







# Brand Me, Cowboy's Second Chance

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**Category:** Romance, Western

**Description:** Fallon

Coming back to Kingridge Ranch after years of playing pro football in Europe should feel like a homecoming. I'm the new head of security and the job should suit me, but somehow nothing feels right. She's missing. Anny was my whole world. She was the fire to my spark and the person who knew me better than I knew myself. All my plans for the future had her at the center... until one day, she cut me off completely. No explanation. No goodbye. So I left her at the ranch and started my new life as a football star for the NFL Europe. Now I'm back, and she's still here, running the ranch with the same fiery sass that always had me wrapped around her finger. But somehow, our paths haven't crossed—yet. I know she's avoiding me, but that won't last. I need answers and she's going to give them to me. Because no matter how much time has passed, Anny is still the only thing I can't live without.

Anny

Fallon was always destined for something bigger than this town and the people in it. That includes me. At least, that's what everyone said. When you hear something enough times, you tend to believe it. When I thought I was pregnant with his baby at eighteen I couldn't be the reason he gave up his dreams. So, I let him go. I cut him off, and let the town whispers of his new life with new women harden my heart. Turns out, I wasn't pregnant. But he wasn't here anymore either.

Now, Fallon's back—bigger, stronger, more infuriatingly handsome than ever. He wants answers. But now that I'm finally moving on, the last thing I want to do is dig up old wounds.

I've built a life here and made my own name on this ranch. I won't let myself fall for him again... no matter how much my heart aches. But when Fallon looks at me like I still belong to him, I feel the walls I built start to crack. Because the truth is, I never stopped belonging to him.

The Kingridge brothers are ranching royalty. But even money, power, and influence can't buy you love.

**Total Pages (Source):** 23

## CHAPTER1

### BOOTS AND BITCHING PODCAST

What's up, Sagebrush Creek? It's your favorite secret podcaster here with another boots-on-the-ground update. Pour yourself a sweet tea... or something stronger. Honey, the gossip is extra spicy today, don't say I didn't warn you.

First stop on our little tour of scandal is the Mane Event Hair Salon downtown. Have y'all noticed the sudden rush of appointments? Those styling chairs haven't seen this much action since a certain stylist and her best friend's boyfriend decided to break them in after her shift... but you didn't hear it from me.

Word on the street is the ladies are lining up for those Texas-sized blowouts and fresh highlights faster than you can say yeehaw. The higher the hair, the closer to the Kingridge boys; at least that's what these desperate darlings seem to think. Nothing says "Notice me, cowboy" like three cans of hairspray and a prayer, am I right?

Speaking of Kingridge royalty, our prodigal son Fallon made quite the appearance at that little wedding party they threw in the pole barn last weekend. For someone who's supposed to be enjoying his homecoming, he sure kept to himself. The man was skulking around the back of the room with that European cologne wafting behind him.

Makes you wonder if he was looking for someone special. If he was, she sure made a point of avoiding him. But I'm sure that's just me not letting sleeping dogs lie. And either way, there's still no ring on his finger. As far as I'm concerned, it's still

anyone's game. But between you and me, sugar, I'd put your money on someone who hasn't already broken his heart.

You didn't hear it from me, but Sagebrush Creek might be on the brink of another Kingridge love story. And this time, it ain't a city girl with a secret past. Nope. It's a hometown girl who never stopped loving him.

Speaking of broken hearts and family feuds... have y'all heard about Dawson Stone? The man got a real Texas welcome, bless his heart. Even those buns in the Reagan sisters' ovens can't seem to bring him into the fold with his new Kingridge brothers-in-law. Instead of playing nice with our small town royalty, our stubborn little Dawson has taken to carving out his own ranch on that pitiful plot of land up the road.

Dawson, sugar, let me give you some free advice... don't start a fight you ain't gonna win. Embrace those in-laws, and life might just get a little easier. Because if you ain't a Kingridge in this town, you might as well be shoveling manure with a teaspoon. And if you ain't from Texas, you ain't never gonna be from Texas. Those Kingridge boys are as Texas as rattlesnakes and oil wells, so play nice.

Meanwhile, it seems like playing nice isn't in Mayor Bellcourt's wheelhouse. He's been all over TV and social media with small town celebrity Brandi Rose and her camera crew by his side. Brandi doesn't age, but Mr. Mayor has seen better days. He's there, face pinched and hat in hand, begging for donations to help his so-called community improvement project.

Anyone can see it looks like he's fixing to put that highway straight through the eastern edge of Kingridge Ranch. I guess nobody told him that having a title doesn't mean squat when you're going up against the family that's been bankrolling this town since cattle first hit these plains.

There ain't a soul in Sagebrush Creek ready to stand against those Kingridge boys. Not even our dear mayor with his fancy suits. But the man's like a chihuahua yapping at a bull. I, for one, am looking forward to seeing them all in one room and on Kingridge turf, no less.

That's right, folks, the annual Farm-to-Table Gala and Auction is finally here. This Saturday is the big night. I wouldn't miss it for all the sweet tea in Texas. They're saying it's about raising money for our community. But for my enterprising Sagebrush Creek women, it's a chance to come into contact with the final four Kingridge brothers who ain't locked down yet.

Alexander, Bowen, and Callum might be off the market. But that leaves Geoffrey with his strong, silent cowboy routine. Holden with those smoldering looks and that silver tongue. Fallon, of course, fresh from that European football contract. I'd bet my hat that even Danner will be on parade... we might as well include him since he's unofficially been crowned a Kingridge brother.

Looks like that boy's here to stay. Thanks to one night between Pa and a mystery woman thirty-something years ago, there's a wild card on the table. Lucky us. I've said it before, but between you and me, I'd love to see a local girl turn up with the Kingridge crown for once.

Put on your best boots, ladies. Bring your wallets for the auction and your wiles for the after-party. There's still plenty of Kingridge royalty to go around. Rest assured, I'll be there hiding in plain sight. But don't worry, them boys aren't for me.

I'll spend my night sipping champagne and catching every whispered secret. Because in Sagebrush Creek, the walls have ears, and those ears belong to me.

Until next time, darlings. This is your bitch with boots on the ground, signing off.

## CHAPTER 2

### FALLON

A literal parade of women saunters past me. They toss smiles and not-so-subtle glances my way like I'm the prize pig at the county fair. It feels like a syrupy sweet, relentless chokehold. I've gotten used to this kind of thing happening in Sagebrush Creek. But this particular brand of flirting seems to have extended beyond the gates of Kingridge tonight.

I've put miles between myself and my home. Travis' Tavern out here in Findlay might not be fancy, but it does the trick. The lighting is dim and the drinks are cold. Even better, there are fewer Sagebrush Creek skeletons lying around this closet.

But there's no escaping the weight of my last name. It seems that whispers of my homecoming have traveled far and wide through small town Texas. Fallon Kingridge is freshly back from NFL Europe. He's twenty-nine. Still no ring...And apparently that makes me fair game.

At another time in my life, I'd have taken full advantage of every lingering smile and eyelash batting in my direction. But tonight, I don't want anything to do with it. I take a sip of my beer and anchor to my corner of the bar.

"This is where you're hiding out?"

I turn in surprise to see my newly discovered half-brother, Danner.

"Yeah, unsuccessfully, I guess," I grunt in reply.

My affect doesn't faze him. Danner slides onto the barstool beside me like he was invited... He wasn't.

"You know there's plenty of booze back at the Kingridge barn." Danner lifts two fingers and orders another round.



## Page 2

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"I know. I needed a break. Not all of us can blend in over there the way you do." I let out a humorless chuckle, but there's no bite behind my words.

The truth is, I'm the only one of the original Kingridge brothers who doesn't mind Danner. The dude's odd as hell. He talks like a yoga instructor and thinks goats have souls, but I'm not worried about that. I'm not exactly reentering life at the ranch seamlessly myself.

"Ha, me too. Bowen, Geoffrey, and Holden only have one, maybe two drinks in them before they're ready to fight me. Thought I'd give myself the night off from that chaos and find out what Findlay Farms is all about. This is a nice place. Not as nice as Kingridge, but still."

"You bet your ass it's not," I smirk. "Question for you... Do you think it's the dumbass trucker hat that makes our brothers want to swing on you or the Cheshire cat grin you insist on?"

Danner shrugs. "Probably a bit of both." He lets out a chuckle.

He launches into a ramble about installing solar panels behind the chicken coops. All of a sudden, it's clear to me that this is the reason our brothers want to swing on him. But I let him talk anyway. I don't mind the company and it's easy enough to tune him out.

My brain is on a loop with thoughts of her. It has been from the moment my plane went wheels up in Europe. Why haven't I seen her? Where is she hiding? What, or god forbid, who is keeping her from me? It's been loud in my head for a long while. But

the moment I stepped foot back in Sagebrush Creek, it got worse. That town screams Anny.

Stepping into a position as head of security should have been like muscle memory. Watch the screens. Monitor the property. Deal with people who step out of line. Protect the livestock. Repeat. Honestly, it's not that different from playing on the offensive line. But everything feels off. It's like I'm walking through a house that used to be mine, only someone rearranged all the furniture while I was gone.

Since I've been home I've seen all my brothers. I've met Bowen and Callum's new wives. Said hi again to Cassidy and my new nephew, Connor. Even Patty June and the rest of the Kingridge Ranch crew have flocked around me. But Anny is a ghost.

She's worked at the ranch long enough to know where all the cameras are. The woman is an expert at avoiding them and it's killing me. Anny isn't just my first love. She's my first heartbreak.

I never meant for things with us to be like this... One contract in Europe turned into two. She hasn't returned a call since I left. I was sick about it for years. Now a part of me wonders if it's for the best.

She deserves better than a man who would leave her the way I did. I thought I had a contract with the Southern Knights football team in South Carolina. When they cut me, everything turned upside down. I let Anny become a casualty of the chaos.

At the time she wanted to be left alone, so I did what she told me to do and left. But after all this time, I've never been able to shake her memory from my world. If I didn't still love her this much, I'd hate her. My thoughts jerk back and forth between regret and pride. But nothing is going to be resolved until I see her again and she can't hide forever.

There's a pause in Danner's constant chatter. I glance up to find him staring at me expectantly. It pulls me back to reality. He's waiting for a response. Shit. I can't read his face. But it's clear he isn't going to move on until I give him something.

I take a shot in the dark. "Yeah, I know that's right." I top my statement with what I hope is a convincing head nod.

Danner hesitates for a moment before his eyebrows furrow together in response. Damn. That wasn't the right answer.

"Right." He bites back a laugh. "I get it. You're preoccupied. Why don't you tell me what you're actually doing way out here? You had to have something that triggered that feeling of wanting to escape the ranch for the night."

I let his question linger for a moment too long. "Now you want to talk about my feelings?" I chuckle, but he stares back at me with all the sincerity in the world.

Leave it to Danner to cross a line none of my other brothers would.

Crash.

The sound of glass shattering cuts through the bar's lazy hum and saves me from a conversation I don't want to have. A metal barstool cascades onto the hardwood floors. The music quiets and voices rise.

"A fight that ain't my problem. This is a nice change," I chuckle and take another sip of my beer.

But my head snaps up and my body moves to full attention when I hear her unmistakable voice.

It's Anny.

