



Big Obsession

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult

Description: She's my son's favorite person.

The curvy, sunshine teacher who never walked away—even when his mama did.

I should be grateful.

Hell, I am.

But gratitude doesn't explain why I look forward to seeing her more than anyone else.

Why I notice every blush, every smile, every soft curve.

Why I want her in ways I have no right to.

Because she's my ex's best friend.

Because if I screw this up, my son loses the only constant woman in his life.

But she's here.

In my house.

At my kitchen table.

Laughing with my kid like she belongs here—because deep down, she does.

One kiss and I know I'm already in too deep.

I've never been the settling-down type.

But for her? For them?

I'd risk it all.

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CHAPTER 1

TUCKER

I'm watching my son run the bases, resisting the urge to clap my hands. Ace just hit a ball over the shortstop's head, and as he slides into second base and gets up, he's smiling ear to ear. I want to cheer, but it's not something you normally do when the team is practicing.

I love seeing him like this. For a long time after his mom walked out of his life, he had me worried. He never laughed, never smiled, and lost interest in almost everything.

I wish I could say I helped him, but it wasn't me. Dolly, his mom's best friend, is the one that brought him out of his sadness. Since the moment her friend left Big Wood, Dolly has made it her mission to help my son find happiness again.

I grip my hands together in my lap as a woman puts her hand on my shoulder. "Ace is doing good out there."

I nod without looking at the single woman sitting next to me. "Thanks," I mutter.

When I first sat down, I was the only one on the bleachers, but soon afterward, I was surrounded by several of the moms from the team.

I lean forward, not wanting to be rude but also not wanting the woman to touch me. As a matter of fact, the only woman I would want to touch me is the one woman that

never would. Dolly. I pull my phone from my pocket and look at it. I expected a text from her because she's usually here. When she can't make it, she always messages me so I can make sure to let Ace know why she isn't here.

She never misses anything that has to do with my son, so the fact that she's not here yet has me starting to get worried.

"So, Tucker, I hear you're riding in the charity ride this weekend. I was thinking of going."

I turn to look at the woman that is staring at me with interest. She's married, and a pit forms in my stomach, so I make sure to mention her husband and son. "You, Gus, and Troy should come to the arena. They always put on a good show with good food and activities for the kids. It would be a great date night for you and your husband."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Dolly walking through the grass. She has her head down as she goes behind the bleachers to her normal spot down the first base side, toward the outfield. I stand up. "Excuse me, ladies."

I don't wait for their response. I follow behind Dolly, and every impure thought I've ever had of her comes to mind. I watch her ass shake from side to side as she walks. She has on jeans and a T-shirt, and her hair is in a ponytail, swinging back and forth. I jog to catch up with her. "Hey, you."

I grab the chair from her arms, and she stops, smiling up at me. "Did you see that hit?"

I reach out and tuck a lock of hair behind her ear just because I want to touch her. "I did see it. I was starting to get worried about you."

She rolls her eyes. "Last day of school and I had bus duty. I had to load up my car

and?—”

I interrupt her. “You should have called me. I could have come and helped you.”

She tilts her head to the side. “It’s fine. I only had to make two trips to get it all.”

I put a hand to her shoulder. “I would have been happy to help, Dolly.”

She avoids my gaze. “I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

I put a finger on her chin and raise it up so she has to look at me. “Honey, you’re always taking care of me and Ace.”

She just blinks up at me. Any time I touch her or try to talk to her one on one, she gets like this. She’s nervous around me, and I’m not sure why that is. When she just stares up at me, I lean down. “Promise me from now on, you’ll call me when you need me.”

“Tucker...” She stops and then pulls back from my hold. “You’re so busy, I’m not going to add my stuff to your list of things to do.”

I put her chair down in the grass and unfold it for her to sit down. She does, setting her tote bag on the ground next to her. At that moment, Ace waves at us, and Dolly makes a big deal of waving back and pumping her hand in the air. She’s letting him know she saw his hit, and my son is practically glowing as he stands on second base.

I lean on the back of Dolly’s chair. “Promise me the next time you need something, you will call me.”

She inhales and lets it out slowly. I lean over her to look at her. “Dolly, promise me.”

“Fine. I promise.”

She doesn't seem happy about it, but I know Dolly, and if she promises something, she's going to keep that promise.

I don't know why it bothers me so much, but it does. I want to be the man that she calls to help her. I want to be someone she can depend on. I understand why she feels like she has to put up a wall between us. Dolly is best friends with Karla, Ace's mom. Karla and I were together one night almost ten years ago. It was a one-night stand. Karla was a buckle bunny, always chasing after the next cowboy, and back then she was offering what I wanted: a night with no strings. For maybe two seconds I considered marrying her when I found out she was pregnant with Ace, but Karla was not interested. Hell, it took a lot of convincing from me for her to even have him, so I knew it would never work out between us.

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For the first five years of Ace's life, Karla tried. She didn't put in a lot of effort, but she did try. I was fine with it. I was happy raising Ace, and even though I hated how upset Ace was when she missed things and didn't come see him, I knew he needed his mom. I tried to get her involved and included her in everything, but after years of her letting Ace down, I was happy when her appearances became few and far between. Now Ace maybe sees his mom once a year, and it usually throws him off for a while.

"You still seeing Trevor?"

I'm standing behind her again, but I don't have to see her face to know I've shocked her. "Who?"

I grip the back of her chair a little tighter. "Trevor. A few weeks ago when you dropped off Ace at poker night, he said you had a date with a guy named Trevor."

"Hmmm."

I lean over to look at her. One, because I want to see her face and second, I want to know how serious this thing is with her and Trevor. I lost three hundred dollars that night because I couldn't concentrate, and the thought of some man having their hands on her has been driving me crazy ever since.

I grip the side of her chair, and my pinky is touching her arm. Just that small touch has my heart racing. "So... Trevor?"

She shakes her head. "I think you got it wrong. Trevor is the class fish. I had to go

and feed him.”

I search her eyes, and she’s telling the truth. I then swing my gaze to my son, who just stole third. Why would he lie to me? That little shit had me thinking that Dolly was dating, but he knew exactly what he was doing. He’s been obvious on where he stands when it comes to Dolly. He always wants to include her when we do things. By God, my nine-year-old is trying to be a matchmaker.

CHAPTER 2

DOLLY

From the moment I pulled into the parking lot, I spotted Tucker. When I saw him sitting on the bleachers, surrounded by all the single and not so single moms, I was clenching my teeth together. I shouldn’t be like this. I don’t have any claim on Tucker. He can talk to whoever he wants. But seeing all those women fawn over him makes me feel things that I have been trying to bury since I first met him all those years ago.

The first time I saw him was at the baby shower I threw for Karla, and he was nothing like I expected. He is nothing like the men that she usually dated, and I’ve been surprised by him ever since. Probably the biggest surprise of all was what a good dad he is. His number one priority has always been Ace.

He asks me again as if he’s wanting to clarify. “So you’re not dating a guy named Trevor?”

“Nope.”

His voice gets lower. “Are you dating anyone?”

I turn in my seat to look at him. There's something in his voice, and I'm wondering if it's jealousy. It sure sounds like it, but I push that thought far away. There is no way Tucker Yates, the number one bull rider in the state, is jealous. I'm nothing like my namesake. I mean, yeah, I'm a good person, but that's about where the similarities stop. I'm flat-chested, overweight, shy, and can't carry a tune to save my life. Nope, there's no way Tucker is jealous.

He is not mine, nor will he ever be. The quicker I come to that conclusion, the better off I'll be.

"Why are you asking? Need me to watch Ace for you while you go out or something? I'm happy to do it."

He grunts. "I was just wondering if you were dating someone, that's all. You never tell me anything about your personal life, and I?—"

I can't help it, I interrupt him. "My personal life? You want to know about my personal life?" I wrack my brain trying to figure out where he's going with this. Tucker is a straightforward kind of guy, and it's not like him to beat around the bush. I sit up a little taller. "Are you worried about me dating someone while Ace is around? I would never have him around some man you didn't know." I sit up a little taller. "Tucker, you have to know that I would never put Ace in a bad situation."

He nods, and for the first time, he seems flustered. "So you are dating someone?"

I rear back. "What? No, I'm not dating anyone."

He nods firmly. "Good."

My forehead creases as I try to make sense of all this. "Good? What do you mean, good?"

He lifts his shoulders in a shrug. “I mean, good. That’s all. It’s good.”

I laugh because he’s being ridiculous. “It’s good that I’m not dating?”

He nods. “Yeah. I mean, of course, you can date. I mean, you should be dating, but not just some random guy or anything. You should date someone you know and like. Someone that respects you and knows your worth.”

I scrunch my nose up like I’m smelling something bad. “You’re starting to sound like my mom.”

He groans. “I’m messing this all up. Look, I was just wondering if you were dating, that’s all.”

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I don't know why, but I can't stop. I've never seen him so uncomfortable before, and even though I should probably let it go, I can't. "Okay, so let's just say, hypothetically, I am dating someone. What would you think then?"

He growls. He literally growls, and it sounds as if it comes from his chest. His nostrils are flared, and he peers at me as if I've just betrayed him or something. His voice is husky. "Then I would say I want to meet this asshole."

I start to laugh, thinking he's being funny, but when his face gets red, I stop. "Wait. Are you serious?"

"Fuckin' A, I'm serious."

My eyes bulge out of my head. "What? Why would you want to meet him?"

He puts a hand on my shoulder. "Because I don't even know this guy and I know he's not good enough for you. Hell, there's not a man on this earth good enough for you, but I just need two minutes with the guy to make sure he realizes what he's got and he doesn't fuck it up."

I can tell how passionately he feels about this by the number of f-bombs he keeps dropping. Before he can get all riled up, even more than he is now, I hold my hands up. "Okay, but I'm not dating anyone, and it's not likely I'm going to be dating anyone soon, so this is a moot point. Now simmer down, cowboy. Let's enjoy this pretty day and watch your son hit some dingers."

He takes a deep breath and lets it out. "Dingers, huh?"

I roll my eyes. “I knew nothing about baseball until this year. I’m learning all the slang. I’ve had my students helping me.”

He looks at me like I’ve said something crazy, but I just turn back to the field.

Now I have to sit here with Tucker hovering over me and act like I’m not affected by him. I need to get focused on why I’m here in the first place. I clap my hands together. “Let’s go, Ace.”

He waves at me from third base, and I can’t help but smile. “You know, I probably won’t be able to do that much longer. It’s going to embarrass him.”

I can’t believe he’s nine years old already. Tucker squats down next to me, and the scent of him surrounds me. He’s smiling. “I think you’ll always be able to get away with it. I don’t think you could embarrass him if you tried.”

I could get lost staring into his eyes. I have to jerk my gaze away from him and back to the field. “So Ace was pretty excited to make this summer team.”

He nods. “Yeah, he’s excited, all right. He was not happy when I told him I was going to hire a babysitter, though.”

My mouth falls open, and then I snap it closed. “A babysitter?”

He nods, looking out at Ace on third. I take the time to really look at Tucker. He’s tan from working outside on his ranch most days. His hair is brown, but it’s been kissed by the sun, and he wears it short. He has the most perfect lips, and I’ve always wondered what it would be like if he ever kissed me. I would probably have a heart attack or die right then. I don’t think I can handle a man like Tucker Yates.

It’s then, while I’ve been daydreaming, that I realize he’s been talking this whole

time. “Yeah, so you know I don’t like to ask Karla’s parents to watch him. They get to see him one night a month, and they’ve never asked for more, so I don’t want to ask them to watch him.”

“Tucker, you’re not hiring a babysitter.”

He blows out a breath and rolls his eyes. “Are you going to tell me he’s too old to need a babysitter? He has to be able to get back and forth to practice, and our ranch is a good twenty minutes from town. If I was only going to be gone a few hours, that would be one thing, but the fact that I’ll be in Jasper or?—”

“I’ll watch him.”

The crack of a bat has us both turning to the field. Ace runs home, and I cheer as he crosses the home plate. Once I realize I’m making a spectacle of myself, I sit down. “I really should tone it down. I need to remember this is practice.”

Tucker is laughing next to me. “I like this competitive side of you.”

I turn in my seat to look at him. “I’ll help out with Ace this summer.”

He’s shaking his head. “I was going to ask you if you would help me with the interviews.”

I wave my hand in his face. “Hello. Earth to Tucker. You don’t need to hire someone to watch Ace. I’ll do it.”

CHAPTER 3

TUCKER

Hell, every part of me wants to take her up on her offer. All this talk about her dating is making me crazy, and I want to do anything and everything to tie her to me and Ace, but this is not the way to do it.

“Dolly, this is your summer break. You can’t spend the whole time taking care of Ace.”

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She shrugs. “Why can’t I? It sounds like the perfect summer to me.” She leans in. “And don’t say it like that. He’s nine. He doesn’t need a babysitter. He just needs a friend to hang out with and take him to all his activities.”

“Right. Well, I just don’t think it’s a good idea, that’s all.”

She pulls her eyes from me, but not before I saw the hurt shining in them. She wraps her arms around herself.

Fuck. She’s the last person I want to hurt, but that’s all I seem to do. I have two options. One, I can let her watch Ace, but I know there’s no way I’m going to be able to keep my distance. Or two, I can hire someone else to watch Ace and then Dolly will be free to do what she wants. Hell, she’ll probably be engaged before the end of the summer.

“Hey,” I say softly.

She forces a smile to her face and looks everywhere but at me. “Okay, so how do you plan to find a sitter? Where are you looking?”

“Dolly.”

She acts like she didn’t hear me say her name and keeps talking. “It needs to be someone trustworthy. I mean, you know that. Forget it, I’m being ridiculous. I’m sure you will pick someone good, and trustworthy, and dependable.”

When she won’t look at me, I pull her from her chair because I can’t squat again.

