



Choose You

Author: *Melissa Tereze*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: Perfect is overrated. But the past has a way of exploiting the cracks.

Finn should have known life was too perfect. With a change in the university's second-year schedule, Gillian will once again be Finn's lecturer. Facing another year of secrets, lies, and sneaking around, she breaks things off. Instead of relief, Finn is unmoored, missing her lover, and waking up with the sour taste of alcohol and regret in her mouth.

Gillian understands why Finn walked away, but it hasn't made their separation any easier to bear. Yet when Finn experiences a family emergency, she knows only one place to turn. Gillian is waiting with open arms. And a decision—taking a risk and telling the university of their relationship, albeit fudging the timeline a bit. Now they don't have to hide any more.

But life is not all sunshine and roses. Trouble still lies in wait on their journey to forever...

Note: Choose You is book two of Finn and Gillian's continuing story that began with Study You. It is an age gap, professor/mature college student novel by bestselling lesbian romance author Melissa Tereze. Contains early-on angst that is quickly overcome, explicit scenes, and a dastardly plot to destroy all these two lovers have fought for.

Total Pages (Source): 81

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

PROLOGUE

MATTHEW

(This prologue also appeared as the

bonus scene at the end of

Restoring You:

Watercress Falls, Book 1)

Nothing brings me more joy than seeing a wide smile on my daughter's face and a cheerful bounce in her step.

"Daddy, do you mean it?" Emmie stands in front of my chair at the dinner table with her hands clasped at her chest. Her big green eyes stare up at me, the overhead light glinting off her pupils.

"Yes." I chuckle and kiss the top of her head. "I signed the papers a few days ago. As soon as Uncle Jimmy signs them, this house is ours forever."

Emmie jumps into my arms and squeals right next to my ear. It's so loud I pull back and flinch. I can't say I blame her. We've been talking about buying this house since we moved in three years ago. For her, this is the only home she's ever known.

She was a year old when I decided to rent the house from Uncle Jimmy. He isn't

really my uncle, though. It's just what everyone in town calls him. Always have. I don't know when or why that started. We're a close-knit community in Watercress Falls, and I guess in a way, we're all like family.

I'd been working as a traveling vet for a few years. It had worked fine before Emmie was born, but as a single dad, all the driving had started to wear on me. Having a permanent location to run a clinic was ideal. But finding a place where we could live on the same property as the clinic proved to be more challenging than I'd expected.

The first time Uncle Jimmy offered to let me rent this house, I'd said no. I said no to him the next three times, too.

The house had sat empty for a couple years. Uncle Jimmy refused to move into it after his brother and sister-in-law were tragically killed in a car accident. He insisted he preferred the bunk house on the vineyard he co-owned with his brother. Maybe that's true, but I'm sure it hurt him too much to live in the house his brother had made home. It didn't matter that it was Jimmy's house, too. They'd been close. Losing them hit him hard.

He said, me living there would do him a favor—keep the house in good shape so it didn't fall to shambles sitting empty.

But I had my own reasons for not wanting to live there. I had too much history with his niece, Jessica, and our shared memories in this house were too personal. Living in the house Jessica grew up in didn't feel right. Not with how badly things ended between us.

Even now, I can still see the seventeen-year-old version of Jessica sitting across the table from me grinning while she played footsie with me during family dinner. Every time she'd run her foot up my leg and make me squirm, her father would glare at me. If he only knew half the things I did to his daughter in this house, he would've done a

hell of a lot more than glare at me.

My need to provide for my baby girl eventually won out. I pushed my memories of Jessica aside, and took Uncle Jimmy up on his offer. And now I'm buying the house. It feels weird and a little wrong, but Emmie loves it here. I'll do anything to make her smile.

"Daddy." Emmie presses her hand against my cheek and forces me to face her. "Did you hear me?"

"Sorry, sweetheart. What?"

"Does this mean I can get that treehouse now? And a big horse? You said I couldn't get a big horse until you had another barn. Can we get another barn now?"

I scoot my chair back from the table and reach for her. "Get up here, kiddo." She jumps up into my lap and wraps her little arms around my neck. Not much else on this earth makes me feel better than a hug from my little girl. "All those things will be possible one day soon. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. You've still got some growing to do before you get a big horse. You're only four."

She pulls back and frowns. "But Aunt Leann was riding big horses when she was four."

"Maybe so, but I wasn't her daddy." I wrinkle my nose and rub it against hers. "You'll be riding big horses in no time. I promise."

She sighs, and her shoulders sag. "But when? I'm a good rider. I can do it."

"Yes, you're a very good rider. But you're still little, and I worry. Horses can be dangerous if you don't know what you're doing."

“But I know—”

“Emmie.” I lower my eyes so I’m level with her. “I know you’re a safe rider. But I still worry. I want you to get a little bigger first. If anything happened to you, I’d never forgive myself.”

“I know.” She drops her head, defeated. “Because you love me, and you’d be sad if I got hurt.”

“That’s right. I just need you to be patient with your old man. Give me time to catch up with you. You’re all I’ve got.”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

“I know, Daddy.” She pulls back and rests her little hands on my shoulders. She looks up at me like she’s about to scold me, and I have to fight back my smile. The seriousness of her expression is too cute. “You can’t keep me little forever.”

My smile grows, and I can’t help but chuckle. “Now you sound like your Aunt Leann. I think she’s a bad influence on you.” I poke her in the sides and make her giggle. “It’s time for bed. We’ll talk more tomorrow about a treehouse, okay.”

“Okay, Daddy.”

She slides off my lap and runs upstairs. I start to clear the table when there’s a knock on the door. Checking the time, it’s almost eight o’clock. We never get visitors this late unannounced and my heart rate kicks up several notches with worry.

When I open the front door, I’m surprised to see Uncle Jimmy’s attorney standing on the other side. “Richard, what are you doing here so late?”

“Hey, Matt. Sorry to call upon you like this, but I have some news that couldn’t wait.”

I nod and open the door wider to let him in. “Why don’t you wait for me in the kitchen? I need to get Emmie in bed. Then we can talk.”

I watch him walk into my house—shoulders slumped, tired eyes, and a tense jaw. He’s not here with good news.

I stare after him until he disappears around the corner, then I rush upstairs to get

Emmie in bed. If Uncle Jimmy changed his mind, I swear I'll kill him. I've kept this from Emmie for months because I didn't want to get her hopes up. The last thing I want to do is disrupt her life any more than it already has been.

Emmie never knew her mother—Emily died in childbirth—but the absence of a mom has had a huge impact on her. I do my best as a single dad, but there are some roles I'm incapable of filling. Not having a mother in her life has left a gaping hole in her heart that I can't fill. When Emmie is around other kids and their parents, I see the longing in her eyes. It breaks me every time. Mainly because there isn't anything I can do to fix that loss for her.

From the moment I found out Emily was pregnant, I tried to do the right thing to make sure my child would never experience anything remotely close to the pain I'd felt as a kid. I never knew my father, and my mother died when I was young. Not knowing or losing a parent is some hard shit. I never wanted that for my kids.

All I've ever wanted was to spare any child of mine of that kind of pain. I failed at that on day one. Not that I could control what happened to Emily, but it still makes me feel like a failure as a parent. Despite my efforts, Emmie still experiences my greatest pain every day.

At least she'll always have me and the family that adopted me. If the Langdons hadn't taken me in and given me a home when they did, I've no doubt I wouldn't be the man I am today. Thanks to them, I know how to be a father to Emmie. That's a gift I'll never be able to repay.

By the time I make it upstairs, Emmie is in the bathroom brushing her teeth. Her little arm stretches to its limit to reach the faucet to turn off the water. I shake my head and hide my smile. She refuses to use the step stool I got her. Using it is an admission that she's little and that's the last thing she wants to be.

She turns to me and smiles. “All ready.”

She bounces across the room and hops into my arms. At least she hasn't decided she's too little to let me carry her. I dread that day.

With a kiss on the forehead, I tuck her in bed. I stand at the doorway for a moment and smile. My life may not have turned out the way I expected, but with this kid in my life, everything feels all right. “I love you, kiddo.”

“Love you, too, Daddy.”

I leave the door cracked and head back downstairs. A heaviness falls over me as I get closer to the kitchen. Richard is on one of the island barstools with his elbows on the counter and his head buried in his hands. This isn't a good visit.

I open the refrigerator and grab a beer. “Do you want one?”

He shakes his head no. He drops his arms but still doesn't look up at me.

“Please tell me Uncle Jimmy didn't change his mind.”

He looks up at me, his eyes red and swollen. “I wish it were as simple as a changed mind. I'm afraid we've got bigger issues than that, Matt.”

The sinking feeling in my gut turns to nausea. I've known Richard since I was a kid, and I've never seen him look so weak and emotional. He's known for being a cold, emotionless asshole. But he's a damn good attorney and does right by all his clients, so we keep him around. “Well, get on with it then.”

He takes a deep breath and looks down at his hands clasped in front of him. “Jimmy was found dead in his bunk earlier this evening.”

My eyes immediately well up with tears, and I almost drop my beer. Uncle Jimmy's been a permanent fixture in my life—everyone's life for that matter. Watercress Falls won't be the same without him.

“How did ...” My voice cracks and I swallow back my tears. “How did he die?”

“We don't know for sure, but they think a heart attack. The farmhand that found him said he wasn't feeling well, so he'd gone to rest. When he checked on Jimmy a few hours later, he found him unconscious. By the time the paramedics arrived, it was too late.”

“Well, shit.” I fall into the chair opposite Richard and stare at the empty space in front of me. I quickly wipe away the tears that run down my cheek.

“Matt, I need to tell you,” Richard pauses. When I look in his direction, he refuses to make eye contact. I lift my beer to take a drink when he starts again. “Jimmy never signed the papers.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

My arm freezes midair. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, he didn’t sign the contract. Meaning, he didn’t sell you the house. It’s not yours.”

My arm falls and my beer hits the island counter with a loud clunk. “But we had an agreement.”

“Maybe so, but without his signature, it doesn’t mean anything. The decision reverts to the eldest Evans child. If you want to buy this house, you’re going to have to convince Jessica to sign the contract.”

All I can see in this moment are endless tears running down Emmie’s face. I just told her this house was ours forever and now I have to tell her I was wrong. There’s no way in hell Jessica will agree to sell me this house. “Well, fuck.”

CHAPTER 1

JESSICA

Regrets. I fucking hate them, and I’m sinking further into the deep abyss of my regrets with no sight of the light at the other end. Every decision I’ve made over the past five years suddenly feels like the wrong decision.

It started when my parents died. Then only got worse when my brother, Ryan, moved away to play baseball. To top things off, the love of my life married another woman. I turned my back on my small hometown in northern Montana, and poured all my

energy into my outdoor clothing company. There wasn't a lot left there for me anyway.

Now, I feel like I missed out on everything that was really important. I'm suddenly filled with an overwhelming sense of loneliness and loss.

Family is everything.

That's what my daddy always said. Yet Ryan and I walked away from the last remaining relative we had—our Uncle Jimmy.

And now he's gone, too.

He was found dead two days ago in his bed by one of the farmhands he'd hired to help with this season's grape harvest. It kills me that he died alone. It shouldn't have been like that.

All those ignored calls and broken promises about coming home for a visit come crashing down on me like a thick sludge of goo. I haven't been home in five years, and it's been at least a year since I returned one of myuncle's calls. With his passing, the only family I have left is my brother. No other aunts or uncles. No cousins. No grandparents. Nobody.

Yeah, I've got regrets.

The spout cap to the tea kettle I put on the stove finally blows off with a loud clank, dragging me out of my thoughts. The whistle signaling the water is ready barely registered before the cap blew. Now that's all I can hear, echoing in my aching head.

Rushing from my bedroom and into the kitchen, I quickly remove the kettle and turn off the stove. I developed a headache after I received the call about Uncle Jimmy, and

it's lingering, refusing to go away.

Our family's lifelong attorney, Richard, was the one to call. His delivery of the news came across as cold and heartless. He doesn't exactly have a gentle tone. He's getting up there in age, and was always a little rough around the edges. It didn't help that he and I never got along. I would've preferred anyone had called me but him.

Who else did I expect to call to tell me such news?

No one.

Because there is no one else to do such things.

Ryan and I are all Uncle Jimmy had.