## CHAPTER3

### FALLON

"Don'tyou dare talk about my family like that," Anny shouts.

I'm on my feet before Danner can blink. I turn in time to see a dude in a brown cowboy hat squaring up to my girl. Every muscle in my body tenses. The walking bag of garbage looms over her five-seven frame like he forgot that real men don't mess with women. I take it upon myself to remind him. I've got a right hook that can drop a grown man, and I'm looking for a reason to use it.

"Calm down Sugar and let me buy you a drink. I said they're crooked," he slurs, pointing a wobbly finger at Anny's chest. "Kingridge ain't nothing but backroom deals and daddy money."

"Why don't you fuck off?" Anny tries to step around him, but he moves in front of her.

## Page 3

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“You defending 'em 'cause you're screwing one of 'em again? I got something for you if you come home with me tonight.” He staggers and puts a hand on her arm.

I see red.

"Say it again." Anny jerks her hand away and balls her fist. She's never been one to back down from a fight.

But she isn't going to get the chance tonight. This asshole is all mine. I cut through the crowd like a blade. It takes me two steps to get to her before she can swing.

"Back the fuck off," I bark, loud enough to snap heads.

The dude turns just in time to put a hand to my chest, and it's a big mistake on his part.

"Fallon?" Somewhere behind me, I hear Anny's voice, but it's too late. “Fallon don't?—”

But it's too late.

I yank the man backward and send him stumbling over a barstool. He crashes onto the floor like the sack of shit he is. The place erupts. People scatter. The bouncer tries to pull me off. I take a step back willingly.

But the dude makes the fatal mistake of getting to his feet. He throws a sloppy punch in my direction, so I lunge again. This time he's down for a three count.

“It’s done.” Danner puts a hand on my shoulder as I loom over the man.

I shake him off. My heart pounds furiously in my chest. "I'm not done until this asshole is done. That's how it goes. I don't make the rules, but I sure as fuck am gonna follow them."

Security surrounds me as I stare him down. The man shouts, slurring and mumbling in my direction. I put up my hands and tell them I’ll leave as they drag the man toward the back doors. I don't take my eyes off him.

I wish he would make a single move in Anny's direction. I'll have every dude on the dance floor laid out flat to get to him in three seconds flat.

"Get out of here. I'll pay your tab. Just go." Danner pushes me toward the exit.

"Okay. Okay. I'm good, I'll leave." I lie.

Danner can't possibly understand the magnetic pull that's anchoring me to Anny. There's no chance of me walking out of here without her. Not when I'm close enough to touch her. Not after all this time.

"Damn you Fallon, I had it handled!" Anny appears in front of me and she’s shouting.

"You were about to get sucker punched." I snap, grabbing her forearm and ignoring the spark of heat that shoots through me. "That's not handling it."

“I could have taken him." She jerks away from me. “I’m not your responsibility.”

"The hell you're not."

My voice booms over the chaos, over the music... over everything. The silence that

follows is sharp and immediate. And just like that, I realize the whole damn tavern is watching us. But I don't care.

I look at Anny, and everything in me tightens. Her eyes are wild with adrenaline. Her cheeks are pink and flushed. Her chest rises and falls like she just ran a marathon. Fuck if she doesn't look beautiful. She's wild, dangerous, furious... and still mine. Always mine.

"Let's go," I growl, grabbing her waist.

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

"You are," I say, pulling her toward the back door. "Unless you'd rather me hang out here and put this guy through the drywall next." I gesture at a man running his eyes down Anny's backside.

"What the hell?" He grumbles at me as he turns away.

She grits her teeth, but doesn't fight me. "You're a jackass."

We get outside and I'm sure these Findlay boys are happy to see me go. The door slams shut behind us, muffling the bar noise and I let go of her. The air is thick and warm. The smell of stale beer and heat wraps around us like a blanket.

Anny spins to face me in the quiet of the night. Fury etches into every line of her face. I brace myself because I already know what's coming. There won't be a 'thank you for rescuing me.' That's for damn sure.

## Page 4

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She points a finger at my chest. "You do not get to pull that caveman shit with me, Fallon. I have been just fine for a few years now. I don't need you to save me. It isn't your job, you gave that up. And why are you all the way out in Findlay? I came here specifically so I wouldn't run into anyone with the last name Kingridge."

I fire back without missing a beat. "You're still stubborn as hell. Give me a break, Anny. He had a fist cocked back. I don't care how tough you think you are, I'm not letting you take a punch from some dude. Especially not for my last name."

Her eyes go wild all over again. "I care about your last name. I always have. More than you do, apparently, so yeah, I'm going to stand up for it. And I wasn't going to take anything."

"Don't start with that." I don't miss the fire in her accusation, but I brush past it. "And you don't know that you weren't going to take a punch. That dude is a drunk asshole."

She's yelling now. It's full-on with no filter. She winds interchangeably through the past and present. It's messy and hot and familiar. Little bits of every fight we've ever had spill out of her like no time has passed. Others simmer beneath the surface, just waiting for their chance to boil over. When she goes quiet, I take a step toward her.

"You're pissed at me for not letting some drunk asshole square up to you tonight? Fine. Be pissed. Go home and make a playlist with bad songs about ex-boyfriends on it. But if you think I don't know I've made mistakes, you're wrong. I know I did. I left you here. That was stupid. I should've stayed. I should've fought for you harder or made you come with me. That's all on me. So be pissed, but don't stand there and act like I don't care. Like I didn't try to call you every fucking day."



Her jaw tightens, and she folds her arms tightly across her chest.

"You can ignore me all you want, Anny. But I see you. I see you working the ranch, staying just out of sight. You've been avoiding me since I got back, and I let it go. But not anymore. You might have stopped caring about me, but you never left my mind. Not for one goddamn day."

A long beat of silence passes between us. Her eyes are glassy. Her lip trembles just enough for me to catch it before she straightens her spine and lifts her chin.

"I didn't stop caring," she whispers. "That's the problem."

Silence stretches between us as I take her in. All I want is to wrap my arms around her and demand another chance. But I know her well enough to know that isn't the way to approach this. Instead I take a step back.

"I'm sorry, Anny."

Just like that, the fight drains out of both of us. We stand there in silence, bathed in neon spillover from the bar sign above. We are finally breathing the same air again, and it's like it's the only thing anchoring me.

Anny Kai is still mine. She might hate it. She might fight it. But she's still mine. And I'm not going anywhere.

## CHAPTER4

### ANNY

They say time heals all wounds. Clearly, whoever said that never dated a Kingridge.

I knew I'd see him eventually. Sagebrush Creek isn't big enough for me to avoid him forever. But I never expected it to happen like this. It seems impossible that Fallon is standing in front of me after a bar fight. After sharp words and even sharper looks, he's really here. My heart hammers from the aftershock of it.

He's looking down at me with those dark eyes that know all my secrets. The ones that used to make me feel safe. The ones that still unravel me... even now. For one breathless second, I forget everything. I forget I'm mad. I forget he left. I forget that everyone in this town whispered behind my back, saying I'd ruin his future, and I let that scare me more than losing him ever did.

Back then, I thought I'd have time. I thought he'd come back. I thought we'd figure it out once things settled. But he didn't come back. Not until now. And every time he opens that perfect, infuriating, dangerously kissable mouth, it gets harder to remember why I built these walls between us in the first place.

His mouth turns up at the corner into a smirk and my face flushes with heat. And this is exactly why I can't be around Fallon Kingridge. He's the last man I should be standing in the dark with. The last man I should let get this close.

And he is close.

Close enough that I can smell him. It's an intoxicating combination of leather, soap, dust, and whatever cologne he wears. The scent could get a woman pregnant on contact. It makes me dizzy and my knees want to give out.

It makes me remember too much. There was a decade of my life when all I wanted was to share this man's last name. But I can't go back there. Not when I've clawed my way forward. Not when I've worked this hard to rebuild.

I step back.

He steps forward.

I shift to the side.

He follows. His eyes locked on mine like he knows exactly what I'm doing and he's not having any of it.

"Fallon," I warn.

He grabs my arm, not rough but firm. It's like he's afraid if he lets go, I'll bolt. Which, to be fair, I absolutely would. Goosebumps race down my skin. I hate that he still has this kind of effect on me. But I'd be lying if I didn't say that I ache for it too.

## Page 5

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"I can't do this, Fallon." I force my voice into something flat and unfeeling, even though it's anything but. "Go back to your night. I'll see you around the ranch."

"You're bleeding."

I blink. "What?"

He nods toward my elbow. There's a shallow scrape I hadn't noticed. It's probably from when that idiot knocked over a barstool in my direction.

"It's nothing," I say. "I've had worse from fence wire."

"Still." He peels his shirt over his head in one smooth motion. "Here."

And there it is; that warm pull low in my belly that betrays me every damn time. He steps closer and presses the soft fabric of his shirt to my arm with surprising gentleness.

"Remember when you busted your chin on the hayloft ladder?"

A quiet chuckle slips out of me before I can stop it. "Yeah. You caught me."

"Had to shove Callum out of the way first," he says, grinning. "He still hasn't let it go."

His laugh is low and nostalgic. I let myself look at him... really look. For a second, it's just us again and it's simple. We are a boy and a girl tangled up in hay bales and

wild dreams.

His stomach is chiseled and tanned from long days outside. Every muscle is defined in a way that makes my mouth go dry. He's filled out, but the raw power he's always had is still there. Only now, it's tempered by time and shaped into something even more dangerous.

He's in my space, and he knows it. That maddening Kingridge confidence is written in every line of his muscles. He still acts like my body is familiar terrain. Like it's his. It's not. Not anymore. I exhale a shaky breath. I could push him away. I should. But I don't.

"Anny, why didn't you take my calls?"

The question lands hard and my throat runs dry. I've imagined this conversation so many times. The moment I let my guard down, here it is. I've been dancing around the truth. Maybe it's the alcohol, maybe it's the adrenaline, or maybe it's the soft way he's looking at me but I'm done dodging.

"I thought I was pregnant," I say.

The words hang in the air like a thunderclap.

Fallon's entire body goes still. "What?"

"I wasn't," I rush to add. "But I thought I was. I had a few false positives, and by the time I figured out the truth... You were gone."

"And you didn't think to tell me?" His voice is rough, but there's pain in it, too. "You didn't think I deserved to know?"

"It's not that simple." My throat tightens. "It's never been simple with you."

"You're gonna have to do better than that sweetheart." His words are rough and challenging.

Guilt washes over me and I stare at the sky for a beat before answering. "It's not easy dating the sweetheart of Kingridge Ranch when half the town thinks you're just a warm body and a pretty face. The gossip brigade found out about the pregnancy scare before I even had the chance to breathe. Everyone said you wouldn't go to Europe if you knew. That I'd ruin your career. That I'd be the reason your future fell apart."

Fallon's jaw clenches, but I push on.

"They called me a distraction with curves," I say, bitterness creeping in. "They didn't say it outright, but they made it clear... If I really loved you, I'd let you go. I've always loved you. So I did what I thought was right."

He drags a hand down his face. The frustration in his posture guts me.

"I deserved to know," he says. "I would've dropped everything. I didn't want Europe. I wanted you. I would've given it up in a heartbeat."

"I didn't know that," I whisper. "Or at least I didn't trust myself to believe it. I didn't want to trap you."