Riding bulls has done a number on my hips and knees. Dolly stumbles, falling into me, and I catch her. She gasps as her chest leans into mine. I hold her to me, longer than I should, and even though I don't want to let go, I ease my hold on her but keep my hands on her shoulders. She is still close and has to lean her head back to look up at me. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

She blinks. "I know you didn't. Ace is your son, and if you don't want me to spend time with him, then?—"

Shit, I can't do this. "Stop, you know that's not it. I would never try to keep you away from Ace."

She pulls from my hold and steps back. "Then what is it? Why don't you want me to watch Ace?"

"You want the truth?"

She rolls her eyes. "Duh, yes, I want the truth."

I nod and put my hands on my hips to stop from reaching for her. "Fine, I don't trust myself."

She shakes her head in confusion. "What does that even mean? You don't trust yourself?"

I stuff my hands in my pockets. "Yeah, I don't trust myself. If I'm around you, I don't trust myself not to touch you."

Her eyes widen. "Touch me?"

And just like that, I'm hard. Just the thought of touching Dolly makes my pulse race,

and the need to possess her takes over. “Yes, I can barely keep my hands to myself when you’re around, Dolly.”

She’s stunned, but before she can react, Ace is running up to us. “Did you see my double, Dad?”

I turn and give him a high-five. Thank God for the interruption because if Dolly and I continued this conversation, I would have embarrassed myself even more than I already have. “I saw it, and it was awesome! You did great, Ace.”

Dolly chimes in with her own high-five and hug. “You did awesome, Ace.”

He’s smiling ear to ear. “I love this team. We have our first game next week.”

I put a hand on Ace’s shoulder. “That’s great, Ace, and you know I’m going to try and be at every practice and every game, but when I’m working, Dolly is going to watch you—” I cut myself off with a laugh. “I mean, not that you need a babysitter, but she’s going to make sure you get back and forth to practice.”

He looks between Dolly and me with a huge smile on his face. Dolly still looks stunned, and I’m sure it’s from my admission earlier. “Really? Yes!” he says, jumping up and down. “Dad, can we eat pizza for dinner tonight?”

“Sure!” I answer him. “I’ll race you to the car.”

Ace takes off running as I grab Dolly’s chair, fold it up, and hold it under my arm. “Would you like to join us for dinner?”

Dolly is watching Ace as he runs across the grass. “Uh, I can’t tonight. I’m going out for drinks with some friends.”

Instantly I want to ask her about her night, but I realize I've already looked like a controlling, obsessed asshole. I shouldn't question her. I should let her go about her business. She's younger than me, and she deserves a night out. As we're walking toward the parking lot, one of the moms stops in front of me. Dolly tries to keep walking, and I don't know why I do it, but I reach for her hand and thread our fingers together.

The woman, I think her name is Josie, says, "Tucker, can I talk to you for a minute?"

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I pull Dolly against my side. “Sure.”

Josie looks between Dolly and me. “Well, uh, I was wondering if you’d like to bring Ace over for a playdate. The kids can play, and we can get to know each other.”

I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t seem to stop myself. I put an arm around Dolly’s shoulder. “What do you think, honey? A playdate with...” I look at Josie. “I’m sorry, what’s your son’s name?”

Dolly answers for her. “Tate. Uh, I’m sure Ace would love that. Maybe at the next practice, we can talk out the details.”

The woman is stunned by the turn of events. She doesn’t back out, but she does nod her head and then practically trips over herself to get away. As soon as Dolly and I are alone, I point to her car. “Unlock it, and I’ll put your chair in the back.”

She does as I ask, and I put the chair into the trunk of her car. I shut the door and walk up to where she and Ace are standing. Ace is trying to talk her into having dinner with us.

“I wish I could, buddy, but I have plans with friends, and I don’t feel right breaking them last minute.”

Ace takes it well. “Okay. Are you coming to my practice this weekend?”

She nods, still avoiding my gaze. “Yes, I’ll be here.”

They hug, and I put a hand on Ace's shoulder. "Right, well, I guess I'll talk to you later, Dolly."

She nods, and I walk around to open her car door for her. "Don't forget."

She stops next to her car. "Forget what?"

I lean in. "Don't forget that you promised you'd call me if you need anything."

Her eyes light up, and she looks at me questioningly. "You meant that?"

I chuckle, sensing that she's playing with me, but I still remind her, "I meant everything I said tonight, and you promised."

She smiles. "You're right. I promised. I'll call you."

She gets into her car, and I shut the door. I would stand here and watch her drive away if my son wasn't shaking with excitement. "Dad, let's go! I'm starving."

I pull out my phone. "Come on, Ace. I'll order some pizza, and you can eat a slice on the way home."

As soon as I place the order, all I can think about is Dolly and how I wish she was here with Ace and me. I miss her when she's not with us.

CHAPTER 4

DOLLY

I pull my cell phone from my pocket and sit on the couch.

When I was out earlier, I received a text from Tucker asking me to call him when I got home.

It's not uncommon for us to talk on the phone, but this seems different. Hell, since he admitted that he doesn't trust himself around me earlier, it's felt different. I'm still not sure what to make of that, but I'm not going to put much weight into it.

I look at my phone, reading the text again. I'm sure he wants to discuss Ace and our plans on how to coordinate schedules.

I punch the button on my phone to call him, and as it rings, I hold my breath.

"Dolly," he answers.

I sit up a little taller. "Hey, Tuck. I got your message. Everything okay?"

There's a pause, and I'm about to ask him about Ace when Tucker clears his throat.

"Uh, yeah, everything is okay. How was dinner?"

I stand up from the couch and start pacing my small living room. "Good, it was good."

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“What did you eat?”

I pull the phone away and look at it. I’m not sure what to think about Tucker trying to have small talk. “Uh, I had the ravioli.”

When he doesn’t say anything, I keep talking. “Alice had the veal Parmesan, and Teresa had the sampler.”

He lets out a breath. “Good, good. I’m glad you and the girls had a good time. The reason, well, one of the reasons I wanted you to call me is that I wanted to apologize.”

Shock doesn’t even begin to cover it. “Apologize? For what?”

I hear a screen door shut, and I wonder if he’s walked out onto his front porch. His ranch has amazing views, and I’ve spent a lot of time with him and Ace on that front porch. I’ve always dreamed about snuggling next to him on that big porch swing he has.

He clears his throat. “Well, where should I start? I’m sorry for making you feel like you have to watch my kid?—”

“Now you stop right there. You didn’t?—”

He cuts me off. “Let me finish, Dolly. I’m sorry for hitting on you, I’m sorry that I led that woman at the ballfield to believe we were together, I’m sorry that I interrogated you about who you’re dating, and I’m sorry that I was asking you about

your dinner tonight just because I wanted to know if you were with a man.” He sucks in a breath and lets it out. “I’m not sure what’s going on with me.”

I stutter out my question because all I can focus on is one thing. “Wait, you were hitting on me?”

He chuckles, and I swear my nipples harden at the rough sound. “Yeah, I was hitting on you, and if you didn’t know that, then obviously I’ve lost my touch.”

I shake my head as if that is going to clear it. “What is happening, Tucker?”

He pauses for a second. “Uh, I was apologizing. I shouldn’t do this to you. You’re Kayla’s best friend and?—”

I cut him off. “I haven’t spoken to Kayla in a year.”

He grunts. “You didn’t tell me.”

I shrug. “We agreed that we wouldn’t discuss her.”

He groans. “What did she do?”

“Nothing,” I tell him, not wanting to get into it.

“Dolly,” he says, his voice low and husky.

I lean my head back and look at my ceiling. I might as well tell him. “I told her I couldn’t be her friend anymore if she was going to keep hurting Ace.”

There’s silence on the other end of the line. “Tuck... you there?”

The squeak of the porch swing fills the air. “Yeah, I’m here. I’m sorry about your friend, but I want you to know that it means a lot to me and to Ace that you care about him and don’t want him hurt.”

I roll my eyes. Is he kidding me right now? “You have to know I love Ace.”

He’s quick to respond. “Yes, I know. Of course I know.”

Silence ensues again, and I can’t just let it go. “You don’t have to apologize for anything, Tuck. I know it has to be tiring that women throw themselves at you everywhere you go, but you have to know that no one is going to believe we’re together.”

He growls. “Why the fuck wouldn’t they?”

I laugh. “Well, let’s see. You’re the number one bull rider in the state. You have been in Big Wood Magazine for most eligible bachelor and?—”

He interrupts me. “Dolly, the only reason someone wouldn’t believe we were together is because anyone that knows you knows you deserve someone better than me.”

I open my mouth and then snap it closed. This whole conversation is unsettling. All this time, I’ve told myself that Tucker would never be interested in me. Even when I felt like there was some kind of chemistry or something going on between us, I convinced myself it was all in my head. Now he’s telling me that he does want me.

I want to ask him what this all means, but I’m scared to. “So…”

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He chuckles again. “Dolly, I know this all seems sudden, but I want to let you know that I’ve felt this way for a while now. I’ve held myself back?—”

“Why?” I croak.

He stutters for a second. “Well, uh, let’s see. There’s a hundred reasons, but the most important is that I knew how important you are to Ace, and I didn’t want to do anything to mess that up.”

I sit down on the couch and put my head in my hand. “Right. That’s right. I wouldn’t do anything to jeopardize my relationship with Ace.” Deciding it’s time I change the subject, I continue, “Good luck this weekend.”

His silence is telling. The only sound is the sway of the porch swing as it squeaks on its hinges. Finally, he starts to talk. “So, uh, Ace has practice this weekend.”

I nod. “I know. He sent me the schedule. I’ll take him. I know you have that event.”

“Are you coming to watch?”

Surprised, I ask, “Watch you?”

He chuckles. “Yeah, I mean, you could come and pick up Ace from the arena.”

I nod. “Sure, sure. I can do that. I can watch Ace while you ride and then I’ll take him to his practice.”

He huffs, and he sounds frustrated. “I’m not asking you to come and watch Ace. He will be with my team; he’ll be fine. I just thought that you would like to come watch me ride, that’s all.”

Surprised doesn’t even begin to cover it. Of course, I’ve seen him ride many times, but this feels different. He’s never asked me to come and watch him. He surprises me even more when he says, “I’d like to know you’re there... for me.”

A heat flushes through my whole body. I still have a thousand questions, but all I can manage to say is “Yeah, I’ll be there.”

CHAPTER 5

TUCKER

The crowd is going wild. When I was asked to ride in this charity event, I said yes without thinking twice about it. It quickly grew, and since the stakes are higher, the competition is stiff and the attendees have grown. What was once a charity event just to raise a few dollars now has become the event of the season.

“Up next, Tucker Yates. He’s the number one bull rider in the state, ladies and gentlemen, and he’s here to help raise money for the local children’s hospital...”

The announcer drones on, and even though I’m the next rider up and should be doing my routine, I’ve been scanning the crowd for Dolly.

“There she is,” Ace hollers, pointing toward the stands.

I follow where he’s pointing, and there’s no stopping the smile from forming on my face. I knew I wanted her here, but I didn’t realize how much it meant to me until I saw her. My whole body reacts to seeing her. I don’t even try to be cool about it. I lift

my arm and wave at her, and sure enough, she's already spotted us and waves back with flushed cheeks. I know she's not used to attention and may not like it, but she's going to have to get used to it. When people find out she's the object of my affection, they are going to want to know more about her.

I decided after our phone call last night that I was going to have a discussion with her about this. I know there's a lot of what ifs, but I also know that I won't forgive myself if I don't try with her.

"There she is," I say to Ace, repeating his words back to him.

I'm smiling like a dope, and Ace points at Dolly again. "Dad, can I go watch with Dolly? I might need to explain things to her or something."

I laugh at his logic. "I'm sure she would like that." I look at my friend Rick. "Can you walk Ace over to our, uh, friend?"

Ace gives me a weird look. "Dad, I'm nine years old. I can walk over?—"

"I can walk him," Rick says.

Ace groans. "This is Big Wood. Nothing exciting happens in Big Wood."

I resist rolling my eyes. My son is growing up too fast, and I'm not ready for it. "Rick can walk you."

He groans. "Fine. Good luck, Dad."

He fist-bumps me, and I look across the arena at Dolly. I motion for her that Ace is coming to her, and she stands up to look for him.

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My son walks straight to Dolly, and even though I should be focused on what I'm about to do, I know I won't be able to unless I know my son is secure. As soon as Rick and Ace reach Dolly, Rick takes his hat off to talk to her. Jealously flairs inside me, and I grip the banister harder.

My name is called, and I should be getting into the chute, but I stand here, watching Dolly and Rick talk. What the fuck was I thinking sending him over there? He's younger and a charmer. I won't be surprised if he walks back over here and tells me that he has a date with her later tonight. Fuck, if he gets her phone number I'm going to throw him in the chute with the bull.

Focus, Tucker. I repeat the mantra to myself, trying to look away, but I'm only able to once Rick starts walking back toward me. Dolly and Ace are talking, and it's obvious my son is explaining everything to her. She's patient with him, listening intently, and even though I love the thrill of the ride, I would give anything to go over and sit with Dolly and Ace right now. Maybe I'd hold her hand, tuck her into my side. We could share a meal together and then leave, hand in hand. It sounds simple enough, but even now, I can't imagine it ever happening. We have a history. She is, or was, the best friend of Ace's mom.

I had hoped our talk last night would come to some declarations and plans for the future, but she was timid on the phone. I get it. She's nervous about all this, and she doesn't want to mess up her relationship with Ace. I respect it, I really do, but I also can imagine how good we could be together, and so I know I need to stay on course, even if I need to take it slower than I want.

I finally get into the chute and get situated. The bull rocks between my legs, and I

clench my thighs together. I shouldn't ask, but as soon as Rick comes to a stop next to me, I ask him, "What the fuck was that?"

