



Buck Me

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Danner

Moving to Kingridge Ranch was supposed to be my reset. After losing my mom, my marriage, and my place in California, I came to Texas hoping to connect with the half-brothers I never really knew. The job? Temporary. The expectations? Low. But from the second I laid eyes on Becca Bellcourt, I knew I was in trouble.

She's everything I'm not. Poised, polished, and tied to the mayor trying to carve up our land. But under that picture-perfect exterior is a woman who sketches wild gardens in the margins and hides a fierce, quiet fire behind her smile. She makes me want to stay. But falling for her means risking everything. Because the moment the town finds out what we've done in that greenhouse... all hell's gonna break loose.

Becca

Being the mayor's daughter in Sagebrush Creek means smiling pretty and staying in line. I've done both for twenty-two years... until Danner Kingridge walked into my life.

I know the rules. His family and mine are sworn enemies. My father controls everything... my future, my finances, and my freedom. But for the first time in my life, I don't want to play it safe. I want him, even if it means blowing up my life.

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

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CHAPTER 1

BECCA

Two Weeks Before, The Farm to Table Gala at the Velvet Spur

“Here.” Danner Kingridge smiles down at me, and it takes my breath away.

I’ve heard the rumors, of course. You can’t grow up in Sagebrush Creek and escape the stories about the elusive Kingridge brothers. I’ve met most of them. But Danner is a new addition, and he rarely makes public appearances.

Danner offers me something, and it takes a second to register.

“A cocktail napkin?” I arch a brow and pull my shoulders back, smoothing invisible wrinkles from my dress in a move I’ve practiced since cotillion school.

“Yeah,” he says, his voice warm and a little amused. “You don’t have any space left on yours. We’re only an hour into this night. I figured I’d better bring you another.”

He smiles again, and I know there’s no amount of whispered gossip that could prepare me for the real thing. Being this close to him is like standing in front of a movie star. He’s quietly stunning and impossible to ignore.

I glance down at the napkin on the table in front of me. Sure enough, it’s covered corner to corner in ink. My loops, vines, and wild swirls suggest a garden more magical than manicured. I hadn’t even realized how much I’d doodled.

The familiar weight of performance settles on my shoulders like a lead blanket. Twenty-two years of this...smile, nod, don't embarrass the family name. I shake my head and slide my napkin toward myself. "Habit," I admit with a sheepish smile.

He pulls it away before I can grab it. His calloused fingers graze mine for a second too long. That fleeting contact sends an electric tingle up my arm and lodges somewhere in the vicinity of my ribs.

"You've got both sides covered," he says, turning the napkin over in his massive palm. "And it's good. Like, really good. What is this?"

"It's a garden." My voice is softer now, shy even. "I spend a lot of time outside. I like painting and being among the plants. It's kind of my escape. I wasn't sure how tonight was going to go, so I guess..." I gesture vaguely. "Nervous habit."

But he doesn't stop the examination. There's something about Danner's genuine interest in my doodles that makes me want to push back against my usual script. For once, I don't have the urge to deflect or minimize what I've created. Having him glimpse into the world I see when I close my eyes feels right.

"So one more isn't gonna cut it then... I'll get you the whole stack. I figure it's that or spend the night talking to these people."

I laugh, and the sound is light and surprising, even to my own ears. "Then by all means, bring all the bar has to offer. But I have to hand it to your brothers. They know how to throw a party." I glance around the room.

The wildflowers on the tables, the candlelight, and the soft music set the perfect backdrop for the event. It's dripping with country-chic charm, and the open bar promises an incredible night.

“Ah, that they do.” Danner slides into the chair beside me.

The move is as casual as anything, but my heart gives a completely unnecessary thud anyway. Up close, he smells like cedar and clean laundry. His dark blue button-down shirt is rolled to the elbows, revealing forearms that could absolutely cause a stir on TikTok.

“I’m Danner.”

No kidding.

“I know.” The words escape with a smile. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Becca... Bellcourt.”

“Oh no. Bellcourt, as in Mayor Bellcourt’s?—”

“Daughter,” I cut him off before he can finish the sentence. I can’t stomach another person mistaking me for my father’s latest girlfriend. Not that I can blame them. She and I could be sisters both in looks and in age.

Danner chuckles, and it’s a warm, rough sound that settles into my skin. “So, me sitting with you when your father hates my family is high stakes. I like it.” His eyes twinkle, and a deep-set dimple appears on one cheek. “Tell you what, I won’t hold your family against you if you don’t hold mine against me.”

I look up at him in surprise. This is different. A Kingridge who doesn’t make his last name his entire personality. Interesting. I finish my drink. “Now that sounds like a deal.”

Our eyes meet for just a beat longer than necessary. I can’t tell if it’s the alcohol or the proximity to the most gorgeous man I’ve ever met, but something shifts. It’s like

a spark that electrifies the air and makes it hard to breathe.

I glance over his shoulder and look at the rest of the Kingridge brothers. Each one of them moves through the room like they were born in boots and baptized in charisma. Callum shakes hands with the district rep. Fallon chats with an event coordinator. Alex broods near the stage effortlessly carrying the weight of leadership on his shoulders.

“No wonder my father’s threatened by them,” I murmur, half to myself. “He might be the mayor, but if they ever wanted it, the Sagebrush Creek popular vote would be Kingridge— even with all the skeletons in their closets. They hold all the influence in this town. Not to mention most of the money.”

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Danner hums in agreement, his gaze following mine. “That seems to be true. It doesn’t mean they don’t have some things to learn.”

“I’ve heard they haven’t exactly made it easy for you since your arrival...” I trail off.

Danner smirks. But before he can respond, a pair of shrill voices hit a crescendo behind us. It’s all pitch and perk, something like a pair of overly caffeinated cicadas. I already know exactly who I’ll see when I turn. My heart promptly sinks into my chest like a stone in wet cement.

Patty June and Brandi Rose. The unofficial eyes and ears of Sagebrush Creek... and in Patty’s case, Kingridge Ranch, too. One is a gossip columnist without a column, and the other’s a small-town celebrity with delusions of a reality show comeback. Together? They’re a pack of lip-glossed piranhas. And their target tonight... is clearly me.

“Well, if it isn’t little Becki,” Brandi croons, her Southern twang thick enough to drown in. “Bless your heart, you look grown in that backless dress. And good for you, not at all ashamed to show off those curves.” Her eyes rake up and down my body, pausing with pointed emphasis at my cleavage.

“Ashamed?” I cut my eyes at her, arching a brow. My voice is sharp enough to draw blood.

“I hear you graduated. Moved right back home to Sagebrush. Good girl,” Patty June adds with a syrupy smile. “Daddy must be proud.”

Danner's eyes flick toward mine, and something in them shifts. "Graduated? It has to be from art school."

Danner has no idea that this conversation is poison. Anything we say can and will be spread like wildfire.

"I wish." I force a smile that doesn't quite reach my eyes. "No, definitely not art school. My father only had a few approved majors on his list. I've got a business degree."

I shake my head slowly, bitterness creeping in around the edges. I don't say how much I hated every second of those four years pretending to care about spreadsheets instead of sketchpads. Not with this audience.

"You might've gotten that B.A., but you didn't find that Mrs." Brandi's voice goes sing-song. "Unbelievable because you are so sweet. But now you've got something to fall back on while you wait for Mr. Right. Maybe get you a job up at the law office. I hear they're looking for a clerk."

"And they've got more than one attorney who is ready to settle down," Patty June adds.

"Sure, yeah. Maybe I'll do that. Or I missed my true calling," I murmur. I reach for my glass and when I find it empty, I toss back the rest of Danners.

Danner leans in slightly, the corner of his mouth quirking up. "Or maybe she'll open an art school," he says, eyes gleaming as he tosses the lifeline. "Bring some creativity to this town."

He winks, and my heart trips over itself. That wink? Illegal. Dangerous. Capable of inspiring regrettable decisions and lifelong infatuation. I can't join the I heart

Kingridge club now, not when I've spent a lifetime avoiding it.

"Ladies, if you'll excuse us." Danner rises smoothly to his feet and pulls out my chair. "We're heading to the bar." He holds out a hand to me like it's the most natural thing in the world.

Patty June and Brandi Rose look like their eyes might just fall out of their heads. I hesitate for only half a second before sliding my hand into his. His palm is rough, and it shoots warmth through me.

The room swells with the sound of collective interest. I can all but see the tongues wagging, but for once, I can't bring myself to care. The way Danner is looking at me makes me feel seen. Not managed. Not polished. But seen.

I start to stand, but a voice dripping with sarcasm bursts through the buzz of the room like a firecracker.

"With all due respect, Mayor Randolph Bellcourt, I think you should stop talking while you're ahead."

CHAPTER 2

BECCA

Two Weeks Before, The Farm to Table Gala at the Velvet Spur

The sound of my father's name jerks my head up like it's attached to a string. Every instinct in me screams to brace.

Here we go.

He doesn't hesitate. Of course, he doesn't. My father has never met a line he couldn't cross in the name of politics or pride. His ongoing feud with the Kingridge family is the kind of petty saga that makes you grateful for wine. The Kingridge brothers might be loud and unfiltered, but they aren't wrong. Watching my father attack them over and over again is humiliating.

But I don't dare let it show.

I school my face into neutral lines. I keep my eyes calm and my chin high. If I've learned anything in twenty-two years as a Bellcourt, it's that personality is a crime. I am to be a perfect pillar for my father, quiet, supportive, and devoid of anything resembling independent thought.