He shakes his head like he's trying to shake off everything he just heard. "You should've taken my calls."

"Well," I say, a bitter laugh slipping out, "that makes two of us who made the wrong call."

## Page 6

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The air between us crackles. It's raw and full of regret.

"I'm sorry, Fallon."

"Me too." He pulls me into his arms.

I hate how right it feels. I hate how much I need this from him. But I let myself stay there, tucked against his chest, breathing in the intoxicating scent of home and heartbreak. His arms tighten around me.

My body reacts to him without permission. His hand drifting down my back sparks every nerve ending I've got. I feel him respond too. The bulge in his pants presses against me. His breath catches when I shift just slightly.

It'd be so easy to fall back into him. So easy to lose myself in everything we used to be.

We're teetering on the edge of something impossible. If I kissed him now, there'd be no turning back. One second is all it would take. I tilt my head up. My eyes lock on his lips.

I see the moment the thought crosses his mind, just like it's crossing mine... But he doesn't kiss me.

Thank God.

Because I don't know that I could've handled it if he did.

Instead, Fallon takes my hand, warm and solid in mine, and walks me to my car in silence.

And somehow... that's worse.

## CHAPTER5

ANNY

I lay in bed, still and silent. But I'm floating. Not from peace, but from something far more complicated. Seeing Fallon again tonight made my heart flutter and ache all at once. Even when I close my eyes, sleep doesn't come. It hasn't for hours.

Instead, I make a playlist and curse the fact that Fallon knows me well enough to make the prediction. Meanwhile my mind races with a jagged, unfinished thought that plays on a loop. It's part flashback and part nightmare.

It's six years ago. I'm twenty-two and standing in front of the old barn at Kingridge Ranch. It's the place he kissed me for the first time. The same place I gave myself to him in the early hours of the morning. But I already know it's about to take on another meaning. This barn isn't just the place of our beginning, it's about to be our ending, too.

The sky is still gray and heavy. The sun is nothing more than a sleepy suggestion behind the clouds. The air carries that familiar scent of hay and dust. But I know everything is about to change.

Fallon's truck is already running. The engine is low and steady like a countdown. The bed is packed with suitcases when he closes the tailgate. He's wearing his old maroon sweatshirt, and there's a duffel bag slung over one shoulder. His hair is still damp from the shower. It doesn't feel big enough to be our ending. But I know exactly



what's coming.

I stand leaning against the fence. My arms are folded like I'm cold. .. I'm not. I'm just trying to hold myself together. My hand instinctively drops to my stomach, where a quiet fear sits heavy. I wasn't sure. Not then. Not yet. But I thought I might be pregnant, and that thought had swallowed everything.

I want to tell him. I want him to stay. I want a thousand things at that moment. But the words don't come. They are cemented to my tongue. I'm too young and it's all too heavy. Instead, I just stand there. My mouth curls into a half-smile that doesn't reach my eyes. Fallon doesn't smile either, but his eyes soften in a way that undoes me.

"This isn't goodbye." His voice is low, but I catch the excitement in it, too. Rightfully so, he's heading toward his dream. "I'll call you as soon as I get there."

I nod because I can't trust my voice. "I know."

He walks closer, stopping just shy of the fence. We are eye-level with only a single rail between us, but it might as well be a canyon.

"You okay?"

I lie. "Of course."

He studies me. His gaze sweeps over my face like he's trying to decode me. "We'll talk. I'll call. I'll be back before you know it. Unless I can convince you to come with me."

I shake my head and give him a half smile. "Go. You're about to get everything you've worked for, and I'm happy for you."

He nods. But the air between us is heavy and filled with words we don't say. I love you. Please stay. Wait. None of it makes it past our lips.

Instead, Fallon reaches down and picks a wildflower growing near the fence post. He tucks it behind my ear. His fingers brush my cheek, just briefly, and he smiles. It's a real one this time, and the sight cracks something open in my chest.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:22 pm*

"You're gonna do great here," he says softly. "You'll be running the whole damn place by the time I get back."

My throat burns. I nod again because it's all I can do. And then he squeezes my hand. Just once. His fingers are rough, warm, and familiar. I don't squeeze back. Because if I do, I won't be able to stop myself.

I might cry. I might beg. And I know Fallon, that's all it will take to make him stay. If he stays, he will resent me for the rest of his life.

It was only six months earlier that I sat with Fallon, holding his face in my hands as he cried over the loss of his contract with the Southern Knights NFL team in South Carolina. He's worked hard for this moment and deserves to go. So I let him.

Fallon hesitates but I tell him to leave. He turns and walks away. The brake lights flare red. My heart shatters. And just like that, he's gone.

A few seconds later, Hunkleberry trots up beside me. He's still a gangly puppy with paws too big for his body. He whines and presses against my leg. His tail swishes back and forth like he doesn't understand what we just lost. I drop my hand to his head. Even now I can still feel the way my fingers sank into his soft fur as we stared at the empty road together.

I didn't tell Fallon about the baby back then and I thought I never would. I told myself that letting him go was the kindest thing I could do. That if he stayed, I'd ruin him. That he deserved more than a girl with a maybe-baby and a fear that she wasn't enough.

But watching that truck disappear broke something in me. And it never fully healed.

We don't use the old barn on the ranch anymore. It's too small for the way the ranch has grown. It's frozen in time and falling apart, just like me and Fallon. But for years, I went back to that spot anyway.

Any time I felt like texting him and ruining his new life, I walked out to our spot instead. It's like I thought if I stood there for long enough, I'd feel him again. Maybe even reverse time and change our conversation. The old barn is magic, but it didn't work.

Now, lying in bed still feeling the touch of Fallon's arms around me from earlier tonight, my memories web and tangle with the present.

Letting Fallon back into my world feels like playing with fire.

But I don't know if I want to put it out.

## CHAPTER 6

### FALLON

After a night spent twisted up in memories of Anny, I wake before the sun. My heart pounds like it's trying to outrun the past. Sleep didn't come easily. My mind kept circling back to the look on her face when I pulled her in close. The way her voice trembled when she said she didn't stop caring.

It feels damn good to be back in her orbit again.

It took every ounce of self-control in me to walk away from her last night. I wanted to kiss her. God, I wanted to throw caution to the wind and remind her exactly what we

used to be. I wanted to show her what we still could be.

But I'm playing a long game this time because I'm not here for a second chance. I'm here for forever.

The sun's barely up when I start repositioning the security cameras across the ranch. It's part distraction and part purpose. We've got the Farm-to-Table Gala coming up, and if the mayor's planning any more stunts, I need to be the first to know. By the time the crew arrives, I'm back in my office.

"You talk to the sheriff about extra security for the gala?" Alex's voice cuts through the morning quiet. He hovers behind me, arms crossed and brows furrowed like he's already in a fight.

"I am the security," I mutter, still focused on the monitor.

"I'm serious, Fallon. While you were gone, Bellcourt cut off our water supply. He's trying to bulldoze a road through the property. Now we're inviting him to dinner. I want to make sure?—"

But I stop listening.

Because something on the upper right-hand feed catches my eye.

Anny.

She's posted up near the paddocks, laughing and holding court like she owns the damn place. Hair falls loose from her bun and her cheeks flush pink from the sun. Her denim cutoffs show every curve in her thighs and cling to her ass. The sight knocks the wind out of me.

Alex is still talking, but his voice fades into background static. I lean in closer to the monitor.

Cornhole. Of course. A fierce game has broken out between the ranch hands, and from the way the guys are looking at her, it's clear Anny is the prize for every round. My jaw tightens. I don't like the way they're looking at her.

"Yeah, yeah. I've got it, man," I cut in, eyes still glued to the screen. "Don't worry about it. We'll be good to go."

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I rush Alex out of my office with a vague wave and lock the door behind him. I don't know what kind of idiot would sit here and watch those boys circle her like vultures but it sure as hell ain't me. Before I know it, I'm out the door and crossing the ranch. I don't even try to hide it. Hell, I want her to see me.

And she does.

From halfway across the property, her gaze locks with mine. She straightens, just slightly. The laughter in her expression doesn't fade, but something sharper flickers in her eyes. Is it heat, awareness, or maybe a memory of what happened last night?

Since I have her attention, I decide to make a show of it. I stroll across the dirt like I've got all the time in the world. Boots dusted with work. Sweat glistens on my neck. Every step is deliberate. She watches me come toward her and I like the feel of her eyes on me.

I stop just close enough that she has to tilt her chin up to keep eye contact. I can see the flecks of gold in her eyes. The heat between us sizzles and burns. And we're both pretending not to feel it.

I don't stop smiling as I call out, loud enough for everyone to hear, "Step aside, gentlemen. Next round's mine, Kai."

She tosses a wink over her shoulder, sass in every curve of her body. "We'll see, Kingridge."

Ten minutes later, Anny and I are in it again. We're going head-to-head like nothing's

changed. I sink my third beanbag in a row and can't help myself.

"Boom. That's how it's done, sweetheart." I flex for full effect, dragging a kiss across my bicep. "Welcome to the gun show."

"Shut the hell up and take your last turn," she fires back, but there's a laugh buried in her voice that she doesn't quite manage to hide.

God, that sound drives me wild.

"Don't choke now," I tease. "You're about to be real embarrassed."

"I never choke." She rolls her eyes and steps up for her turn.

I swear time slows down just so I can watch her move. Her cutoff jeans hug every curve like they were sewn on her body. Her hips sway just enough to make my mouth go dry. My brain short-circuits for a second. I imagine her flat on the grass. I'd crawl up her body and cage her in with my arms. Those thick thighs would wrap around my waist while I?—

"That's two," she calls, interrupting my spiral with a cocky little grin.

Shit.

Then she winds up again and sinks a third beanbag without even blinking. "Boom," she says, tossing a wink over her shoulder. "Are you nervous?"

I let out a low whistle. "Damn, Kai. Remind me never to play poker with you."

"Oh, sweetheart, if we were playing poker, you'd already be shirtless and down to your last shred of dignity."



"You tryin' to get me naked?" I shoot back, sauntering toward her, "Because all you gotta do is ask."

Her lips twitch. "Keep talkin' like that and I'll put you flat on your back right here in the grass---"

My grin widens. "Promise?"

We banter like old times. It's sharp and familiar. But there's something new in it, too. It's not just teasing anymore. It's a loaded promise I plan on delivering on. We're four rounds in when I glance around to take in our audience, only to discover that we're alone. At some point, the ranch hands must have drifted back to work. I don't waste the opportunity.

I stride across the grass in three long steps. She tells me to get back behind the line, but I ignore her. Instead, I wrap my arms around her waist from behind and lift her clean off the ground. Anny shrieks and laughter bubbles out of her as her boots kick in the air.

"Fallon, put me down." She giggles, and it ignites me.

Instantly, I want to hear the sound again. I spin her once, just because I can. The feel of her body pressed against mine ignites something deep in my chest. The spark between us doesn't just catch, it explodes into something unstoppable.

I toss her gently down onto the sun-warmed grass. She lands with a grunt. It's half laugh and half daring me to try it again. I lower myself down, too. But before I can climb on top of her, she flips the script on me.

Anny grabs my shirt fast. She pulls me with her strength and momentum. In a blink, she's straddling me. I look up at her, stunned. She settles her weight over my hips the

way she has a thousand times before. It makes my dick twitch.