His cheeks are ruddy. "Sorry, man. I didn't realize I was flirting with your woman. Ace set me straight, though." He chuckles. "He wasn't having it. He said, 'My dad wouldn't want you flirting with his girlfriend.'"

I raise my eyes in question and then look over to where my son is sitting with Dolly. Ace stands up and gives me a thumbs-up, so I return one to him. I should have known that Ace knew how I felt about Dolly. I haven't done anything to hide it from him. "Yeah, she's taken," I tell Rick.

He holds his hands up, palm out. "Right, I get it. Honestly, I'm more scared of Ace than I am of you."

I wrap my hand around the bull rope and shake my head. "You probably should be. He don't play when it comes to Dolly." I give a nod to him, and he gives a nod to our team. "Let's ride," I call out.

I nod to the announcer, and the countdown begins. As soon as the buzzer rings, the chute opens, and Warrior springs from the barricade. Instantly the thrill of the ride takes over, and all I can focus on is the bull between my thighs and the dirt under his feet, and I hold on until the sound of the buzzer.

Normally, that's all I think about when I'm on a bull, but today is different. Today, I'm thinking about a certain blue-eyed woman and how I'm going to convince her I'm worth the risk.

CHAPTER 6

DOLLY

I blow out the breath that I've been holding. I've seen Tucker on a bull a thousand times, but it never gets easier. It's in these moments when I'm completely focused on him that there's no hiding my feelings for him. I've loved him for a long time, even when I shouldn't have.

"Go, Dad!" Ace screams next to me as the count gets closer to eight seconds. As soon as the buzzer dings, the crowd erupts in cheers but not me. Nope, I'm still holding my breath until I see Tucker jump off the bucking bull and land on his feet. He takes his hat off and waves it to the crowd. It feels like he's looking right at me, and Ace and I are screaming and waving back at him.

The whole thing lasted seconds, but it feels like it was hours.

I take a deep breath, dragging oxygen into my lungs.

Ace grabs my hand and tugs me back into my seat. "Dad will come to us."

Adrenaline is pumping through my veins, but I sit down next to him. I look at the time on my phone, and we have a little while before we have to leave for Ace's baseball practice. Ace is so excited he can barely sit still, but I can't say I blame him. I know exactly what he's feeling. "My dad was awesome!" he shouts.

I laugh. "He is awesome!"

Ace tilts his head at me. "You like my dad, don't you, Dolly?"

I tense next to him. I'm sure this is not a conversation I should be having with Ace. He knows what my role has been in his life. He has always thought of me as his honorary aunt or something. "Of course I like your dad. He's a great guy." I playfully ruffle his hair. "And you know I love you."

He would normally laugh or something, but his little face is all pinched up in concentration. “No, I mean, I know you like my dad, but do you like him like him?”

“Uh...” I start. I’ve never lied to Ace, but I’m not so sure I should be telling him everything right now. I mean, how do I tell a kid I love his dad when his dad would probably freak out if he knew it? Nope, I need to keep some things to myself. “Ace, you know your dad and I are not dating, right?”

He rolls his eyes at me. “I know that. He still wouldn’t want Rick flirting with you.”

Worried that Ace thinks there’s more to it than that, I gently nudge him. “Honey, he wouldn’t care. We’re just friends.”

His little eyebrows shoot up. “Dolly, my dad really likes you.”

I lean back in surprise as my mind starts filling with questions. Has Tucker talked to Ace about this? Has he told him that he likes me? It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask, but then I think better of it. I’m not going to get Ace in the middle of this. Instead, I act like his statement didn’t just rock my world. “That’s good because I really like you two!”

“There he is!” Ace shouts as he sees his dad walking toward us.

He’s looking at me with a huge smile on his face. As he draws near, I can feel my heart start to race. Tucker Yates is the most handsome man I’ve ever laid eyes on, and when he looks at me the way he is right now, my heart skips a beat. Tucker fist-bumps Ace, and they’re both all smiles. Then Tucker turns to me and pulls me in for a hug. His big, thick arms surround me, and I suck in a breath as all my senses go on overload. Everything about this moment feels right. It’s everything I’ve dreamed it would be and more. I put a hand to his chest and give him a little shove, not because I want this to be over but because I need it to be. If I stay in his embrace much longer,

I'm going to do something foolish like kiss him... or think this is more than it is.

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“Congratulations,” I tell him with my head leaned back to look up at him. His eyes search mine, and there’s a heat in them that I hadn’t noticed before.

He doesn’t let me go far. His hand finds mine, and he threads our fingers together. “Thanks. You know, you might be my good luck charm.”

Damn, it would be so easy to fall head over heels in love with this man. Shoot, who am I kidding? I’ve been a goner for him for a long time. Afraid he’s going to see how I feel, I look away to Ace. “We probably need to get you to practice.”

Ace is looking between me and his dad with a huge smile on his face, but when he realizes that we really should be leaving, he nods reluctantly. “Yeah, I guess.” He nudges his dad. “Can I go say bye to the team?”

Tucker nods. “Yeah, go ahead. We’re right behind you.”

As Ace walks in front of us, Tucker explains, “We’ll let him say bye to everyone, and then I’ll help you get out the back door that leads straight to the parking lot. It will knock off a few minutes.”

I nod as I fall into step next to him. People are all smiles, praising Tucker’s ride as we walk through the people. When we get toward the back and the crowd has thinned out, I look around us. “Do you think we can talk later?”

He takes his hat off and holds it in his hands. “About what?”

I shrug. I definitely don’t want to talk to him about all of this here. Heck, I’m not

even sure what I need to say to him at this point. I can't just drop the bombshell that his son thinks we're an item. No, I need to do that when we have some privacy. My hesitancy has him stopping and pulling me to a stop next to him. "Are you rethinking taking Ace to practices? I know it's a lot to ask and?—"

I cut him off. "Of course not." I look around again. "I just think it's something we should talk about in private."

He smiles and then takes his hand and brushes a piece of hair off my face. "Sure. How about I bring dinner when I pick up Ace?"

I nod. "Sounds good, but is it okay if I take Ace to your house after practice? He's been wanting to show me the new barn cats and... I mean, or you can just pick him up at my house. Whatever you want to do."

A slow, heated smile forms. "Yeah, Dolly. I'd like that. I'd like for you and Ace to be waiting at the ranch for me when I get home."

I scrunch my nose up. "Are you sure?"

He leans toward me. "Yeah, honey, I'm sure I want you on my ranch, in my house. The only thing that would make it any better is if you were in my bed."

I gasp, and he puts an arm around my shoulder. "Close your mouth, honey. I guess whatever it is you're wanting to talk about later we're going to include a conversation about what's happening between us."

I gulp. I'm freaked out but in the best way possible. "Okay," I mutter.

He chuckles. "Now come on. You have a kid to get to practice, and I have one more ride to get ready for."

With his arm around me, he walks us to Ace and then to the back door of the arena. He hugs Ace and me bye with a promise to see us later.

The whole way to the car, Ace is smiling ear to ear, and I can't help it, so am I.

CHAPTER 7

TUCKER

"What time is it?" I ask my team.

One of them calls out, "Five-thirty."

I grit my teeth. We're running behind. I'm the last ride of the night, and as soon as I'm done, I'm going to go and pick up dinner and then head home to Ace and Dolly.

Thankfully, my team will take care of my horse for me. I sit astride Bullet and run my hand through his mane. "I know we haven't done this in a while, but I thought it could be fun. What do you think, boy?"

The horse neighs. I haven't participated in a barrel racing event in a long time, but when I got the call they were short a rider, I thought why not?

When the gun goes off, Bullet starts sprinting. I grip him with my thighs, lie forward, and lean into the curves. The first two barrels are a piece of cake, and from the roar of the crowd, I know my time is good. It's as we're going around the third barrel that things go off the rail. I'm leaning too close, and either Bullet or I trip up.

I remember a collective gasp from the arena... and then everything goes black.

When I come to, I'm surrounded by my team and emergency personnel that had been

hired for the event.

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Everyone is talking at once, and I'm trying to clear my vision to see who is saying what.

"He's coming to."

"He hit his head hard."

"Pretty sure he cracked a rib."

"Dude should stick to bull riding."

I lean up, even though my head is spinning. "Fuck you. Where's Bullet? Is he okay?"

Rick is crouched down beside me. "All right, take it slow, ol' man. You don't want to get up only to fall again. Put your arm around me."

I do what he says, and he helps me to my feet. With every breath I take, my abdomen hurts, making me think that the assessment is correct. I might have a broken rib or two. Hopefully, they're just bruised.

The doctor chimes in. "You really shouldn't move until I'm able to assess you."

I nod my head to the back. "Well, then follow me because I'm not being 'assessed' in front of a crowd."

I force a smile to my face and wave to the crowd. Everyone cheers, and I try not to wince as I focus on putting one foot in front of the other and breathing.

“Bullet?” I ask again.

Rick is huffing, and I’m obviously leaning on him more than I thought. “He’s fine. I got the thumbs up from the vet. He’s good. You took the brunt of it all. Hit your head on the barrel.”

I use my free hand to wipe across my eyes. I guess that explains why everything is blurry. We get to behind the curtains, and I sit down in the closest chair. The doctor is in front of me immediately. He’s shining a light in my eyes, making me follow the path of his finger.

“Hospital,” he declares.

“Fuck that.” I grunt and try to stand up only to fall back into my chair.

The doctor glares at me. “You leave now without getting checked out, you’ll never ride in another circuit here again. You know the rules. You signed the contract. I say you need to go to the hospital, you go.”

I snarl my nose at him. “Fine. I’ll go, but I’m not getting into the back of any fuckin’ ambulance. Rick, give me your phone and go get the truck.”

“You want my phone?”

I open one eye and glare at him. He reaches into his pocket and hands me his phone. “My truck has the keys in it. Make sure someone is taking care of Bullet.”

As he walks away, I lift up the phone and start punching in numbers. The doctor is still hovering, so I stop and gesture to him. “Can you give me a minute?”

He nods. “Sure, but Tucker, I’ll know if you don’t go to the hospital.”

I just glare at him until he walks away. As soon as he's gone, I finish typing in Dolly's phone number.

She answers on the first ring tentatively. "Hello?"

I try to hide my pain. "Hey, Dolly..."

"Tuck, is that you? Oh my God, what's wrong?"

I should have known she'd sense something was off. "I'm fine, honey. Just a bump to the head."

"Oh my God, where are you? I'll get Ace off the field and we'll be right there."

A warmth comes over me. Of course she'd come right to me if I was hurt. That's who she is. "Honey, I need you to listen, okay? Rick is going to take me to the hospital, so I'm not going to be able to pick up dinner."

"Dinner?" she screeches. "You think I'm worried about dinner? I need to know you're okay, Tuck."

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I run a hand over my chest, right over my heart. “I promise I’m okay. This is just part of the contract. You get hurt, you get checked out. I won’t get to ride again until they get a clearance, so I’m just going to go get cleared and then I’ll be home. Can you stay with Ace? Or if you’d rather take him to your house?—”

“Tucker Yates, I’m coming to where you are.”

I try to calm her. “Honey, you don’t know how much I appreciate that you want to be with me, but I promise I’m fine. I’m going to get checked out and then I’ll be home. That way Ace can finish his practice and you guys can eat.”

She blows out a breath. “Fine. After practice, I’ll pick up dinner, stop by my house and pick up an overnight bag, and then we’ll head out to the ranch.”

Even in the condition I’m in, my manhood hardens. “So you’ll stay the night? At the ranch?”

“Yes, is that okay?”

I’m nodding my head even though pain is shooting through it. “That’s more than okay. Look, honey, I gotta go. I’ll see you soon, okay?”

She sounds rushed, as if she wants to say something before she hangs up. “Yes, but if you need anything, anything at all, just call me, Tucker. I can get my mom to stay with Ace while I come there. I just need you to be okay.”

I’ve fallen hard for this girl, and I know it for sure now. There’s no turning back: One

way or another, Dolly is going to be mine. “I promise. I’ll be fine.”

It’s two in the morning when I finally make it home. I had Rick drop me off at the hospital because I knew it was going to be a long wait and I wanted him to go and take care of Bullet for me, so I called my friend Jace to come and pick me up.

I should have known the moment I called him it was a mistake because he’s never going to let me live this down.

We’re almost to the ranch, but Jace still hasn’t let up. “What the hell were you thinking, man?”

I lean my head back on the seat with my eyes closed. “I was dumb to do the barrel racing event. It requires completely different skills than bull riding, and I hadn’t trained with Bullet for any of it. I knew better, but for charity, I couldn’t say no.”

I turn to look at Jace. “What are the chances of you not telling the guys about this?”

He starts to laugh. “I put your phone on silent at the hospital. You already made the group chat, Tuck.”

I grab my phone from the console and start to scroll. From the texts, the guys are all worried and were going to come to the hospital, but Jace told them I was fine. Stupid but fine.

I can’t even get mad about it. My actions were stupid.

Eyes tired, I stop scrolling. “Shit, I’m never going to live this down.”

Jace laughs again. “Nope, you’re not.” He clears his throat. “Ace know what happened?”

“Yep, he called me while I was at the hospital. He was worried, but he’s okay.”

Jace just grunts in response.

We pull into my long drive, and I’m looking at the house. When I see Dolly’s little car parked in front, my pulse starts to pick up.

I’ve been hurt many times. I get bandaged up and go on my way, but this was the first time that I wanted someone with me. And not just any someone: I wanted Dolly.

Something catches my eye, and I see Dolly coming out the front door and walking to the bottom step of the porch. She has on shorts and a T-shirt, and her feet are bare. Fuck, what I wouldn’t give to come home to her every day.

As we get closer, Jace starts to talk. “You ever going to get your head out of your ass?”

I don’t even take my eyes off Dolly. “What are you talking about?”

He points toward the house. “Her. She obviously loves you, and I know it’s complicated and messy, but trust me, a love like that is worth it.”