Especially when his spotlight flicks from the crowd... to me. He selected this red backless dress for me to wear tonight himself. He said it would show off my poise. I think he meant to parade my curves like a campaign prop. I used to hope things would change as I got older. They haven't. The only thing that's shifted is the length of my hemlines and how much more control he tries to exert now that I'm grown.

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Things have been particularly bad since I graduated and returned home to his full control. But I have a feeling they're about to get a whole lot worse.

Then Geoffrey Kingridge appears behind Danner. He claps Danner on the back with the force of a man on a mission. "Hey, you want to be a Kingridge or not? You don't sit here while that asshole's popping off." And just like that, he's gone, storming toward the middle of the room where the shouting's getting louder.

"Right," Danner mutters, rising to his feet. "I'm sure there isn't going to be a problem, but I should probably head over."

"Of course," I mumble.

My stomach knots as a familiar, authoritative voice slices through the rising tension. Then I hear it, and my heart stops altogether.

"Rebecca. Come."

Shit.

It isn't a suggestion. I take a steady inhale of breath and stand slowly, smoothing my dress with one hand as I move to my father's side.

Think of the optics. Think of the optics.

The words loop in my head like a chant I can't escape. I position myself between Dad and his perky campaign manager. I'm opposite his newest girlfriend. Her eyes don't

meet mine. She keeps her gaze fixed on the assembling crowd and holds her wine glass like a trophy. They might be a match made in heaven.

A tense silence falls over the even space in the Velvet Spur. It's the kind that prickles against your skin before a storm. I glance around as the Kingridge brothers assemble, one by one, forming a loose wall of muscle and fury across from us.

Dad raises his glass, the crystal catching the candlelight as he straightens his posture with theatrical ease. My stomach clenches. I already know what's coming.

Then he raises his voice. It's loud, calculated, and meant to carry. "This community needs growth. The highway expansion isn't just about convenience. It's about jobs, opportunity, and progress."

The words echo like a threat because that's exactly what they are. Alex Kingridge steps forward. He's all coiled muscle and sharp fury. My former stepmother, Cassidy, is by his side. She shoots me a sympathetic look. Even though I appreciate it, I look away. She got out of this nightmare and didn't stop to take me with her.

The fire in Alex's eyes is unmistakable. "You want progress? Try doing it without threatening to cut our ranch in half."

My father stares back at him with a smug smile. It's the kind that makes me want to disappear into the floor.

"Progress comes at a cost," he says smoothly. "Sometimes that means sacrifice for the good of the community. It's about time the Kingridge Ranch did its part, if you ask me."

Geoffrey Kingridge lets out a derisive snort and steps in. "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.”

There’s murmuring between the Kingridge men now. It’s low, gravelly, and thick with warning. The tension crackles through the air like a live wire, and I suddenly feel lightheaded.

Alex’s shoulders rise, then drop, his expression shifting from rage to something colder. “Yeah, I’m okay,” he says, though his voice is taut. “It’s just this asshole is about to find out what we call sacrifice. I’ve had enough.”

I take a small, instinctive step back. But before I can get far, my father’s hand clamps around my wrist. Instinctively, I try to pull away, but his fingers dig into the flesh on my forearm. It takes everything in me not to let out a yelp.

“Let me go,” I growl under my breath.

Dad turns toward me. “United front,” he hisses, his breath hot and sharp against my ear.

“Fine.” I tug my arm away.

I glance up at him, startled. But Dad’s expression is already smoothed into a politician’s grin as he turns to face Alex. I know we aren’t done yet. My training takes over, and a smile stretches onto my face.

“Alex, you’re just upset that my proposal might force you to open your books. Is that it?” His voice is sharp with venom now. “Or maybe it’s the fact that your wife is my leftover? That one still stings a little, doesn’t it?”

Gasps ripple through the room like a shockwave. There’s a beat of silence, just long enough for the floor to feel like it’s dropping out from under me.

“Oh,hellno.” A woman’s voice slices through the hush like a blade.

Then chaos explodes.

My father’s laughing, sharp and cruel. The Kingridge brothers are lunging. One of the catering tables flips, sending plates, cutlery, and champagne glasses crashing to the ground in a silver-and-glass symphony of destruction. Guests gasp and scatter.

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So much for optics.

As I edge toward the side door, I catch fragments of my father's urgent whisper to his campaign manager. "The development company's already broken ground on the shopping complex. If this easement doesn't go through by Christmas, we lose the anchor stores. And I lose my biggest campaign contributor." His eyes flash toward the Kingridge brothers. "Those boys think they can play politics? They have no idea what's coming."

In the midst of the storm, I spot Danner.

He's holding his brother back. One arm is wrapped around Alex's middle, and the other braces against his shoulder. But his eyes... his eyes are locked on me.

Even as he manages the chaos, Danner jerks his head toward the kitchen behind me. It's subtle, but intentional. I follow his gaze to the glowing red Exit sign and then back to him.

He mouths, go now.

I don't need to be told twice.

With my father distracted by his own performance, I slip from his grip and edge toward the side door. My heart pounds as I push it open. The quiet whump of the door closing behind me is a relief.

When I get outside, the cool night air hits my face like a balm. I kick off my heels

and start walking. As soon as I reach the field beyond the barn, the grass softens beneath my feet. I don't look back. I just keep walking until the noise from the gala fades into crickets and moonlight. I'm desperate to put distance between myself and my father's chaos.

I knew it'd be like this when I got back. But where else can I go? How the hell will I get there when Dad holds all the cards?

I reach what looks like an abandoned garden and slip through the gate. When I hear the creak of the spring behind me, my whole body stiffens.

Please don't be my dad. Please don't be—I turn.

My heart stops.

It's Danner.

CHAPTER 3

DANNER

Two Weeks Before, The Farm to Table Gala at the Velvet Spur

"I saw him tug your arm." My voice comes out sharper than I meant it to. It's more bark than question, but I can't help myself. "Why is he tugging your arm like that?"

Becca blinks up at me. She looks startled, but not afraid. Not of me, at least. "That's just how he is," she says quietly, brushing a piece of hair behind her ear. "He wanted to make sure I didn't embarrass him."

She says it like it's normal. Like it's fine. Like she's already justified it to herself a

thousand times.

“You say that like it’s normal, like it’s fine when it’s anything but. I don’t know how many times you’ve had to justify that to yourself, but that doesn’t make it right.”

She cuts her eyes at me, and the heat bubbles in her stare. Then, without another word, she turns and forges a path between the overgrown garden beds. I give her space to take it all in and push it all out of her mind.

The moment she steps off the stone path and into the moonlit soil, she changes. Her shoulders lowered. Her breath steadies. She starts pulling deadheads off the rosebushes. Her fingers move with practiced ease. She brushes petals and tugs off dead leaves.

Then Becca crouches to pick at weeds and leans into a cluster of overgrown wildflowers. The sequins on her dress stretch across her back, catching the light, shimmering like starlight across velvet skin.

My mouth goes dry. Don’t look. Don’t think it. She’s too innocent. But I am looking. Hell, I can’t do anything but look. I catch the imprints of angry fingers on the inside of her forearm. My adrenaline spikes again, flaring through my chest and arms like wildfire. The anger has nowhere to go, so it just sits there, burning.

“Ha.” My laugh is dark, bitter. “Your dad doesn’t need any help embarrassing himself. I don’t like what I saw. There’s not a reason for any man to put his hands on you like that. You know that, don’t you?”

She doesn’t look at me, just keeps deadheading a rose like it’s the only thing in the world that makes sense.

“Becca, how old are you?” I ask the question hot on my tongue before I can stop it.

She glances over her shoulder, then straightens, a handful of seed pods clutched in her hand. “I’m twenty-two.”

My jaw clenches, and I lean against the splintered split rail fence. “So get out of there. You’re an adult, move away from Bellcourt’s bullshit. You don’t have to deal with it.”

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“I know,” she snaps, voice sharper now. “I know that.” Her chest rises and falls as she breathes through it, fingers tightening around the seed pods. “But where would I go? He’s the only family I have. Some family is better than no family, don’t you think?”

There’s a beat of silence, and I swallow a lump in my throat. It’s a shared truth that’s bitter and binding at the same time.

Becca turns and walks towards me. I take in the sway of her hips with each step she takes. When she leans against the fence beside me, the ghost of a smile plays on her lips. “How old are you?”

“What?”

“How old are you?” Her eyes flick over me, serious, searching, and unafraid. Her lashes flutter. Her voice is soft but steady, and I swear this woman is more composed in a sequined dress than most people are in full body armor.

The red backless dress. The curves. Her quiet confidence. She’s too young to be in such control of her power. And yet, here she is.

“Too old to be sitting this close to you,” I murmur. “I’m thirty-one.”

Her eyes crinkle, but I don’t feel any judgment behind it. “So you’re an adult. And why do you put up with your family’s bullshit?”

I huff out a laugh, not because it’s funny, but because it’s fair. “I suppose... they’re all I’ve got. I just met most of them not too long ago. No matter how messy it gets,

they're still mine."

She doesn't respond at first. Just drops the seed pods into the soil beneath her feet and then points toward the shallow ceramic saucer nestled in the dirt.

"We need to add pebbles to that."

I blink. "What?"

"That's a perfect bee bath for way out here, but if we don't add pebbles, they'll drown," she says, crouching beside it. "You know, give them a place to rest."