I may not have visited in a long time, but just knowing Uncle Jimmy was there kept me connected to the place I'd once called home. Now that he's gone, I feel like my lifeline has been severed, and my existence is slowly being drained out of me.

It's an odd feeling, and I don't really know how to describe what's happening to me. My chest is tight, and my lungs feel heavy, like I can't take in enough oxygen. I'm convinced that the only way to make all this go away is to be in Watercress Falls. Like somehow standing on my family's land will reconnect me, and this heaviness will be lifted. Maybe then, I'll be able to breathe normally again, and my headache will go away.

It hadn't been my intention to build a life in Seattle. It was a temporary stopping point while I was in college. But when I finished school, I started a business. Once my company, Flathead Apparel, was up and running, I'd planned to move back to Watercress Falls and run it from home. It was my dream to take over the family business, Rush Creek Vineyard, while adding my own line of outdoor apparel to the

mix.

But that takeover never happened. Fourteen years later, I still live in Seattle. The more time that passed, the easier it was to stay than to go home and face all that I'd lost.

How could I go home?

My parents died and the man who promised to marry me married another woman. Matthew broke my heart more than once over the years, but marrying someone else nearly destroyed me.

I shudder and pour the steaming water into a mug prepped with peppermint tea. The last person I want to see is Matthew, but going home makes that inevitable. I hope I'm ready for the onslaught of emotions that reunion will stir.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

I head back to my bedroom to finish packing. My flight leaves before sunup tomorrow, and I still have work to finish before I leave. I don't have time to allow Matthew to take up head space, so I do my best to lock him back up in the vaults of my mind.

I stop in front of the bedroom window of my downtown apartment to take in the setting sun. Seattle sunsets are stunning, and I chose this apartment for the views it offered. My loft takes up the entire top level of the small apartment building its in. From my living room, I can see Mount Rainier. Even the sunset reflecting off the mountain is a sight to see.

If I'm going to be stuck in the city, I might as well have scenery that reminds me of home. Stunning sunsets and ominous mountains. What's not to love?

I take a sip of tea, and my phone rings. From the ring tone, I know it's my right-hand man and senior vice president, David.

I grab the phone off my nightstand. "Hey, David. What's up?"

"Are you packed?"

"Almost. Just a few last-minute things to get together."

"Good. I've confirmed your flight. You should have a text message with your boarding pass. Just check your bags when you arrive, and you'll be ready to go. I also reserved a car for you at the airport in Kalispell."

Tears well up in my eyes again, and the throbbing pain behind my eye intensifies. “You didn’t have to do all that. I told you I’d take care of it.”

“I know you did, but it’s no problem.” His soothing voice is almost too much, and my tears break free. “You’ve got more important things to worry about.”

I dry my cheeks and take a few deep breaths. “Thank you. You’re too kind to me.”

“I’m just being your friend, Jess.”

“And I appreciate that. More than you know.” I may not have much family left, but I lucked out in the friendship department when I met David in college. He and his wife, Blaire, are two of the kindest people I’ve ever met. I’m lucky to call them friends, and to have him working with me. “While I have you on the phone, can we talk about the marketing strategy for the new line? With needing to leave town, can you communicate my concerns and revisions?”

“Already done.” I heard the rustling of papers in the background. “I also took care of the charity donations and let them know you would no longer be able to speak at the fundraiser next weekend. They were disappointed, but they would love to have you speak at a future event.”

“Are you still in the office?”

“Yes.”

“David! Your wife is going to kill me.”

He laughs. “Blaire is fine. She sends her condolences. She also offered to care for your horse for however long you’re gone.”

“That’s sweet of her, but I can’t ask her to do that. The stable manager will care for Flight.” Almost every weekend, I sneak out of the city to a small boarding stable about ten minutes outside Seattle to ride my horse, Flight. It’s the one joy I have in my life outside of work.

“Jess, you don’t have to ask. This is what friends do when tragedy hits. We help each other.”

“Thank you.” I struggle to fight back the tears again. David and Blaire truly are great friends. They were there for me five years ago when my parents died, same as they’re here for me now.

“Listen, Jess. Finish packing, try to get a good night’s sleep, and don’t worry about the company. You’ve created a well-oiled machine. I’ve got your back. I can handle everything in your absence. You be with your family.”

His last words break me. I know he didn’t mean for them to, but my tears flow down my face like a waterfall. “But that’s just it. I don’t have any family.”

He sighs. “Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. You and I both know family isn’t about blood. From what you’ve told me about that town, everyone there is family. They’ll be there to support you even if it has been years since you’ve been back. And as soon as you finalize the arrangements, Blaire and I will be there, too.”

“You’re right.”

“Ryan arrives the day after tomorrow. Let him help you.”

“I will.” I let out a deep sigh and slow my breathing. “Sounds like you’ve got everything under control. I’ll try not to worry too much.”

“I know you still will, but I’m just a phone call away. Call if you need anything. That goes for Blaire, too.”

“Will do. Now go home to your wife. Everything else can wait until tomorrow.”

“Good night, Jess.”

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Night.”

Driving down Main Street of my hometown, everything looks the same, yet feels very different.

The buildings themselves haven't changed, but some of the store fronts are new. It's nearing the end of August which also means tourist season is at its peak. The crowded sidewalks indicate this season is just as busy as ever.

Come Friday, Main Street will shut down in the evening in preparation of the weekend festival. This town loves its summer festivals. The locals may argue they do it for the tourists, and while there's truth to that, they organize them for themselves even more.

There's not a lot to do in a small, remote town like Watercress Falls. The summer festivals give year-round residents a way to gather and socialize while also boosting local economy. It's a win-win, really.

My family always ran a booth at these festivals as a way to attract visitors to the vineyard. I wonder if Uncle Jimmy kept that up. Now that he's gone, who will continue in his place?

As I near the end of Main Street, I smile as the familiar sign for Sweet Cakes and Coffee comes into view. “Thank God, that hasn't changed.”

Sweet Cakes has been in business for decades. New owners took over after I graduated high school—a woman and her husband a few years older than me.

Thankfully, it doesn't look like they changed it too much. I make a mental note to stop by while I'm in town.

Leaving Main Street, the road leads me toward the all too familiar mountain road that will take me to my childhood home. But it doesn't feel like home anymore. I'd hoped being here would be enough to reconnect me to the place I once loved more than anything. But it isn't. I feel like a stranger—an interloper. It's a feeling I hate.

As I turn onto the last road that will take me to my family vineyard—or should I say my vineyard—I'm filled with a sense of longing.

Growing up, I spent countless days with our head vintner, Nick, learning everything there was to know about wine making. From cultivating the land to optimizing it for grape production to harvesting to processing to bottling. I'd wanted to know it all. This was supposed to be my future, after all. Not my past.

What started out as a side hustle to learn how to apply all the things I'd learned in college turned into a multi-million-dollar enterprise. My business success made it easy to stay away. That wasn't what I wanted, though. Losing my parents too young was hard, but Matthew's marriage to another woman made it impossible to come back.

When the first glimpse of the mountain behind my family vineyard comes into view, tears escape my eyes. I quickly wipe them away. There's no time for tears right now. I can cry later when I'm alone in my house. If I walk into my meeting with Richard all teary-eyed and weak, he'll likely try to take advantage of my emotional state and lead me to a decision I'm not ready to make.

I can't let him do that.

I pull up in front of The Wine Room, the tasting bar that's situated at the front of the

winery. It looks the same as it always did. It's a little run down and in need of a face lift. If I decide to sell it, I'll have to invest some money into fixing this place up.

Not that I'm sure selling is an option I'm interested in exploring. Richard was pushing for that when he called. Whenever he got an idea in his mind, he pushed for it like it was the only option worth consideration. He means well, and he never did my family wrong. He just lacks tact and compassion. It's partly why I never liked him. He'd just informed me my uncle died then expected me to make a decision about the property. Rational decisions aren't something I'm going to be able to make anytime soon.

I step out of my car and breathe in deeply, filling myself with fresh mountain air. I've missed that local scent of clean pine and sweet grapes. It's harvest time, and I can smell the newly picked grapes.

The main entrance door opens and Nick walks out with a welcoming smile. "Hey, Jessie Cat."

I smile at my childhood nickname. No one has called me that since I left home. I used to hate it, mostly because of how it got started. I've always had a temper, but when I was six, Adam, our neighbors oldest son and Matthew's brother, was picking on me. It was all in good fun, but I got upset. Instead of hitting him, I scratched his arm with my fingernails. He just laughed and called me Jessie Cat ever since. After a while, others started calling me that, too. Eventually, it grew on me.

He opens his arms for a hug and I rush to him, struggling with those damn tears again. "Nick, it's so good to see you."

"You too. I just wish you'd come home to happier circumstances." Nick holds me tight. I forgot how good it feels to really be hugged. The last hug I had like this was five years ago under even worse times than now. "How you holding up?"

I bury my face in his chest, focus on slowing my breathing, and stopping these tears. “Oh, you know. I’ve been better.” I force a chuckle.

He pats my back, and kisses the top of my head. “I’ve no doubt about that.”

Nick’s a longtime family friend and has worked for the vineyard since my father took over management. Growing up, he was as much a father figure as my own dad. We stayed in touch the first few years after I left for college. But just like with everyone else from here, I distanced myself from our relationship after my parents died.

“Sorry we lost contact.” My voice gives away to my tears as my words crack and a snuffle escapes.

“None of that now.” He hugs me tighter. “I just wish I was the one to call you. I’m sure Richard wasn’t the most compassionate in his delivery. That’s something worth being sorry about.”

That brings out a smile. “Ain’t that the truth. If I’d been within arm’s reach of him when he told me, I might’ve knocked him in the head. He delivered the news like it was unimportant and went straight to talk about selling. Like I could even think about something like that right now.”

“Well,” Nick pulls back and holds me at arm’s length. He wipes an escaped tear from my cheek. “I imagine you might hear a lot of talk about selling property while you’re here. So be prepared.”

“I’m not sure anything can prepare me for that kind of talk. I know I haven’t been here for a while, but I love this land. I can’t imagine it not being a part of my family.”

Nick smiles and squeezes my shoulders. “I’m glad to hear you say that, but that doesn’t change the conversation Richard is ready to have with you. Just to warn you,

he's angry you're late.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

I roll my eyes. “Like I can control my flight. Besides, it’s only a few minutes after ten.”

“You know Richard. He’s waiting for you in the back office.”

I groan. It figures he’d be angry over a few minutes. Richard is the last person I want to talk to right now, angry or not. I’d rather open a bottle of wine with Nick and drink our sorrows away. “Do I have to?”

He chuckles. “Afraid so. Best to just get this conversation over with. Shouldn’t take him too long before he pisses you off anyway. I imagine you’ll be hightailing it out of that office in less than ten minutes.”

I put my hands on my hips and grin. “You make it sound like I’m some kind of hothead.”

“Well, if the shoe fits. Wear it with pride.”

Stepping inside The Wine Room is like stepping back in time. I’m flooded with memories from my childhood. I can see my younger self following Dad and Uncle Jimmy around like a shadow.

After a quick scan of the room, I’m pleased to see the inside isn’t as worn and outdated as the outside. Updating some of the decor and refinishing the floors and trim would make this place look pretty good.

My eyes are immediately drawn to the small booth in the back corner. Without

thinking, my legs take me to it. I have so many memories in this booth. All of them shared with Matthew. I search the wood framing around the top edge, worn and defaced from years of people carving their names into it. My eyes find the one Matthew carved when we were fourteen. It's starting to wear thin, but I can still make out the words clearly—Matt + Jess 4-ever.

I sat in the back booth waiting for Matthew to arrive. He was late and our ice cream was melting. I'd already taken a few bites, but I was trying to be nice and wait. If I ate too much of it before he arrived, he'd get mad.

Just as I started to pick up the spoon again, the front door opened. Matthew walked in and made a beeline for me. His smile was so huge. Any frustration I had with him for being late vanished. I instantly smiled. But then again, I always smiled around him. We'd been best friends ever since he came to live with the Langdon's, my next-door neighbors. That was two years ago.

They were his foster parents now. He didn't know who his birth father was, but his biological mother died of a drug overdose a few months after he came to live with them. He spent the next several months worried Rosie and Leo Langdon would send him away. Even now, at fourteen, he still worries about that.