Her hands press against my chest. The sensation grounds me and lights me up at the same time. My cock fully springs to life. I'm hard and eager beneath her. Anny's eyes flash with heat and mischief. Her breath hitches just the slightest bit.

Dammit. She feels it. I know she does.

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“Not so smug now, are you?” She murmurs and leans in close enough that her tits nearly press into my face.

It’s the best kind of torture. My hands find her waist. My fingers dig into her denim waistband. “You have no idea what you’re doing to me,” I growl.

“Oh, I think I do,” she whispers, and the way she rolls her hips just a little proves it.

A groan escapes me, low and primal. My head drops back into the grass. “Careful,” I murmur, voice hoarse. “You keep this up, and we’re gonna give the cows a show.”

She leans in, close enough that her lips almost brush mine. “Maybe I’m not worried about the cows.”

“Hey, hate to interrupt whatever the fuck this is,” a familiar voice calls out, lazy and too damn amused. “But y’all do remember the gala’s in, what... three days? Are you planning on getting The Velvet Spur set up, or are you just gonna dry-hump each other into next week?”

I turn my head and glare up at Holden. He’s standing a few yards away with Geoffrey beside him.

“This is better than reality TV,” Geoffrey chuckles. “Carry on. I want to see where this plotline goes.”

Anny jerks up like she’s been caught red-handed. She lets out a mortified laugh as she scrambles off my lap. She’s already halfway back to the barn before I can say

anything. Her hair bounces and her boots kick up dust like she's running from something a hell of a lot scarier than my brothers.

"Fucking cock blocks," I grumble and drag a hand down my face as I sit up.

"Hey, I call it like I see it," Holden shrugs, still grinning. "And what I saw was borderline illegal for daytime hours."

Geoffrey smirks. "You're welcome. She looked like she was two seconds away from wrecking you, man."

She already did.

My eyes still track her retreating form. "Y'all done?"

Holden claps a hand on my shoulder as he turns. "We'll leave you to your feelings. But don't forget you've got a list here... flowers, fairy lights, five-star beef, security."

"I've got it." I exhale a long, slow breath and watch Anny until she disappears around the corner.

## CHAPTER 7

### ANNY

I'm standing outside of the Velvet Spur in a black dress that hugs every curve like it was custom-tailored for chaos. The satin catches in the breeze, clinging to me like it's got a personal grudge.

The neckline dips lower than I'm used to. The heels make my calves scream. And being nearly six feet tall in them? I feel like a spotlight is trained on me. There's no

blending in tonight. No fading into the background. Not that I ever could.

I tug at the top of the dress then give my reflection in the glass door one last scolding look. Get it together Anny. You can survive three hours.

With that I push through the double doors. The Velvet Spur is glowing. The combination of candles and string lights make it light up like a country music video dream sequence. It's country living with a touch of elegance. Wildflowers spill from every corner. The scent of roasted vegetables, smoked meat, and Patty June's famous biscuits lingers in the air.

Every cowboy in Sagebrush Creek has squeezed into a dress shirt. The cowgirls on their arms are rocking fringe, micro skirts, and big hair. The silent auction is in full swing, and people are starting to crowd around the paddock gate for the live bidding. The sound of fiddles and faint laughter hums beneath it all.

And then I see him.

Fallon Kingridge is smack-dab in the center of it all. He's a picture of relaxed arrogance with his head thrown back, laughing at something Callum said. He's holding a beer like it belongs in his hand. The button-down he's wearing fits him so perfectly it's a sin. The sleeves are rolled just past his elbows and there's a glint in his eyes. It's a slow-burning charm that draws every woman in the room toward him like moths to a flame.

My stomach does this traitorous flip. Fallon is magnetic. He always has been. But now? He's a wildfire.

I keep moving toward the bar, avoiding the clusters of gossip like landmines. I duck past Brynn Rose and Brandi June, who are definitely watching me with thinly veiled judgment. I should've worn my boots. There's something about this dress and this

hair that makes me feel like an imposter.

I head for the bar and grip the edge harder than necessary. My nerves rattle like pennies in a tin can. I'm technically working tonight which means I should be circulating and doing the rounds. I need to make sure everything's running smoothly. But the setup is flawless and it feels like my job here is done. Which leaves only one task left for the night... survive. That's where the liquid courage comes in.

I'm halfway through my first sip of wine when I feel that low tug in my belly. I glance up completely unsurprised to find Fallon's eyes locked on mine.

Everything stills around me.

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His easy smile falters for just a second. His gaze drops, then sweeps over me with slow and deliberate waves. My skin prickles in its wake. His jaw ticks. His expression shifts and I see a flash of something hungry, possessive, and intense.

I can't take it. There's nothing in this room more dangerous than Fallon Kingridge and the way he's looking at me right now. I look away, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear and pretending like I don't feel his attention burning through the room like a brand. I finish my wine in a single gulp then grab a second glass to go.

The crowd ebbs and flows around me as I make my way toward the auction table. I'm halfway through scanning the bid sheets when I feel him.

That familiar heat coils around me. It's electric and magnetic. Fallon is a gravitational pull I've never been able to fight. He steps into my space like I'm his to claim and holds out a drink to me.

"A jalapeño peach margarita, extra salt. My favorite and it's not even on the menu." I arch an eyebrow at him. "Where did you even get this?" I ask, the corners of my lips twitching despite myself.

"Sweetheart, I own the place." His wink is slow and lethal.

I roll my eyes, but take the glass, letting my fingers brush his just a little longer than necessary. His touch is warm, rough, and familiar. And damn it, my hand tingles where he touched me. "Well, thank you."

"You're welcome," he says, voice low, like it's just for me. Then he leans in, arm

slipping casually around my shoulders. "Come on. I'll show you the fancy stuff before the auction starts."

I should tell him no. I should step back, excuse myself, and regain my footing. But instead, I nod.

We weave through the crowd together. He walks closer than he needs to. His shoulder brushes mine. The scent of cedar and warm spice wraps around me. He greets people with a nod or a subtle tip of his chin. That's all it takes for him to charm them.

I swear the men want to be him and the women want to date him. I'm not sure which is worse. But it's like they don't even exist to him. Fallon's eyes keep cutting back to me. I can't help but feel the thread pulling us tighter with every step.

Fallon doesn't lead me to the silent auction items. Instead, he leads me straight to the dance floor. My heart skitters.

Fallon's arms wrap around my waist as he tugs me flush against him. The music is fast and twangy. It's soft enough to let the tension between us speak louder. His hands trace the shape of my hips. His fingers graze the curve of my lower back. The heat of his palms burns through the thin satin of my dress and leaves trails of fire wherever he touches.

"You look..." His voice goes hoarse. "You look like a goddamn dream."

I want to scoff. Say something sarcastic. Keep this from meaning too much. But the words get stuck. All I can do is breathe. Fallon doesn't miss a beat. He spins me away from him and wraps his arms around me from behind.

He leans in and his breath brushes my ear. "I missed you."



It lands in my chest like a hammer. The room spins a little. When I turn to face him, he catches my chin in his palm and tilts my face up toward his. His thumb brushes the edge of my jaw. The look he gives me cracks something open I've been holding shut for years.

"I—" The words catch and I can't slow my breath.

My throat is too tight. The room is too warm. I pull away from him.

"I'm going to get some air," I mutter, stepping away before he sees the way my ribs are straining against this dress, desperate for space.

I don't wait for him to respond. I push through the doors, the night air slaps me with its cool relief. My heels clack softly against the wooden planks of the porch. I rest my elbows on the railing, tilt my head toward the stars, and let the tension bleed out of my shoulders.

I exhale.

But then I hear it...Boots on gravel. The creak of the door.

Fallon steps into the moonlight like he owns it. My throat burns all over again. I nod because it's all I can do. It's like he's been waiting for this moment every damn day since he left.

"You run from everything like that now, " he says, voice easy. "Or just me?" He steps closer, and this time, he doesn't ask permission. "You're cold, " he murmurs. He lifts his coat and drapes it around my shoulders.

"I'm not." I should shrug it off. Instead, I melt into it.

The air between us tightens. My chest lifts. His hand brushes my hip. His thumb traces the curve of my waist through the coat. My body sways toward him like it remembers something my mind keeps trying to forget.

He leans in slowly, just enough to make my breath hitch. His nose brushes mine. His lips are right there. My breath hitches, and I don't know whether to lean in or pull away. My body tenses. If our lips touch, there won't be any stopping us.

Fallon's mouth pulls into a smile. "Relax, I just want to finish our dance."

He wraps his arms around me and tugs me close. We stare at each other as he rocks gently under the stars. My heart leaps into my throat. My pulse is thunder. My skin is on fire.

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The unspoken truth between us rings louder than the music inside. There won't ever be another man for me. It's Fallon. It's always been Fallon, and that's a lot of pressure. But maybe this new Fallon is up for the challenge. Maybe not. But as I lose myself in his eyes, it's getting harder to come up with a reason not to try.

In a moment of bravery, or maybe stupidity, I decide to tell him how I feel. I inhale through my nose and steady myself...

But I don't get the chance.

The door behind us bursts open with the force of a barn kicking loose in a storm, and I exhale.

Geoffrey's silhouette fills the frame. His voice is low and urgent. "Hey, sorry to break up..." He pauses, and his eyes shift back and forth between Fallon and me. He continues with a grin. "Sorry to interrupt whatever the hell this is."

"It's not anything, " I say quickly, stepping back from Fallon like I wasn't two seconds away from tossing all my common sense off the porch railing.

Geoffrey raises a brow, but wisely decides not to comment. "Right. Well, whatever it isn't, it's gonna have to wait. " He jerks a thumb toward the barn. "Mayor Bellcourt just showed up late and started talking some slick shit about zoning and land use easements. Alex is not having it. "

Fallon's whole posture shifts. He steps away from me and jaw tightens as he straightens to his full height. "Shit. "

“They’re about three seconds from turning the silent auction into a very loud, good old-fashioned barn brawl, ” Geoffrey adds as he rolls up his sleeves.

Fallon’s eyes flick to mine. There’s one last second of something unspoken hanging between us. Then he steps forward. His coat still hangs off my shoulders as he murmurs, “We’ll finish this later. ”

I don’t respond. I can’t. Because I’m already burning again. If I’m not careful, it’s going to be more than I can handle.

## CHAPTER8

### FALLON

If anyone had told me a year ago that I'd be spending a Saturday night wearing a bolo tie at a ranch gala, trying not to punch the mayor in the throat, I'd have laughed in their face.

I'm not laughing now.

Earlier Alex was working the room like a man running for office. He was all firm handshakes, and tight smiles. But this is a completely different story. His gaze keeps cutting toward the mayor like he's watching a snake slither too close to his boots.

I take in the situation.

I spot all my brothers standing at attention from various points in the room. Callum sips bourbon with an eye on controlling the crowd. Holden stays at the auction table calculating market value like he's on Shark Tank, but his eyes flick back and forth to Alex.

In the center of the room Mayor Randolph Bellcourt is running his damn mouth... Again. His daughter, Becca stands beside him and a woman with huge tits and even bigger hair stands beside him. Her eyes are trained on the floor. You can cut the tension with a knife.

