her family before we'd head back home, and I'd have her all to myself.

"Absolutely not," Cheryl scoffed. "I'm just no longer going easy on you since you're no longer an invalid."

Reese and I shared a look and tried to stifle a laugh.

Arlene was recovering great. She was walking almost completely without a cane and only had one more week of physical therapy left.

"I don't know about that," Arlene grumbled and then turned to Reese while Cheryl dealt the next hand. "When do you start at the hospital?"

"Monday," Reese said with a smile.

We'd stopped in earlier today for her to fill out her paperwork and pick up her badge. I swore the moment we stepped through the doors, her shoulders relaxed, and she looked at me with this sense of calm I hadn't seen before—as though she realized she was exactly where she was meant to be.

"Tim is so excited to have you."

"Tim?" Reese arched a brow.

"Dr. Kay." Arlene blushed.

"Mom..."

"Spill the beans, Arlene. As we've already determined, you've got a

terrible poker face.”

Everyone looked at Arlene who hesitated and then confessed, “Oh, it’s nothing—”

“Dr. Kay asked her out to dinner last week after her last appointment with him.”

“Mom!”

“I know, it’s ridiculous. I should tell him no—”

“Absolutely not,” Reese argued and reached for her mom’s hand, smiling. “I think it’s a wonderful idea.”

“You do?”

My woman’s smile grew. “One worth all the jelly beans.”

I tipped my head. I didn’t understand the reference exactly, but it meant something to the two of them because Arlene smiled warmly and squeezed Reese’s hand.

“Thank you.”

We all picked up our cards, ready for the last hand of the night.

“So, Reese, what do you think your story will be for your kids when they ask how you and Decker fell in love?” Cheryl teased, looking up over the edge of her cards.

Reese laughed, the full and throaty kind that made my blood hum with want, and then she winked at me.

“Accidentally, that’s how.”

“Bullshit,” I called and bent toward her, giving her no choice but to meet my gaze. “You fell in love with me on purpose.”

She grinned and licked her lips. “Alright,” she murmured. “Maybe it was accidentally...on purpose.”

The End

The Country Love Collection

Did you know this story was based on a song?

The idea for this novel came from the country song, “Accidentally on Purpose” by Love and Theft!

Some songs seem to have a story behind them, and that is the premise for my Country Love series.

The Country Love collection of full-length standalone novels is based on some of my favorite country songs. They are all unconnected stories, so there is no reading order and no crossover characters—just unique plots and great characters with their roots in country music.

Want to see the full collection?
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About the Author

Rebecca Sharp is a contemporary romance author of over thirty published novels and dentist living in PA with her amazing husband, affectionately referred to as Mr. GQ.

She writes a wide variety of contemporary romance. From new adult to extreme sports romance, forbidden romance to romantic comedies, her books will always give you strong heroines, hot alphas, unique love stories, and always a happily ever after. When she's not writing or seeing patients, she loves to travel with her husband, snowboard, and cook.

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If you want to be emailed with exclusive cover reveals, upcoming book news, etc. you can sign up for her mailing list on her website: www.drrebeccasharp.com

Happy reading!

xx

Rebecca