I know what he’s saying is true, but I still have to bust his balls. “I swear you’ve gotten all soft since you got with Delaney.”

He just chuckles, not taking any offense at all.

When he parks, we get out of the truck, and I walk straight up to Dolly. I wrap my arms around her shoulders, and she instantly buries herself into me. I’m not sure who is clinging to who, but neither of us seems to want to let go.

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Her voice is a muffle. “What did the doctor say?”

When I don’t answer right away, she pulls back enough to look up at me. “Tucker Yates, what did the doctor say?”

“My ribs are bruised, not broken.”

Jace clears his throat and gives me a look. “AND he has a concussion. Someone needs to stay with him and wake him up every hour. No driving for two weeks, until he’s been rechecked.”

“I’m driving,” I state with a shrug of my shoulders.

Dolly pulls from my arms and points a finger at me. “No, you’re not. Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

She turns on her heel and marches up the steps and back inside the house, leaving Jace and me to follow.

As soon as we’re inside the lighted room, Dolly’s mouth drops looking at me. I’m covered in sweat, dirt, sawdust, and dried blood. I know I’m a mess.

She looks so worried. I open my arms again, and she steps against me, holding me tightly. I ignore the pain in my ribs and tell Jace, “Thanks again for picking me up at the hospital. I know you hate leaving Delaney and the kids at night.”

Jace just crosses his arms over his chest. “You don’t have to thank me.” He blows out

a breath, then looks at Dolly and back to me. “You know you’re going to get yourself killed if you keep on like this. You’re all Ace has, Tuck.”

Dolly gasps next to me. “What happened?”

When I don’t say anything, Jace starts to explain. “Tucker here decided after riding a bull, he would try his hand at barrel racing. He and Bullet got tripped up somehow, and Tuck ended up with his head hitting the last barrel.” He looks straight at me. “You could have died tonight.”

I open my mouth and then close it before I finally mutter, “I know.”

Jace points at me. “You want me to stick around? I can let Delaney know I’ll be home in the morning.”

Dolly looks up at me as if she’s asking if it’s all right. “I can stay with you, and I’ll make sure you wake up every hour.”

I nod. “We’re good, brother. Thanks again for coming to get me.”

We walk Jace to the front door, and after waving bye to him, Dolly looks up at me. “Bruised ribs and a concussion? Anything else?”

I pull a bottle of pills from my pocket. “Pain pills, but I won’t be taking any.”

She takes the bottle from me. “I’ll lock them up in the medicine chest just in case.” She looks me up and down. “Okay, first things first, I’m going to help you shower.”

And just like that, I’m hard.

CHAPTER 8

DOLLY

I sound all confident, but inside I'm shaking like a leaf. Tucker could have been killed tonight. I want to curl up in a ball and cry, but I'm going to let myself do that later. Right now, I need to help him get comfortable.

He points at me. "You're going to help me shower?"

I roll my eyes. "Well, it's not like you can do it on your own."

He shakes his head. "Nope. No way, not going to happen."

I point at him. "Okay, cowboy, let's see. Can you take your clothes off?"

He easily undoes the buttons on his shirt, but when he tries to take the shirt off, his face is etched in pain, and it kills me to see him that way. "Look, just let me help you."

I reach for him, and he grabs my wrists. "Dolly..."

We stand here facing each other, his hand wrapped around my wrists. "You're being ridiculous."

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He's gruff, and his voice is strained. "I've dreamt of having your hands on me, and I don't want the first time it happens to be because you have to."

I pull from his grasp. "Look, Tucker, I get it. We obviously have a lot we need to talk about, but right now, we need to focus on you. I'm going to help you get cleaned up, feed you, and then put you in bed. We'll deal with the rest another day."

He turns away and starts walking through the house. I follow behind him, and when he walks into the bathroom, I don't even hesitate. He's gritting his teeth as I reach for his shirt. I help him out of it and then take off his T-shirt. I'm scanning his abdomen and gasp when I see the huge bruise. "Oh, Tuck."

He shakes his head. "It looks worse than it feels, I promise, honey." A tear escapes my eye and rolls down my cheek. "No, baby. None of that. Don't cry."

I sniff loudly, and it echoes in the large bathroom. "I'm sorry. I just don't want to think about what could have happened to you."

He pulls me in, and I'm plastered against his bare chest. The warmth of his body envelops me, and I audibly sigh as I lean into him. His chest rumbles under my cheek as he speaks. "Honey, bull riding is my job. It's what I do, and I can't give that up. But I promise, no more barrel racing. I was foolish to even attempt it, and I promise I won't make stupid mistakes like that again."

I sniff again. "Okay."

I pull back and reach for his belt buckle. He sucks in a breath as I undo the belt, the

button, and then slowly lower the zipper. His hands fist at his sides, and he hisses a breath as I pull the denim down his thighs. His hard manhood is tented under his shorts, and I do my best not to ogle him, but he's pretty impressive. He steps out of the jeans, and then I reach for his shorts. His hands stop me. "Dolly, I'll come right here and now if you have your hands on me." He's shaking his head. "Fuck, I'm sorry. I shouldn't talk to you like this, but with you bent down in front of me, I only have one thing on my mind, and now is not the time."

I stand up with a huff, feeling the heat in my cheeks. "Well, how exactly do you plan on getting these off?"

He gestures to the shower. "Turn the water on, will you, honey?"

I do what he asks, and I hear him jostling around behind me. When I turn around, his shorts are off, he's fully hard, and he's walking toward the shower. I sidestep him, but there's no looking away. He's magnificent. He stands under the water, and I'm not lying, I think his dick twitches as I stare at him.

I force my mouth closed and shake my head. He's watching me stare at him. "I'm sorry... I shouldn't..."

He grabs a sponge and squirts some soap on it before running it across his abdomen. "Don't apologize. I like it when you watch me."

His hand travels down his chest, his abdomen and lower belly, and when he gets to his fully erect manhood, a whimper escapes me. "Uh, I'm going to be standing right by the door. Unless you need my help... I mean of course you don't. You got this. I'll be right here."

I practically choke on the words, and as soon as I step out of the bathroom, I lean against the wall and try to catch my breath.

Only a few minutes go by and I hear the shower go off. I warn him, "I'm coming in."

I walk into the bathroom as he's wrapping a towel around his waist. I pick up the dirty clothes and drop them in the laundry basket and then follow him into the bedroom. "Where's your pajamas?"

He chuckles. "I don't wear pajamas."

I gulp. "Uh, okay. Underwear?"

He nods. "Second drawer."

I grab the shorts from the drawer and walk over to him. I can do this, and I won't ogle him this time. At least that's what I'm telling myself. I stop and bend down in front of him. "Lift."

He grunts and lifts a foot, stepping into the leg of his shorts. He does the other one, and I slowly stand, lifting the material up his legs. He grabs them when I get to his thighs and finishes the job. He pulls the towel off once he's clothed, and I try not to let my disappointment show because yes, I was hoping for another peek.

I grab his arm and lead him over to the bed. I gently push him down, put the TV remote in his hand, and then point at him. "Can I trust you to sit right here until I get back? I'm going to go heat up some food for you."

He sets the remote down. "I'll go with you."

I put a hand on his bare chest. "You should be resting."

He gives me a look. "Dolly, you're in my house. I'm going to take full advantage and spend as much time with you as I can. So you're sorta stuck with me."

I swear my heart does a little flip in my chest. If this man keeps saying sweet things to me, I'm going to get naked and make a fool of myself.

He stands up and walks beside me. "Come with me to check in on Ace first."

I would tell him no, but the way he grabs my hand and laces our fingers together, I know I'd follow him anywhere. We walk silently through the house, up the stairs and down the hallway to Ace's room. The door is ajar, and Tucker pushes it open. We walk into the room, and Ace is softly snoring. Tucker gets a big smile on his face watching his son, and my heart melts a little.

Quietly, we leave the room and follow the same path down into the kitchen. I push him gently into a stool at the island. "Sit."

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I pull out a container from the Italian restaurant that Ace and I picked up dinner from. I put it in the microwave.

“What do you want to drink?”

“Water is fine.”

I fill up a glass with water from a carafe in the fridge and set it down in front of him. He chugs the whole glass, and I laugh.

I grab the carafe from the fridge, pour some more water, and then set it down in front of him.

He sniffs the air. “Is that lasagna from Gino’s?”

I nod. “Yeah. It’s your favorite, right?”

He looks surprised, but before he says anything, the microwave dings. I take it out and carry it over to him with a fork and napkin.

He thanks me. “You shouldn’t be waiting on me, Dolly.”

I shrug. “You’re hurt. Are you telling me if I was hurt you wouldn’t help me out a little bit?”

He scrunches his nose up. “You wouldn’t lift a fuckin’ finger.”

I laugh out loud and then lean against the counter. “Ace was worried about you, ya know.” I shrug. “I was worried too.”

He reaches across the counter and holds my hand. “I know. I promise I’m not going to make decisions like that anymore. I’m not sure what I was thinking, but it was a bad idea.”

I gesture to our hands as he takes another bite. “You going to hold my hand while you eat?”

He shrugs. “You okay with it?”

I don’t even have to think about it. “Yeah, I’m okay with it.”

He does a nod and continues to eat. He insists on cleaning up, and I go through the house, making sure it’s locked up and then follow him down the hall to his bedroom. When he climbs into bed, I sit on the chair across the room.

His forehead creases. “What are you doing?”

“Oh!” I look around us. “I’m going to sleep here so I can make sure you’re okay. Is that all right with you?”

He pats the bed beside him. “No way. You’re sleeping here.”

I stare at him, my mouth dropped open. “Uh, I’m not supposed to be sleeping at all.”

He pats the bed again. “Come on. I’ll set alarms, and we can wake up together.”

When I don’t budge, he leans forward. “Come on, there’s no way I’m going to be able to sleep with you curled up in that tiny chair. This way you can stretch out next

to me, and you won't have to get up to make sure I'm awake."

He is making a point, but when I get up to walk over to him, I make a joke. "Are you just trying to get me into your bed, Tuck?"

He pulls the covers back and smiles at me. "Honey, I've been thinking about getting you into my bed for a while."

I lie down gently next to him. I'm on my side, hands curled under my cheek. "When did you become a flirt?"

"I've never flirted a day in my life."

I giggle. "Oh yeah? What do you call it then?"

He slides his hand across the bed and puts it on my arm. I suck in a breath, and he asks, "Is this okay?"

I nod, and he says, "It's not flirting, it's just telling you what I'm thinking. I feel like I need to break you in slow."

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I want to talk to him about us and about Ace, but I know now is not the time, so I change the subject. “So what did the doctor say?”

He’s quick to respond. “Concussion and bruised ribs.”

I roll my eyes. “You know what I mean. I may not know a lot about concussions, but I do know that you’re supposed to rest your brain. Like no bright lights, no reading, no driving, and?—”

“I have to drive.”

I raise up on my elbow to look at him. “Tuck, you just told me downstairs you’re going to start being safe. If a doctor tells you not to drive, you don’t drive.”

He growls. “The doctor said no driving for two weeks. He’s going to reevaluate me then, and we’ll go from there.”

“And bull riding?”

It’s obvious he’s unhappy. “No bull riding. My manager already pulled me out of the next few rodeos.”

I nod. “Okay, so I’ll drive you around where you need to go the next two weeks.”

He squeezes my arm. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“I want to.”

“I’ll pay you?—”

I cut him off, unable to hide the anger in my voice. “You will not pay me, Tucker Yates. We’re friends, that’s what friends do for each other. I will not be taking your money.”

He holds his hand up. “Whoa, whoa, okay, okay. I just hate to burden you with all this.”

My voice softens. “You and Ace are never a burden. I like...” I hate being vulnerable, but I know I need to say it. “I like spending time with you guys.”

He reaches over and puts his hand on my cheek. “We like it too, honey. Probably too much.”

He yawns, and I shake my head. “You should be resting. Go to sleep, and I’ll check on you every hour.”

“I want to sleep, but I don’t want to miss this.”

Confused, I ask, “Miss what?”

He smiles at me. “You in my bed.”

I roll my eyes, but he’s not done yet. “Come over here. I want to hold you while I sleep.”

I scoot toward him, expecting us to just sleep closer, but he surprises me when he rolls onto his back and pulls me half on top of him. His legs go around mine, his arms wrap around my back, and when we’re settled, I swear he lets out the biggest sigh of contentment. I match his sigh. “Good night, Tuck.”

“Good night, honey.”

CHAPTER 9

TUCKER

As I walk through the house, I can hear Dolly and Ace talking and then Ace laughing. A smile forms on my face, and I stop at the entrance of the kitchen and just take it all in. Dolly checked on me every hour through the night, and if I wasn't so exhausted, I would have taken complete advantage of the situation.

I love seeing Ace and Dolly laughing and talking. When Ace notices me from his seat at the island, he points at Dolly. “Dad, Dolly spent the night.”

I smile over at Dolly, and she blushes. I'm wondering if she's thinking about last night and being in my arms. “Yeah, I know, son. She's going to be around a lot. She's going to be helping us around here.”

“Yes!” Ace pumps his hand in the air.

Dolly points to the chair. “How's your head? Sit down and I'll fix you some breakfast.”

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I shake my head. “Nope, I appreciate everything you’re doing for us, but you’re not here to wait on either of us. Let me help.”

She puts another pancake on the stack. “Well, we can do dishes together afterwards. The food is ready.”

“Everyone want some OJ?”

“Yes!” Ace hollers, and I try to hide my wince but not well enough, it seems.

Dolly nudges Ace. “Remember, honey. Your dad hurt his head last night, and we gotta try to be a little quiet until he heals a little bit.”

Ace starts to whisper. “Oh yeah. I’m glad you’re okay, Dad, and I’m glad you’re going to spend the next few weeks at home.”