Bellcourt raises his glass in a toast, "This community needs growth." His voice is raised just enough to draw attention. "The highway expansion isn't just about convenience. It's about jobs, opportunity and progress."

Alex steps forward, and I can see the fire behind his eyes. "You want progress? Try doing it without threatening to cut our ranch in half."

I don't like the way Bellcourt's looking at Alex. I don't like the smug little curl of his lip or the way half the room is starting to tune in like this is some kind of show.

"Progress comes at a cost," the mayor says smoothly. "Sometimes that means sacrifice for the good of the community."

Holden bristles beside me. "Man, there ain't nothing out here for miles and you're telling me the only option is straight through here. I'm so sick of your bullshit."

The room falls silent, and I race to get to Alex's side. We are rapidly approaching the boiling point. We've been here before.

"You good?"

A calm washes over Alex's face. "Yeah, I'm okay. It's just this asshole is about to find out what we call sacrifice. I've had enough."

I chuckle, but it's hollow.

Then the mayor drops the real bomb. "Alex, you're just upset that my proposal might force you to open your books. Is that it? Or maybe it's the fact that your wife is my leftover? That one still stings a little, doesn't it?"

The air goes razor-sharp.

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"Oh, hell no." Anny's voice comes from behind me.

From there it's a blur. Bellcourt laughs. Alex lunges. We manage to grab him before he can land a punch, but a table flips in the process. Cutlery cascades to the floor with a loud crash that brings the night screeching to a halt. Alex is seething.

I step in. "You're out of line, and you're done here." My heart thuds in my chest as I stare at him with heat in my eyes.

The mayor turns to me, completely unbothered. "Ah. The prodigal son. Back from your little football vacation to play cowboy again, huh?"

"You want to try me?" I growl.

"Try you?" His smirk widens. "Son, you wouldn't last five minutes in a town hall meeting. Leave the grown-up business to the people who know how to get things done."

I don't remember closing the distance, but I'm suddenly right there in his face. My fists are clenched. My vision narrows. I've got a dozen reasons not to swing. Not a single one of them is good enough to stop me.

Alex and Bellcourt sling insults back and forth. Cassidy pleads for them to stop causing a scene. Alex takes a step back like he might be ready to end it, but I'm not planning on letting the mayor off that easily no matter how many people are watching.

Then something shifts in the periphery. It's Becca Bellcourt.

The mayor's twenty-two-year-old daughter slips out the side door in a backless red dress that's about one bad decision away from going viral. She doesn't even glance around. Just floats out like she's heading somewhere more important.

I wouldn't have paid her any attention... except for the tall, quiet figure trailing behind her. It's Danner.

His posture is casual, but his eyes are locked on her like a heat-seeking missile. The sight throws me off. What the hell? I mentally flag it. But before I can deal with that particular wildfire, a hand grips my arm.

"Come with me," Anny says.

It's not a suggestion.

I let out a huff and decide that laying the mayor out on his back isn't the kind of press I need. Instead, I follow Anny. I let her pull me through the double doors and into the warm hush of the hallway behind the ballroom.

The second the door swings shut, I feel everything. All the anger. The fight. The old Kingridge pride still boils just beneath the surface. Every muscle in my body clenches with anger.

"I was fine," I say, pacing like a caged bull.

"You were about to redecorate the mayor's face with your fists."

"He earned it."



"And what would that prove?" she asks, voice low but firm. "That he's right? That we're just a bunch of hot-headed cowboys who solve everything with punches and property lines?"

Anny steps in front of me, placing both hands on my chest. The contact is unexpected. It's hot and grounding. She stops me in my tracks. I stare down at her, my chest heaving. She's so close I can feel the heat of her body through the thin fabric of my shirt.

"You don't get it," I say quietly. "This land is everything. He touches it, he touches us."

"I do get it," she says. "I work it every damn day. But if you throw a punch, you lose control. And if he wins, we all lose."

She's right. I hate that she's right. But I love that she's the one pulling me back from the edge.

"You've changed," I murmur.

Her brows lift, and she lets out a giggle. "Don't worry, everyone in that room knows you can take him."

I brush a stray strand of hair from her cheek. Her breath catches and we stand there in the stillness. The music behind the walls is muffled and our breath is the only sound between us. Anny's eyes flick to my mouth. My fingers brush her waist in response. She doesn't pull away... Neither do I.

There's a pull between us. It's hot, electric, and impossible to ignore. Her lips part. Her fingers tighten in the fabric of my shirt.

My voice is a low whisper. "Every time I look at you, I remember who I want to be."

"Fallon..." she says, barely above a breath.

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And then I kiss her.

I grab the back of her neck and pull her to me. Our mouths collide and the result sparks like a match to dry timber. There's no more hesitation, no testing the waters. It's just adrenaline and need.

Fire burns through me, and it's all-consuming. I part her lips with my tongue, and it's fierce. She tastes like everything I've ever wanted and convinced myself I couldn't have. Her hands tangle in my shirt like she's trying to hold herself together. But I'm ready for her to fall apart.

I press her back against the wall. My thigh shoves between hers. Her dress rides up just enough to make my heart stop. I kiss her like she's mine. Like she's always belonged to me... because she has. And when she moans into my mouth, low and desperate, I damn near lose it.

Gripping Anny's hips, I anchor her to me. Her tongue slides against mine, and I swear I see fireworks. I'd stay in this hallway forever if she'd let me. When we finally break apart, we're breathing like we've just run from a barn fire. Her lipstick's smudged. My shirt's wrinkled. Her fingers are still fisted in my collar, and her eyes are wide.

The truth pounds through me.

It's in my head, in my chest, and in every beat of my blood. I know I never should've left her. Never should've believed the lies I told myself about what she needed, or about what I was capable of. Because this woman doesn't need a perfect hero, she needs me.

And I need her. I'll burn the whole damn ranch to the ground before I let anyone take her from me again.

## CHAPTER9

ANNY

I don't know who moves first. Maybe it's me, but it could be him.

One minute we're standing in the hallway of the Velvet Spur, still breathless from that kiss. Next, we're sprinting across the moonlit ranch like kids again. I can't help but giggle, and my heart thuds in my chest.

"Come on," Fallon calls over his shoulder, glancing back at me with a crooked grin that guts me.

He's holding my hand like he doesn't ever plan to let go again. And damn it... I don't want him to. The night air is cool. The grass is soft beneath my feet when I slip out of my heels and duck between barns.

We cross the paddocks like we're on a mission... And maybe we are. We both know where we're heading without saying a word.

The old barn is tucked out at the edge of the property. These days it's half-hidden by oak trees and overgrown shrubs. It's set far enough from the main path that no one wanders by it by accident.

When we reach it, I find the old barn is quieter than I remember. But the doors still make the same loud creak when Fallon pushes them open. The floorboards still groan like they remember every secret we ever left in their knots and grain.

It isn't perfect, but this is our place. It's where he'd get that wild look in his eyes. It's where we came to hold each other back when I had a heart I hadn't learned how to guard yet. Being in here with him now, our past rushes back to me.

Fallon kicks the door shut behind us. The silence wraps around us like a warm blanket. He turns to me slowly, and his eyes darken. I know what he wants and I'm desperate to give it to him. Then he's closing the distance between us. But he doesn't touch me. Not yet. Instead he circles me slowly, his heat radiating toward me in waves.

"Do you remember the first time I kissed you in here?" His breath is warm against my neck.

I nod, unable to find my voice as he stands behind me. We're close enough that I can feel the rise and fall of his chest.

"You were wearing that blue sundress." His fingers finally make contact with my skin as he traces the line of my shoulder. "Had your hair braided like you always did when it was hot."

His hand slides down my arm, leaving goosebumps in its wake. "I was so nervous my hands were shaking."

"Your hands aren't shaking now."

His eyes lock on mine, dark with intent. "No, they're not."

He places his palms flat against the wall on either side of my head, caging me in. The heat between us is unbearable, every inch of my body aching for his touch.

"Tell me to stop," he whispers, his lips hovering just above mine.

"Don't you dare," I breathe.

His mouth crashes down on mine, and it's like striking a match in a room full of gasoline. His hands are on my hips, and I'm in his arms again. He presses my back into the wooden wall as his mouth finds mine. He slides the fabric of my dress off my shoulder, then plants hot kisses on my newly exposed skin. He traces down my collarbone, across the hollow of my throat, and on the top of my breasts.

When he reaches my mouth again, the kiss slows and deepens. It's like he's memorizing me all over again. Fallon's trying to make up for every kiss we didn't have in the years we were apart, and it melts me. His fingers slide down to the hem of my dress.

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He skims the bare skin of my thigh, and it makes my breath catch. This man has always known how to make me come undone. Fallon's hands roam my curves. His lips move from my mouth to my neck. Then down across my chest, each kiss burning a new memory into me.

His hands trail up under my dress. His touch is rough and warm against my skin. I gasp when he brushes the inside of my thigh and then teases his way between my legs. Fallon runs his fingers across my slit. He works me open, tracing circles on me that leave me arching into him. I feel beautiful in his arms and I'm greedy for more friction.

He peels off my dress and then lays me down on a bed of hay. His clothes follow. I've been here with him so many times before. My body responds with ripples of anticipation before he even touches me. The smell of old wood clings to the air as he lowers himself on top of me.

I look up at him, the love of my life, and give myself over to his touch. Our fingers tangle. Our legs shift. My breath catches as he lines himself up with my opening. I feel his tip pulse, hot and insistent against me.

He's already slick with want, and I'm desperate for him to fill me. Then he does.

Fallon slides into me with a single thrust. He lets out a deep, guttural moan as he sinks inside. The sound vibrates through my chest where our bodies press together.

"Are you okay?" His voice is gruff as he holds me there. One hand grasps at my thigh, the other tracing gentle circles over the racing pulse in my throat.

I let out a breathy exhale. "Yes, I want more." My walls stretch around his length, the delicious burn of him making my toes curl as he moves until I take every inch.

"Good girl," he growls and the praise sends a tingle down my spine.

He rocks into me slowly, the drag of his firm length against my most sensitive places makes me come to life. We move together in perfect timing and find a rhythm that was never lost. Everything slows around us. Every touch feels deliberate. Fallon whispers my name like it's like I'm the only thing anchoring him to this earth.

The tension builds in me as he picks up the pace. My skin is slick with sweat and my heart thunders against my ribs. I feel every muscle in Fallon's body flex as he claims my body. The corded strength of his arms on either side of my head as he cages me in. The powerful roll of his hips driving him deeper.

I arch up to meet his thrusts. My nails leave crescent moons across his shoulders. His hands roam wild over every curve then tangle in my hair and tug just enough to make me gasp. Having Fallon fill me is like coming home and falling apart all at once.

He drives me toward the edge. Waves of longing wash over me and rack my body with tremors. I squirm as he presses my thighs open even further. Then I clench along his length and fall over the edge.

When I let go, I take him with me. Everything goes white as he shoots hot streams into me. The release is white hot and all-consuming. It's everything I didn't know I still needed from Fallon, and it leaves me breathless.

Afterward, the barn is quiet.

We lie tangled in each other. The old rafters above us creak in the breeze. His chest rises and falls beneath me. I'm curled on my side, with his arm slung over my waist.