"What's with the smile?" I asked as he slid in beside me.

He didn't answer me. Instead, he wrapped his arms around me and pulled me in for a tight hug. My heart immediately picked up speed and my breath caught in my throat. If he had any idea how his touch made me feel, he wouldn't do that. I'd been in love with him ever since he stole my horse two years ago by the creek that separates my family's property from the Langdon's. But I'd been too scared to tell him.

He pulled back, his smile wide and a sparkle in his dark green eyes. His hand cupped my cheek, and I sucked in a breath. His smile slowly faded, and when his eyes shifted

to my lips, I think my heart stopped beating. He'd never looked at me like that before.

"They adopted me, Jess." His words dragged me out of my love-filled daze.

"What?" My hands rested on his arms, and he dropped his forehead to mine.

"It's official. I'm now a Langdon. I never have to worry about leaving you. I'm staying forever."

His lips touched mine before I could respond. It was just a light brush at first but when I didn't pull away, he pressed his mouth to mine. Every inch of my body tingled, and my belly felt so light—like whatever was inside me could lift me up and fly away with me.

When he pulled away, I moaned in disappointment. I'd waited so long to kiss this boy, and now that it happened, I didn't want it to stop.

"God, I've wanted to kiss you ever since I met you. I hope this is okay." He searched my eyes like he was trying to find the answer.

"It's more than okay." My reply came out breathy and heady. "I want you to do it again."

And he did. This kiss lasted longer. He even teased my lip with his tongue, though I didn't open my mouth to let him in. This was my first kiss, and I wasn't sure about the whole tongue thing yet.

I felt his lips turn up into a smile before he sat back in the booth and watched me. "One of these days, I'm going to marry you, Jessica. You wait and see."

He stuffed his hand into his pocket and pulled out his knife. Turning in the booth, he

started carving into the wood like so many before him had done. “Matt, what are you doing? My dad is going to get mad. He hates that people do this.”

Matthew just grinned. “He can get mad all he wants. But I’m declaring my love to you right now and immortalizing it into this wood.”

“Okay,” I whispered. Because what else could I say? The boy I loved justkissed me and told me he’d marry me someday. It was everything I’d ever dreamed about since the day he entered my life.

“Jessica.” Nick’s voice drags me out of my memory. “Richard’s waiting.”

“Sorry, I’m coming.” I shake my head and push out the memories of Matthew. Nothing good will come from thinking about him anyway. Especially not my foolish childhood dreams. When I look up at Nick, the sadness in his eyes tells me he knows what I was reminiscing about. I sigh and head toward the back room.

When I reach my father’s old office, I find Richard sitting in his chair behind the desk. “Isn’t that my seat?”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

Richard looks up at me with a scowl. “Figured it didn’t matter much. You’re selling this place anyway.”

“Don’t go assuming shit, Richard. You have no clue what I want.”

He lets out an angry grunt and points to the seat opposite him. “Sit, this shouldn’t take too long.”

Hoping he’s right about that, I sit down and wait for him to start.

“Your uncle’s wishes and the conditions of both his and your parents’ wills are simple. The entirety of the estate passes jointly to you and Ryan. That includes all financial holdings, the land, the business, and all that it entails, and the house. There should be no surprises there.”

“That sounds about right,” I confirm.

“Your uncle also asked for the funeral service to be held at Stocks and Stables, and that the entire town be invited.”

I chuckle. “That also sounds right.”

Stocks and Stables was his home away from home. The owner, Frank, was his closest living friend. And since he was called Uncle Jimmy by everyone in town, it only makes sense to hold his funeral reception there. It’s the only place I can think of that’s large enough anyway.

“Now, there is the business with the house, barn, and small piece of land surrounding it,” Richard continues.

“And what business is that?”

He looks up at me with furrowed brows like I just asked a ridiculous question. “Your uncle’s plans to sell it.”

My anger spikes and I sit up straight, ready to launch myself across the desk and strangle Richard for even suggesting such a thing. “Over my dead body.”

“Your uncle was in negotiations to sell already. The contract was signed by the buyer last week. All we were waiting on was Jimmy’s signature. Would’ve been signed already had it not been harvest season. We expect you to honor your uncle’s agreement.”

I cross my arms over my chest and shake my head. Selling the house is never something I’d considered. The business, maybe. The house, never.

“Who’s the buyer? Anyone I know?” Richard’s eyes shift to the doorway. I follow his gaze. My jaw drops in disbelief.

“Hey, Jess.” A very nervous Matthew stands in the doorway. His eyes never meet mine and are focused on his black Stetson in his hands.

“What’s he doing here?” The words come out with a growl. Matthew is the last person I want to see today.

“Well,” Richard starts, drawing my eyes back to him, “he’s the one buying the house.”

CHAPTER 2

MATTHEW

Jessica's eyes widen and her nostrils flare. "The fuck he is."

Richard slams his hand down on the desk with a loud thump, causing both Jessica and me to flinch. "Now, I'll have none of that language in here. Clean up your mouth, young lady."

Jessica pushes to her feet and mimics Richard by slamming her own hand on the desk. Her response is so very Jessica, and I can't help but smile. She looks just like the fiery, hot-tempered girl I met almost twenty years ago. My stomach twists into a knot from seeing her like this. God, I've missed her. "This is my office, and if I want to say fuck, I'll say it all fucking day long."

Richard winces at her response, and my smile turns into a laugh. Jessica always had a temper. Seeing her this mad reminds me of why I fell in love with her in the first place. I didn't enjoy being on the receiving end of that temper, but man did I love watching her passion build until she unleashed it on whoever was pissing her off. Her cheeks always pinked, and her dark blue eyes turned a deep turquoise blue just like they are now.

It's been five years since I last saw her, and she was angry then, too. Not surprisingly, it was my fault then, same as it's my fault now. But at least she's taking it out on Richard and not me.

For now.

I take this moment to really look at her. Jessica was always beautiful, but she's even more gorgeous than she was when we were kids. Her blond hair is longer than she'd

kept it before. She always wore it at shoulder's length, but now her curls fall in loose waves down to her elbows. I like it long. It's sexy.

And fuck, those curves. I always loved admiring her body, but she's all woman now. And her form-fitting sundress highlights everything about her that's changed. Her full breasts, narrow waist, round ass, and curvy hips are perfection.

The only thing missing is her captivating smile. When this woman smiles, angels sing. Jessica's smiles have to be earned. She doesn't give them to just anybody. There was a time when I knew exactly what to do to draw that smile out. Be it ice cream, horseback riding, or making out on the big rock by the creek, I could make my girl smile. But bouquets of wildflowers—wild just like her heart—were her favorite. Anytime she was upset all I had to do was pick her wildflowers and her face would light up.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

What I wouldn't do to see that smile again. But something tells me that'll never happen. I've exhausted all my chances with her. I even received borrowed chances and managed to fuck those up, too.

She turns her angry stare to me, and my smile drops. "And what are you laughing at?"

I toss my hands in the air and retreat slightly. "Just enjoying watching you put Richard in his place. That's all."

"Well, you can enjoy the memory of this from home. Why don't you just turn around and leave. This doesn't concern you."

"Now, Jessica," Richard says. "This very much involves Matt. Like I said, he's in negotiations to buy the house and barn. We can't go back on that deal now. He's already signed the papers."

"But you said Uncle Jimmy didn't sign. Therefore, there is no deal. Not to mention, he can't sell the house or any other portion of the property without mine or Ryan's consent."

Richard shuffles some papers around on the desk until he finds the folder he's looking for. He pulls out a sheet and hands it to Jessica.

"What's this?" she asks.

"Just read it." Richard snaps, his patience running thin. If he isn't careful, he'll piss

Jessica off to the point we'll never see reason with her.

"Richard," I warn. Both of their heads snap in my direction. The death glares coming at me had me stepping back a few steps. But I hold my eyes on Richard. "Have a little compassion here. She did just lose her uncle."

His shoulders relax and he drops his head on a sigh. "You're right. I apologize. But none of this should be a surprise to you. Jimmy assured us he talked to you about this, and you agreed. We only needed one signature on that consent form, and Ryan provided it without question."

Jessica's eyes scan the form, tears welling up in her eyes. "I don't understand," she whispers.

Her tears break free and stream down her cheeks. My arms ache to reach out for her. I never could stand to see a woman cry, especially not Jessica. Lord knows, I've made her cry enough to last two lifetimes. Knowing that I've contributed to her current tears, even a little bit, is killing me.

My own anger builds as I realize Jimmy lied to me. He never told her about selling me the house. This isn't something she'd forget. I should've known when he said he got Ryan to sign the agreement instead of her. I thought it was odd, but he said Ryan was close by for a game and he was seeing him anyway.

She drops the paper on the floor and falls back into the chair. "Are you saying my brother agreed to selling the house?"

Richard nods. His simple response causes a sob to escape her. I can't stand here and do nothing. So, I rush to her side, and kneel down next to her. "Jess, Uncle Jimmy told me you knew about the sale and were fine with it. Had I known otherwise, I never would have moved forward with it."

When she looks up at me, all I see is pain and hurt in her eyes. “But that’s my house. It’s all I have left of them.”

I reach for her cheek to wipe her tears when Richard speaks. “Jessica. He’s already been—”

“Richard,” I hold my hand in the air, “you’re not helping.” I turn back to Jessica. She looks like she’s going to completely shut down. “Jess, I’m so sorry you found out this way. I really did think you knew.”

When she doesn’t respond to my words, I take her hand in mine. As soon as I touch her, a spark ignites in me and every feeling and emotion I’ve had for her rushes to the surface. My entire body warms, and all I can think about is kissing her.

Because her soft lips are everything. From the very first kiss, her touch ripped me apart before she put me back together and made me whole. I squeeze my eyes shut and drop my head as the constant pain that lives in my heart bites back. I’ll never feel that whole again. I made sure of that when I fucked up and married another woman.

It doesn’t matter that Emily’s gone and I’m a widower. It doesn’t matter that my marriage ended before my first anniversary and my wife was now in the ground. There aren’t enough ways in this world to apologize to earn Jessica’s forgiveness. I’ve caused her too much pain.

When I open my eyes, she’s staring at the emptiness in front of her. Her eyes are full of turmoil and pain. I squeeze her hand. “Jessica, please talk to me.”

Her eyes shift to our joined hands, and she tenses. She’s in shock, and I don’t think she realized I’m holding onto her until now.

She pries her hand from mine and pushes me away. I fall back and have to catch

myself with my arms to keep from falling on my ass. I only held her hand for a moment, but it was enough to wake my body up. I already miss the feel of her and want her hand back in mine. I want her body close, to feel her breath brush across my skin.

She pushes to her feet and steps back, putting as much distance between us as this small office will allow. “No. This is not happening. It’s too much. I need you to leave. I can’t be near you. Not after everything you’ve done.”

Her words sting, but I don’t blame her for how she feels. I wouldn’t want me around either after everything I’ve done. I made her promises I didn’t keep. And then I married someone else.

I stand, and put as much distance as I can between us without actually leaving. “Come on, Jess. Can we just talk about this? Please.”

Her head snaps up. Every ounce of her anger is directed at me through her eyes like highly tuned lasers. “There’s nothing to talk about. You and I are done. We’ve been over for years, and nothing is going to change that. I suggest you go find a different house to buy.”

“But he’s already living in the house.” I cringe at the sound of Richard’s voice. That fucker has zero tact.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Richard.” I glare at him. “Will you shut it? You're not helping here.”

“What’s he talking about?” Jessica’s voice sounds so small and wounded. A fresh stream of tears run down her face.

“Baby, please. Let me—”

“Don’t call me baby,” she yells through her tears. Fuck. I didn’t even realize I’d said it. She’d been my baby for so long, the pet name rolled off my tongue like it’s still true.

She steps forward and shoves me back against the wall. Her hands are balled into fists, and she pounds against my chest. I let her. I deserve anything and everything she throws at me. It’s not like she can hurt me anymore than I’ve already hurt myself.

“You lost the right to call me that a long time ago. In fact,” she pokes me in the chest with her finger, “don’t talk to me at all. I didn’t come home to see you.” Her voice cracks, and her tears turn to sobs. It’s killing me not to hold her and wipe those tears away. “Stay away from me.”