"There shouldn't be so much overgrowth here anyway," I mutter, more to myself than her. "I've been pushing these guys to plant a cover crop, get the nitrogen sorted out. God forbid they compost something."

Becca looks up, a spark of challenge in her eyes as she lets out a giggle. "Right? Somehow, the save the bees message hasn't reached middle-of-nowhere Texas, not even with all these farms."

"Yeah, bros don't recycle. Didn't you get the memo?"

"Trying to save the planet? Yuck." She adds a scoop of pebbles to the saucer and stands back with a nod.

The moonlight outlines her silhouette, and I can't help but get lost in her. It's like the rest of the world fades into static. The chaos, the damage, the noise of that damn gala... we left it behind the second we stepped into this garden. And somehow, I already know I'm not walking out the same.

"Where were you before this?" She tilts her head slightly, curiosity warming her

features.

“I hate to be unpopular, but I’m from California.”

She laughs. “Ah, it isn’t that bad. I’ve been at UC Berkeley for years. What were you doing out there before you decided to come here and play cowboy?”

Here you go, the moment you should run, Becca.

“I was getting married and trying to prove myself, I guess. I was living near my mom and sister. I was trying to piece together what my life could have looked like if things didn’t end up the way they did with all these brothers. I could’ve been a proper rancher, you know.”

“You might still get there.” Becca bites her bottom lip, seemingly unfazed by the mention of my divorce. “I can see you roping and riding. Maybe on the back of a bucking stallion.”

She leans into me, and the press of her skin against mine makes me bubble with heat. “So why come now?”

“She’s passed now.” I try to keep my voice even, but the words still land like a rock in my throat.

The ache flickers in my chest like it always does. It’s dull but permanent like a phantom pain. I couldn’t save my mom from cancer. Couldn’t save my marriage, either. No matter how hard I worked. No matter how many paychecks I brought home. Turns out money doesn’t heal the kind of hurt that eats from the inside.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Becca leans away from me slightly. Then something unreadable crosses her face. “Wait, is it your mom, your sister, or your wife who

passed?”

The hesitation in her voice pulls a laugh from me, unexpected and sharp around the edges. “My mom,” I say. “But... my marriage, too, I guess.”

She lets out a breathy giggle, and damn if it doesn’t hit me right in the ribs. It’s light and real and far from the polished, performance-laugh I’ve heard from her all night.

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“Sorry, I didn’t want to get that part wrong. But now you’re here,” she says, lips tugging into a smile. “You’re trying to figure out how to fit in on a ranch with a bunch of bros who can’t get out of their own way.”

I snort. “Pretty much.” The words tumble out before I can stop them. “I thought I’d get to know my family. Figure out if I can belong here. Didn’t think it’d be this hard, if I’m being honest,” I admit. “I’ll die trying to get them to understand that recycling isn’t a personality trait. I really thought the whole world had caught on. You know—plant food, not lawns. Build habitat, conserve water. Turns out outside the west coast, sustainability makes you woke.”

“It can’t be easy for them,” Becca leans into me. “Learning they’ve got some random brother out here, suddenly part of the family. Pa’s instant favorite. The most handsome of all of them. Showing up, charming all the women in town.” Her cheeks flush, and she drops her gaze for a second too long. A deep red crawls across her skin like wildfire.

“Someone’s got to do it,” I growl.

“You know what? Fuck the bros. Build a habitat. Save the bees. Conserve the land.”

I grin. Wide. Real.

“Yeah,” I say, nodding. “Fuck the bros.”

CHAPTER 4

DANNER

And just like that, we're standing in the moonlight, and my heart is thudding in my chest. Becca and I are trading battle cries like we're the only two people on the planet who understand what it means to want more than what we were handed.

An hour passes in the blink of an eye. The conversation is smart and deep. She tells me about growing up with the expectations of a narcissist. She doesn't feel like being run out of the only life she's ever known just to escape him, and I understand that. She tells me that she's never been in love and about all the guys who have tried to make her fall along the way. Becca is different from anyone I've ever met.

I tell her my truth, too, even the dark parts, but she doesn't seem afraid. I came here broken. My ex left me three months after Mom's funeral. She said I'd emotionally checked out, and maybe she was right.

I'd spent two years watching cancer eat away at the strongest woman I knew. When it was all over, I didn't know how to feel anything but empty. But the problems in our marriage started much earlier than that. I had the wrong family. The wrong connections and the wrong degree. I was never enough, no matter how much I did.

When Becca talks about her love for the arts, I drink in every detail. She's a breath of fresh air and my first real connection since I arrived in Texas. The ranch was supposed to be a fresh start for me, but some days I wonder if I'm just running from one failure into another.

Until tonight.

Tonight, this woman who sketches gardens in the margins of her life has changed everything. She looks at me like I might actually be worth something, and I like the

version of myself I see reflected in her.

Becca pulls a pin from the back of her hair. It sends a wave of auburn hair cascading down her back in soft waves. The strands catch the moonlight as it tumbles over her shoulders. One coil catches on the sequined strap of her dress.

She frowns and tugs at it gently, but it snags again. “A little help here?”

“Of course,” I say, though the words feel like a promise I’m not sure I should make.

My hand lifts before I can stop it. I brush my fingers along the exposed skin at the nape of her neck, slow and careful. Her hair is soft and silky, but wild too. The touch sends a jolt of awareness through me. I notice the way her breath catches as my fingers work through the tangles. I feel the way her body reacts to my touch and sense the slight tremor that runs through her. As I ease the strands free, my fingertip trails down her shoulder blade. Goosebumps ripple up in my wake.

Becca leans almost imperceptibly into my hand. When I trace the line of her shoulder blade, the small sound she makes goes straight to my gut. The way she responds to me is delicate and strong at the same time. It makes me want to pull her against me until there's no space left between us.

"There." The word catches in my throat. But my hand lingers, thumb brushing once more across her neck.

She turns to face me, and the want in her eyes mirrors my own. All of a sudden, Becca and I are close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from her body.

“Thank you,” she whispers. She turns to face me, chin tilted up, lips parted just slightly.

"Becca," I say, her name like a prayer and a warning all at once.

The moonlight reflects off her cheekbones, painting her in silver and shadow. Her eyes are wide, steady. She's not scared of this moment.

I am.

We're so close I can feel the heat of her skin. My heart hammers against my ribs like it's trying to break free of the cage. Kissing her would be a bad idea on every level. My brothers. Her father. Politics. The small town gossip. The fact that I've never been able to hold on to a woman I love. I failed enough for both of us. I carry baggage.

Becca may not know it, but she carries the weight of expectation. She's young and bright and full of the kind of softness I've learned to live without. She's innocent and unjaded.

And yet... I want her.

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I want her in that red dress, out of that red dress, tangled in wildflowers and bent over the split rail fence. I want her name in my mouth and her hands in my hair. My hands clench into fists at my sides as I fight the urge to reach for her.

Between the way the moonlight plays across her bare shoulders and the way her dress hugs her curves, I can imagine exactly how her skin would feel under my hands. Warm. Soft. Electric. Becca leans in even closer, and I wonder if she's imagining my mouth on her throat.

The space between us crackles with want. One step forward, and I could have her pressed against the garden gate. I could find out if she tastes as sweet as she looks. But footsteps over gravel echo in the distance, and it jolts me back to reality.

Immediately, I'm reminded of why this is dangerous. I turn, instantly tense, to find Randolph Bellcourt marching toward us. He's all puffed chest and righteous fury as he plows through the garden gate.

"Rebecca, what is this? I've been looking all over this farm for you." The word farm comes out as a sneer.

"I'm fine. I just needed some air." She shakes her head.

"Randolph." I step forward, my jaw tight. I catch Becca's wrist gently and rotate it, exposing faint fingerprint marks that still linger. They make my blood boil all over again. "If I see this again, you and I are going to have a problem."

We lock eyes until the tension is broken by the sound of more footsteps pounding the

earth behind us. They come heavy and fast. I turn to see my brothers file in like backup at a bar fight.

“Randolph,” Alex growls as he steps forward. “You’re on your way out, aren’t you?”

The mayor’s smile returns, oily and smug. “Yes, I’m going to take the path of my future easement. Like I said in my press release, I’ve already spoken with the city commissioner. It’s the only place that works.”

“We’ll see what the taxpayers say,” Geoffrey chimes in.

“Haven’t you heard? We already have. They are all in the preliminaries.”

My brothers fire off a few insults. They’re half-drunk and at least half-true. But none of them land. Randolph is too practiced.

“Actually, Dad, I think you should hear the latest update.” Becca’s voice silences the group, and all eyes fall on her. “The ranch has applied for a grant.”

I glance at her. This is news to me.

“Danner was just telling me about it.” Her poise and confidence are unmatched.

My brothers explode with questions all at the same time. I raise a hand to quiet them, then nod for Becca to continue.

“It’s for an interactive pollinator garden right here, where the easement is projected to pass. It’s the only place that would work. It’ll have recycled art installations, compost systems... It would be the largest of its kind in the state.” She takes a breath. “If it’s approved, it becomes a protected native habitat. Illegal to dig up.”

The silence that follows is delicious. I can't help the smirk crawling across my lips.

I clear my throat. "Since you've already informed the taxpayers and the commissioner that this path is the only viable option," I say, "once the habitat is designated, you'll need to find a new route. Off our property."