I reach over and ruffle his hair. “Me too, son.”

Dolly starts carrying everything over to the table, so Ace and I help her. I soak up every minute of sitting around the table, talking and laughing with the two of them.

We talk about the practice that Ace has later in the day and how much he’s loving the team. And I talk to Ace about the accident yesterday and try to explain to him that I had no business entering a barrel race.

When Dolly tries to clean up after we’re done eating, I tell her that Ace and I are going to take care of cleanup, so she nods her head. “Okay, you care if I take a

shower before we head out to Ace's practice?"

I nod my head. "Sure thing, honey. You can use my shower."

We have two other showers in the house, but I like the idea of her using mine.

When she walks down the hall, Ace looks up at me. "You like her, don't you, Dad?"

I put a hand on his shoulder. "You know I do, son. What about you? You like Dolly?"

He nods. "I love her, and I'm glad she's going to be around here more."

I nod. "Me too."

My phone dings, and I pull it from my pocket. I groan as I read the thread of text messages I've missed. Jace wasn't kidding. He outed me to the guys, and it seems now they're having a field day discussing my life.

"Ace, go brush your teeth and get ready for practice."

"Okay, Dad." I hear him running up the stairs and then I look at my phone.

Walker: So how's the barrel racer this morning?

Brody: Barrel racer, my ass. What was he thinking?

Walker: He obviously wasn't thinking.

Jace: Guys, he's probably still sleeping. I left him in Dolly's capable hands. He's probably milking his bruised ribs and headache.

Brody: She spent the night?

Jace: Yep.

Brody: I told that fucker he needed to tie that down.

I sigh and start typing. “First of all, I have a concussion, not a headache. Second of all, quit talking about me like I’m not here.”

I pause and then add another text. “Fuckers.”

Walker, Brody, and Jace are my best friends. We met because we’re all single dads—well, we were until the three of them all fell in love. We get together weekly to play poker, and it’s a good time to just hang out and relax.

Brody: Did you hook up?

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Jace: I don't think Dolly is someone you hook up with. She's more a put a ring on it woman, I think.

I read the text and wait for the unease to settle in, but it doesn't. I never thought I'd be ready to settle down, but with Dolly, I can totally see it happening.

"I'm taking this slow," I tell them and then type out, "Anyway, I'm good. Two weeks of no driving and no bull riding." I leave out the part where I have to go get rechecked.

Walker: With all seriousness, you and Ace need anything? I can drive you around.

I smile at my phone. "Nope. Dolly offered."

Brody: See? Ring on it.

I type out, "Thanks for the pep talk, guys. I've gotta go and get Ace to practice. See you this week at poker."

Brody: Want to move it to my house since you're hurt?

I type, "Nope. I got it. Later."

I stuff my phone in my pocket and then go in search of Dolly. She's walking out of the bathroom as I walk into my bedroom. "That was quick."

She shrugs. "We need to leave soon."

“We need to talk.”

She opens her mouth and then shuts it.

“I think you and I should?—”

I’m cut off when Ace comes barreling down the hall and stops at my bedroom door.

“I’m ready when you guys are.”

He starts backtracking out of the room. “Come on! We can’t be late.”

Dolly starts to follow him, and I put a hand on her arm. “Dolly, we should?—”

She interrupts me. “Come on, we should go. We can’t let him be late. He has to run if he’s late.”

Before I can stop her, she’s walking out of the room, and I’m having to follow behind her. She and Ace talk the whole way there, and the longer I sit in the passenger seat, the more unsettled I get. I really fucked up last night. For all the obvious reasons but also because I want Dolly to spend time with me because she wants to not because she sort of has to.

CHAPTER 10

DOLLY

As soon as I park, Ace is bounding out of the car and running toward the field.

I get out and meet Tucker at the back of my car. “Your head hurting?”

He shakes his head.

I put a hand on my hip. “Well, something is bothering you. You were scowling the whole way here.”

“It’s nothing.”

I stare at him for a full ten seconds, and when he doesn’t give me anything more, I shake my head. “Fine.”

I reach for the two chairs I have in the back of my car, but Tucker stops me. “I’ll get them.”

I wish he didn’t have those damn glasses on so I could see his eyes, but I get that the sunlight is hurting him. He grabs the chairs and carries one in each hand. I point at him. “You do know you’re hurt, right?”

He grunts. “Yeah, I know. Trust me, I’m trying to forget.”

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I reach for one of the chairs. “Tucker, this is ridiculous. I can carry my own chair.”

He juts his chin at me and tightens his hand on the chair. “Not when you’re with me.”

I put a hand on his chest. “Tuck, talk to me. What’s going on? If it’s your head, you need to tell me.”

He grunts. “It’s not my head.”

I look at him, drawing on all the patience I have as an elementary school teacher, and I have a lot of it.

He blows out a frustrated breath. “You wanna know what’s wrong with me, I’ll tell you. I made a stupid mistake last night, and I don’t like that you, Ace, and everyone else that is going to have to help me out this week is paying for it. I don’t like that you had to drive me down the road today because I want to be the one taking care of you. And I hate that I’m hurt and now I don’t know if you’re here with me because you wanna be or if you feel like you have to be.”

My mouth drops open in shock, and I point at myself. “You think that I’m here out of some sort of guilt or responsibility?”

He just shrugs in response.

I slide my hand to his waist and lean into him. “Tucker Yates, you’re being foolish.”

“Oh yeah? How?” He says it smugly, but I see the vulnerability in his face.

“Well, for starters, I always want to hang out and be with you and Ace. Of all the people and all the places in the world, this is where I want to be.”

His stance softens a little, and I smile up at him. “You say you want to take care of me? Well, it’s the same for me. That’s why I hated you being at the hospital without me. I wanted to be the one that was there for you.” And then as if I’ve given up too much, I add, “That’s what friends do, right?”

I don’t wait for an answer. I shake my head and slam down my trunk. We walk across the parking lot, passing by the concessions and bleachers to get to my normal seat. Tucker moves the chairs around so he’s holding two in one hand and then reaches for me with the other. I’m surprised, but I don’t resist him. We finish walking to my spot, and I feel all the other parents’ eyes on me. I look out onto the field where Ace is watching us, and I know I have to say something to Tucker.

I wait until we’re seated before I get started. I open my mouth, and Tucker reaches for my hand so I slam my mouth shut. His thumb is drawing circles across my skin, and my whole body reacts to his touch. I gesture to our hands. “We should probably talk about this.”

Before he can say anything, I continue, “I know why you’re doing this, but I’m afraid it’s going to confuse Ace.”

He turns toward me. “What do you mean?”

Ugh, I don’t want to say it. “You know what I mean.”

He reaches over and puts his other hand on my bare knee. I’m not going to survive this.

He squeezes. “Why do you think I’m doing this?”

I resist rolling my eyes at him. “Uh, because you are tired of women hitting on you.”

He laughs out loud. “Okay, and why do you think me holding your hand is going to confuse Ace?”

“Tucker, this is what I was wanting to tell you, but it’s never been the right time. Ace told your friend at the rodeo that I’m your girlfriend.”

“Okay.” He nods.

He doesn’t seem upset about it, but I still feel myself getting defensive. “I didn’t tell him that. He thought you wouldn’t want your friend flirting with me?—”

He nods. “Ace is right. I don’t.”

I lean back. “But why?”

I’m waiting for Tucker to get uncomfortable. He’s normally a man of few words, and he definitely doesn’t talk about emotions or anything like that, so I fully expect him to bottle this all up. But he doesn’t seem fazed at all. As a matter of fact, he seems completely comfortable having this conversation now. “Well, first of all, Rick is a player.”

I wait for him to continue. Is that all this is? Is he just trying to protect me? What about now and all the possessive things he’s said to me? There’s more to it than what he’s saying, but should I call him on his bullshit?

I think I will. “So you’re just protecting me? If Rick wasn’t a player, you’d be all right if he asked me out? That would be okay with you?”

His face twists up in anger. He pulls off his glasses and squints as the sun hits him in

his eyes. “Look at me when I say this, Dolly.”

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When our eyes meet, he gruffly responds, “I don’t want you to have any doubts here, so take it all in. Hell, take notes if you need to. You will not be going on any dates with Rick, Bob, Joe, or any other guy that is interested.”

I jut my chin at him. “Well, I’m going to hold off telling you that I’m an adult and can do what I want until you tell me why.”

He leans in. “Because you’re mine.”

CHAPTER 11

TUCKER

She looks so surprised, and I don’t get it. I thought I’d made it plain with my intentions but maybe not. “What’s that look? You have to know I’m attracted to you.”

Her eyes widen, and I don’t stop. “Hell, honey, I was so hard last night with your hands on me, you had to know I wanted you.”

Her cheeks turn red, and she shushes me. “Tucker Yates, keep your voice low. Do you want everyone to think that we... that I...”

I laugh. “What? That you slept at my house and in my bed with me last night? Why, yes, I do want everyone to know that.”

She gasps. “Tucker!”

I pull her hand toward me and hold it in my lap. “You can’t be surprised by this.”

She shrugs. “So you want to sleep with me... but not sleep... you want to have sex with me.”

I growl. “Fuck, baby, you keep talking like that and I’m going to take you back to the car.”

She’s shaking her head, and I can already tell I’m not going to like what she has to say, so I keep talking. “I don’t want to sleep with you. I mean, I do, of course I do, but...”

I let my voice trail off.

“But what?” she insists.

I nod. It’s time. “We both know we can’t just sleep together.”

Her eyebrows shoot up. “We can’t?”

“Honey, you’ve been like a mother to Ace. You’re the closest thing to a mother he’s got.”

She nods her head. “I love him like he is my son.”

I swear, that right there does me in. It’s like a hit to the chest, and I know I’m making the right decision. I want Dolly so badly that I’d wondered if sex and attraction was making me have poor judgment. And I knew she loved Ace, but hearing her say it without any hesitancy at all makes me even more sure about what I need to do.

“And he loves you... so we can’t just sleep together.”

Her silence is not reassuring.

“Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I don’t want to lose Ace.”

I squeeze her hand. “You could never lose Ace. You won’t. You can’t. He loves you, too. I would never try to keep you two apart.”

She points between the two of us. “So when you’re done with me, would I still be able to see Ace?”

I gasp. “Done with you? What the fuck, Dolly?”

She shrugs, her lips puckered. “Yeah, you know, after we sleep together.”

Stunned, I ask her, “You think I’m going to use you to get off? And then what? Just walk away?”

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She pulls her hand from mine and throws both hands up in the air. “I don’t know what to think, Tucker. We’ve known each other for nine years, and it just seems all of a sudden you are, uh, attracted to me, so I’m just trying to catch up.”

I grip my hands together in my lap. I hate having this conversation here. There are kids laughing, people talking in the distance, and so much going on. If we were home or somewhere private, I could be holding her and reassuring her while we had this conversation. “Honey, I’ve always been attracted to you. I’ve told myself it was too messy with you being Karla’s best friend and how you and Ace are so close. I’ve fought this like you wouldn’t believe, but the more time I spend with you, the more I know how good it could be between us.”

She reaches for me, putting her hand on my arm. “Okay, so tell me what I should be thinking.”

“This could never be a one-night stand between us, Dolly. I want to date you.”

She laughs. “You want to date me?”

I don’t know how to put it any plainer than that. “Yes, I want to date you. I like spending time with you. You’re smart, beautiful, sassy, you won’t take any of my shit, you don’t back down from something you believe in, you try to protect my son from people and things that hurt him, you take care of me... and I’ve never wanted a woman as much as I want you.”

She lifts her hand to my forehead. “You were hurt.”

It takes me a minute to get her meaning. “You think me hurting my head is making me say all these things?”

She lifts her shoulders, and I see the insecurity on her face. “You did just hit your head and get a concussion last night.”

I cup her face in my hand. “Honey, talk to me. You know that things were good between us before I hit my head. Hell, I was holding your hand in this very spot the other day.”

She shoves a thumb over her shoulder. “Yeah, because one of the moms was trying to hook up with you.”

I lean toward her. “I didn’t hold your hand because I wanted you to ward off some woman. I held your hand because I wanted her to know I was taken.”

She opens her mouth and then closes it. “But...”

“Dolly, this isn’t a hard decision. You either want to be with me or you don’t.”

She blinks up at me and breaks my heart with three words. “Tuck, I can’t.”

CHAPTER 12

DOLLY

He releases his hold on me and sits back. He puts his glasses back on his face and turns to the field.

“Tucker...” I start.

But he's shaking his head. "I'm a fool, Dolly. Why didn't you tell me? I've been pushing myself on you, hell, I insisted you sleep in my bed last night, and now I find out that you don't want to be with me."

When I just sit here, biting my tongue, he keeps talking. "I mean, I can't blame you. I'm a broken-down cowboy. You can do way better than me."

I'm about to argue with him when another dad comes walking toward us. "Hey, Tucker, I heard about your fall last night. You doing okay?"

Tucker walks over to where the man is standing, and I'm left to myself. I stand up and lean against the fence to watch Ace on the field, but my mind keeps going back to everything that Tucker said to me. I never would have dreamed in a million years that he would be interested in me, and now that he's said it, fear has me in a chokehold.

Tucker keeps talking to the man for the rest of the practice, and I know he's doing it because he needs some space from me. Hell, I can't blame him. I've hurt his feelings. I told him I can't be with him when in reality I want to be with him more than I've ever wanted anything.

As soon as practice is over, Ace comes running, and he and Tucker walk up to me at the same time. "Dad, can we go to the Hog & Hickory to eat?"

Tucker is avoiding my gaze. "Ace, we're depending on Dolly to drive us around, and we've got food at home."

"I'm hungry," I tell him, wishing he'd look at me.

He finally does, even if it's behind his sunglasses. "Are you sure you don't have plans or anything?"

“I’m sure.” I grab my chair, and he folds his up and then takes the one I’m holding from me to carry them back to the car.