His chest presses against my back. One of his hands is still in my hair and the other rests on the bare skin of my back beneath his coat.

"I missed this," he says, his voice rough.

"This barn?"

"You in this barn. I never stopped loving you," he says quietly. There's a soft sincerity in his voice. It's a promise that means everything to me. "I will choose you every time."

I close my eyes. This could be everything. "Don't say that unless you mean it."

His arm tightens around me. "I mean it."

The air smells like hay, sweat, and memories. For the first time in years, I let myself believe in the possibility of us again. Maybe there is a future where I become Mrs. Fallon Kingridge after all. I cover his hand with mine, linking our fingers across my stomach. The weight of his words settles over me like a blanket. It feels like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

"Fallon," I whisper, staring out at the shadows on the wall. "I love you."

## CHAPTER 10

### BOOTS AND BITCHING PODCAST

Well, well, well. If the walls of the Velvet Spur could talk, honey, I'm not sure they'd ever shut up.

That's right, your favorite anonymous host is back with the post-Gala roundup you

didn't know you needed and definitely can't survive without. The Farm to Table Gala and Auction might've been billed as a community event, but let's be real---what y'all showed up for was the drama.

And baby, it delivered.

We will get straight to the tea and it starts with a certain cowboy freshly imported from NFL Europe. This was the Fallon we've all been waiting for. Finally he made his return to the spotlight in true Kingridge fashion. No more brooding in the corner or smoldering at his ex-girlfriend across the room for this rancher. He turned up looking like a snack wrapped in a starched shirt with none other than Anny Kai on his arm.

Rumor has it they ran off faster than a jackrabbit on a date with a coyote when things got interesting. Ain't no secret where they ended up. Made it right across the ranch and straight into an old barn that's seen more stolen moments than a high school parking lot.

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Welcome back, Fallon. Some folks are excited you're here. And others? Well, let's just say that little bar brawl your girl started last week didn't exactly scream southern belle.

Speaking of Anny, how is she getting along with the new queens of the Kingridge castle? Cassidy, Priya, and the Reagan sisters don't exactly know how to throw punches. But maybe even with all that time refining your palate in Europe, you still like them rough. You know what they say, you can take the boy out of Texas, but...

Speaking of bar brawls... Let's talk about our Mayor.

Randolph Bellcourt didn't just show up. He rolled in like he was the guest of honor. Left with nothing but bruised pride and a whole lotta side-eye, but I'm getting ahead of myself. He picked the wrong venue to throw shade, considering Kingridge Ranch owns half the land and most of the hearts around here.

Insiders say he tried to make a scene with Alex Kingridge. Alex already had one hand on a whiskey glass and the other on his brother's collars, trying to hold them back. It almost got ugly. Some of us wish it had. Those boys were a lot more fun before they went and got tied down. I, for one, would have loved to see the fireworks show. But it sounds like the mayor's road through the ranch ain't gonna happen.

Don't you worry y'all, this battle of the egos is far from over, thanks to an unnamed Kingridge brother who had eyes for one Ms. Becca Bellcourt. She in that red dress? Him looking like a man trying to start over? Sugar, no one slips off in a dress like that for a nature hike... I'll let you do the math until I confirm my details.

For now, let's not pretend the gala was all feathers and fury. There were sweet moments, too---like the Peach Margarita Incident. Someone special remembered someone else's drink order without having to ask. And that someone else? Blushed like a debutante caught skinny-dipping in the river.

Meanwhile, over at the chicken coop, a batch of hens went missing during the gala. Patty June says it's a fox. Darla from the Feed & Supply says it's teenage boys and tequila. But I've got another theory.

I've heard it's a familiar face with a real flexible moral compass, back in town just in time to stir things up. They say they're here for a "fresh start." I say maybe that start involves a few feathers and a flashlight.

Keep your eyes peeled, darlings. Something tells me this barnyard ball was just the beginning. Until next time, keep your boots on and your hands to yourself. I'll be here waiting to spill the tea.

## CHAPTER 11

### FALLON

This morning I'm in the ranch office with my brothers. With the gala behind us, we're all breathing a little easier. The guys are checking in about our week and droning on about ordering supplies. But I can't wipe the smile off my face.

I've been back in Sagebrush Creek for over a month, and it's finally starting to feel like home again. The past week has been good... Unbelievably good. Every morning starts with Anny's body pressed against mine. Every night ends up with her tangled in the bed sheets.

During the day, we tuck into our secret place in the old barn. We can't keep our hands

off each other. But then it's always been like that with us. We've made love in the greenhouse, on the back of my truck, and behind the drapes in The Velvet Spur. Hell, even the tack room got blessed the other night. But it's more than that.

It's the way she looks at me. The way she trusts me with her whole heart. I know I don't deserve her, but somehow I've got her. And this time, it's forever. Knowing she's mine drives me wild. Anny's become a permanent fixture in my world and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"Fallon, are we good with the new fencing for the back forty?" Alex's voice brings me back to the present.

"Yep, I'm just going to check my email now to confirm the shipping date."

Alex continues, "Great. We've got a booth at the Sow Much Farmers Market coming up. It's going to be a wine and cheese tasting from what I hear from Priya..."

He's still talking, but all of a sudden, I can't hear him. I can't hear anything because a subject line in my inbox steals all of my attention.

Subject: Contract Opportunity -- Southern Knights NFL Practice Team

My heart stutters.

"Whoa," I mutter, and it must be out loud because when I look up, all eyes are on me.

"What is it? Geoffrey leans over my shoulder.

I spin the screen toward them. "The Southern Knights. I think it's real this time."

Alex straightens from beside the filing cabinet. "The Southern Knights football

team?"

Callum whistles low.

I open the email, and my eyes race across the screen. It's all there... scout interest based on my Euro league stats. An offer to join their full-time practice team. Housing in South Carolina. A six-month salary that makes my head spin. A straight shot at being rostered next season.

"Jesus," I breathe. "They want me. Again. Only, this time it isn't just a letter of intent, it's an offer."

Holden's already reading over my shoulder. "Dude, this is massive."

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"This is what I worked for. All those years, all that shit in Europe... it wasn't for nothing. Did Priya make them do---"

"No," Bowen cuts me off. "Her dad is more of a silent owner of the team. She definitely doesn't know anything about this. She would have told me. This is you making an NFL team on your merit. Congrats, man, I know you've wanted this for a long time."

I stare at the email, and the room spins around me. "I could be back in pads with stadium lights, the whole thing." It's not just the possibility, but the validation that knocks the wind out of me. They were wrong to cut me the first time. It was worth it.

"I didn't think I'd get another shot like this," I say, scrolling through the contract again. "Full housing, salary, healthcare. They even offered a moving stipend."

Geoffrey whistles. "You could live on the beach, man."

"I could live anywhere. I mean, I'd be back in it," I say, heart thudding. "Full-time. Part of a real team. Something that matters."

"You've always mattered," Alex says, quiet but firm.

"Still, you know what I mean. This matters outside of our small town... It's huge."

I nod, but something feels hollow about it. My eyes drift to the window overlooking the ranch. The land is in my blood. My family is here. It's the place where Anny moves through her day.

Danner leans forward. "Are you really considering packing your bags again?"

"I think I have to, right? This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." I let out a humorless chuckle. Even as I say the words, something feels off. "I'm getting older in football years, this might be my last chance to chase this dream."

But as I say it, a knot tightens in my chest. Is this still my dream? Or am I just chasing it because it's the dream I thought I wanted? When I picture myself in that uniform again, why does it feel more like obligation than desire?

Then the room falls silent. At first, I wonder if it's something I've said. I don't know that I actually want to chase that football dream anymore. But they've got to understand that I need to at least think it through. I'm always going to end up back at the ranch with them. Then there's Anny. I don't know whether she would go, but I don't have time to ask. Because when I follow their line of sight, I turn to find her standing in the doorway.

The look on her face tells me she's been there long enough to have heard the excitement in my voice. We lock eyes and I know that look. It's the look of someone who thought they were being chosen and just found out they weren't.

She heard me talk about chasing my dream. But not once did I say her name, and it isn't lost on her.

Shit.

"Anny—" I start, but she just shakes her head. "Hey, I um..."

Her lips press into a straight line. Without a single word, she nods. Then she turns and walks back out the way she came. The door closes behind her with a soft click. My stomach sinks and I think I'm going to be sick.



## CHAPTER 12

ANNY

Dammit I should've known better. I should've known not to let my guard down and not to believe that this time could be different.

But that's what love does, doesn't it? At least that's what loving Fallon Kingridge does. It tricks you over and over again.

He makes you soft in the places you swore you'd keep sharp. He makes you hope for forever, even when you know better. I can't believe I let him back in. I can't believe I started to believe in us all over again. I barely survived this the first time, and here I am in it all over again like an idiot.

Who puts their trust in a man who just stood there grinning about his big chance?

Meanwhile, I stood in the doorway like a fool, waiting to hear my name. Only to realize loud and clear that I've never mattered as much as the game. He wasn't just excited. He was lit up.

Fallon was alive in a way I haven't seen him since the first time he scored a touchdown on home turf. I'd know that look anywhere. It's the same one he bit back the day he left for his first European contract. He said we'd figure it out way back then. But in reality I wasn't a part of the vision, and that hasn't changed.

I walk straight past the old barn and into the far pasture. My boots crunch over the dry grass. My tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall until I'm sure that there isn't anyone around to see them. The last thing I want is an entire ranch making me their new favorite topic of conversation. I've done that once, and I'm not interested in a repeat.

I sink down onto the wooden fence at the edge of the pasture. The rails are cool and rough beneath my palms. My chest aches. My stomach is knotted up like a horse tied too tightly to a trailer hitch.

It wasn't just a gut-punch. It was a truth bomb. He's always going to choose movement over stillness. Adventure over home. Dreams over love. The worst part is, this time it's my own fault. He's shown me who he is for years, and I refused to believe it.

But deep down, I knew. I knew better than to believe in love again. I told myself I was strong, smart, and guarded. The second I let that guard down, he did exactly what I feared. He showed me that I'm not worth staying for... again.

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This is just like before when the town whispered I'd ruin his career. Just like when I let him go, so he wouldn't have to choose between me and the game. Just like when I wasn't pregnant. I never got the chance to not hold him back, because he was gone, and I was already a ghost in his rearview mirror.

And now, he just looked happy. It's like the idea of leaving didn't cost him a thing. I sit for a long time letting the reality of the situation wash over me in waves of disappointment. Then I hear footsteps, and I pull my walls up around me.

"Anny," Fallon says, voice low and frayed at the edges. "I've been searching this whole damn ranch. How the hell did you get out of here so quickly and without tripping a single camera?"

I don't look up. "You didn't think to tell me that you're considering packing your bags all over again?"

"I just found out. I didn't expect you to be hiding in the damn doorway."

I cut my eyes at him. "You didn't tell me you wanted it. I thought you were home for good, like a total idiot. But the joke's on me. You were so excited," I whisper. "It's like I was watching you slip out of my hands in real time."

"I didn't mean?—"

"But you did," I snap, finally turning to face him. "You meant every word. Every smile. Every 'this is what I've been waiting for.' And it was never me."

He swallows hard. "That's not true."

"Isn't it?" My voice is shaking. "Because I didn't hear my name once. Not in your smile. Not in your plans. Not even in your hesitation."