Bellcourt's jaw ticks. My brother's face lights up one at a time. And for the first time tonight, I know we've got him.

CHAPTER 5

BOOTS AND BITCHING POD

Hey y'all! Sagebrush Creek, are you ready for some tea?

It's your favorite secret podcaster back again with another boots-on-the-ground update. That's right, as usual, I've got my eyes open, my boots on, and my gossip ready. So pour yourself something sweet, something stiff, or both because this is hotter than the devil's backside.

Let's start at the hair salon. You know the one, Mane Event. It's where roots get retouched, brows get butchered, and gossip goes to get born.

Word on the shampoo chair is someone's taken hair dye to a whole new level. And by new, I mean down there. Let's just say the curtains don't match the carpet anymore for a certain stay-at-home someone, and apparently, that's just the way her working man likes it. I'm not here to judge your hobbies, darlin', but maybe save the color experimentation for after church.

Now on to more pressing produce.

The Sow Much Farmers Market is heating up for its seasonal kickoff, and most of us are bringing the fruits of our actual labor. Keyword... most. Because rumor has it someone's been stocking up at a big box store, slapping on a hand-painted "homegrown" sign, and passing it off like it sprouted from their backyard. PSA— If your tomatoes have barcodes, you're not fooling anyone. You bought those next to the bulk paper towels.

And now for what y'all really came here for, our weekly (almost daily at this point) trip out to Kingridge Ranch. Them boys really do keep it coming, don't they?

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Hey there, Danner Kingridge. I'll hand it to you, you didn't heed a single word of my warning. It didn't take you long to make headlines, did it?

You roll into town with all your West Coast charm and conservation credentials, and suddenly you're whispering sweet nothings to Becca Bellcourt. That's right, folks, the mayor's daughter. And might I add, the only woman in town who might be more complicated than the Kingridge family tree.

Word is, you two slipped out of the Farm-to-Table Gala together, and let's just say it wasn't to admire the herb garden. Bold move, cowboy. Especially considering her daddy's been trying to carve up your ranch like it's a Thanksgiving turkey.

She's all wide-eyed innocence. Starry-eyed over the latest member of our small town royal family. Plus, daddy hates you; that checks out. You're just her type. But why you would go for such a complicated situationship, I couldn't figure out.

Who are you, Danner? Inquiring minds need to know, and I'm not one to disappoint. So I did some digging.

It looks like you've got an ex-wife in California. Turns out she had daddy issues, too. But that zip code must have come with a big price tag. So what happened? Is that what brought you all the way to Texas? Maybe this is what healing looks like... Or maybe it's just a slow-motion trainwreck. You should know by now that we love those around here.

Honey, you're hardly a Kingridge. I thought you might want to take this slowly. I liked you, Danner, I really did. But you insist on ignoring me, so consider yourself

fair game. Whatever it is that you're taking from Ms. Bellcourt, I'll see it. I'll listen for it and I'll make sure everyone knows.

Stay tuned, folks, there ain't no way I'm sleeping on the conclusion of this saga. Until next time, this has been your bitch with boots on the ground, signing off. But never signing out.

CHAPTER 6

BECCA

Present Day

I don't know how the idea to apply for the grant manifested at exactly the right moment, but I'm sure glad it did. It's given me the perfect excuse to spend an incredible amount of time with Danner in the last two weeks. We've been living for this application and working from sunup to sundown nearly every day.

We started the application process immediately, and somehow, his conviction has made him even more attractive. I had no idea that was even possible. But today Danner's in an old T-shirt that clings to his chest and arms. It's snug in all the places that should come with a warning label.

He truly doesn't care what anyone thinks, and it's so refreshing. His Fuck the Patriarchy hat is turned backward with a little sweat at the brim. At this point, it's like he's daring the town to talk about him. Daring his brothers to disown him. It's ridiculous. And ridiculously hot.

We settle on the back steps of the old greenhouse while the sun sinks lower, turning the sky the color of ripe peaches. The glass panels are cracked and mossy in places, but there's beauty in the ruin.

This location feels like the perfect home base for the grant project. It's ready to come alive again. Danner pulls out his phone and drops onto the bench beside me. The wood creaks under his weight, but the sound is comforting and steady, like him.

He scrolls for a second, then clears his throat and starts reading the grant application essay to me for what has to be the hundredth time. I don't mind. I love listening to him. I like the way his voice sharpens when he's passionate. I love how he gestures like he's sketching the future into thin air.

When he finishes reading, he turns to me, expression hopeful. "What do you think?"

"It sounds perfect," I say, and I mean it. "I can already see it. Arches between the garden beds. Twinkle lights strung between posts. An outdoor classroom where kids can learn without walls. It has to be a place where plants can grow wild the way they should, not constrained."

"I love your vision. "How'd you get so smart?" he asks, voice low and a little hoarse.

"Well... I had to raise my father. That has to count for something." I keep my tone light, but his use of the word love makes my face flush like a giddy teenager, and I turn away. When his phone vibrates, I'm grateful for the distraction. But Danner glances at his phone, and his face goes pale. My stomach sinks.

"What happened?"

"It looks like they moved up the site inspection to next week." He runs his hand through his hair. "We need months of growth documentation, and we have weeks at best. Plus, someone filed a complaint about our water usage permits." He looks at me grimly. "Your father's not playing around."

I raise an eyebrow. "That's fine because neither are we."

Danner doesn't say anything at first. Instead, he reaches over and puts his hand on my thigh. It's large and calloused, but his touch is warm and confident. It's everything I didn't know I was waiting for. Heat crawls through my entire body, blooming outward from the spot where he touches me.

When he starts to pull his hand away, I trap it there with mine before I can think better of it. I press it just enough to make my breath catch. His eyes darken in response, and I see the exact moment he realizes what I'm doing. The muscle in his jaw ticks. His thumb brushes once across my skin, and the touch sends liquid fire straight to my core.

"Becca," he says, my name rough with warning.

But I don't want warnings. I want his hands everywhere. I want my round curves pressed into his hard edges. He holds my gaze for a beat longer, then finally slips his fingers free. His touch brushes lightly over my skin as he goes, and the loss of contact leaves me aching.

Just like that, we're back to work. Danner and I carry on like this. We push and pull. We draw lines and cross them. It's pure bliss.

"I don't think I'm doing it justice," he says suddenly, swiping through his notes. "I need them to see it. I want to show them how incredible this could be. The smell of the soil. The buzzing of bees. The way recycled sculptures lead into edible beds..." He turns to me, eyes bright. "You have to sketch it."

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“What?” I blink. “No. I can’t be officially a part of this. If my father finds out I’m evenhere, let alone helping with the application, he’ll lose it.”

“Let him be mad,” Danner says without hesitation. “You’re so damn talented, Becca. And I know you believe in this project. You’re already part of it. Just... let yourself beinit.”

I hesitate. The instinct to hide is strong. I’ve spent my whole life keeping the best parts of me tucked away, like being toocolorful might ruin his grayscale world. But the fact of the matter is, I’m not established. I still go home to my father's house at the end of the day. Granted, I don’t see much of him because he’s in another wing, but still. He won’t hesitate to take the reins and make my life impossible.

“Let me see it,” I murmur, swallowing past the nerves. “Maybe I can add something.”

Screech.

The sharp sound of tires cuts through the quiet and pulls my attention. I jerk my head up just in time to see two white work trucks pull up the grave driveway. They kick up a long cloud of red dust behind them. They’re hardly at a stop when the doors burst open with Kingridge brothers. The guys file into our space like a pack of wolves looking for their next meal.

“Hey,” Danner waves. “Came to take a look at the progress?”

“Man, you keep showing me, but I don’t see nothing,” Geoffrey says, crossing his arms like a bouncer outside a barn dance. “I see a chalk line on an open field.”

“You don’t see it because you aren’t trying,” Danner replies, voice calm but firm.

Geoffrey scoffs. “No, we don’t see it because there’s nothing to see. You know how much we’ve spent trying to eradicate bees around here? Now you want us to save them?”

“Stop,” Alex cuts in, already rubbing his temples like this argument has been brewing since breakfast. “We need to get this grant, period. End of story. So we can finally be done with Bellcourt.” He glances at me, then adds, “No offense, Becca.”

“None taken,” I say with a shrug, but it still lands like a pebble in my shoe.

Alex continues, “Danner’s the only one who actually knows what the hell any of this means, so like it or not?—”

“Or not,” Geoffrey mutters with a chuckle, and a few of the other guys join in.

Alex rolls his eyes so hard I’m surprised he doesn’t pull something. “Like it or not, we’re going to listen. Danner, what do you need from us to move this forward?”

“Well, for starters, like I told you last time, this is all Becca. I’d never heard of the grant. So you can’t blame one Bellcourt if you aren’t ready to thank another.” Danner doesn’t miss a beat, and his flattery makes me blush. He continues, “As far as getting the application moved forward, there’s a ton to do. With Thrusty the goat on the run again, we’re gonna need to start with a wire fence line to keep him out of the beds.”

That earns a round of groans and eye rolls. But the grumbling turns into movement in an instant. Before I know it, there are tools being fetched, gloves pulled on, and boots stomping over dry soil.

Two of the guys haul timber from the mesquites into rows. Another is measuring and

staking the ground. It's chaos, but there's a cadence to it. Danner fits in more than he admits. He's leading the helm and helping at every turn.