Luckily, Ace doesn’t pick up on the awkwardness between me and his father. He talks the whole way to the car and across town to the Hog & Hickory Smokehouse. We grab a booth, and as soon as we sit down, Ace is asking to go play some arcade games with a few of his friends from practice that just walked in with their parents.

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Tucker gives him some money, and after a quick thank you, he's running off.

When we sat down, we were sitting across from each other, so I get up and move around the booth to sit next to him.

He tenses next to me, especially when I put my hand on his thigh. His muscles flex under my touch. "We didn't get to finish our conversation."

He's staring at me. "You don't want to be with me. I got it, and I'm sorry if I pushed myself on you... I can get someone else to drive me around, but if you can keep taking Ace to practices, that would be good because he really likes spending time with you."

"Stop," I say.

When he clamps his mouth shut, I squeeze his thigh. "It's my turn to talk now. I'm going to be the one to take you and Ace anywhere you need to go. And you didn't push yourself on me at all. Anything and everything that has happened between us, well, I was more than willing."

There's a question in his eyes. "But..."

I shake my head. "There's no but. I think if we do this, we should keep it between us. I don't want Ace hurt in all this, and I don't want him to get his hopes up and then be hurt when it doesn't work out."

He leans toward me as he covers my hand with his. "When it doesn't work out?"

“Yeah,” I answer simply.

His voice is deep, and he leans in to whisper into my ear, “I haven’t even kissed you yet, and you’re already planning for this to end.”

I bring my chin up in defiance, but inadvertently I tilt my head so he has better access to my neck. I stutter as he runs his cheek along mine. “Uh, well, I don’t have a lot of experience, so the likelihood of me keeping you is slim.”

He puts a finger on my chin and lifts my face so I have to look at him. “I don’t want to hear about you with other men.”

I smile with a laugh. “It would be a short story.”

“I want you, Dolly. I don’t care how much experience you have.”

He’s stroking my knee with his finger, and I breathe heavily, parting my legs. “I want you too.”

He pulls his hand away. “But I won’t hide what’s happening between us.”

My eyes that were at half-mast pop open. “But…”

He’s shaking his head. “It’s not happening, sweets. If I claim you like I want to, there’s not going to be hiding anything that happens between us. Any and everyone is going to know how I feel about you.”

I grip his arm. “I need time, Tucker.”

He wants to say no. It’s that easy to read on his face. He likes to have things his way, and I’m waiting on him to tell me no, but he surprises me. “Fine.”

“Fine?” I ask him.

He nods. “Yeah, I’ll give you a few days to get used to the idea, but after that, all bets are off.”

“Okay.”

I smile at him, and he brushes a piece of hair away from my face. “When you take us home, can you stay for a while?”

I tense up but nod my head. “I can stay awhile if you want me to.”

He gives me a heated look. “I want you to.”

I take in a deep breath and then let it out slowly. “Yes. Yes, I can stay for a while.”

He threads our fingers together and brings my hand up to his mouth to kiss my soft skin. I want him to kiss me, but I also don’t want our first kiss to be at the Hog & Hickory Smokehouse in front of half the town.

The server comes, and I order the smoked chicken with baked beans, coleslaw, and cornbread. Tucker orders the trio of brisket, pulled chicken, and pulled pork with all the sides, and then he orders a half chicken and mac and cheese for Ace.

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Ace comes to the table when the food is brought out, and even though it's good, I know I'll be taking most of it to go with me because my belly is all flutters, and there's no way I'm going to be able to eat much of anything.

When the check comes, Tucker insists on paying, and as we walk out of the restaurant, he holds my hand, completely forgetting or probably ignoring the agreement we had on keeping this to ourselves.

"You okay?" Tucker asks.

Ace is smiling up at me, and Tucker is holding me close. "Yeah, I'm okay. Never better."

CHAPTER 13

TUCKER

I don't think I've had a better day.

After lunch at the Hog & Hickory, we came back to the ranch, and every moment that I spend with Dolly in my space, at my house, on my ranch, I know it's meant to be. She just fits in perfectly with us, and I don't think Ace or I have ever smiled as much as we do with her.

Ace convinced Dolly to go riding with him, so I stood on the fence at the corral while they rode around. We've played board games, watched television, and we've just laid around. For dinner, I made us all quick sandwiches, and by the time Ace is about to

go to bed, I'm half on edge, wanting Dolly more than ever.

"Dad! Dolly!" Ace hollers down the stairs. "Are you going to come and tuck me in?"

Dolly and I are sitting on the couch when we hear him, and I see the surprised expression on her face. I grab her hand and pull her to her feet. "Come on, you're in for a treat. Wait until you see how this kid tries to prolong his bedtime. He's going to have us read a book, he's going to want to tell us everything that happened today, and then he'll want to talk about what we have planned for tomorrow."

Dolly looks almost giddy and claps her hands together. "Oh, how exciting!"

As soon as we get to the top of the steps, I pull her against me, lean down, and whisper, "Oh, honey, I have more exciting plans for later."

She blushes prettily, and my cock expands in my jeans.

I stand outside of Ace's room. "Go on in, I'll be there in a minute."

She looks at me questioningly, and I gesture to my manhood, then she blushes again. She pats me on the shoulder and walks into Ace's room.

I stand outside and take a few deep breaths, and once I feel like I've got some kind of control over my libido, I walk into my son's bedroom. He already has Dolly sitting on the edge of the bed, book in her lap, reading.

I sit in the chair across the room and listen to her sweet voice as she reads from Ace's favorite book. After two read-throughs, I stand up. "All right, time for sleep, son."

He nods his head. "Dolly, are you going to be here in the morning? We can make pancakes together again."

She doesn't even look at me. "Nope, I need to go home."

"Awww." Ace whines.

She just laughs and tickles his side. "I gotta go home, kiddo, before I wear out my welcome."

Ace looks up at me. "What does 'wear out my welcome' mean?"

I lean down and ruffle my son's hair. "It means that someone has stayed too long and they're no longer welcome."

Ace gasps. "Dolly! You're welcome. I think you should stay forever. We could make pancakes every day for breakfast, and we can go riding and play games."

Dolly looks up at me, and I don't know if she thinks I'm going to be uncomfortable with what my son is saying, but I'm not. "He has a point, Dolly. If you were here all the time, we could have a lot of fun."

"See!" Ace shouts. "Even Dad agrees."

Dolly laughs. "Okay, okay, you guys are going to gang up on me, I see." She leans over and kisses Ace's forehead. "I have to go home tonight, but I'm sure I'll see you tomorrow."

He scrunches his nose up, and there's doubt on his face. Dolly holds her pinky out to him. "I pinky promise. And you know if I make a pinky promise, I keep it."

He hooks his finger with hers. "Love you, Dolly."

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Dolly's voice gets all soft and emotional. "I love you too, Ace."

I lean over and hug my son. "Love you, Ace. See you in the morning."

I have to practically pull Dolly from the room, and it's not until we're back downstairs on the couch that she breaks her silence. "He said he loved me."

I don't know why she seems surprised by it, but I hold her hand and try to talk to her about it. "Honey, you had to know he loves you."

She nods and then shrugs. "I mean, I know he does, but he's never said it, that's all."

The fact she has no idea how much she means to my son and to me makes me sad. She's the most amazing woman I've ever met, and she doesn't have a clue about her worth. "Come here."

She scoots toward me until our legs are touching, but that's not enough. I pat my lap. "Come here."

She points at me. "I'm too big to sit on your lap."

I pat my thigh again. "Dolly, you're talking nonsense now. Sit on my lap, honey."

She's reluctant about it but does as I ask. When she's settled her weight on me, I circle my arms around her. "Baby, I don't know who hurt you in the past, but if I knew who it was, I'd kick their ass. You're the most special, beautiful, generous, loving woman I've ever known. I wish you could see how amazing you are."

She loops her arms around my neck and leans into me. “If you’re trying to get into my pants with your charm and compliments, you can stop now. I don’t need all that, Tucker. I want you.”

A growl escapes me before I can contain it. The fact that she wants me makes me crazy, and I pull her hips against me so she can feel my erection on her hip. “You keep talking like that, I’m not going to be able to hold back, Dolly.”

She presses herself into me. “I don’t want you to hold back.”

I toss her onto her back on the couch and then hover over her. I look into her big blue eyes and cup her face in my hands. “I want to kiss you.”

Her eyes widen. “Okay.”

I smirk at her. “Okay?”

She nods. “Yeah, I want you to kiss me. I’ve dreamt about it enough, I would like to know what the real thing feels like.”

Slowly, I lower myself and softly press my lips to hers. I intended to go slow and take my time, but our lips touching is too much for me to handle. I tilt my head, deepening the kiss, and when she gasps, I stroke my tongue along hers.

She whimpers, and I bring a hand to cup her breast. She jolts against me, arching her back, pressing her breast into my hand. “Yes,” she moans.

I need more. I grab the hem of her shirt and pull it up her body. She raises her head up and looks toward the stairs. “What if Ace comes down?”

I groan and lean my head against her chest. “Fuck.” I raise my head to look at her.

“We’re not having sex tonight, Dolly.”

She raises her eyebrows. “We’re not?”

She wants to, that much is obvious, and she almost looks disappointed. “No, baby, when I take you, I want to have you in my bed all night long and not have to worry about anything else but pleasing you.”

She trembles, and I kiss her lips again. “With all that being said, would you come to my room with me?”

Her eyes widen, and I shake my head, making sure we’re clear. “I want to—I need to—touch you, and I don’t want to do it here and have little eyes see us.”

She nods her head. “Yes.”

I don’t wait a second more. I stand up and help her from the couch. I lead her down the hall and into my bedroom. As soon as we’re inside, I close and lock the door behind us. I sit down on the edge of the bed. “Take your shirt off.”

She grips her shirt in her hands, and there’s a flash of insecurity before she pulls her shoulders back and draws her shirt up her body.

She tosses it to the chair, and my mouth goes dry. “Pants,” I grunt.

She immediately undoes her pants and slowly lowers them down her thighs. When she has them past her pretty, pink-painted toes, she tosses them on the chair with her shirt.

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It's like there's something lodged in my throat until she stands up in only her bra and panties. She puts her hands on her hips. "Now what?"

Shattered, I stutter, "Fuck, you're even more beautiful than I imagined."

She walks slowly to me but stops before I can reach her. When her hands go behind her back, my hands fist in my lap in anticipation. She undoes her bra, letting it fall from her shoulders, and when her breasts are bared to me, I can no longer sit still. I stand up, hovering over her. Like a caveman, I pick her up, and her legs go around my waist. I dip my head and nuzzle my face into her breast before suckling her. Her back arches, and one of her hands goes to the back of my head to hold me to her.

I move from one breast to the other and then lay her gently on my bed.

I grip each side of her panties and pull them down, tossing them over to the chair.

When she's completely naked, my first thought is that I want to keep her right here, naked in my bed, forever. I climb onto the bed and put a hand on each knee, pushing her thighs open.

She grips the covers, and I when I kiss her lower belly, her hips buck. She moans my name, and I have every intention of going slowly, but as soon as I taste her, there's no holding back. I part her lips and lick her swollen folds. When I nudge her engorged clit, she bucks again. I circle her with my tongue and then suck her into my mouth. "Yes," she moans.

I'll never get enough of her, and when her orgasm hits, she writhes under me, but I

don't stop. I softly lick her, tasting her arousal, and when she comes down, I take her to the edge again. Over and over, I kiss, touch, lick, and please her. I don't stop until she's begging me to, telling me it's too much.

Her eyes are hooded as I climb up her body and lie next to her.

As soon as she catches her breath, I pull her to me.

"Wow," she says. "I had no idea."

I kiss the top of her head. I should say something, but I'm speechless. Dolly is an addiction, and I can't imagine letting her go. Not now, not ever.

Her hand slides down my chest, and when she reaches for my belt buckle, even though I want her hands on me, I have to stop her. She raises her head to look at me. "Tuck, I thought?—"

I cup her face in my hand. "Honey, not until you're ready."

She laughs. "I am ready. I think you felt how ready I am."

My cock is practically vibrating in my pants, and I would love some relief, but I'm not going to give in. Not yet.

"If you were ready, you wouldn't want to hide us."

She sits up, pulling the sheet around her, and as soon as she hides her body from me, I know I've said the wrong thing. "Baby, please."

She pulls her knees up under her chin. "I don't think you get it, Tuck. You're you, and I'm me."

I sit up too, not following where she's going. "What do you mean?"

She shrugs and looks so sad, I wish I could take away whatever it is that is hurting her. She won't even look at me. "It means that you are Tucker Yates, most eligible bachelor in Big Wood and the best bull rider in Tennessee!"

I shake my head, not understanding.

She slides from the bed, and with the sheet wrapped around her, she starts pacing. "I'm nobody. I'm a school teacher and have never been out of Big Wood. I'm too loud, too big, too much. You should be with a woman like Karla, not with me."

I stand up from the bed, and when she tenses as I get close, I stand my ground in front of her but don't touch her. "You think I should be with a woman that puts herself before her kid?"

She looks surprised. "What? No, of course not. I meant how Karla is beautiful?—"

I cut her off. "Dolly, you are the most beautiful woman I've ever met. You're letting everything Karla has ever said to you fill your head. She always made you feel less than, and she wasn't nice to you. You can't let her ruin what we could have together. You're the only woman that I've ever wanted to settle down with. I want to be with you. And until you're ready for that, I think—I know—we should wait before we take this any further. I'm telling you right now, baby, once I have you, I'm never letting you go."

Because her standing in my bedroom in only a sheet is too much temptation, I pick her clothes up and slowly start dressing her. I kiss her skin before I cover it, and when she is fully clothed, I'm so hard I could hammer nails.

I ignore the erection in my pants. "Come on. Let's get some ice cream and sit on the

porch.”