His eyes fill with something like regret. But he doesn't deny any of it. How could he when we both know it's true?

"Stop it—" He starts, but I don't want to hear the bullshit.

I cut him off. "I can't do this again. I can't be the thing someone leaves behind because something shinier comes along. I don't believe in us," I say, finally letting the words free. "Not anymore."

He flinches. "Don't say that. You are jumping to so many conclusions, and you're wrong, sweetheart. I know it's hard for you to believe, but it's true."

"You say you want to take care of me, but the truth is, you're still the guy who runs when things get too real. You ran before. And you're already doing it again." I shoot back at him.

"I'm not running." He folds his arms across his chest and frustration etches in the pinched lines on his forehead.

"You're leaving. I didn't stop you then, and I'm sure as hell not going to stop you now."

That lands like a punch. Fallon shakes his head and fury flashes in his eyes... but he doesn't argue. Maybe he can't because he knows I'm right.

"I'm not going to get into this with you when you are acting crazy. Cue the Miranda

Lambert playlist because this is insane."

He steps toward me, but I back up. There's no fight left in me this time.

"I hope you get everything you want, Fallon. I just wish I weren't stupid enough to think I might be part of that."

And then I turn and walk away. It's my turn to leave with my dignity intact. He calls my name, but I don't look back. I know Fallon and I will have to talk at least once before he leaves, but it isn't going to be right now.

I make it all the way to the big oak behind the hay barn before I'm sure I'm alone and my knees give out. I drop to the grass and finally let the tears fall. Big, ugly, silent sobs escape me. I bury my face in my hands and curl into myself. I ache in places I didn't even know were still breakable.

"You know, crying under trees is becoming a pattern with you."

The voice startles me. I look up to find Patty June standing there, a basket of fresh eggs balanced on her hip.

"I don't need a lecture," I manage, wiping my face.

"Good, because I don't give 'em." She puts her basket down and lowers herself onto the grass beside me with a grunt. "What I do give is perspective."

I sniff. "I'm not in the mood for old-lady wisdom right now."

"Tough shit, sugar." She gives me a look that would wither most of the ranch hands. "You think you're the only one who's ever loved a man with a wandering spirit? Hell, girl, I married one. Thirty-seven years with that man, and he was gone half the time."

I draw my knees up to my chest. "So you're saying I should just accept it? Be the woman waiting at home while he chases his dreams?"

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"I'm saying that loving someone means letting them be who they are. And if who they are doesn't fit with who you are, then you've got choices to make." She plucks a piece of grass and twirls it between her fingers. "But don't go making those choices based on fear or pride."

"It's not pride," I argue. "It's self-preservation."

Patty June laughs, but it's kind. "Oh, honey. You think self-preservation looks like closing yourself off? That ain't living. That's just existing."

The truth of her words settles over me. I've spent six years building walls, convinced I was protecting myself. But now I feel trapped within them.

"I've built something here," I say finally. "When he left, I had to figure out who I was beyond just being his girl. I learned to doctor the livestock when we couldn't afford the vet. I redesigned the breeding program. I have plans to expand the organic produce side that could double our revenue."

"And you're proud of who you've become," Patty June nods. "As you should be."

"I'm terrified of losing her if I let myself fall for him again."

"She ain't going nowhere." Patty June studies me for a long moment. "The heart wants what it wants, girl. Question is, what are you gonna do about it?"

## CHAPTER13

FALLON

That night I don't sleep. Not even a little. Instead, I sit on the bunkhouse steps with my elbows on my knees. I watch the moon drag its pale ass across the sky while Hunkleberry stretches out at my feet like he's staging an intervention.

"You mad at me, too?" I mutter.

He lifts his head and gives me a long, disappointed huff. Then he drops it again.

"That's a yes."

And I deserve that because I messed up, big time... again. Anny's face keeps replaying in my head. She looks wide-eyed, glassy, and wounded. It's like I tore something open that she barely managed to stitch shut the first time.

She called me a runner. And I admit that it crossed my mind to leave, but never without her. She's a part of the deal now. If I go, she goes, or we stay here together. Those are my terms. I didn't mean to hurt her. But I didn't see her.

I was caught up in the adrenaline of the offer. Being wanted on the field by a team that ruined my life the first time around was a rush. I didn't stop to think what it would sound like to someone listening from the outside.

I just impulsively... chased the dream like it was still mine to chase.

But the truth is, even when I imagined putting that helmet back on, I didn't feel the old thrill in my gut. I felt a knot tighten and grow heavy over my chest. It was a warning that I was about to lose her again.

And I did.



She walked away without asking me to stay. Just like before, because I didn't give her a single reason not to. I lean back with my hands laced behind my neck and stare up at the stars.

"I'm tired of running," I say out loud, voice rough. "Tired of chasing things that don't mean a damn thing if I lose her in the process."

Hunkleberry sighs and bumps his head against my knee. He knows what's up.

My phone buzzes to life, but none of my messages are from her. I ignore texts from Alex, Bowen, and Holden. I clear a call from Pa. Instead, I spend my night on the porch with Hunkleberry making a plan to win Anny back once and for all.

\* \* \*

The next morning, I wake up to a text from Danner asking me if I want to process things over breakfast quinoa. I mentally add breakfast quinoa to the list of reasons the rest of my brothers can't stand the dude. Then I ignore him, too.

I walk the perimeter of the ranch at dawn, boots crunching on frost-covered grass. The Southern Knights contract sits in my email, unanswered.

What was once so clear now feels murky.

I used to measure my worth in yards gained and plays made. But watching Alex with his family, Bowen with Priya, and hell, even Callum settling down, I've seen a different kind of victory. The sun breaks over the ridge, painting Kingridge in gold. My phone buzzes again.

This time it's a call I can't ignore. The name Southern Knights flashes across my screen. I stop at the fence line and stare out at the land. Football gave me purpose

when I was lost, but it never gave me peace. Not like this place. Not like her.

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When I picture life in South Carolina, I can see the stadium lights, hear the roar of the crowd, and feel the rush of the game. But Anny isn't there. And without her, none of it means a damn thing.

I take the call. The recruiting coach bombards me with flattery. He paints a picture of what joining the team could look like. I hear the enthusiasm in his tone. But in the end, my decision slips easily from my lips.

"I appreciate the opportunity, but I've found where I belong."

The relief is immediate. Peace washes over me. The weight lifts from my shoulders the moment I say the words.

But when I hang up, a new realization settles over me...I've got so much work to do.

I head straight into the barn, grab a toolbox, a bucket of paint, a bag of nails, and a whole shit ton of lumber. Alex is going to murder me when he finds his inventory is off. But I don't care.

Anny is worth whatever Alex is about to throw at me. I don't waste a single minute. Every beam I reinforce and every board I lay down brings me one step closer to winning her back. It's a confession. A vow. A whole goddamn apology in wood, nails, and splinters.

Callum stumbles upon me mid-project around noon, and honestly, I'm surprised it even takes that long. When he finds me, he doesn't ask questions. Instead, he starts cutting boards right alongside of me.

Word travels fast at the ranch. Before I know it, Bowen's here with two strings of twinkle lights sent by Priya and a six-pack courtesy of himself. The rest of the Kingridge crew is quick to follow. Hell, even Danner picks up a drill and gets to work.

We carry on like this for two full days. I work around the clock and hardly sleep. Hunkleberry stays by my side. The guys rotate in and out, helping where they can in between their other duties.

When it's finished, I take a step back. It's a job well done. But the barn is only one part of the plan.

For the final touches, I pull on my old maroon sweatshirt. It isn't anything to look at, but it's the one she used to steal. I light the lanterns we strung along the rafters and sweep the floor again, even though it's already clean.

When everything is in place, I get ready to punch out a text to Anny. But before I can, I hear the sound of paws padding toward me, followed by footsteps. My stomach flips like I'm back in high school and about to get benched.

I look to see Anny walking toward me with Hunkleberry at her side. The old dog must have gone to get her for me. She stops when she sees me standing in front of the old barn.

“Hey, I was just about to come find you,” I call out to her.

“I thought you might be out here, taking over my thinking spot.” Then her eyes go wide as they sweep over the space. “Wow.”

The freshly painted green exterior. The new rows of hydrangeas. The brick path. The outside of the old barn looks nothing like it did before, but it's nothing compared to

the inside. The whole place glows. It feels warm, lived-in, and intentional.

“What can I say? It’s a good place to think.”

Hunkleberry steps into the barn and makes himself comfortable in the hay-padded bench against the back wall. Anny takes one step into the doorway. Then another. Her hand drifts to her chest.

She turns to face me, arms crossed... but it's not defensive. It's protective. It's like she's bracing for the hit in the exact same spot I broke us last time. But that isn't how our story ends.

The truth pounds through me. In my head. In my chest. In every beat of my blood. I know I never should've left her. Never should've believed the lies I told myself about what she needed. About what I was capable of. Because this woman doesn't need a perfect hero, she needs me. And I need her. I'll burn the whole damn ranch to the ground before I let anyone take her from me again.

"Fallon... I can't do the back-and-forth."

"Great, me neither." I take a deep breath. "I used to think football was all I had. That being part of a team was the only thing that made me worth a damn."

She says nothing.

I step forward and close the distance between us. "But the truth is, every field I stepped on, I looked for you in the stands. I didn't even know I was doing it. But I was. Every city and every game. Part of me was always hoping I'd find my way back to you."

Her brows pinch, lips trembling just slightly.

"I didn't realize home wasn't a place. It was you. It was this ranch. This barn. Hunkleberry. Your terrible playlists. Your hair on my pillow. Your hand stealing the blankets. I left you once and I stayed gone for far too long. But I'm here now. And I'm not going anywhere."

She takes a shaky breath. "What about the Knights? We'd have to try and figure things out. I never want to leave, but maybe I could. It would be hard and I?—"

"I turned them down."

Her lips part. "You what? Dammit Fallon, you shouldn't have done that for me."

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"I didn't do it for you. I did it for me," I explain, holding her gaze so she can see my sincerity. "I turned them down, Anny. My heart wasn't in it the way I thought it would be. Because they might've been offering a contract... but you being here is offering me a life. After all these years of chasing the dream, I finally realized I was running in the wrong direction the whole time."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't want touchdowns," I say. "I want lazy Tuesday mornings. I want to fix fences with you. I want to lose to you at the cornhole and pretend I didn't. I want your damn greenhouse plants all over my truck seat. I want to kiss you in this barn when we're wrinkled and old and still in love."

Tears spill down her cheeks. She doesn't wipe them away. "I waited for you once," she whispers. "And it nearly broke me."

I step closer. "I'm not asking you to wait anymore. I'm asking you to build the rest of this life with me. Right here and now. I want to start today."

She stares up at me like I'm her whole world. I don't take the responsibility lightly. It's everything to me. I'll spend my whole life proving that to her.

Then Anny moves, and it's fast. She lands right into my arms. She wraps herself around me like she's trying to memorize the feel of every inch. Like she's afraid I'll disappear, but I never will. I hold her tighter than I ever have.

Her voice is a whisper. "Don't let go."

"There's not a chance in hell."

Because this time, when she falls, I'm going to be right here to catch her.