Danner catches my eye as he unrolls a length of graph paper and launches into an explanation of the schematic he sketched last night. His voice gets this clipped rhythm when he talks about land use and native pollinators. It's like he's tapping into a part of himself most people never take the time to see. But he's shown me who he is, and I'm desperate for more.

While they work, I slide down onto a nearby bench and pull my sketchpad into my lap. Pencil in hand, I start tracing the outline of what this place could become. Raised beds. Gravel walkways. Wildflowers spill over into edible greens. Solar lanterns light the path. A bench tucked in beside a flowering vine-covered trellis, just big enough for two.

Two... Like me and Danner.

I think about the way he moves. The quiet command he holds. The way he talks like every problem has a solution if you just look at it from the right angle. He isn't just smart and sexy as hell—he's thoughtful. Inspired. Steady in a way I didn't know I needed. He commands a room not with ego, but with purpose. The exact opposite of my father.

All I want is for Danner to kiss me. But he hasn't. He's had two weeks, and the dude hasn't even attempted it. It's not like I haven't tried. I've leaned in, closed the space, and waited for him to make the move.

But still... nothing. I don't know if it's my age or my father or some deeply ingrained sense of honor that's stopping him. But whatever his reason, he's wrong. He's wrong to keep himself at arm's length.

The Kingridge brothers keep slinging complaints Danner's way right up until the break for lunch, and the field quiets again. This looks like nothing. Why are we doing this again? Rocks matter because...?

But I can't understand what they mean. From where I sit, nothing is as it was before. The field that was blank just hours ago is completely transformed. Uneven red clay dirt now houses the hardscape to support the plants that could be. There are raised beds, boulders, and concrete blocks creating structure and taking shape.

Danner stands at the center of it all, like a statue of a Greek god. His hands are on his hips. His hat is tipped back, and his eyes are on the horizon. It's like he's already planning what comes next.

"Look at the progress," I step beside him.

"Those guys can be real assholes, but damn if they don't know how to get things done."

"Don't let them get to you," I say, nudging his arm with mine. "The way you can make things happen is... impressive. It's just a few rocks in the center of a field right now, but I can already see it. Imagine the vines, the flowers, the pollinator paradise!" I reach into my bag and pull out the sketch I've been working on, smoothing the paper before holding it up for him to see.

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He takes it gently, like he's afraid to crease the page. "This is incredible," he says, eyes scanning every line. Then he looks up. "You are incredible."

My heart does a full somersault. "We should head to the farmers market," I say quickly, needing to anchor the flutter. "Find all the native plants we can. If we start planting the top right corner first, we can take a photo for the grant. That way, they won't have to imagine anything. We'll show them exactly what we want."

"Yeah, that's exactly what we'll do."

Danner nods, still staring at the drawing, but something shifts in his expression. His walls are lower now. His shoulders are looser. There's something raw in the way he looks at me. I reach out, my fingers brushing up the sleeve of his shirt to reveal the remainder of a tattoo that I saw peeking out of the bottom.

"What does this mean?" I ask, letting my finger linger over the script etched there.

He glances down, almost sheepish. "It means 'I am enough.'" There's a pause, then he adds, "Cheesy, right?"

"No." I shake my head slowly. I trace the dark ink curling just beneath his skin. "I'm just wondering why you need the reminder." I meet his gaze, and I don't blink. "Because from where I sit, you're the most incredible man I've ever met."

His eyes darken just slightly, the air between us thickening. The way he stares at me makes my skin hum. I can feel the unspoken words sitting between us like gravity, like they've been waiting for the right moment to fall. So I lean in.

And this time, when he hesitates... I don't.

I close my eyes and press my mouth to his. The moment our lips make contact, electricity whips through my body. His hands wrap around my arms, anchoring me to him. Our kiss is soft at first, testing. But when he doesn't pull away, I deepen the kiss just enough to show I mean it.

My tongue parts his lips, and it ignites him. Danner takes control. His manhood grows firm and presses into me. His hands roam my curves and tangle in the back of my hair. His hungry touch takes my breath away.

CHAPTER 7

DANNER

I spent the night tossing and turning. I'm fighting with myself over the kiss that could change everything. Becca looks at me like I'm the man I want to be. Not the man I've been. Not the man I've failed to outrun. She makes me want to be better. Makes me believe I could be.

Honestly, it scares the hell out of me. Because she's too good to be true. She's too young to be sure. And yet, when I close my eyes, all I see is her.

This morning, I'm up with the sun. I pull my boots on and my hat low. I take my wheatgrass shot and fill my thermos with black coffee. Then I make my way across the ranch toward the future home of the garden, still fighting that same quiet war in my chest.

It's early. But when I arrive, there's movement in the distance, and it catches my eye.

"Thrusty, you stupid goat, I know it's you." I squint at the silhouette in the rising sun.

The rambunctious farm animal has been on the run for a week after chewing through a weak spot in the fencing around his pen. I haven't yet had the pleasure of being personally assaulted by the horned menace. But from what I've heard, it's a rite of passage around here. Maybe today's the day I earn my cowboy street cred.

I pick up my pace, still squinting into the morning haze. But when I reach the edge of the field, it's not Thrusty rustling through the brush?—

It's Becca.

She's kneeling in the red clay. The sleeves on her oversized button-down shirt are rolled up. She's got headphones on and is lost in her own world, tugging weeds like she's been at it for hours. Her hair's pulled into a messy braid.

When I get closer, I note the dirt smudged across her cheek like war paint. She yanks hard with both hands, pulling a stubborn root loose from the earth. "I need a mental picture, and this is in my way," she mutters, mostly to herself. Then she stands and smooths her shirt, breathless.

I step closer. "Don't stop on my account."

She looks over her shoulder and jumps. "Danner, you freaking scared me. You have to warn people. I'm a hot mess."

"I see you," I say quietly. "Hot is right, and I like the mess."

She goes still. The energy between us is charged like lightning in the air before a storm. I step into her space and catch her chin in my hand. Then tilt her face up to mine. Without a word, our lips meet. There's no hesitation and no second-guessing. It's just heat and need. The whole world pulls into focus around us.

Her mouth parts for me, and our tongues meet, slow and sweet, and then something else entirely. Becca is intoxicating. I kiss her like I've waited a lifetime for it because I have. All the wrong paths and all the heartache have led me to this moment.

My hands settle around the curve of her ass and her breath catches. Roaming her back and pulling her close, I am desperate for more friction. I lift her easily, and her thick thighs wraparound my waist. Her laughter muffles against my neck as I carry her toward the greenhouse.

I lean on the old door, and it creaks open behind us. Dust floats in the air like flecks of gold. Once we are inside, the air is thick with the smell of rich earth. I set Becca on the wooden countertop. It's worn smooth and warm from the sunlight streaming in through the old windows. Her fingers grip the front of my shirt like she's never letting go.

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There's no hesitation in her eyes, but I ask the questions anyway. Are you sure?

Do you want this? And finally, can I take care of you?

When she responds, her breath is quick and her cheeks flush. "I've never been sure of anything, but I am sure of you."

In an instant, my mouth is back on hers. It's a frenzy of tugging and pulling. I plant kisses down her neck and across her collarbone. My fingers find the hem of her shirt. When I pull it over her head, the morning air kisses her skin. I bury my face in her swollen cleavage.

Her hands work at the buttons of my flannel. When it falls away, she traces the lines of ink on my forearms. "Danner, you are everything."

I lean her back and slip her shorts onto the floor. Mine follow. My mouth finds the hollow of her throat, then I move lower. When I press on her thighs, she lets them fall open for me. I run my tongue down the length of her slit only to find she's already drenched. The taste of her sends blood coursing through me and my cock pulsates with anticipation.

Taking my time, I work her into a fervor. She matches my long strokes by arching into my touch, and it's stunning. Becca's fingers dig into the back of my scalp, and she moans my name into the ceiling. The breathy sound ignites me.

I climb on top of her and line myself up with her opening.

Becca's hand shoots up, and she presses her fingers into my chest. "You have to go slow, this is my first time."

"Okay, I've got you. Don't worry."

I press inside of her slowly. Becca gasps as I fill her. My body hums while her walls stretch around my girth. We finally come together, slow and sweet and desperate all at once. I pick up the pace and rock into her.

Grasping at her ass, I guide her movements until her hips move in time with my thrusts. I lose myself in time and space. Claiming her is white hot bliss. Becca is the only thing I can see, and I already know there isn't any going back.

When she asks me for more, I give it to her. I thrust into Becca until she clenches along my length. Her beautiful body wracks with tremors. Her breath comes in shallow gasps. It takes everything in me to hold on as I drive her toward the edge.

When she falls over, she takes me with her. Becca chants my name as she rides a wave of release, and it undoes me. I cage her in with arms, pin her to the countertop, and pound her into the old wooden surface until I collapse.

CHAPTER 8

BOOTS AND BITCHING POD

What's up, Sagebrush Creek? My ears are perked, my tea is steeped, and I've got a story so hot they might just curl your hair. Kingridge Ranch has never been accused of being boring. And lately, they've been giving us everything.

It's your favorite secret podcaster back again with another boots-on-the-ground update. Grab your sweet tea, your spiked lemonade, or whatever makes you bold, and

settle in because today it sounds like the bees ain't the only ones getting busy in the flowers...

Well, yeehaw, y'all. When the greenhouse is rockin', don't come knockin'. Or so the rumor goes....

Apparently, things have been growing a little too well out on the edge of the ranch's property if you catch my drift.