She turns on her heel and rushes out of the room before I can respond. I know I should let her go, give her the space she’s asking for, but like the dumbass I am, I follow her.

By the time I make it out of the office, she’s halfway across the tasting room and heading out the front door. I pick up my pace and jog after her.

I catch up to her just as she opens her car door. “Jess, can we talk about this?”

“No, we can’t.” She hops into her car and slams the door shut before I can say another word.

I lightly knock on the glass, but she doesn’t look at me. “Please, Jessica. I’m begging you.”

She throws the car in reverse and peels out of the parking lot. She’s halfway down the road and out of sight before I can even catch my breath.

I hit my hat against my thigh and run my fingers through my hair before I put it back on. I didn’t expect this first meeting to go great, but I at least thought she’d talk about it. Then again, I didn’t get anything less from her than I deserved. I probably deserved worse.

I head to my truck with my head hung low. If she refuses to sell the house, I’m screwed. I’ve built my life around that house. I run my veterinary clinic out of the barn, but my business is the least of my worries. If I’m forced to move, my business will recover. That’s not what I’m worried about. It’s my baby girl’s home, too. It’ll break her heart if we have to move.

Just before I reach my truck, it dawns on me the direction Jessica drove.

“Fuck.” I run the last few steps to my truck and start it up before I even shut my door.

She’s headed to the house.

CHAPTER 3

JESSICA

The desperation in Matthew's eyes guts me.

I have enough to manage with my own emotional turmoil. I don't need his on top of mine. The pain he caused has dictated my life for far too long, and I need to shore my strength against it if I have any hope of surviving Uncle Jimmy's funeral. Dealing with him is not a part of my survival plan.

Why exactly is he so upset in the first place? This is my childhood home. Not his.

I'd think our shared memories would be enough to keep him away. It doesn't matter, though. I don't plan on getting close enough to him again to find out. I'm much too weak around that man. Being near him is asking for trouble.

Case in point, he held my fucking hand, and I liked it. I was so shocked by the bomb Richard dropped on me. I didn't even realize Matthew had moved to my side to comfort me. But I welcomed it all the same. His hand felt good in mine, and for a moment, it calmed me. When I finally pulled myself out of my dazed state-of-mind, my hand tingled and a rush of heat ran through me. I hate my body for reacting like that.

I pull up in front of my parents' house—my house now—and drop my head to the steering wheel. I take a few steady breaths as the slow drip from my eyes begins to stop.

Seeing Matthew at some point during this trip was inevitable. But seeing him today completely threw me off. I'm not prepared to deal with him and all the feelings—love, hate, need, utter confusion—I still have for that man. I'm not sure I'll ever be prepared to deal with that.

I sigh and bang my head against the steering wheel a few times, trying to knock the image of him out of my mind. Why did he have to look so damn good? He was

always handsome with his deep green eyes—the color of forest leaves—his dark hair, tall stature, and muscular frame. But he’s filled out even more. Broader. Bigger. Harder. He’s more man than boy now.

I’d secretly hoped he let himself go and would be scrawny and balding, but that’s so not the case.

Instead, time has been kind to him.

I let out a deep breath and wipe my face. I hate that this made me cry in front of him, but seeing him in my emotional state was too much. Lord knows, I’ve cried enough over that man to last a few lifetimes. My well of tears should be all dried up by now, yet they still keep coming anytime he’s involved.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

I lift my head, and my mouth falls open as I take in my first look at the house. I'd expected to find my childhood home a little run down and in need of repair. But it looks well-maintained, like the welcoming home it had always been when I was a kid—fresh paint, new porch furniture, and a new stone path from the driveway to the porch. There are even flowers blooming in the planters Mom asked Dad to build when I was a kid. I was seven, maybe eight, when she'd asked for those for Mother's Day. Ryan was too little to help, but Dad taught me how to finish them in the deep brown stain that contrasted perfectly with our two story, white house.

Movement catches my eye near the big oak tree in our front yard. A tire swing still hangs from the same large branch that sweeps over the yard, and the same bench is still sitting in the shade.

A little girl, no more than three or four is sitting on the swing, now still, watching me. And someone who looks very similar to Matthew's mother, Rosie, is sitting on the bench.

My heart rate kicks up again, and my chest suddenly feels so heavy I can't breathe. This has to be a bad dream—a nightmare of the worst kind. Any second now I'll wake up and all of this will go away.

I turn my face away from the little girl with long dark hair the same color as Matthew's, and my eyes fall on the old barn and stable. Though, it doesn't look old anymore. It's been completely overhauled and converted into a veterinary clinic.

Along the top of the stable doors is a sign that reads, Langdon Veterinary Hospital. "What the actual fuck?"

I drop my hands in my face and mumble, “This can’t be happening.”

Why would Uncle Jimmy do this to me? I’d always told him no matter what happened to the vineyard, I wanted to keep the house. Always. I have too many memories in this house with my parents and friends, and even Matthew, to ever let it go. I can’t believe he let Matthew take it over like my wants and needs meant nothing.

I wipe my face dry and take a deep breath. I need time to figure out what all this means. There’s no way I can reach a decision on the best path forward until I’m in a better emotional state.

My car door swings open, and I let out a startled yelp. Matthew is standing on the other side.

“Jess, please don’t do this here. Not in front of my little girl.” His expression is tense, and his eyes are filled with concern.

The look on his face only feeds my anger, and I push him away. I hop out of my car and approach him, my finger poking him in his chest. “And what exactly don’t you want me to do, Matt? Tell you what an asshole you are? Tell you that my uncle and brother lied to me? Or would you prefer I tell you how empty I feel, knowing that everyone in this God forsaken town knew about this and apparently thought it was okay? This,” I point at my house, my anger boiling over, “is not okay. You can’t live here. This is my house.”

“Please, keep it down.” He looks over my shoulder toward the big oak tree, but I don’t bother following his gaze.

“I will not keep it down,” I say even louder than before. “All this required was a fucking phone call.” I cringe as those words come out. Because Uncle Jimmy did

call, and I never answered. My words lose a little steam after that realization hits me. “Even a note would’ve gotten my attention. But no. You went on with life as you saw fit without any regard to my feelings or needs.”

I expect him to yell back—to beg me to stop yelling in front of his daughter again, but he doesn’t. Matthew’s shoulders drop. He looks defeated. “Uncle Jimmy said he told you. You have to know I never would’ve moved forward with this if I had known you didn’t know.”

“Why should I believe you? Everything you’ve ever told me has been a lie. Not once have you ever just asked me what I wanted. Your choices made my decisions for me with zero regard for what I actually wanted. Why would I believe for one second that you took me into consideration before moving into my house?”

He lets out a deep exhale. “Not everything was a lie, Jess.”

There’s so much pain and anguish in the way he looks at me that it almost calms me down. Almost. But I remember all the pain and heartache he’s caused me, and my anger regains control.

“Matt, this is my house. I don’t care what my uncle told you. I need you to get out. I will never sell this house to you.”

“Daddy?” The panicked voice of a little girl cries behind me. When I turn around, I come face-to-face with a young version of Matthew’s eyes, sharp nose, and gentle frown. Seeing his daughter up close only sticks that knife deeper into my chest.

Tears are streaming down her face. Matthew rushes past me and swoops her into his arms. “It’s okay, sweetheart. Don’t cry.”

“But she said we have to get out.” She wraps her little arms around his neck and

buries her face in his chest. The way he holds her and comforts her breaks me even more. I'd dreamed about starting a family with Matthew. We talked about having kids and raising them together on this land. A fresh batch of tears run down my cheeks. That should be my daughter he comforts, not some other woman's child.

He turns an angry eye to me. "Thanks, Jess," he says with frustration. "You can say whatever you want to me. I know I deserve it, but I will not have you upsetting Emmie. This has nothing to do with her."

His words come out harsh and demanding, and I take a step back. For once he's right. Whatever happened between us has nothing to do with his little girl. She's innocent in all of this.

Needing to get away from him, I turn toward the forested area bordering my property and run. I don't really have a plan when I start, I just know I have to get as far away from him as I possibly can. As soon as I hit the treeline, my feet carry me toward the creek. When I was a kid, this was my place of solitude. I escaped to the creek anytime I needed to think or be alone or wallow in my sorrows.

And I definitely have lots to wallow in today.

CHAPTER 4

MATTHEW

I hold Emmie close and whisper calming words into her ear. I hate that she heard Jessica and me fighting. She doesn't need to see that kind of shit. No kid does.

The first twelve years of my life were filled with nothing but fights. First, it was daily screaming matches between my mom and the boyfriend she had at the time. Every day it was something. Either he wasn't giving her enough attention, or she burned

dinner. Regardless, the fights were loud and often violent.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

He left when I was six. After that, my mom had a string of boyfriends that never stayed around for more than a month or two. But before he left, it always ended in more fighting. I swore when I had kids, they'd never see fights like that.

"Shh. It's okay, sweetheart. There's no reason to cry." I rub my hand down her back and hold her tight.

She lifts her face and looks at me with sad, tear-filled eyes. Was every girl I cared about going to cry today? "Then why did that lady say she wouldn't sell us the house? I don't want to lose my room."

"I'm sorry, kiddo. I wish you hadn't heard that. She's just upset right now. Give her time to calm down, and Daddy will fix this." I kiss her on the nose and force a smile. I really hope I'm not lying to my girl, and I can fix this. Jessica can be stubborn. If she decides not to sell me the house, there's nothing I can do about it. But dammit, I'm going to try.

"Why is she upset?"

"You know how Uncle Jimmy just died?" I wait until she nods. "Well, unlike to us, he really was her uncle. So, she's extra sad that he's gone."

"Oh." Emmie looks down and fiddles with one of the buttons on my shirt. I can see the wheels turning in her mind as she processes what I said. She looks up at me, her tears dry, and scowls. The kind of scowl she gives when she decides she doesn't like something that's happening. "If she's extra sad, then you shouldn't have yelled at her like that, Daddy. Never yell at someone when they're sad. It's mean."

Her words make me smile, and I pull her in for a kiss on the cheek. “You’re right. I’ll be sure to apologize for that.” I look over her shoulder and catch Momma standing with her arms crossed over her chest wearing an even bigger scowl than Emmie. I take in a deep breath and prepare myself for what’s about to come. “Now, head back over to the tire swing, and let me talk to Grandma for a second. I think she has something to say, too.”

“Okay.” Emmie dries her eyes and sniffs before she kisses my cheek. She wiggles free from my arms and runs off.

Once she’s back to swinging, I turn my gaze to Momma. “Well, let me have it.”

“I guess this means Jessica didn’t know you were living in her house.” Momma glares at me.

I rub my hands over my face to stifle the scream that desperately wants out. “Yep, that’s a safe assumption.”

“I thought you said she knew?”

“Jimmy told me he talked to her about it. What was I supposed to do? Call her myself?”

“Well, there’s a novel idea. I think maybe if you talked a long time ago, everything would be different now. When are you going to fix whatever went wrong between you two?”

“Momma.” I drop my head into my hand and rub the bridge of my nose. It’s bad enough that I had to go through this with Jessica. I didn’t want to do it with Momma, too. “It’s not that simple.”

“It never is. But nothing will ever get solved if you two don’t talk.”

I take my Stetson off my head and slap it against my leg in frustration. “I already followed her over here after she asked me to leave her alone. What more would you have me do?”

Momma drops her arms to her side, her hands balled into fists. Momma didn’t get mad often, but when she did, she struggled to contain it. “Keep following her until she listens.”

“She doesn’t want to talk to me,” I yell in frustration.

“Can you blame her? I wouldn’t want to talk to you with that attitude either.”

“That’s not fair. You don’t understand.”

“You’re right. I don’t. Because you never told me what happened between you two. All I’ve got to go on is what I see. And I see my son being too hard on a woman who’s in shock and in mourning. That girl has no one left, Matt. You of all people should understand what that kind of loneliness is like.”

She’s right, but I keep digging myself a deeper hole. “I’m sure she’s not completely alone. And she still has her brother.”

“Matthew Edward Langdon, you go after that woman right now and make this right. You two used to be inseparable. Your father and I were so certain you two would—” Momma stops and rubs her hands over her face. When she looks back in my direction, there are tears in her eyes. “She’s hurting. She may not know it yet, or even be willing to accept it, but you’re the only one who can make this right. Find a way and fix this.”