## CHAPTER14

ANNY

Fallon took me back to his place and we sealed our new promises in my favorite way... naked. He thought he could make it about me, but that wasn't what I had in mind. He barely had the door closed before I dropped to my knees in front of him and showed Fallon how much I love him.

Afterwards, the man was dead to the world for hours.

Now I'm done with my work day. I let myself back into his house and find Fallon in the shower. He doesn't hear me over the rush of water, giving me a moment to appreciate the view. Steam billows around his massive frame. Water cascades down the sculpted planes of his back, over the curve of his ass, and down his thick thighs corded with muscle. My mouth goes dry at the sight.

Fallon looks like he was carved from marble. But marble doesn't have scars and Fallon sure as hell does. Each one tells a story of the years we were apart, and I'm suddenly desperate to learn them all.

I strip silently, leaving my clothes in a pile on the tile floor. When I slide the glass door open, he turns. Surprise flickers across his features before it melts into hunger.

"Room for one more?" I ask, already stepping in.

His reply is to pull me against him. His skin is slick and hot against mine. The



contrast of the cool tile at my back and his burning body pressed to my front sends a shiver through me.

"Done with work already? Lucky me." He murmurs against my neck and his teeth grazing the sensitive spot below my ear.

I arch into him. My fingers trace the water droplets racing down his chest. I guide his hand between my legs. His eyes darken as his fingers explore me, finding me already slick and ready. "Tell me you're mine" he commands, circling slowly.

"I'm yours, Fallon."

"Say it again." With a growl, he lifts me.

"I'm yours."

My legs wrap around his waist as he presses me harder against the wall. Water streams between our bodies, making everything hot and frictionless as he positions himself. He pushes into me with one powerful thrust.

I cry out, clinging to his shoulders as he fills me completely. He stays still for a moment, his forehead pressed to mine, our breath mingling in the steam. Then he begins to move, each stroke deliberate and deep.

The shower drowns out my moans as he takes me against the wall. His pace builds from measured to relentless. One of his hands grips my hip. The other tangles in my wet hair and he tilts my head back to expose my throat to his mouth.

I've never felt so claimed, so utterly possessed. And when he whispers, "Come for me, Anny," against my lips, I shatter around him. It triggers his own release.

We stay locked together. Our bodies tremble until the water runs cool around us. There's no doubt that Fallon is exactly where I'm meant to be.

## CHAPTER15

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:23 pm*

### BOOTS AND BITCHING PODCAST

Well,well, well. Did you hear that, friends? That's the sound of a certain cowboy finally pulling his boots out of his mouth and planting them firmly on the ground he thought about leaving all over again.

Pull up a rocking chair, y'all. If it happens in Sagebrush Creek, you better believe I've got boots on the ground and eyes in the barn loft.

Today, we're heading right back to Kingridge Ranch. I wish them boys would leave space for anyone else to get some attention. But they can't help themselves. Being thirsty seems to be genetic in that family.

That's right, folks. Word on the street is that Fallon Kingridge is staying put. He's passing on a chance to join the Southern Knights football empire. He's officially trading touchdowns for tending goats... and this time he seems to be happy about it.

It took one near-miss heartbreak, a whole lotta unresolved sexual tension, and a rendezvous in an old barn, but love wins, y'all. Or maybe Anny Kai just got tired of his nonsense and demanded he grow up or piss off.

Either way? I love to see it.

It doesn't get much more true-Texan than Anny. That girl grew up on the farm, and she's finally taking her seat in Sagebrush Creek's royal court. Seems they're back in love. Some would even say she's glowing, if you know what I mean... But I'm not one for gossip.

And while we're on the subject of things heating up, let me go ahead and stir a little sugar into your sweet tea with two fresh rumors making the rounds this week.

First up, let's head over to the Sagebrush Feed & Supply. Word is someone's been sneaking in after hours. The front door's locked up tight. But someone's been helping themselves to the goat feed and slipping out the back. Now, I'm not sayin' it's Hank Carmichael—who suddenly started "donating" fresh milk to the farmers market—but I ain't not sayin' it either.

Then over at The Biscuit Basket Diner, there's something even spicier than the gravy. Apparently, a certain line cook with a handlebar mustache has been sharing more than his recipe for buttermilk pancakes. The whispers say he's been warming up the walk-in freezer with two waitresses, on different shifts. If that's true, someone's biscuits are about to burn.

Don't get too comfortable, Sagebrush Creek. Because while one Kingridge brother has finally figured it out... another one is teetering on the edge of a scandal so spicy I have to fan myself.

Hello, Danner. I know you're new around here. You don't know me yet, but I sure know you.

You're our West Coast transplant. You came complete with a truck full of oat milk and an accent that makes you feel like you're being therapied. So, what do your woke friends think of you spending time with a twenty-two-year-old? She's a little young, ain't she?

You didn't think anyone would notice the way you disappeared with Becca Bellcourt? Sugar, that's adorable. You whispered like this town doesn't have ears, but we caught it.

But here's something you might have missed. That little girl you're talking to is the mayor's pride and joy. He's already got a bad taste in his mouth for your family's ranch. Rest assured, he hasn't forgotten the way Alex moved in on his ex-wife before the ink dried on the divorce. I can't imagine he's going to take this lying down.

But why don't you just keep playing with fire? From what I hear, most of your brothers are looking for a reason to send you packing anyway.

And I, for one, can't wait to see how Mayor Randolph Bellcourt reacts when his little girl starts playing house with a man who drinks mushroom tea and builds compost bins for fun.

Stay tuned, folks. Danner is about to get a firsthand education on life in a small town. Around here, gossip runs faster than wildfire, and the barns have very thin walls.

Until next time, darlings.

This is your bitch with boots on the ground.

## CHAPTER16

## EPILOGUE

Fallon

There's a rhythm to life on Kingridge Ranch. Always has been.

Our mornings start before the sun is even up. Choke, our resident rooster, makes the announcement with all the bravado of a Kingridge brother. Makes me proud.

In the stables, someone's always cussing out a piece of broken equipment. No one,

and I mean no one, knows where the good wire cutters are because these people would die before they put things back where they belong. This place is loud and dusty. It's organized chaos at all times. But it's also love.

Anny and I have settled into something better than the puppy love we had way back then. My world feels right in a way it hasn't since the moment I left. I'm steady in my commitment to showing her that she's the most important thing in my life.

I fall in love with her over and over again. I pick flowers and tuck them behind her ear. I listen to the absolute worst love songs and sing along because it makes her smile.

Today I pace the space along the split rail in front of the old barn. I wipe my palms on the thighs of my jeans like I haven't already done that a hundred times. I wore the shirt she likes. The one that hugs my arms just enough to make her bite her lip. Danner said I should've picked something more romantic. I told him to fuck right off.

## Page 22

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:23 pm*

I've got music and candles that flicker in every corner of the old barn. They cast soft, golden light over the weathered wood, and I know she's going to love it. The ranch hands helped me pick hundreds of sunflowers, baby's breath, and a few rogue sprigs of lavender. They even arranged them to make it look like I know what I'm doing.

Of course Hunkleberry's big ass tail took out two vases and almost burned the whole barn down. But it's fine. Because Patty June just sent me the text I've been waiting for all day. Anny is on her way.

My heart damn near punches through my chest when the barn door creaks open. I turn toward the sound, and there she is. Anny is backlit by the warm Texas twilight. Her hair is tousled from the wind, and her eyes scan the space until they land on me.

It takes her a minute to take it all in.

Her lips part slightly, like she wasn't expecting this. Then she blinks and I can't decide whether she's trying not to laugh or cry. I close the space between us in three strides and wrap my hands around her waist.

She laughs, soft and breathy, fingers clutching the front of my shirt. "Fallon. What is this?"

I step back just enough to reach into my pocket. The ring box is warm from being held so tightly in my palm.

"I wanted to do this somewhere special," I say. "And there's nowhere more special to me than the place you first kissed me... and the place you gave us a second chance."

Anny covers her mouth. Her eyes go glassy the second I drop to one knee. She's already nodding when I promise to love her more every single day. She's already crying when I tell her that there isn't a woman in the world who compares to her. She's already said yes before I even open the box.

Just like that, it's settled.

Anny is going to be my wife.

The weight of our reality settles around me and brings tears to my eyes, too. When I slide the ring onto her finger, my whole world shifts. But it doesn't feel new. It feels like coming home to the life that was always meant to be.

Anny stares at the ring, sniffing and laughing all at once. "We are really doing this. You are the only man I've ever loved, and now we're doing this..."

I pull her into me, hand cradling the back of her head. "Anny Kingridge has a nice ring to it. Don't you think?"

"Yeah," she nods and bites back a smile. "I always have."

"Always."

I hold Anny pressed against me, and the whole world falls into place around us. But she sucks in a breath, and pulls away. I look down at her, and something shifts in her expression.

"What is it?"

"I didn't want to do this right now, but I can't wait to tell you." She bites her lip, glances down... then slides her hand over her belly. "I'm..."



I freeze.

"Anny?"

"I found out this morning," she whispers. "This time I didn't want to wait to tell you."

I cup her face in my hands and kiss her. It's hard, fast, and desperate. She melts into it. Her fingers fist my shirt like she's anchoring herself as emotions whip through me. When I finally pull away, she looks up at me.

"Are you okay?"

"Am I okay? I'm a damn legend. Put a baby in you without even trying. I'm gonna be a dad," I say softly. My heart thunders in my chest with a mix of joy and excitement. "And I'm going to be your husband. I've never been more ready for anything in my life."

Her laugh bubbles up, bright and stunned, and I swear it's the most beautiful sound in the world. I hold Anny and dance with her in the setting sunlight that beams in through the windows.

An hour later, we're still sitting together on the hay bale in the middle of my candlelit proposal setup. She curls into me, and her breath is warm against my neck. I can't stop touching her... Mostly because I don't want to.

"You're really mine," I whisper. I brush my knuckles along her cheek, down the soft curve of her throat, and let them rest just above the flutter of her pulse.

She leans into the touch. "Always have been."

My hand drifts to her waist, then lower to the soft curve of her belly. She puts a hand

out, and I catch her wrist. I gently tug her into my lap. She straddles my thighs, and the weight of her curves on my lap sets me on fire.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 3:23 pm*

Anny's arms wind around my neck. And just like that, the air shifts.

The candles flicker, and the heat between us builds. Her eyes darken as her lips hover above mine. "I love you, Fallon."

I kiss her slowly and deeply at first, sealing my promises. Then it grows messy and frenzied. Anny gasps when I tug her shirt over her head. Her hands slide up my chest. She moans when I unclasp her bra and trace my mouth over the swell of her breast.

From there, it's a blur. We lie back on a blanket draped over the hay. Our bodies tangle in soft light and shared heat. Everything else falls away. The ranch. Our past. All the gossip. Gone.

All that's left is us.

We move together. It's like we're fighting for every second we lost while I was away. Her fingers dig into my shoulders as she whispers my name, over and over, until it's the only thing I hear. I keep her there, worshiping her curves and claiming what's mine.

When she falls apart beneath me, I fall with her.

And afterward, when she's curled against me and I can feel her heartbeat under my hand, I kiss her temple and say, "Let's do this thing tomorrow."

"What?" She turns to look at me in surprise.

“Anny I’m serious. I’m done waiting. I love you and I want you to marry me tomorrow.”

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