Sources say someone spotted a certain greenhouse door swinging open at dawn, and inside? A flannel-clad Kingridge and a mystery woman tangled up like roots in spring soil. No names were spoken aloud, but let's just say the town's favorite conservation cowboy has been spending extra time in the pollinator beds.

Now look, with so many of those Kingridge boys getting cozy these days, it's hard to say whose boots were whose... Word is someone's been getting very comfortable with the greenhouse's... amenities. Sources say the old wooden table in there has been seeing a lot more action than just potting plants. The kind of action that leaves handprints on dusty surfaces and requires a good scrub-down afterward.

Guess who made a prodigal return with the incriminating evidence in his mouth... Thrusty. Yes, that goat.

Apparently, the ornery little bastard came swaggering out of the brush with a victory strut and—get this—a pair of lacey underwear in his mouth. White. Floral. Delicate. Not the kind of thing you expect to see on a livestock escapee, but hey, we don't kink shame on this podcast.

The underwear was traced back to a pile of laundry left in the corner of the ranch's old greenhouse. So now the real question is: Who's running around Sagebrush Creek commando today?

Not that there's anything wrong with a little agricultural romance, but maybe invest in some curtains with all that ranching money. The sunrise tours are starting to get a little more educational than intended.

Let's take a moment to appreciate what we're dealing with here: a reformed goat, a mystery hookup, and someone who clearly had a very good morning.

Now, don't go clutching your pearls just yet. This town's no stranger to scandal, but this one? This has legs. Maybe even a whole future crop of wildflowers. And before you ask—no, Mayor Bellcourt has not commented. But wouldn't you just love to see his face when he finds out who's been pollinating who? Allegedly, of course.

Anyway, I'll be watching. I'll be listening. And I'll be double-checking all the farmstand produce for any unwanted lacy surprises.

Until next time, Sagebrush?—

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This has been your bitch with boots on the ground, signing off. But remember: secrets don't stay buried long in this soil.

CHAPTER 9

BECCA

Things at home have been even more tense than usual with my father. But something about having mind-blowing sex with Danner makes it hard to care. Today we're walking side by side at the Sow Much Farmers Market.

The air smells like honey and hot cinnamon, and the whole place is buzzing with life. There are people in boots, couples walking hand in hand, and toddlers in overalls clutching dripping popsicles. There are patchwork quilts hung like tapestries behind tables, old timers carving wooden spoons in the shade, teenagers passing out lemonade from a washtub cooler. It's noisy and chaotic and so alive. The whole place feels like a scene out of a storybook. It feels like home.

This is everything I love about life in Sagebrush Creek.

Everyone here knows where their food comes from. We pass booths stacked with heirloom tomatoes, towers of handmade soap, and baskets of fresh eggs with the feathers still clinging to the sides. Every vendor calls out like a friend. Everyone waves. The people here are real.

They are the exact opposite of my father's world of appearances and abstractions. This is why I could never have stayed in California after college. I have to carve out a

life formyself in this place that has always had my heart, even if it means playing by my father's rules for a little while longer.

I don't know what that will look like, but being here with Danner makes freedom feel closer than ever. The gravel crunches under our boots. The sun is warm on my shoulders, and every time I glance up, he's already looking at me. He's nothing short of magic.

It's more than just our physical connection, though that leaves me breathless every time. It's the way he sees me for who I am and leans into it. When I told him about my secret sketchbooks, he didn't tell me to be practical.

When I admitted I'd never had an orgasm before him, he didn't make me feel broken. He just smiled that slow, devastating smile and told me he had all night. And he did. He worshiped my body from head to toe. I've never felt more beautiful.

For the first time in my life, I understand why people get so lost in love. Being loved by Danner Kingridge, if that's what it is, feels like seeing the world for the first time. With him, I don't have to perform or posture or calculate how I'll be perceived. With him, I just am.

We turn a corner near the honey stand, and I spot a familiar figure. He's old, kind, and wrinkled. The sight of Pa Kingridge pulls a smile from me as it always has. It's strange to think that I've known Danner's father longer than he has.

He's leaning on a cane and in his other hand, he's holding a leash. I expect to see Hunkleberry, Kingridge Ranch's farm dog and official mascot. But as we get closer, I realize there's a sheep on the other end of the leash. Pa's standing back and watching the chaos of the market with a bemused expression that says he's seen worse and probably caused it.

“Hey, Pa,” Danner says, reaching out to shake his hand, and there’s something so simple and sweet in the gesture that it squeezes at my chest. “What are you doing up here?”

“My boy,” Pa lifts one eyebrow. “Had to bring this damned sheep up here to square my bet.”

My eyes go wide. “You bet a sheep?”

“Not willingly. But they don’t let me have control of my own cash anymore. Hell, they hardly let me drive. Say I can’t see none after I took that tractor off the road a few weeks back. I taught them how to drive in the first place. Becca I tell you these damn boys will be the death of me.”

“Don’t let them win,” I wink at him, and Danner lets out a laugh.

“How’d you get down here today?” Danner asks.

“Holden and Geoffrey brought me. Now they’re tied up over there.” Pa waves vaguely in the direction of the main field. There’s a livestock gate with a rickety-looking sign at the entrance. It reads, WHEELBARROW OBSTACLE RACE—One Rides. One Pushes. Winner Gets Pie.

“Of course.” Locals train for this event like an Olympic sport. “At least they’ve got a good chance at winning. Did Patty June make the pies?” I ask.

“You know she did. Y’all two give it a try,” Pa says, as casual as if he’s offering us a lemonade.

I cough on a laugh, nearly tripping over my own boots as the image flashes through my head: Becca Bellcourt, mayor’s daughter, face-first in the mud with her knees in

the air. Danner Kingridge tries to haul her upright while the whole town watches.

“Oh no,” I say between giggles. “I think I’m going to have to pass on that one.”

Pa nods at the grown men in full costume, stretching and sizing each other up. Danner turns to follow our line of sight to the event space. I watch as his face morphs into something akin to the mask from SCREAM. It’s halfway between dread and disbelief.

“What the Texas is happening over there?” Danner’s eyes bulged.

I can’t help but burst out laughing. Loud, unfiltered, full-body joy. “Every now and then, I forget that you aren’t from Sagebrush Creek.”

“We’re gonna pass on... Whatever that is. We’ve got some plants to find. Good luck with the sheep, Pa.” Danner chuckles as we walk away. He’s still eyeing the obstacle course like it might come to life and chase him.

I tuck my sketches carefully into my folder as we walk past a display of bee boxes and down a shaded path lined with hanging flower pots. It’s crazy how fast my life has changed.

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We went from first kiss to first time to first love in a single night. And I've never been happier.

Danner is quiet, where my world is loud. He's patient while my life is frantic. He's grounded in a way that makes me feel safe, but never stifled.

CHAPTER 10

BOOTS AND BITCHING POD

Howdy, Sagebrush Creek! It's your favorite secret podcaster with gossip hotter than the weather. I wasn't going to bring you another episode this week, but I've got the news you've all been waiting for. So let's get right into it.

I don't know if y'all heard the news... though let's be honest, of course some of you did. But I figured I'd put it on record. It looks like Kingridge Ranch just pulled off a miracle. That's right. Word on the grapevine is the ranch has officially secured that big fancy SPECIAL grant.

Say it with me, y'all, easement officially denied.

Looks like Mayor Bellcourt's grand plan to bulldoze a chunk of the county's most historic land is officially off the table. Sorry, Randolph. Better luck steamrolling someone else's legacy next time.

Now I could talk about the sustainable agriculture initiative, or the native pollinator restoration, or the fact that Sagebrush Creek might finally be known for something

other than cornbread and gossip... but where's the fun in that?

Instead, let's talk about the most interesting element of this grant. I've heard whispers that a certain someone's daughter might've had a hand, or two, in bringing the grant across the finish line.

For those still not getting it, I'm talking about Ms. Rebecca Bellcourt.

The mayor's daughter. The artist. The one who's been seen allegedly lips-on-lips with Danner Kingridge himself.

What's she doing sneaking around the Kingridge property? Helping plan a native garden like some kind of crunchy revolutionary? Or is she finding her own sexual awakening? And what does Daddy Dearest think about all this? My guess? Nothing good.

Congratulations, Kingridge Ranch. You've saved your land and made headlines doing it. Just be careful. This just might be the straw that breaks the Randolphs' haystack if you know what I mean.

I'll be watching the fallout. Our dear mayor lost this battle, but will he wage war?

Until next time sugar, your bitch with boots on the ground.

CHAPTER 11

DANNER

We're out digging in the clay, the sun beating down on our backs. But the air is thick with satisfaction today. The news of the grant approval changes everything.

Around the ranch, the mood's lighter. My brothers have eased up, too, and not just on me. It seems they're ready to get along with each other, too. There's laughter between the rows of wildflowers. They've been out here all morning putting in the work with real teamwork.

It feels like actual peace, and it's all thanks to Becca. She's helped me find my place on the ranch. When we got the news of the grant approval, we'd been working around the clock for days. Except for the hours we'd spent tangled up in each other.

I read the email and ran across the field to her. I scooped her in my arms and lifted her off the ground. We kissed, covered in dirt. She laughed as the wind whipped her hair. I carried her straight to the shower, both of us still half-dressed, water streaming over her curves as I pressed her against the tile wall.

She was hungry for me. I felt her desperation in a way that made my chest tight with possession. Her nails raked down my back as I lifted her. Becca's legs wrapped around my waist as I buried myself deep inside of her.