Without giving me a chance to respond, Momma walks back to the bench and sits down to watch Emmie swing. I turn my gaze to the path Jessica took into the forest. I know where she went. There's only one place she ever went when she needed to think.

On a sigh and with my head hung low, I walk into the forest to find her.

I don't have to think about where to go to find Jessica. I've made this walk so many times, I can find my way to her spot with my eyes closed.

I was twelve the first time I'd stumbled onto her sitting on the big rock that looks out over the water. I had just come to live with the Langdons, and I wasn't exactly adjusting well to the new environment. No one yelled. Momma and Dad were respectful to each other, and Leann and Joseph, who were nine at the time, looked out for each other like brothers and sisters should. It didn't matter that Joseph was adopted. They treated him like blood. I didn't see Adam a lot at first. He was still in Chicago at the time. But he seemed nice enough.

I didn't know how to deal with nice. No one had ever been nice to me. If Dad had punched me in the gut or stuck his foot out to trip me, causing me to hit my head on the edge of the table, now that would have been familiar. I still have the scar on my forehead from where one of my mother's boyfriends tripped me to prove it.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

To say the twelve-year-old version of me had been uneasy in the Langdon house was an understatement.

As soon as Leo went outside to the barn and Rosie into the kitchen, I snuck out the back door. I'd only been here for two weeks, and they still watched me like they didn't know what to do with me. My last two foster homes sent me back to the state after only three weeks, so I suspected my time here was running short.

I hadn't gotten into any trouble yet, so maybe they'd let me stay longer than the last two families. But the Langdons were so far away from town, it was hard to get into too much trouble.

And I was itching for it. I didn't know how to exist if I wasn't in the middle of something bad.

My only real shot at trouble was at school. But this school was so lame, I couldn't seem to find trouble even though I kept looking.

So today, I was sneaking out to make my own trouble. If I couldn't find it, then I'd sure as hell create plenty of it on my own to make up for the lack of it in this dull town.

I just didn't know how I'd make my way to town without a car. I may only be twelve, but I knew how to drive. Someone had to pick my mom up from the bars after she'd gotten wasted. But the Langdons hid their keys, and I didn't know how to hotwire a car. That was a skill I should learn. It'd be useful out here in the middle of nowhere.

It looked like I was hoofing it instead.

To avoid being seen, I darted into the forested area that ran along the edge of the property. If I kept walking south, the forest would lead me to the main road. From there, maybe I could hitchhike.

I walked in a few hundred feet before I'd heard the sound of running water. I followed the sound until I happened upon a creek. This must be the famous Rush Creek that was the namesake of the ranch.

I followed the creek south for a few minutes before I stopped. Movement between the trees caught my attention. I slowed my pace and took care not to step on any twigs or dead leaves. I didn't want to give away my position. When I neared the creek bank, I crouched behind a bush.

A pretty blond girl sat on a large rock on the other side of the creek. At first, I didn't think she was doing anything but sitting, but then I noticed her skipping rocks. She was pretty good at it for a girl.

I'd seen her in school. I think she was in my English class, but I didn't know her name. I didn't bother with names most of the time. I'd be leaving soon so no use getting friendly.

But I felt an odd urge to get friendly with this girl. There was something about her that held my attention. Maybe it was because she was so damn pretty.

She had blond hair that curled around her shoulders. Her legs were long and slender, and she was developing a nice rack for a twelve year old girl. Most girls my age didn't have boobs yet, so I couldn't help but stare at them sometimes in class.

That wasn't the only thing nice about her. Her eyes were as blue as sapphires and

when she smiled it made my belly feel funny. It made me feel like I was going to be sick. I had no clue what that meant, but I kinda liked it. Did that make me weird?

I watched her skip rock after rock, every one of them skipping across the water at least three times before it sank. I could watch her forever and never get bored. But I had trouble to create, and I couldn't do that by watching a girl.

I was about to sneak away when I heard the neigh of a horse. I glanced past the girl, and sure enough, there was a horse tied to a tree a few feet away from where she sat.

Hot damn, I found my ticket into town.

Now, I had to figure out how to cross the creek and sneak off with her horse without getting caught.

I headed north until the creek curved and the girl was hidden from view. If I couldn't see her, then I assumed she couldn't see me either. Crossing was a little more challenging. For a creek it was kinda deep, but it was narrow. I came upon a tree with a limb that hung over and swung across like it was the jungle gym on the school playground. I made it two-thirds of the way across before the limb sagged and my feet hit the water.

"Shit," I mumbled. "So much for staying dry."

I lifted my feet and swung myself the rest of the way across. I missed my landing and fell smack on my back. I clenched my jaw to keep from crying out and did my best to remain still. I hoped I didn't make too much noise and scare her off. If she left before I got to her horse, I'd never make it to town.

When no one came to investigate my clumsy attempt at crossing the creek, I slowly stood and stretched out my legs and back. No harm done.

I followed the creek south again until I saw her from behind. She was still sitting on the rock, seemingly unaware of my fall upstream.

When I reached her horse, he seemed gentle enough. Or her, I guess the horse could be a girl. I didn't know much about horses, but they seemed cool. Leo was into horses, and he said he'd teach me all about them if I wanted. It would be nice, but I doubt they'd keep me around long enough for me to learn much.

I untied the reins and stared at the saddle, debating on how best to get up on this thing. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. I'd never ridden a horse before and had no clue what I was doing. Then again, how hard could it be?

As soon as I stepped into the stirrups and threw my leg over the horse, I heard the girl call out. But I was already on, and the horse started running. There was nothing she could do to stop me now.

That was until she let out a loud whistle, and the horse stopped suddenly. My hands slipped, and I lost my hold on the reins. I flew right over the side, flipped in the air, and landed on my back. Again.

Before I was able to catch my breath, the girl jumped on top of me and straddled me. She grabbed my shirt with one hand and held a fist in the air like she was going to punch me in the face with the other. I stared at her deep blue eyes, and they flickered with hints of gold right around the pupils. Her lips were pinched into a thin line and her brows were wrinkled.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

I should have pushed her off me and ran, but I couldn't. All I could do was stare. Her angry glare and complete lack of fear held me captive. My eyes shifted to her mouth, and she bit down on her bottom lip. I didn't know what was going on with my body, but I really liked that. This girl was ready to fight, and all I could think about was kissing her.

“Tell me why I shouldn't punch you for trying to steal my horse?”

I didn't answer her because I couldn't speak. She was beautiful, but seeing her up close like this was an entirely different experience. Her blond hair glowed like a halo with the afternoon sun shining through the trees, and her anger heightened the passion burning in her eyes. As our eyes locked, and her expression shifted. I don't know much about girls, but my gut told me this shift was a good thing.

Apparently deciding not to hit me, she dropped her fist and let go of my shirt before she stood. She dusted off her jeans and grabbed the reins to her horse.

“Did you hurt yourself?” she asked.

“No.” My voice croaked. I cleared my throat and stood up. My back ached from the second fall, but I'd be fine. Nothing was broken, at least.

“I've seen you around at school. You're the new kid staying with Leo and Rosie, right?”

“Yeah.” I dusted off my clothes and pulled a few crumbly leaves out of my hair.

She crossed her arms over her chest like she was annoyed. “You got a name?”

“Matt. And you?” I never spoke much to begin with, but words were more challenging than usual around this girl.

“I’m Jessica, but everyone calls me Jess.”

We stared at each other for an uncomfortable minute. I didn’t know what else to say. I should tell her I was sorry for trying to steal her horse, but I couldn’t get my mouth to work. So I just stood there like an idiot.

“I was skipping rocks into the creek. I like to sit on that big rock back there. You’re welcome to join me if you want.” She turned around and headed back. Now I was even more confused. No one ever invited me to do things with them. But all thoughts of going out and causing trouble left me, and all I wanted to do was sit with Jessica. I liked her, and I wanted to be her friend. I never wanted to be anyone’s friend before.

I followed her back to the creek, and she schooled me on skipping rocks.

Jessica saved me that day.

I never told her that, but it’s true. Instead of going out and causing trouble—which I still did plenty of over the next few years—I stayed with her by that creek for hours. We talked about everything. I told her about my childhood—years in and out of foster care, how my mom was currently hospitalized from her most recent drug overdose, and that I didn’t know who my dad was. I never told anyone about those things, but I told Jessica.

For the first time in my life, I’d made a friend. And later in life, I hurt that friend. Deeply. That’s something I don’t ever expect her to forgive me for, and I’m certain I won’t ever forgive myself for doing it.

I step into a clearing and the creek comes into view. My breath catches in my throat when I see Jessica sitting right where I expected to find her. The image of her with her knees pulled to her chest, and her long blond hair blowing around her face from the gentle breeze is a permanent fixture in my brain. It's good to see her back in this spot.

"I know you're there," she says. I'm still a good fifty feet away from her, but I'm sure she heard my footsteps.

I walk closer to her, but stay on the bank of the creek. As much as I'd love to sit next to her like we did as kids, I don't. "Just came to talk, Jess."

She lets out a deep sigh and wipes her face before she stands. When she turns her gaze at me, I see the same intense and passionate glare she'd given me that first day I'd met her. She's angry—at me, nonetheless—and I want her more than ever.

She marches toward me with a look so angry and determined I'm sure she's going to hit me. I wouldn't stop her if she did. I deserve it. But she stops about a foot away, and all the air in my lungs vanishes. My chest feels tight, and my heart is pounding faster than the ripples of water crashing over the rocks in the creek beside us.

"There's nothing for us to talk about." Her words sound small and weak despite her rigid stance and stern expression.

I followed her out here to talk, and now I'm at a loss of words. Because all I can think about is touching her. Like a fucking idiot, that's what I do. I lift my hand, and gently brush my fingertips down her arm because I don't know how to be this close to her and not touch her. In some fucked up reality in my head, this is okay because she's still mine. She will always be mine.

She sucks in a breath, and for a second, she relaxes against my touch. That one

second fills me with so much hope. She still responds to my touch the same way I'm responding to her. She still wants me, even though I've hurt her, and that notion makes my heart soar.

But that second ends. Her posture stiffens, and her expression turns hard again.

"I can't do this, Matt." She starts to walk past me, and I reach for her. Our hands glide together like they're made to fit. They belong together.

I clear my throat and refocus my brain on the situation at hand. "I figured you expected on staying in the house. You're not going to find a place to stay in town, and you can't possibly expect me to uproot Emmie on a moment's notice. You can stay in your old room. Or I can make up the guest room for you where you'll have more privacy."

She stares at our hands. Her eyes are so focused, I'm not sure she heard me. When she looks up at me, tears well up in her eyes again. "I can't stay with you. You broke my heart into a million pieces, and I've never been able to put it back together again."

Her hand slips out of mine, and she heads back toward the house. I'm left by the creek with so many feelings and emotions swirling around in my mind, and I don't know which one to address first.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

I'll always love Jessica. She's my soulmate. No doubt about it. But I didn't expect to have this gut wrenching need to hold her and keep her. I never should have touched her. It may have seemed so innocent and minor, but that one brush across her arm and the feel of her hand in mine is enough to set free every feeling, thought, and memory of her that I have.

That one touch opened the floodgates of my emotions. I had that shit locked up so tight in the back of my mind, but now that it's free, I don't know if I'll ever be able to close it up again.

CHAPTER 5

JESSICA

Damn him. And damn my treacherous body.

I never should have gotten close enough to let him touch me. One touch and my body went up in flames. Every memory of us together flashed before my eyes, and I struggled to walk away. All I wanted was to feel his lips on mine and his hard body pressed against me.

Hell, I almost said yes to his ridiculous offer to stay in the guest room. In my house. There's no way I can handle being under the same roof with him right now, even if the guest room does have its own bathroom and is separated from all the other bedrooms. I'm too tempted by him. And being tempted by Matthew is dangerous.

I've lost count of how many times that man broke up with me or told me it wasn't our

time yet. One minute he'd tell me he planned on marrying me someday, and the next he told me we couldn't be together. He broke my heart every time he pushed me away.

Then again, I'm the fool who kept letting him do it. I believed him when he told me he'd marry me. All the way up until the point he married someone else. That was the day my entire world crumbled down on top of me, and a little piece of my soul died. There's no way I can trust him again after that.