I send her outside while I get us some scoops and I take a minute to calm my raging hormones. My cock is pretty pissed at me right now, and I can't say I blame it. I had a woman—my woman—ready and willing, and I put her off. I hope I'm making the right decision.

As I let the screen door slam behind me, I watch Dolly swinging on my porch. She slows it down so I can sit next to her, and I hand her a bowl.

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We eat, listening to the sounds of the ranch, and it all feels perfect. For the first time, my heart feels at ease, and I'll do anything I have to do to keep this feeling because the three of us deserve happiness, and I know we'll get it if we're together.

CHAPTER 14

DOLLY

I'm sitting next to Tucker at Ace's baseball game. I've had two days to think about everything that has happened. I've felt the guilt about the fact that Karla was once my best friend and a part of me feels like I'm betraying her. I've felt the insecurity because Tucker is who he is, and I'm not sure I can be the woman that he needs. But there are two things that have kept me from running away. One is Ace. I always want to be in his life, and the thought of not watching him grow up literally makes me sick.

The other thing that keeps me from running is Tucker. For a long time, I've been in love with him, but I never thought anything would come of it. Can I throw it all away because of fear, guilt, and insecurity? I don't think so.

As if Tucker knows I'm daydreaming, he nudges me. "Ace is up."

I scoot to the end of my seat and holler for Ace.

We watch as he gets two balls and then a strike. I holler out, louder than I probably should. "You got this, Ace. Nobody better, buddy."

He stands a little taller, sucks in a breath, and when this pitch comes, he hits the ball

over the shortstop's head.

Ace rounds first, and it's close, but he slides into second and is safe. I jump to my feet, screaming and pumping my arms in the air.

It's when I realize I'm probably making a spectacle of myself that I look at Tucker, but he's not embarrassed in the least. He's smiling at me, ear to ear, looking at me with pride on his face.

"Did you see that?" I ask him.

He nods. "I did. He did good."

I roll my eyes. "Good? That was awesome!"

He chuckles. "Yes, yes, it was."

We both sit down, and I look curiously at Tucker. He carried our chairs again. I can tell he hates that I'm having to drive him around, but he's not complaining about it.

He hasn't touched me, though. Not once today or since he gave me all those orgasms the other night. I know he's doing what he said he'd do. He's giving me a few days to come to terms with everything, and it may have taken me a while to get here, but I know that I can't let this opportunity pass me by. Even if it doesn't last forever, I should enjoy it for however long he wants me.

I take a deep breath, and then ever so slowly, I slide my hand over to Tucker's lap where his hand is lying. I grab it and lace our fingers together.

He gasps in surprise and then clenches our hands together.

He seems in awe as he looks at me. “Does this mean...” His voice trails off.

I lean over and kiss him right on the lips. I know the other parents are watching us, but I don’t care. If I’m going to do this, I’m going all in. When I pull back, I tell him, “This means that I want to be with you, and I don’t want to hide it.”

I kiss him again, and he whimpers when I pull away, breaking off the kiss. “But I think you should know something.”

He’s smiling ear to ear. “What should I know?”

I playfully smack him. “I’m serious. This is serious.”

He tries to hold back the smile, but he’s not very successful. “I know this is serious. Now tell me so I can kiss you again.”

I suck in a deep breath. I can do this. “I just want you to know that I love Ace?—”

He cuts me off. “I know you do.”

“And... there’s more. I love you too, Tucker Yates. I have for a long time, and well, I just wanted you to know that because, well, I don’t want you to hurt me.”

He leans toward me, taking off his sunglasses. “I love you too, Dolly.”

I gasp and look into his eyes. “You love me?”

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He chuckles. “If you didn’t know that, then I’m really off my game. Yes, I love you. This is serious between us, baby, and I won’t be hurting you. I’m going to love you so hard that you’ll never ever regret loving me.”

We kiss some more, and I can hear the chatter behind me, letting me know that people are talking about us, but I don’t care.

When the game is over and Ace’s team wins five to one, Tucker picks up our chairs, and then we walk over to wait on the players. As we’re waiting, Tucker looks at me worriedly. “Shit, I’m sorry, Dolly.”

I raise my eyebrows. “What is it?”

He gestures toward the couple walking toward us. “I forgot that Gina and Tom were picking up Ace for a sleepover.”

I saw the bag that Tucker put in my car when I picked them up, but I just thought it was something he needed for baseball.

I look toward Karla’s parents and register the surprise on their faces when they see me. I’m holding Tucker’s hand, and my first instinct is to let go, but the fact that Tucker loves me gives me the courage to keep holding it.

They walk up to us, and I’m not sure what is about to happen, but I’m surprised when Gina walks straight up to me and hugs me. “Dolly, we haven’t seen you forever. How you doing, honey?”

Tom pats me on the shoulder and then shakes Tucker's hand.

I stutter at the warm reception, which makes me wonder if Gina knows that her daughter and I are on the outs. "I'm good, Gina. It's good to see you."

Immediately, she starts in. "We've been so worried about Karla. Have you heard from her? She's getting my messages, and I know she's reading them, but she won't return any texts or calls."

I shake my head. "No, I'm sorry. I haven't talked to Karla in over a year."

She seems taken aback by that. "Oh."

There's silence after that, but luckily, Ace comes running up to us. "Did you see that hit?"

Tucker gives him a high-five, and I lean down to hug him. "I saw it! You did awesome, buddy."

He is grinning ear to ear as he looks up at Gina and Tom. "Did you see it?"

Tom shakes his head. "No, son. We just got here."

Ace's face falls, and I hate seeing the disappointment in his expression. He looks at his dad. "Are they taking me out to dinner?"

Tucker tugs on Ace's hat. "No, remember, tonight is the night you spend with your grandparents. We'll go celebrate with pizza tomorrow night."

Ace doesn't look happy, but he agrees. "Okay. Grandpa, are you going to take me home early in the morning?"

He nods his head. "I sure will, buddy."

I point to my car. "I'll go grab Ace's overnight bag."

I pull from Tucker's hold and walk to my car, happy to get away from the awkward moment. I grab Ace's bag, and they're walking toward me, so I stay where I'm at. Tucker and Tom are talking, and Gina has her arm around Ace's shoulder.

I hold the bag out to Ace. "I'll see you soon, Ace."

"Tomorrow? Will you go to have pizza with me and Dad?"

I look toward Tucker, and he's smiling. "You sort of have to. We have to celebrate that hit."

I squat down to hug Ace. "Yeah, I'll be there, Ace."

He hugs me. "Love you, Dolly."

I clench my eyes shut, savoring his words. "I love you too, Ace."

He lets go of me, and after goodbyes, Tucker holds my hand until we get to my car, then opens the door for me.

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I get in and watch as he walks around to get into the passenger seat. “Home?” I shake my head. “I mean, your house?”

He grips my hand. “Yes, home, and I’m hoping you’ll stay the night with me.”

My mouth falls open. “You mean—? You want to...”

He chuckles. “You have a dirty mind, Miss Dolly. I was talking about sleeping, but you obviously have other ideas.”

I feel heat rise in my cheeks, but he takes mercy on me. “I just want to be with you. No pressure.” He pauses, searching my face. “Stay the night with me?”

I want to, there’s no doubt about it. “Okay.”

Excitement spurs inside me as I drive to Tucker’s ranch.

CHAPTER 15

TUCKER

I couldn’t ask for a better night.

Dolly agreed to give us a chance. She told me she loved me, and now I’m lying in my bed with her in my arms.

I promised her there would not be any pressure, and I meant it. Even though I want

more, I'm willing to be patient for it.

Dolly snuggles against me, and her hand goes to my waist. I try to calm my reaction to her touch, but it's easier said than done.

When she slides her hand under my shirt and strokes my bare skin, I tense, and there is strain in my voice. "What are you doing?"

She leans her head up. "I want my turn."

"Your turn?" I ask, confused.

She nods. "Yeah, I want my turn to please you."

I cover her hand with my own. "You don't think tasting you pleased me? It did."

She playfully smacks my chest. "You know what I mean. I want to be together."

"How?" I ask her. I don't know what it is, but I want to hear her say the words.

She sits up and turns to straddle me. When she's sitting astride me, she leans forward. "I want you inside me."

My hips jerk instantly. "Fuck, when you talk like that, it makes me lose all control."

She presses her hips down, and my bulge hits her heated core. "That's good. I want you to lose control."

I flip us over so she's on her back, and it happens so quickly, she doesn't know what to make of it. She's staring up at me wide-eyed. Her hands loop around my neck. "Are you going to make me beg for it, Tucker?"

I lean down and run my nose along her neck, kissing her skin and then whispering in her ear, “No, baby, because I want to be inside you just as bad.”

I help her remove her clothes, and only then do I pull my shirt off and then my pants. I leave my underwear on because I don’t trust myself to be skin to skin with her. But she’s not having it. She puts her hand down the front of my shorts and wraps it around my girth.

My hips pump into her hand. “Oh God,” I moan.

She pushes me back on the bed, gripping me tighter, and when she lowers down the bed and takes me in her mouth, I throw my head back and concentrate on not coming right here and now.

She bobs up and down on me, and it feels so good I might just explode.

My whole body is tense as I try to hold back. She releases me just to take my underwear the rest of the way off, and then she’s planting herself between my legs and taking me into her mouth again. With each stroke, she takes me deeper until I’m hitting the back of her throat. When she hums around me, it’s too much, and I lift her by the arms up my body.

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She settles on me, her legs astride my hips. I reach between us. “Are you wet, Dolly?”

I slide my finger through her folds, tweaking her clit, and she jerks. Her cheeks are flaming red. “I’m always like this when I’m with you.”

I lean up, holding her against me. I search her face. “If I’d known that, I wouldn’t have been able to keep my hands off you this long.”

She loops her arms around my neck. “You can make it up to me now.”

I commit this moment to memory: her breasts pressed against my chest, her pussy, soaking wet, leaking on my lap, the smell of her, the taste of her, it’s all consuming me. I kiss her lips. “I need to be inside you.”

She nods. “I’m on the pill, so I won’t get pregnant.”

I growl at the possession that rages inside me. The thought of filling her with my seed and putting a baby—our baby—inside her makes me crazy. I want that, but we have time.

I lift her up to line up my shaft, and she’s gripping my shoulders tightly. “Go slow,” she pleads.

I nod. “I won’t hurt you.”

She gives me a look, and I try to reassure her. “If I do, I promise I’ll make it up to

you, and you won't even remember the pain."

She looks at me doubtfully, but I lean in and kiss her. Instantly, passion takes over, and her stiff body starts to relax until she's gyrating her hips, seeking the friction she needs.

She lowers herself on me, gripping me like a vise.

The need to pull her the rest of the way is overwhelming, but I'm patient. I reach between us and circle her clit with my thumb over and over until she's working her body, taking me deeper and deeper. When her orgasm hits and she shatters around me, I plunge into her honeyed depths. It only takes three strokes and I'm shooting my release deep inside her.

We're both breathless, but I need to see her eyes and know she's okay.

I lean back, cupping her head in my hands. I push the hair off her face, and she's smiling ear to ear. "Wow."

I chuckle, and she winces because I'm still inside her.

"You okay?" I ask her.

She nods. "I'm more than okay. I'm perfect."

I nod. "You are that, for sure. Look at me, honey."

She opens her eyes, and I see the happiness shining back at me. "I love you," I tell her.

She grins. "I know you do. I love you too, Tuck."

I pull her into my arms, and we sit here, holding each other.

I think we'd both be happy to stay right where we're at, but I'm sure she's going to be hurting.

Slowly, I lift her up and roll her onto her back on the bed. I nuzzle against her, knowing I should get up but content to lie here just like this.

I hold her tighter but don't move. "We should get up."

She groans. "I don't wanna."

I chuckle, tracing my hand up and down her back. "I know, but we can get cleaned up, get a snack, and come right back here."

She lifts her head. "And do that again?"

I laugh out loud. "Yeah. If you're not hurting, we can definitely do that again."

I nudge her hip with my cock, which is already hardening again. Her eyes get big, and she starts pushing away from me. "Oh my God, your concussion. You should be resting, and here I am taking advantage of you."

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I grab her arms and tug her on top of me. “I’m fine. Quit worrying. I promise, I’m okay.”

Her hands go to my ribs. “And your ribs. Oh my God...”

I sit up and hold her before she has a meltdown. “I’m fine, I promise. But I have to admit, it’s nice that you worry about me.”

She looks me straight in the eye. “I love you, Tuck.”

I kiss her. “I love you too.”

CHAPTER 16

DOLLY

I hear loud pounding and raise my head off Tucker’s chest.

“What...?” I ask him.

He kisses my head. “Stay right here. Don’t move.”

I watch him get up and stuff his legs in his jeans and walk out of the room bare-chested.

I can’t help it, I have an uneasy feeling, and when I hear Karla’s voice echoing through the house, I feel like I’m going to be sick.

How could last night be so amazing and now as I listen to her cussing Tucker, it all goes down the drain? Gina must have texted her daughter about Tucker and me being together. That's the only reason I would think she would show up after all this time.

I sit here quietly, listening for as long as I can. Karla's voice echoes through the house.

"Tucker, you never gave us a chance."

"You know Ace would love to have his mom and dad together."

"Dolly forced me out of his life, did she tell you that? I left because she told me to."

I sit and listen until I know I need to do something. I grab my clothes and put them on and try to calm my nerves before I walk out because I know when I do, Karla is going to lose her ever-loving mind.

I walk through the house and get to where my shoes are. I put them on and then walk to the entrance of the living room where Karla and Tucker are standing. Karla sees me before I even say anything. "You! I should have known you would take my family from me. You've always been jealous of me, and you just wouldn't stop until you had my man and my son."

I ignore Karla's tirade. "Tucker, I think you two have some things to discuss. I'll talk to you later."