"Mine," I'd growled against her throat.

In response, she'd gasped, "Yours." I moved inside her and claimed her all over again.

The guys have made their way to other tasks for the day. But Becca's still here with me now. The truth is, I like having her all to myself. I'm drawn to her like a magnet, and I can't get enough. She's slipped her shoes off and her hair is a mess just the way I like it.

The memory of her falling apart in my arms is still fresh in my mind this morning. The way she cried my name as she came undone is burned into my brain. I can still taste her on my lips. I can still feel the way she tightened around me when I followed

her over the edge.

She smiles up at me, standing in the center of our dream coming to life. “Look what we did, Danner. This is going to be amazing.” There’s dirt smudged across her cheek. She’s got her folder tucked under one arm and a smile that knocks me sideways every time she looks at me.

I close the distance between us. “You did. Look what you did.” I brush a strand of hair behind her ear.

The sound of footsteps interrupts my would-be kiss with her, and I roll my eyes in anticipation of a Kingridge brother crisis. “Let me guess, the damn goat is out again?”

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But when I turn, it isn't my brothers.

He stands just past the last row of raised beds, arms crossed, eyes fixed on Becca with razor-sharp scrutiny.

"Shit." Becca freezes beside me, color draining from her face.

Randolph barrels towards us like he owns the place. His face is turned down into a scowl, and I can all but feel the heat coming off of him.

I step forward to intercept him. "Randolph."

He moves around me and rips the folder from Becca's hands. "What's this?" The voice hits like a cold gust.

"We are—" she starts, but her voice falters. She swallows hard.

Randolph steps toward her, jaw tight. Becca looks away, and I don't like that look on her face. I don't like what it says about how many times she's had to back down just to keep the peace.

My heart rate ticks up, and I see red. Without thinking, I move between them. My hand goes flat against his chest. "Let's calm down." It takes everything in me to keep my tone level even as tension vibrates in my bones. "I don't remember inviting you to come here."

"Danner," Becca turns to me and shakes her head. Her voice is tight with panic. She

flashes me a desperate look that punches straight through my ribs.

“No, he’s not going to talk to you like that. Not here.” My heart thuds in my chest. Anger seethes through me. I consider what it would take to lay him flat on his back. Not much, maybe I’m a Kingridge after all.

“Danner, stop.” This time her words are strong and sharp.

But why are they directed at me?

“Dad,” she says, stepping forward. “I want to be a part of this. I am a part of this. I think if you got out of your own way, even just a little, you’d see that they aren’t the problem here.”

Randolph doesn’t answer.

Instead, he yanks the folder from her arms and flips it open. His eyes scan the pages like they’ve betrayed him.

“You’re helping them,” he sneers. “You’re helping them with your...drawings?” He lets out a bitter, mocking laugh that makes my fists clench. “Well, art saves the day after all.”

“It has, Randolph,” I blurt. “Her drawing has?—”

“Danner!” Becca snaps at me.

Randolph raises his voice. “Rebecca, I don’t know what you’re doing with this grown man, but you look like trash. Unpolished. Unkempt. Gallivanting with one of them. Is this really the person you want to be? Is this a good look? I’ll let you decide.”

His voice drips with venom. Like she's an embarrassment. Like she's disposable. Becca exhales, long and slow. Her chin lifts, but I can see the glassiness in her eyes.

"Enough," I roar. "Enough. I'm not going to stand by and watch this. You're done here, Randolph."

Randolph's voice drops to that tone that makes my skin crawl. It's quiet, controlled, and lethal. "You think you're clever with this little grant stunt, but you're playing a game you aren't going to win. Rebecca, you're going to come home with me right now, or I'm calling the county inspector about those water permits. I noticed they weren't pulled before the application process got underway. One phone call, and this whole project gets shut down pending a six-month environmental review." His smile is razor-sharp. "Their grant, their garden, their precious little family legacy... gone. But if you come home now, we'll walk away. We'll make our peace with this little farm and forget it ever happened. Your choice, sweetheart."

"There's no way, Randolph. You're full of shit and we know it. The grant is done."

But Becca steps away from me. She puts a hand around her throat like a noose. "This isn't about me anymore. It's so much bigger and we're so close. It isn't worth it. I have to go."

"Are you joking?" I ask the words out before I can stop them. My eyes widen. "What? Becca, no, we'll be okay. I've got you."

She pulls her shoulders back, and the real her fades into a polished veneer that looks anything but authentic. "That's fine, I'll go home. We'll move forward."

"Becca..."

But she doesn't answer.

Instead, she turns and walks away. After everything we've done. After last night.
After us.

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I stand there, rooted in the red clay. I feel the earth shift under my boots, and I think I might be sick. I gave her my whole heart. I let myself believe in love all over again. I let my guard down... But this time, I refuse to believe that I'm not enough.

I know that I can love Becca like no one else can. I know that she belongs with me, and I'm not going to stop until I have her in my arms forever.

CHAPTER 12

BECCA

It's been a few weeks and I've toted the line at home. Not that I've had much of a choice. Dad hasn't let me out of his sight. There's no phone, no computer, and no car. He's also made a few calls to ensure that getting a job in town is next to impossible.

So I've stood by my choice. I walked away from the one person who made me feel like I could breathe. Dad wasn't just threatening me, he was threatening everything Danner has worked for and everything we've built together.

The garden, the grant, his brothers' respect, and the Kingridge family's future was put on my shoulders. I felt the weight. My heart is shattered. But my decision had nothing to do with my happiness. My life won't be like this forever, but I have to do what I need to survive this time in my life with as few casualties as possible.

Today I'm in the backseat of my father's blacked-out SUV. We're on our way to yet another event. His newest girlfriend clings to his arm in the front seat like a designer handbag, wide-eyed and silent. I'm wearing the same polished smile like an old hat.

I'm dressed exactly the way he likes with neutral colors, polished hair, and shoes that make me feel small in every way that matters.

And I hate it.

The weight of my choice sits on me like a knot on my chest, the face of the cruelest irony. Today, I won't just stand by my father's side at a random event. I'll be standing in front of Brandi Rose and her TV camera, along with half the town, at Kingridge Ranch.

Today is the grand opening of the garden. This is the event that should have belonged to Danner and me. Weeks ago, I was sketching the layout for this space in Danner's truck bed. Weeks ago, we were dreaming about it together. Now I'm here representing a man who can be a monster, who tried with everything he had to stop this from happening.

"Ladies, are we ready?" Dad's question contains a thinly veiled threat.

"Of course."

As we step into the garden, my breath catches in my throat. The air is thick with the scent of blooming milkweed and native mint. The beds are vibrant and wild. They are overflowing with life and bursting with color. It takes my breath away. Bees hum lazily around the flowering stalks. The sunlight bounces off rows of pollinator plants and casts golden halos over everything.

"Wow, he did it," I mumble as I take it all in.

My father's stare hits me like a slap in response. But I don't care. Because this... this is perfect. Danner got it right down to the very last detail. And all I want to do is cry.

Then I see it at the center of the garden. The greenhouse has been completely transformed. The broken glass has been replaced. The old wood is painted white. Vines climb the trellis arch outside the door. It's stunning. Above the entry, a hand-painted sign reads, BLOOM ROOM — A place where nature can grow wild.

My heart shatters and swells in the same breath as the TV crew ushers us inside. It's impossible not to think of the way Danner held me within these windowed walls. It's like walking into a memory that is too good to be real.

Brandi Rose adjusts the mic pack in her back pocket. "Y'all take a moment to get acclimated. We'll get a B-roll of you walking the space. Then we'll come back up front for your ribbon cutting. How's that sound?"

Like a fucking nightmare.

"Sounds fine," Dad replies.

It's clear he isn't going to waste a single smile unless the camera is rolling. Dad takes off to the left, so I break right. I walk along the perimeter of the greenhouse. I look for Danner, but Pa Kingridge seems to be the only member of the family willing to be here for the mayor's dedication ceremony.

I've heard they had their own party to christen the garden. That is one piece of gossip I have no doubt is true. Then a horrifying thought crosses my mind... someone must have come across my underwear at this point. I know I left them here.

The thought makes me chuckle to myself, but still, I can't shake the sadness that settles deep in my bones. Sometimes, when people break up, they're left wondering what could have been. Not me. I see exactly the life I'm missing out on.

My eyes are drawn to the framed and backlit images lining the wall. As I get closer, I

realize they are sketches...my sketches.

Danner found them, and they're permanently on display. My heart thuds and my jaw falls open as I walk through them. He found the ones I hid in folders, in notebooks, and kept the ones scribbled onto napkins and tucked into my purse. They're all here like a blueprint for the garden in front of me.

One sketch in particular makes my breath catch. To most people, it's just another garden. But I know that it's drawn from memory, the morning after our first time together. I'd sketched it while Danner slept next to me. My skin heats as I remember the moment that inspired that drawing. The way he moved over me in the golden morning light, the way he whispered my name like a prayer.

I tried to capture the feeling anyway I could. I wanted to remember the way it felt to be seen and wanted. In the corner, barely visible unless you know to look for it, I'd drawn two figures intertwined among the flowers. No one knows it's us.

In it, our bodies curve together like puzzle pieces, my hand in his hair, his mouth on my throat. It's intimate. Private. The kind of sketch that was meant for my eyes only. But here it is, displayed like art. Like it matters.