I can hear his footsteps behind me as I walk toward my car. It doesn't sound like he's trying to catch up, but I pick up my pace anyway. I need to put space between us so I can think about everything I've learned in the past hour.

I can't believe how upside down my life feels after just arriving. Day one at home was supposed to be easy. Meet with Richard, maybe visit the funeral home, and settle into my old room. That was it. There shouldn't have been any reunions with my ex, and I certainly shouldn't have to deal with the fact that he's living in my house.

When I reach my car, I hop in and start it up. Matthew is still walking toward me. He stops next to the driveway, his arms crossed over his chest, and waits. Is he expecting me to get out and talk to him? Or maybe he's debating on stepping in my way so I can't leave?

Regardless, I put the car in reverse and back out of the driveway until I reach a place I can turn around. I check the rearview mirror, and he's still standing in the same spot watching me drive away. My heart aches to go back to him—to let him touch me again—but my mind is screaming no.

My mind wins.

As soon as I hit the main road, I pull up David's number.

The phone rings once before he picks up. “Hey, Jess. Didn’t expect to hear from you so soon.”

“I’ve got a huge problem, and I need help.” The words rush out so fast. Even I hear the panic in my voice.

“Whoa. Calm down.” David speaks in a slow, controlled tone. “What happened?”

I take a deep breath and wipe away more tears. I’m getting really tired of crying and need to get my emotions under control before my eyes enter into a permanent state of puffiness. “He’s living in my house. That’s what fucking happened.”

“Huh? Who’s living in your house?”

“Matt!” I yell. Now that there’s a little distance between Matthew and me, my anger is taking over. I can handle anger. “And the fact that he’s living there isn’t even the worst part. My uncle was planning on selling him the house!”

“Wait.” There’s a long pause before I hear David take a deep breath. “NottheMatt? The man who said he would marry you someday and then married another woman without even telling you he was dating someone,thatMatt?”

“Yes,thatMatt.”

“Well, shit. That sucks.”

“You think?” I turn the car toward town, though I have no idea where I’m going. Just somewhere away from Matt. “I need your help. I have nowhere to stay now. It’s tourist season, and I need to find somewhere in town.”

David’s silent for a few minutes. Did he hear me, or did I lose him out in the middle

of nowhere? “David, are you there?”

“Yeah, I’m here. I’m just wondering why he’s staying in your house while you’re looking for somewhere to stay.”

I sigh because I’m struggling with this sudden decision too. “You know he has a daughter. I can’t exactly kick her out on the street.”

He tsks, and if I could see him, I imagine he’s nodding at my predicament. “You could. You just won’t.”

“David, it's not her fault her dad’s an asshole. I’m not going to take my issues with Matt out on a four-year-old little girl.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

“You’re a good person, Jess. I’m not sure everyone would be able to do that.”

“What choice do I have?”

He’s silent for a moment, almost too silent and I start to wonder if I lost him again. But then he speaks. “You said it’s a big house, right? Why don’t you just stay there? Make him sweat it out.”

“Hell, no. Not happening. Can you just start looking for a place for me to stay? It doesn’t have to be in town, but close. I’m desperate here.”

“Okay, if that’s what you want.”

“Yes, it’s what I want.”

He falls silent again. David has never met Matthew, but he and Blaire know almost every detail of our relationship—from the day I met him by the creek to the day I found out he married Emily. For reasons I’ve never fully understood, David’s always been in favor of seeing me with Matthew again. But I’d be a fool to even consider that path.

“Spit it out, David,” I blurt out, too anxious to wait for him to tell me what he’s thinking.

“What happened to his wife again?”

I roll my eyes. He knows what happened to her. “She died in childbirth. Why?”

“Well, if she’s gone, and you and Matt had this great connection, why not see if anything can come of it?”

“Why am I not surprised by this? I’ve given that man so many chances over the years. His chances are done.”

“I understand why you feel that way, but I think you should at least have it out with him. I still think there’s more to the story as to why he married this woman. You should ask him.”

“I don’t need to ask him. Because my Matt, the one that loved me and promised to marry me, would never have married another woman. Not for any reason under the sun. The fact that he did proves he was never really mine in the first place. It was all a lie.”

“I hear you, Jess. I really do. But I’m a guy, and we do dumb shit. All. The. Time. You need closure from this. It’s been five years and you still won’t date. Whether you want to admit it or not, Matt still has a hold on you. Until you have it out with him, I’m afraid he always will.”

God, I hate David and his logic sometimes. He’s right. About all of it. Matthew’s been the only man for me. Despite how many times Matthew told me to date others—to test the waters and make sure my feelings for him were real—I never did. I didn’t need to date other men to know I loved him. I knew the minute I met him that he was my soulmate.

“Now is not the time for that. Right now, all I need is a place to stay. Will you help me search or not?”

He exhales slowly. “Okay. I’ll see what I can find. Stay close to your phone. I’ll call you as soon as I find something.”

“Thanks. Talk to you soon.”

We hang up just as I approach Main Street. The sign for Sweet Cakes and Coffee is the first thing I see, and my stomach immediately growls. It’s almost noon and I haven’t eaten much today.

Food and searching for a place to stay will be a good distraction. After I eat, falling into a soft, comfortable bed sounds ideal. With any luck, I’ll fall asleep and wake up when it’s a new day.

I pull my car into a parking space and grab my laptop bag and purse. If they have Wi-Fi, then I can help David search. I don’t need much, just a room with a bed that’s far away from Matthew.

I open the door to Sweet Cakes, surprised there aren’t more people inside. It’s almost lunch time and I expected it to be busy considering its prime tourist season. But most of the tables are open, and there’s only a few guests inside.

I pick a table in the corner, and set my stuff down in one of the chairs. Before I have a chance to head to the counter a woman a few years older than me approaches. She has long dark hair pulled back into a ponytail and a warm smile on her face.

“Hello, there.” Her smile is huge and her eyes radiate happiness. The joy I see in her eyes instantly makes me feel a little better. “Can I get you something? Coffee, pastry, maybe a lunch sandwich?”

“Do you make mocha cappuccinos?” I ask. I don’t indulge in them often, but today I need a pick me up.

“Sure do. Would you like whipped cream on it?”

“No.” I pause and lift my finger in the air. “You know what? Yes, I’d love whipped cream. Thank you.” I glance at the chalkboard menu and quickly read through the lunch options. “And one of those turkey and Swiss croissant sandwiches.”

“Coming right up.” She heads back to the counter, and I plop into the seat like I haven’t sat down in weeks.

I’m completely exhausted, and this visit from hell has just begun. I can’t wait to see how much more interesting things get when Ryan arrives tomorrow. I’m sure he’s got a million reasons—none of which will matter to me—to why he never told me about Matthew buying the house. We may not see each other often, but Ryan and I have remained close since losing our parents. This is something he should’ve told me.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

I pull out my laptop and fire it up. While I'm waiting, I glance around the dining area and my eyes find the Wi-Fi sign-in information posted above my table.

The waitress returns with my coffee and sandwich before I have a chance to even log into my computer. "Wow, that was fast. Thank you."

"No worries. You're a tad early for the lunch crowd, so you caught me at a down time. Give it another hour and it'll be standing room only."

Her kindness makes me smile. "Then I'm glad I'm early. I'm starving."

She hesitates at my table, and stares at me for a second or two longer than socially acceptable before she says, "Sorry, I don't mean to stare. But do I know you?"

"It's possible." I take a moment to really look at her and she looks familiar too. "I grew up here. Haven't been home in years, though."

"What's your name, sweetie?"

"Jessica Evans."

Her smile drops, and she reaches out and squeezes my hand. "Of course, you are. Now I see it. I'm so sorry about Uncle Jimmy. He meant so much to this town."

I smile, fighting back the tears again. "Thanks. I appreciate that."

"I don't know if you remember me. I was several years ahead of you in school. But

I'm Rachel Foster. Well, used to be Green. I married Ricky Foster a few years after school."

"Oh, yes. Weren't you the one that won the bake off at the state fair shortly after you graduated?"

"Yep. That was me." I don't know how it's possible, but her smile grows. "That prize money helped me buy this place when Mrs. Kerns decided to downsize."

My phone buzzes, and when I look down, it's David calling me back. "Sorry, I need to take this."

"Of course, you enjoy." She pats my hand and heads back to the kitchen.

I swipe the screen to answer, and hold the phone to my ear. "Please, tell me you have good news."

"Sorry, Jess. There's nothing available within fifty miles of that town."

I drop my head and sigh. "That's what I was afraid of. What am I going to do? I have to be here."

"You know my answer."

I grumble and drop my head onto the back of my chair. "I can't. Staying in that house with him will be too hard."

"Sometimes you gotta do the hard stuff in order to move forward. You've been ignoring this thing with Matt for far too long. It's past time you deal with it."

"I have too many other things to deal with right now. I can't handle him on top of my

uncle's funeral arrangements. I have to decide what to do with the family business, while still keeping my own business afloat. There is no head space left for him."

"I've got your business covered while you're gone. There's not much you have to think about where Flathead Apparel is concerned. So that part of your brain is completely free. Fill it up with him."

"You're not helpful."

He laughs. "Oh, but I am. You just don't want to admit I'm right about this."

He's right. Again. It's easier to ignore Matthew and lock up my feelings rather than deal with them. "I'm gonna go now. I'll call you later, okay?"

"Don't forget what I said."

"Bye, David." I hang up before he can respond.

I pick up my sandwich and take a bite. I groan when the buttery croissant hits my tongue. Either this is the best croissant I've ever had or I'm that hungry. Regardless, it hits the spot and I start to feel a little better.

Unfortunately, it's not good enough to make me forget about my problem. I've been running from this thing with Matthew for years. I know I should talk to him, settle this between us once and for all. But that's the part that scares me the most. If we settle this—go our separate ways—then it means we're truly over. That's the reality I've never wanted to accept. I know it's unhealthy, and I'm doing more harm than good to myself, but at least this way there's still a chance he's mine. Because he's supposed to be mine.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

I finish my sandwich and start scrolling through a few more rental listings. Maybe David missed one that has an opening. After a few minutes, a shadow passes over me, and someone sits in the chair opposite me. When I look up, my eyes lock with Matthew's deep green gaze.

"Jess, please. Can we be civilized adults for once, and just talk about this?" His voice is calm, but his words trigger all my inner anger. He's right, but that doesn't mean I'm ready for this conversation.

CHAPTER 6

MATTHEW

The anger on Jessica's face is so familiar, yet so foreign to me. I'd seen her mad plenty of times growing up. Jessica has a temper and seeing her pissed off is an interesting thing to watch. It's cute most of the time.

But her anger was never turned toward me, except when I tried to steal her horse. So being on the receiving end right now—no matter how deserving it might be—is an unfamiliar position.

I'm not sure any of my usual methods for calming her down will work. Especially not kissing her. That used to work like a charm. Pulling her close, wrapping my arm around her waist, and gently pressing my lips to hers always turned her anger to mush. She'd melt into me, all the tension in her body fading as she relaxed.

She's changed a lot since the last time I saw her. Her features are sharper, more

pronounced than what I remember. Maybe because she's thinner than I recall. Not that she was ever big, but her curves were softer before and her cheeks were fuller.

Any hint of the young girl is gone and she's all woman now, more beautiful than ever. The soft curls of her hair hug her body and accentuate the swell of her breasts. Her very full breasts. Her dress cuts into a deep V in the front, and I'm struggling to keep my eyes up, and not stare at her cleavage. But fuck, it's hard.

Her eyes are the same. Deep pools of sapphire blue with hints of gold that sparkles when the light hits them just right. And that mouth—pouty, pillowy, pink lips made for kissing.

She sits back in her seat and crosses her arms over her chest. Any other time, I'd be grateful she did that because her arms push her breasts closer together and up. Fuck, that cleavage. "What do you want, Matt?"

I drop my head and rub my hand on the back of my neck. I start to open my mouth to answer her, but Rachel walks up to our table.

"Hey, Matt. I brought you a coffee, just the way you like it." She sits a travel mug in front of me with her typical big grin.

"Thanks, Rach." I reach for my pocket to pull out my wallet, and she shakes her head.

"This one's on me." She pats my arm before she turns to Jessica. "Yours too, sweetie."

Jessica shakes her head, and waves her hand over the table. "Oh, no. I can't let you do that. I can pay."