Karla screams, "You're not going anywhere until you tell Tucker what you did."

I point to myself. "What I did? What is it you think I did?"

"You made me leave. You told me to go and then you stole everything I loved?—"

I shake my head. “I didn’t make you leave. I told you to quit hurting Ace. You made promises over and over and never kept them. I couldn’t watch you hurt him like that.”

She blurts out a laugh. “Right, you destroyed my relationship with my kid. You made him hate me!”

“I didn’t.” I deny it, shaking my head.

Tucker walks toward us. “Now, listen, Karla, you can’t come into my house and talk to Dolly like this. I was never your man, and Dolly is right. You have hurt Ace so many times?—”

Karla starts screaming, and it’s hard to understand everything she’s saying, but I do get the gist of it. “You don’t get it. The reason we are not together is because of her. She turned you against me.”

Fear of losing Ace and Tucker has me backing toward the door. “I’m going to go.”

“No,” Tucker yells, but it doesn’t matter because I’m already down the front steps and running toward my car. I get inside but can’t shut the door because Tucker is standing there, holding it open. “Don’t leave, Dolly. She should go, I want you to stay.”

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I wipe at the tears running from my eyes. “Tucker, I didn’t?—”

He puts a hand on my knee. “Don’t. I know you didn’t.”

I raise my eyes to his. “Maybe she’s right, though. Ace would probably love to have you and his mom together.”

“That’s not happening.”

“Well, you and Karla obviously have a lot to talk about, and you can’t do it while I’m here.”

He squats down. “Don’t run away, Dolly. Don’t let her ruin what we have together.”

I wipe at more of my tears, and it feels like my heart is breaking. “I’m not running. I’m giving you space to handle things, Tucker. When you go back in there, I want you to do whatever is best for you and Ace.”

Karla is screaming from the porch now, and Tucker looks out at the end of his driveway. “Fuck. Here comes Gina and Tom with Ace.”

I grip his hand. “Tucker, you’ve just had a concussion. You don’t need this stress, and I don’t want Ace upset. If I’m here and Karla is screaming the whole time, it’s going to destroy him. Just let me go.”

He blows out a breath in frustration. “Okay, you’re right. I know you’re right. I’m sorry.”

It's like a punch to the stomach, but I hold it in. "Okay. See you."

He stands back and shuts my door. With nothing left to say, I back out of my spot and then drive down the driveway. When I pass Gina and Tom's car, I lift a hand and wave but keep going.

When I look in the rearview mirror, I see Tucker and Karla standing on the porch talking, and the tears come even harder. One night. He was mine for one night, and I've already lost him.

In my head, I start to imagine the future and seeing Tucker and Karla holding hands at Ace's ballgames. Just the thought makes me sick.

I grip the steering wheel tighter. More than anything, I want to turn around and fight for Tucker. I want to refuse to give him up, but I can't do that to Ace. He deserves happiness, and I won't stand in the way of it. Even if it destroys me in the process.

CHAPTER 17

TUCKER

"Karla, I'm telling you right now. I don't want my son upset."

"Our son," she snarls.

I could argue that fact with her because she hasn't been much of a mother. "Fine. Our son. Do not upset him."

I move to the bottom of the steps. I'm barefoot and bare-chested, but I can't do anything about it now. "Hey, buddy," I call to Ace as he gets out of the car.

He bolts toward me. “Dad, was that Dolly that just left? I thought she was going to get pizza with us today.”

I ruffle his hair. He’s completely ignoring the fact that his mother is standing here, and I can’t say I blame him. “We will go see her later.” I gesture up the porch. “Your mom came to see you.”

Gina and Tom stop at the bottom of the stairs. “Hey, Karla,” Gina says. You can tell she’s happy to see her daughter. A part of me is angry because I know Gina is the reason that Karla is here, but another part of me gets it. If Karla wasn’t returning her calls, she did what she had to do to see her child.

I put a hand on Ace’s shoulder and take the overnight bag from Tom. “Ace and I are going to go inside and let the three of you talk.”

Surprisingly, Karla doesn’t make a scene, and Ace and I walk in the house. I want to lock the door and not have to deal with this drama, but I know I need to take care of this now. It needs to end today.

“Dad, what is she doing here?”

I squat down in front of my son, and then as if I just realized how big he’s gotten, I sit on the coffee table in front of him. “I’m not going to lie to you, son. She heard that Dolly and I are dating and?”

His eyes light up. “You and Dolly are dating?”

I nod. “Yeah. You okay with that?” He nods vigorously. “Right, well, no matter what, your mom is your mom, Ace. I want you to know that any time you want to see her, you can. I won’t ever keep you from her.”

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He scrunches up his nose. “Okay.”

The front door slams, and Karla walks in. “Ace, come give me a hug.”

I watch as my son dutifully walks over to his mom and gives her a lackluster hug.

She peers down at him. “Now do you care if your dad and I have a private talk?”

Ace doesn’t hesitate at all. “Nope. Dad, I’m going to my room. Let me know when we’re going to get pizza.”

I look at the clock on the wall and chuckle. It’s nine o’clock in the morning, a little too early for pizza.

My smile drops when Karla moves in front of me. I jump to my feet, and when Karla advances toward me, I move to put the couch between us. “What do you want, Karla?”

She smiles. “You. I want you.”

When she reaches for me, I put my hands up to stop her. “That’s not going to happen.”

She rolls her eyes. “Tucker, you know we were good together.”

Stunned, I blurt out, “We had a one-night stand almost ten years ago.”

“Yeah, but...”

I don't let her finish. “Forget it. I don't know how else to say it but just say it. I don't want to be with you.”

“But...” she starts. She's getting mad, and when she gets mad, it gets ugly, but I can't just stand by and let this go on any longer.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Karla, you signed your rights to Ace over to me. I let you see him because I want you and him to have a relationship, but all you do is hurt him. Over and over, you make promises and don't keep them. You and I will not be together. Not now, not ever.”

She matches my stance. “You know, Dolly acts like a saint, but she's not. She planned this the whole time.”

I want to tell her that she didn't make Karla a bad mother. She didn't force her to walk out on her son and just see him when she felt like it. But I can't say that to her. “Do you want to spend some time with Ace before you go?”

She's looking at me like I'm an evil person. “You really won't give us a chance, will you?”

I shake my head. “No, there's no us, Karla. There never was, and there never will be.”

She grabs her purse and lugs it up onto her shoulder. “Well, I'm leaving.”

I nod. “Okay, do you want to say bye to Ace?”

She scrunches up her nose. “No, it's probably better if I just go.”

I want to yell at her and tell her how much she's missing, but I'm not going to. I just nod my head. "Okay."

She tosses her hair and storms out of the house. As soon as the front door slams, I let out a sigh of relief.

"Ace!" I holler as I'm walking to my bedroom for my shirt.

I get dressed and then meet Ace at the bottom of the stairs. "You ready for that pizza?"

He throws his hand up in the air. "Oh boy, am I! But Dad, I haven't had breakfast yet."

I put a hand on his shoulder. "Pizza for breakfast?"

He runs to put his shoes on, and I slide my boots on. He is so excited, he's vibrating with it. "Dad, what about Dolly?"

I nod and pat him on the shoulder. It doesn't get by me that he hasn't asked about his mom. "I have an idea. Let's get a pizza and take it to Dolly's house to eat. What do you think?"

“Let’s do it!”

We walk outside to my truck, and I’m already thinking about having Dolly in my arms again. This time, she’s not going to walk away. She’s going to know that we stick together, no matter what.

CHAPTER 18

DOLLY

There’s a loud knock on my door, and instantly I think it’s Karla here to yell at me again.

I look in the mirror by the front door, wipe at the mascara on my face, and when I realize it’s hopeless, I drop my hands and hesitantly answer the door.

“Tucker! Ace! What are you doing here?”

I peek outside and see Tucker’s truck, and my mouth falls open. “Did you drive here? You’re not supposed to be driving. You should have called me!”

Ace is holding a frozen pizza. “We wanted to surprise you. Nowhere was open that sold pizza, so we had to buy this, but I love any kind of pizza.”

Stunned, I just stare at him. He tilts his head to the side. “Is this okay? Do you like frozen pizza, Dolly?”

I almost start crying all over again. “Yes, I love frozen pizza.”

He wraps his arms around me in a big hug. “Dad said you guys were getting married and that you were going to move to the ranch and?—”

Tucker leans over and wraps his hand around Ace’s mouth. “Okay, that’s good. Go put the pizza in the kitchen and then watch some TV, big guy. Let me talk to Dolly for a minute.”

He smiles playfully because he knows what he just did, and then takes off running through the house.

I step back to let Tucker in, but instead of walking past me, he grabs me by the waist. “You told me to do what is right for me and Ace. Well, you’re what is right for me and my son, Dolly. You’re the one we love and want to be with.” He nods to where Ace went. “And yes, Ace and I had a big talk on our way over here, and we both agree that you should marry me and move out to the ranch.”

My mouth drops open. “Tucker.”

He interrupts me. “Now don’t go saying no. I’m not saying we have to do all this today or even next week, but maybe after you’ve had some time to think about it, next month?—”

“Next month!” I exclaim in surprise. “Are you kidding me?”

He leans in and whispers, “I told you that once I had you, I wouldn’t let you go.”

I search his eyes. I knew how I felt about last night. It had to be the best night of my life, but I’d wondered if it had been the same for him. “Last night was amazing, wasn’t it?”

He nods. “It was the best damn night of my life, and I want at least another 50, 60, hell 80 years of nights like those.”

I laugh, because how could I not? “I doubt we’ll be doing that when we’re ninety.”

He cups my chin. “Well, I’m sure I’ll want to. I love you, Dolly.”

I lean into him. “I love you too, Tucker Yates. Today, tomorrow, forever!”

“Yes!” Ace whoops from the hallway. “Did she say yes, Dad? Is she going to be my mom, too?”

I put a hand to my heart. “There’s no way I could ever say no to that.”

Ace runs toward us, and the three of us hug. In the entryway of my house, every dream I’ve ever had is coming true. I can’t stop smiling as Tucker and Ace hug me tighter than I’ve ever been hugged.

EPILOGUE

TUCKER

Brody clears his throat. “So uh, Tucker, when are you released to ride again?”

“I was released today.”

He nods his head. “Good, good.”

I look around the table at my friends. These three men are my best friends. We’ve been through a lot together, and I don’t know what Ace and I would have done without them. I love poker night, but tonight we all seem off.

“What are we doing here, guys?” I ask.

There’s laughter from the other room, and we all turn to look at the door.

Jace grunts. “We’re playing poker.”

Walker nudges Brody. “Your turn.”

Brody picks up the cards he hasn’t even looked at yet. “Shit, sorry.”

We all look at our hands as chaos, laughter, running, and squeals sound from the other room. Jace sets his hand down. “I wonder what they’re doing.”

I apologize even though I don’t feel any remorse whatsoever. “Sorry, guys, I guess I wasn’t thinking.”

Ever since Jace and Delaney got together, and Walker and Hailey, and Brody and Winnie and then me and Dolly, on poker nights, Dolly has been inviting all the women to the ranch. I guess they do crafts for the little ones, and she has some of the

ranch hands take Ace and Jace's boy, Eli, horseback riding, and then they finish up with some kind of outside game and eat out on the deck. She says it's wild and chaotic, but she loves it.

From what I'm hearing here, I can see why.

"I guess since the women and kids are going to start coming here on the night I'm supposed to be playing poker, I may need to skip my turn and have us go to one of your houses."

Brody strokes his chin like he's considering it. "Or on the nights you host the poker game, instead of poker we can join in on the fun out there?"

Fuck, I'm glad someone said it. I point a thumb over my shoulder. "You want to go out there? To the party?"

Jace scoots his chair back. "You think there's enough food?"

I nod. "Dolly made extra ribs and chicken since we're here."

Brody scoots his chair back. "I mean, I can eat."

Walker stands up. "Well, what the fuck we waiting for?"

The guys all stand up, and I follow them out of the den and through the house that now is quiet. "Where they at?" Jace asks.

I point to the back. "On the porch it looks like."

Single file, we go out the door, and when we get outside, the kids all come running. I hear Ace and Eli asking us to play wiffle ball with them, Clementine jumps into

Brody's arms and lays her head on his shoulder, and Wren runs to Jace. "Look, Dad, look what I made you!"

Jace is smiling ear to ear at the craft, and all I can do is stand back and take it all in. I never thought we'd get here. We were all single dads, depending on each other to get through the good times and the hard times, and we did our best. One by one, we fell for these magnificent women that have made all of our lives better.

Dolly is smiling at me, and I put a hand on each of Ace and Eli's shoulders. "After we eat, I'll play a game of wiffle ball."

Walker chimes in. "We all will."

Ace and Eli scream their excitement, and as they go to grab all the gear, I walk over to Dolly. "I can't believe you put all this together."

She smirks up at me. "Oh, you mean because you haven't let me go home the last few weeks."

I lean down and kiss her, reminding myself to keep it PG13. "You are home." I kiss her again and moan as I pull away. "You know, your month is almost up."

She looks at me curiously, and I remind her, "Remember, I said you have a month before we get married."

Her eyes round. "Oh, you were serious about that? You haven't asked, so I just thought?—"

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Before she can finish her statement, I drop to one knee.

Dolly gasps and puts her hands to her mouth.

Ace comes over to stand next to me.

“Dolly, I think you know this already, but I’ll say it over and over as many times as you need to hear it. I love you.”

Ace jumps in. “I love you, too.”

“And I would be honored if you would marry me. Will you be my wife?”

“And my mom!” Ace chimes in.

I chuckle, and Dolly starts to cry. “Yes, yes, to both of you, a thousand times, yes.”

As I pull her and Ace into my arms, our friends, our family, all cheer.

I take in a deep breath, as my heart expands in my chest. My life is good, but it’s only going to get better.