The fact that Danner kept it threatens to break me. Not only that, he framed it and made it a permanent part of this public space. That's everything I need to know about how he sees us. Not as something to hide, but as something beautiful worth celebrating.

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As I walk, I find each step of the process displayed in my scribbles. Together, they don't just tell the story of this garden; the sketches tell our story too. Tears sting my eyes, and I blink them back. I press a hand to my chest like I can keep the pieces from falling apart.

The crowd is ushered outside, and I take my time following suit. I stand as far back from my father as possible as the lights of the camera flick on. I force a smile on my face by taking in the smiling faces in front of me. This place will be everything I'd hoped, even if I don't get to enjoy it myself.

My father's voice carries over a small microphone as he addresses the press. Brandi Rose asks questions he can't answer, but he comes up with a word salad on the spot, and it seems to work. Brandi Rose nods along as my father dedicates the garden to the children of Sagebrush Creek. Dad takes it a step further and tells the Kingridge brothers they can thank him for his part in developing the space with their votes. But all of a sudden, I can't hear a single word he's saying.

Across the garden, I find Danner. And he's looking right at me.

We lock eyes, and my heart stops. A slow-growing smile stretches across his face. There's no hesitation in his eyes. Danner is quiet and steady. He's everything I want.

Danner gestures toward the doorway behind me with the slightest nod of his head. I take a step towards the exit without giving it a single thought. My movement catches Dad's attention, and he turns to shoot me a warning look.

But I shake my head and give him my most genuine smile of the day. "I'm going."

Anger etches in the corners of my father's face, but I don't stop walking. I know where I belong, and for once, I'm following my heart.

The sunlight hits my face as I step into the garden. And I breathe out a sigh of relief when I find Danner already there waiting for me. I fall into his arms, and before I can speak, he wraps me against his chest. My face presses into him, and my heart beats wildly.

When we finally pull away, I look up at him. "This is amazing," I whisper. "You did such a good job."

"This is all you," he says, voice low and sure. "I just brought it to life. You are the vision." He leans back enough to look at me, his hands cradling my face like he's afraid I'll vanish. "I love you, Becca. I want to be with you. When you're ready. You're my whole heart."

My heart cracks wide open. "I'm sorry I didn't stay right here. I love you. I've loved you from the minute we met, and I'm ready to do whatever it takes to be beside you. You're the most incredible man I've ever known."

"This ranch feels like home now, but only when you're here. I'm not letting you go again."

Danner lifts me off the ground, arms tight around me, and for the first time in my life, I don't feel like I'm being pulled in two directions. I feel whole. I breathe, and then I press my lips to his.

The kiss is fierce and freeing and true. I don't care who knows it. This man is the start of my happily ever after.

CHAPTER 13

DANNER

Ten Months Later

The golden sun's setting over our garden, everything is drenched in light. It filters through the wildflowers and softens the edges of everything, like the whole ranch is holding its breath for us. It's been nearly a year since we dreamed this up, and the whole thing has taken shape.

But it isn't the plants taking my breath away. It's Becca in a white dress.

This is nothing like my first wedding. There's no band, no guest list, no stiff suit, and sure as hell no choreographed vows.

Today is just about us, Becca and me... Well, and Pa too. We needed a witness other than Thrusty the Goat. Pa was more than happy to volunteer. As it turns out, he's pretty good at keeping a secret, too.

The trellis we built together is wrapped in honeysuckle. Lavender sways around the benches. The Bloom Room glows behind us like a promise kept. I can't think of a more perfect setting to make it official with the woman who has captured my heart.

Becca walks slowly down the center of the garden path. Her bare feet brush the gravel, and the hem of her dress catches the breeze. Her hair's half up, messy and perfect. Tucked behind one ear are the wildflowers we planted weeks ago. They are fully bloomed.

When she reaches me, I wrap my arms around her. She's strength and beauty and fire and softness all tangled up in one person, and she's mine. I tuck a strand of hair behind her ear and let my thumb linger against her cheek. She's floating as we join hands.

“Becca Bellcourt, the mayor’s daughter. The dreamer. The artist. The visionary. My wife. You are beautiful.”

She laughs, soft and full of disbelief. “We’re really doing this.” She’s smiling up at me like I’ve made her dreams come true when anyone can see that I’m the lucky one.

“Damn right we are.”

CHAPTER 14

BOOTS AND BITCHING POD

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Hey y'all, come on over, did you hear the wedding bells? I've got the scoop on the big news, and I'm ready to spill the tea. It's me, your favorite boots-on-the-ground bitch, and baby—today, we're talking love, lace, and a little leftover drama.

Let's start with the wedding of the year... That's right—Danner Kingridge and Becca Bellcourt went and tied the knot. Now, honey, if you think you're the only one whose invitation got lost in the mail, you'd be wrong. Even I have to hand it to them, these two pulled off the secret of the century.

No seating chart. No registry. No big production. Just a couple of people in love, an old converted greenhouse, and Pa Kingridge as their witness.

They eloped... sort of.

Word is that someone snapped pics from the tractor shed up the road by Thrusty's pen. I heard that Choke the Chicken strutted his stuff down the aisle, too. But until I see it, all I can do is assume it's true and share it with y'all.

From what I've heard, it was Danner in a chambray shirt, Becca barefoot in a white sundress, and Pa holding court like it's his second coming. If that's all true, then precious doesn't even begin to cover it. I wonder if they were hiding from Daddy Bellcourt or if there was another reason for the quiet nuptials?

I hear there's a bun in the oven.

Yep. Rumor has it that the Bloom Room isn't the only thing in full bloom. Let's just say someone spotted Becca at the pharmacy, and the town's only pregnancy test was

mysteriously restocked two hours later.

Coincidence? I'll let you decide.

Now, while we're talking ranch gossip, let's pivot to someone who's been flying a little too low on the radar lately... Geoffrey Kingridge.

You know, the hot one with the smirk and the habit of dating outside his pay grade. Well, word around the feed store is that the girl he's been seeing, the one from over in Findlay, she might not be keeping things exclusive.

When I say might, I mean she most definitely ain't. There's a high school football coach she's been putting time in with. Let's just say they're running and playing all night long.

I hope this isn't the first time Geoffrey's hearing the news, but just in case, let me be clear, sugar, this comes from a place of love.

I've always had a soft spot for that cowboy. He's rough around the edges, but I wouldn't mind seeing him land someone who treats him right. And hey, if you're listening? Maybe it's time for your story to start.

This has been your bitch with boots on the ground—serving facts, sweet tea, and just enough heat to keep things interesting. Until next time, Sagebrush. Stay messy.

CHAPTER 15

EPILOGUE: GEOFFREY

One DayAfter the Podcast

“Hey, thanks for your help, man. I’m going to take these beds out to the park by the elementary school this afternoon,” Danner nods as we load the wood frames into the back of his truck.

“This is Bloom Room Garden number four. I can’t believe it. They’ll be all over Sagebrush Creek by next spring.” Becca Kingridge, formerly Bellcourt, claps her hands.

Between her and Danner, they’re making this garden thing their whole personality. But I’ve learned to just roll with it.

“Cool, yeah, no problem.”

I was worried at first because Becca seemed so uptight. She’s weird for sure, but he is too. As far as sister-in-laws go, she isn’t so bad. Hell, I like her better than I like Danner. But I’ll admit, even he’s grown on me.

What I can’t get used to is the increased presence of the media out here at the ranch. Reporters. Bloggers. Lifestyle influencers with tripods and fake cowboy boots. We’re doing all kinds of shit that don’t have anything to do with ranching, if you ask me.

This week will be our third sustainability workshop for local kids and teens. The Bloom Room’s taken on a life of its own. It’s some terrible combination of a learning center, event space, and living Pinterest board.

And it’s loud.

We’ve got groups coming in for pop-up photo shoots, and I’ve heard talk of goat yoga. Goat yoga. Thrusty’s going to thrust someone into early retirement. I don’t like any of it. But it ain’t up to me.

I close Danner's tailgate. "Is that it?"

"What's wrong with you?" Danner asks.

"Nothing, just trying to get back to some actual work."

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“You heard that podcast this morning, and I did too.” Danner reaches across the split rail and squeezes my forearm.

I rip my hand away. “Dude, what the hell. Yeah, I heard it, I ain’t paying it no mind. Just go do your garden thing. Damn.”

When Danner doesn’t move a muscle, I roll my eyes. “The more we let people in, the more we end up on that damn podcast. I already knew she cheated. We weren’t that serious to begin with, didn’t need everyone in town knowing, is all.”

“People will forget. There’ll be some other salacious piece of gossip coming, and everyone will move on.”

“Thanks,” I mumble.

But for once, I know Danner is right. There will be big news coming. Whoever’s behind that Boots and Bitching podcast has been running this town’s narrative long enough. I’m ready to unmask them.

“No problem. You will be amazed at how much lighter you feel when you talk through things instead of keeping them bottled up.” Danner’s still looking at me like I’m a puppy at the dog shelter.

I cut my eyes at him, but the ghost of a smile plays on my lips. “Damn Danner, give it a rest. You show up here making people talk about feelings and shit. I’ve just gotten over the fact that you’re staying on the ranch forever, let’s call it good. You don’t have any more secret Kingridge brothers running around California, do you? Because I

don't think I can take it.”

“No,” Danner chuckles. “Just my sister Eliza, and she’s planning on making a trip out here for Christmas, so you’ve got some time to mentally prepare.”