"I'm sure you can, but you've got enough to deal with right now. The least I can do is

comp your lunch.” Rachel turns to me and winks. “Anything to eat?”

“Nah, this is good.” I lift the coffee and force a smile. “Thanks.”

“Of course.” She pats my shoulder and leaves me alone with Jessica’s softened gaze. If Rachel picked up on the tension between us, she didn’t let on. But that’s typical for her. She probably sensed it before she brought the coffee over. Hell, it’s probably why she brought the coffee and comped Jessica’s lunch. Rachel hates for people to be upset and makes it her mission to cheer them up.

“Jess, I just want to make sure you have a place to stay. It’s tourist season, and I doubt you’ll find anywhere close by to rent. Mom’s making up the spare room for you as we speak. But if you prefer your old room, that’s an option, too.”

“So, you thought you’d march in here like a knight in shining armor and save the day?”

“I’m not trying to be a knight. Just trying to do the right thing here. I thought you knew.”

She drops her arms and leans forward, and fuck, that’s even worse. Her chest presses against the edge of the table and pushes her cleavage right in my face. I force my eyes to look away, and hope she can’t see the effect she’s having on me. “I didn’t know shit. Apparently, no one thought I needed to know my ex and his new family were living in my house.”

I cringe because that stings. “It’s just me and Emmie. We moved in after Emily died.”

Her expression softens and her eyes gloss over. “I heard about her death. As much as I hated her, I never wished her dead. I’m sorry that happened.”

I shrug. The last thing I want to talk about with Jessica is my dead wife or how she died. Having a child was supposed to be a happy time. But for us, it was anything but. Leaving the hospital alone with a newborn baby had never been something I'd considered would happen. "Thanks. That was a long time ago. Emmie and I are fine. Being a single dad suits me."

A tear escapes her eye, and she quickly wipes it away. I doubt that tear has anything to do with my loss. Hell, I'm not upset about it. I know that makes me an asshole, but I was never in love with Emily. I cared about her. She was a good person with a heart of gold, but she was never supposed to be my wife. I never intended to marry her. When she ended up pregnant, I didn't have a choice. I did what I thought was the right thing, and made her my wife no matter how much it hurt me to do it.

Jessica closes her laptop. Whatever anger she had when I arrived is gone and replaced with sadness. "I can't do this with you right now."

"Jess, please." I reach across the table for her hand, but she pulls back. It was an instinct, and I immediately regret it. I can't help my need to comfort her. "Sorry. I'm just offering you a place to stay while you're here. I'll keep my distance."

"Oh, that's very kind of you considering it's my fucking house." Her voice elevates, and several heads turn in our direction.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Keep it down, Jess. Let’s not air our problems for the town to see.”

She leans forward and pokes her finger in my chest. “I don’t care if the town knows what kind of asshole you are Matt. Maybe it’s time someone called you out on all your shit. Do they know about the promises you made me? Do they know you said you’d marry me, and not some stranger from God-knows-where? I spent years believing you—loving you.” Her voice cracks. She sits up straight and covers her face before she continues. “Like a fool, I believed you still wanted me. And when I needed you most, you were wither.”

I start to respond but Rachel approaches. “Hey guys. I appreciate you two have some things to talk about, but do you think you can keep it down a bit?”

Jessica stands and gathers her things. “Sorry. We’re done here. I’m leaving.”

I drop my head against the back of my chair and rub my hands over my face. I understand where she’s coming from. Her feelings and anger toward me are completely valid, but she’s frustrating the hell out of me. She has nowhere else to go and she knows it.

When I look back up, she has her bag over her shoulder and she’s heading for the door. “Jess, wait.”

She doesn’t stop. I shouldn’t follow her, but all I can hear are my momma’s words insisting that I make this right.

By the time I make it out the door, she’s halfway down the sidewalk. I have no clue

what I'm going to say to her when I catch up to her. All I know is I have to stop her from walking away. I've let her go so many times in the past, but something is different now. I can't explain it. Everything within me is pushing me toward her, screaming at me not to let her go.

Her being here is a sign. It's the one last chance I have to fix things with her, and I don't intend on wasting it.

When I catch up to her, I step in front of her, careful not to touch her. She lets out an angry growl but stops.

"Seriously, Matt. Why won't you just leave me alone?"

"Because I can't." The words flow out of me, and I loosen the tight hold I have on my desire for her. I let every bit of it free, and she sees it. Her eyes widen, and her mouth falls open. All I want to do is swoop her into my arms and kiss her, lick her, taste her.

I slowly step closer, my eyes glued to hers. With every step I take forward, she takes one backward until her back rests against the wall of the building behind us. "I've made that mistake way too many times in the past. I'm not making it again now."

"It's not up to you anymore." Her voice is low and heady. Her chest rises and falls quickly. And her eyes give me a different answer than her words. No matter what she says, she still wants me.

I take a step closer. Our bodies are like magnets, pulling us closer and closer together until we're almost flush. Her breath brushes against my neck. I lightly run my fingertips down her arm, and she trembles under my touch. I shift my gaze to her mouth, and she licks her bottom lip eliciting a growl from me. All I can think about right now is pressing my mouth to hers and sucking her plump bottom lip between my teeth and nibbling on her.

Her hand rests on my chest, and I expect her to push me away. I'm prepared to give her more space if that's what she needs, but I can't walk away from her. Not again.

But she surprises me. Instead, she fists my shirt and gently tugs me closer. It would be so easy to kiss her right now. And I really want to. I stare at her mouth as I slowly inch closer and closer to her.

Then a car door slams shut somewhere nearby, and I jerk back. "Fuck, I'm sorry."

I step away, putting distance between us, and run my fingers through my hair. She slumps against the wall and drops her head. I can't be sure, but I think I hear a sob escape her. Her shoulders shake and she covers her face.

I can't stand seeing her like this. And I hate it even more that I'm completely to blame. I can't fix this, no matter how much I want to. But there is one thing I can do to make this better.

"I'll vacate the house. Emmie and I will stay at Momma's until you decide what you're going to do. All I ask is that you allow me to continue using the barn for my clinic. I can't exactly move my business somewhere else on such short notice."

I don't wait for her to answer. I head to my truck to go home where I have an even harder conversation waiting for me.

CHAPTER 7

JESSICA

My body is shaking, and if not for this wall behind me, I'd fall to the ground.

He was going to kiss me, and I was going to let him.

I drop my head back and mumble, “I’m not going to survive this visit.”

Rolling my head to the side, I watch Matthew as he slides into his truck and drives off. My gaze follows his truck until it disappears down Main Street.

I hate that he’s right. I don’t have any other option than to stay in my house. There’s no place to rent and I’ve severed all ties with the friends I had here. I don’t feel right asking one of them to let me crash. If I want to keep my sanity and my resolve, he has to leave while I’m there. I feel bad, especially for his daughter, but what choice do I have?

I head to my car and drive back to the house. When I park next to his truck in the driveway, I let out a slow, even breath. The house looks peaceful and welcoming even though I don’t feel the least bit welcomed.

Page 19

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

When I reach the front door, I try the handle and it opens. Gotta love country life. Unlike the city, no one ever locks their doors.

I hear Matthew and his mom talking in the kitchen. If I'm not mistaken, Emmie is crying. I cringe knowing I'm responsible for that. None of this is her fault. She's just a little girl, and I'm being so unfair to her.

Instead of going to the kitchen, I head upstairs to my old room. When I reach the door, it's closed. I hesitate before I open it, unsure if I'm ready to face the memories of Matthew and me together in my childhood room.

When I open the door, I gasp. Nothing has changed. It looks the same as it did the last time I was home. Same yellow bedspread with matching curtains. All my ribbons and pictures from my horse jumping competitions are still on the shelves. I can't believe he left it untouched. I spin around and glance down the hall, wondering what else hasn't changed.

The door across the hall from my old room is ajar, and I catch a glimpse of pale pink and purple decor. I leave my room behind and head across the hall to what used to be my mom's crafting room. The windows are covered with lace curtains and the bed has a matching lace bed skirt and fluffy purple comforter. Several pink and purple lace and sequin pillows are arranged at the top with a few stuffed animals in the mix. The walls are covered in images of horses. Most of them of real horses, but a few are cartoon drawings.

But there's one photo that catches my eye. It's mounted above the headboard just below dark purple block letters that spell out Emmie.

It's a picture of me after I won my first blue ribbon for junior show jumping. I was fifteen. I run my fingers along the bottom of the frame and smile. I looked so happy back then. Hell, I was happy. After winning the ribbon I remember thinking I was the luckiest person alive. That my life would only get better. I loved riding, I had a boyfriend who loved me, and parents that supported my dream of taking over the vineyard someday.

I sit down on the edge of the bed and pick up a framed picture from the nightstand. It's Emmie with a huge smile on her face sitting in front of Matthew on a full-grown horse. She looks so tiny in the saddle, and I can't help but smile. I was just like that at her age. All I wanted to do was ride big horses like all the women I watched compete. Forget ponies. Those were for babies. I wanted to be just like those women and win all the ribbons.

"This is my room." I look up, and Emmie is standing in the doorway. She wipes her cheeks dry and stands tall like she's trying to be brave.

"This used to be my mom's crafting room." I glance around and smile. "Although, I don't recall it being this pretty when I lived here."

"You're the lady making us leave." She's not asking, she's telling me she knows who I am.

I turn around and point to the picture of me above her bed. "Where did you get that picture?"

She relaxes a little and walks over to me. "It was already here. I like it and Daddy said I could keep it. One day I want to be like her and win."

I smile. "I'm sure you will someday."

“Are you really going to make us leave?” When I look back at her, I meet the same dark green eyes of the man I fell deeply in love with. The man I still love, and probably always will.

A single tear falls from her eye, and her bottom lip pops out like she’s perfected this pouty look.

I close my eyes and shake my head. David’s right. I’m a softy. There’s no way I can make this girl leave. “Of course, not. I could never make you leave this room. It looks like it suits you.”

She lunges forward and wraps her arms around my waist. I’m so taken aback by her hug that my arms fly out to my sides, and I stiffen. “Thank you. I knew you were too nice to make us leave.”

My arms slowly fall, and I return her embrace. There’s a part of me that really needed a hug. I love the feel of her little arms around me. But there’s another part of me that’s freaking out because of who this is. Regardless, I feel better. “Why do you say that?”

She looks up at me and smiles. “I can just tell. You have kind eyes. And you’re too pretty to be mean.”

A huge smile spreads across my face. “Why, thank you.”

She releases me and bounces on her feet. “Can I go tell Daddy you’re letting us stay?”

“Why don’t you let me go do that?” I pinch her nose and she giggles. “You stay here and play with your horses. I have a few other things to discuss with him as well.”

She runs over to the corner of her room where her toy box is and starts pulling out toys like I'm not even there. She's already recovered. I wish I was that resilient and could overcome pain and heartache that quickly.

I head downstairs and find Matthew leaning against the counter in the kitchen. His mom is sitting in a stool next to him. They're talking quietly. I assume so Emmie doesn't hear.

I take another step forward and a floorboard creaks under my foot. Matthew's eyes jump to mine, and for a split second I see want and desire burning in his gaze. But it vanishes quickly, and I question whether I really saw it or if it's nothing more than wishful thinking.

In some sick, twisted way, I want Matthew to still want me. I want him to ache for me the way I still ache for him. I've been tortured by this hole in my heart for so long. I guess I want someone else to know the pain it's caused me. It's made me miserable over the years, and the idea of a miserable Matthew alongside me brings me comfort. Yep, definitely sick and twisted.

The silence grows awkward. But then Rosie jumps up and pulls me into a hug, easing the tension that's starting to build. "Jessica, it's so good to see you, dear."

She tightens her hold. Even though I return her hug, I'm stiff and uncomfortable. Not because I don't want a hug from Rosie, but because of the additional pain it drags out of me. She was supposed to be my mother-in-law. There was a long period of my life where I called her Momma. That's how close we were. Even his family had already accepted that we would marry one day. I had already integrated into their family like a sister, daughter, wife.

I pull away from her embrace and clear my throat. I glance at Matthew, but quickly look down at my hands. "You and Emmie don't have to leave. I can't kick her out of

her room and home. It's not fair to her to let our issues impact her."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

Rosie reaches for my hand and squeezes, but I keep my eyes down. If I look at her, I'll cry again. I don't want Matthew to see me cry anymore. He doesn't deserve my tears.

"I made up the guest room for you down the hall," Rosie says. "I figured you'd be more comfortable there than upstairs, close to everyone else. The guest bathroom attached is a little outdated, but it's clean and private."

I nod and slip my hand out of hers. Without looking back, I head down the narrow hall behind the kitchen to the guest room.

My body is shaking when I sit down on the bed. I'm both mentally and physically exhausted.

I didn't sleep much last night. I couldn't get my mind to shut off long enough to let sleep take me. I had too many warring thoughts about this visit—anxiety over coming home after so many years away, the potential of seeing Matthew again, seeing my brother, planning a funeral for a man I loved dearly, yet ignored for the last year. My thoughts weigh me down like a sack of sand is resting on my shoulders.

I physically ache all over.

Seeing Matthew was inevitable. I knew that before I left Seattle, but nothing prepared me for how seeing him makes me feel. I want to hate him so much. If I hated him, it would make not being together so much easier.

But no matter how much he hurt me, I will always love Matthew. He's a part of my

soul, and there's nothing I can do to change that.

A light rap on the door draws my eyes up. I wipe away the tears running down my face. I'm not surprised I'm crying again, but I was so lost in my thoughts, the tears didn't even register.

"Can I come in?" Rosie asks.

I shrug and give her a slight nod.

She sits down next to me, and wraps her arm around my shoulder. My body craves motherly affection, and I sink into her. My head falls to her shoulder, and her other arm comes around me. I grasp hold of it with my hand.

I crumble. Again. Full on body shaking sobs.

Only this time I'm not alone with my tears. The harder I cry, the tighter her arms wrap around me. It feels good. For years, I've longed to be held like this again. To feel this loved again. I didn't just lose Matthew when we broke up, I lost my second family, too. I didn't realize until this moment, I'd been mourning two losses all these years. Two families were ripped away from me five years ago. One by a tragic car accident, and the other by a marriage.

By running away, and never coming back to this place, I've never dealt with either loss.

"I'm so sorry, Jessica. Had I known, I would've told you myself. I hope you know that."

I nod because I can't seem to form words right now.

Rosie squeezes my shoulder and kisses the top of my head. “You know you’ll always be family, dear. No matter how things end up with Matt, you’ll always be like a daughter to me.”

Her voice cracks on those last words. All these years I never thought about how my leaving affected the rest of Matthew’s family. I only considered my heart and how broken I felt. I look up at Rosie and see her pain so clearly. Me leaving hurt her just as much as it hurt me.

“I’m so sorry, Rosie.”

“None of that.” She dries her eyes and takes a deep breath. “We all understood why you never came back. We didn’t like it, but we understood.”

“Thank you. It means a lot to hear you say that.”

She pats my hand before releasing me and standing. “Matt got called over to the clinic to care for an injured horse. You’re free to get settled without worrying about running into him. I’ll be here through dinner. Just let me know if you need anything.”

I nod. She gives me another gentle smile before she leaves. I really should get my bags out of my car, but I’m too exhausted. Instead, I kick off my shoes and curl up on the bed. I grab the throw blanket folded at the foot of the bed and pull it up to my chin. Maybe after a little sleep, I’ll be able to think more clearly.

CHAPTER 8

MATTHEW

“Come on, kiddo. Why don’t you sit up here and watch?” I lift Emmie up and sit her on the counter next to the stove. She giggles and reaches for the bottle dispenser I use

to hold the thinner pancake batter.

About a year ago, I learned how to make faces and designs in pancakes by using a squirt bottle. Emmie loves it and asks for pancakes almost every day. I typically only agree to it on the weekends, but after the day we had yesterday, I couldn't refuse her.

"Can I squirt it in?" She looks at me with wide eyes, clutching the bottle with both hands.

"Sure. What do you want to make?"

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

“A smiley face.” Her own smile grows as she uses the bottle tip to draw eyes, a nose, and a big grin out of pancake batter. I give it a few seconds to brown before I spoon a larger dollop of thicker batter on top. Once the batter starts to bubble, I flip it. Emmie claps and kicks her legs in excitement. This never gets old.

“Well, would you look at that?” I grin and kiss her cheek. “This just might be the best smiley face I’ve ever seen.”

“Let’s make more.” She holds the squirt bottle close to her chest waiting for the first one to be done.

“What do you want to make next?” I ask as I flip the finished pancake onto a plate.

“More smiley faces.” She starts to draw the face before I have a chance to question her.

“Really? You don’t want me to make you a horse?”

“Nope.” She shakes her head and grins. I put on a forced frown because she always wants horses. The whole reason I learned to make pancakes like this was so she could have more horses. She looks up at me and laughs. “Stop it Daddy. We need happy faces today. I think Jessica will like them.”

I freeze midway through adding the thicker batter on top of the current smiley face. Emmie nudges my arm and points at the skillet. “Daddy, hurry up before it burns.”

“Oh, sorry.” I quickly spoon more batter over the face and watch Emmie carefully.

She looks really happy considering what happened yesterday. “So, we’re making these for Jess.”

“Yep.” Emmie doesn’t even break her gaze off the skillet. She’s ready to make another face as soon as this one comes off. “She’s sad, and we need to make her feel better. Smiley faces will help.”

I brush her hair back from her face and kiss her forehead. “You’re a good kid, you know that?”

She shrugs. “I know.”

“And modest.” I laugh. “You’re also very modest.”

She looks up at me and frowns. “I don’t know what that means.”

“It means—”

“Jessica!” Emmie yells in my ear, causing me to flinch. She starts bouncing and kicking her legs on the counter. “Let medown,Daddy!”

I look over my shoulder, and Jessica is standing in the entryway with her hands on her hips. Her hair is wet, and she’s not wearing make-up. I like her better natural. She’s also wearing a bright blue t-shirt and jeans. I thought she looked good in the dress she had on yesterday but seeing her like this is way hotter.

My mouth runs dry, and it feels like sandpaper scratching my throat when I swallow. I feel a strong tug inside me to go to her, to pull her close and hold her tight against me.

“Morning,” she says. There’s a faint smile on her face when she makes eye-contact

with me. I open my mouth to respond, but nothing comes out. Instead, I flip the pancake before it burns.

Emmie starts bouncing on the counter even more. I lift her off and put her down, so she doesn't fall. She immediately runs over to Jessica and wraps her arms around her waist. I can't even find the words to explain how it feels to see my daughter hug Jessica like that. It's everything I've ever dreamed could be real, and yet it feels like a nightmare since I'm pretty sure Jessica hates me.

"We're making smiley face pancakes just for you." Emmie's beaming face draws a bigger smile out of Jessica, and my chest tightens.

"For me?" Jessica leans down until she's eye-level with Emmie. "Are you sure they're just for me? I bet you like pancakes, too."

"I do. I guess they're for both of us. But they definitely have smiley faces for you."

"Smiley faces, huh?" Jessica wrinkles her brow, putting on a playful, suspicious expression just for Emmie. It's more than I could ever have hoped for from her and makes my chest tighten even more. "I can't say I've ever had a smiley-face pancake."

Emmie claps her hands and runs back to me. "Did you hear that Daddy? She's never had them before! Can I show them to her?"

"How about you do one better and let's make her a plate?" Together, we plate up a couple pancakes. Emmie carefully walks around the island to the stools on the opposite side. The butter and syrup are already out, and I sit a plate of bacon in the middle.

"Here," Emmie says as she sits the plate down. "You can sit next to me."

“Oh wow, these look too happy to eat.” Emmie runs to the drawer on the opposite wall to grab the flatware. Even though Jessica is smiling while she watches her, I see sadness in her eyes. I hate that my greatest joy in life is making her sad. Jessica and I talked about having kids after we got married. She wanted two and I wanted four. Seeing how she looks at Emmie is just another reminder that I lost the one woman I truly loved, and I may never get her back.

“Here you go.” Emmie hands her a fork and knife

“Thank you.” Jessica takes the flatware and they both sit down. Emmie stares at Jessica with a constant grin on her face.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

I sit a plate of pancakes down for Emmie and pour her a cup of orange juice. I grab an extra coffee mug and pour some coffee for Jessica. “You still drink it black?” I ask.

She nods but doesn’t look up at me. I’m grateful she’s being kind to Emmie, but she’s still keeping her distance from me. All I can think about is taking her into my arms and hugging her until that distance between us goes away. It’s what I should’ve expected, though. But a part of me—a very foolish part—had hoped she’d be ready to talk to me today.

“Do you like horses?” Emmie asks as she stuffs a bite of pancakes into her mouth.

“I do. Riding is one of my favorite pastimes.”

Emmie’s face lights up and makes me smile. “Really? Me, too! I want to ride a big horse, but Daddy won’t let me.”

Jessica gives her a fake pout. “My dad was the same way when I was your age. It used to make me so mad, but he just wanted me to be safe.”

Emmie looks at me and smiles. “Yeah, that’s my daddy, too.”

“Give it a couple years, and I bet you’ll be riding circles around your daddy.” Jessica glances at me as I sit down across from her and Emmie. She looks a little more relaxed than when she first walked in and that makes me feel a little more at ease. Even though I know she’s not staying, I really want her and Emmie to get along. “You just have to be patient.”

“How old were you when you were allowed to ride big horses?”

Jessica taps her finger on her chin and looks up at the ceiling like she’s thinking hard.

“I think I was six, no, seven years old, before my daddy let me loose on a big horse by myself.”

“Seven! I can’t wait that long. That’s so far away.”

“Sure you can.” Jessica nudges her shoulder as she takes a drink of her coffee.

“You’ve got so much growing and learning to do. Especially if you want to be a show jumper.”

“Oh, I do. But if I want to win ribbons like that girl in the picture, I need to start now.”

Jessica chuckles. “I can understand why you think that, but can I tell you a secret?”

Emmie nods. She’s hanging on every word Jessica says. I can’t remember the last time Emmie’s been this excited around a new person. The more excited she gets, the more Jessica relaxes. And the more it makes me want to go to her and wrap my arms around her waist and press my lips to hers. These are thoughts I shouldn’t be having if I want her time here to go smoothly.

Jessica leans close to Emmie’s ear and whispers. “That girl in the picture is me.”

Emmie gasps, her eyes wide, and covers her mouth with her little hands. “Daddy! Did you know that was Jessica?”

I smile. “I did.”

“Wow.” Emmie looks up at Jessica in total awe. This is what I’d always hope could happen but instead of feeling relieved, I’m saddened. This is what I wanted with

Jessica but never got.

I've been such an idiot where she's concerned. If I could go back in time and stop the eighteen-year-old version of me from breaking up with her the first time, I would. No hesitation.

"Emmie, you need to finish your breakfast. Grandma will be here soon to pick you up."

Emmie's shoulders sag and she groans. "Can I stay with Jessica today instead?"

I shake my head. "I'm sure Jess has other things she has to do today."

"He's right." Jessica brushes Emmie's hair over her shoulder, and my heart aches at the kindness she's showing my daughter. "I've got meetings I have to attend today. But I'll be in town for a couple of weeks. Maybe we can go riding together while I'm here."

"Really?"

"Sure. As long as your daddy doesn't mind."

Emmie looks at me with wide eyes like there's a chance I would say no. This kid knows me better than that. "I don't mind. Now finish eating so you can go get ready for Grandma."

Emmie smiles and stuffs the last of her pancakes into her mouth before she runs off to get dressed. Now that she's gone, the silence in the kitchen is awkward.

I glance up at Jessica and she's pushing her food around her plate, looking just as uncomfortable as I feel. I clear my throat and take a drink of my coffee, mostly for

courage, before I say, “Thanks for being kind to Emmie. I appreciate that.”

She looks up at me, her eyes wide like she’s surprised I spoke. She wipes her mouth with a napkin and nods. “She’s a sweet kid. You did good.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

I smile. “Thanks. It’s not been easy for her with it being just me. But we make do.”

Jessica drinks the last of her coffee before she stands. Her expression is distant, almost sad again. “Well, thanks for breakfast. This was nice.” She picks up her dirty dishes and takes them to the sink. Without looking at me again she walks toward the back door. “I’m going to go for a morning walk. Clear my head and think before I have to go to the funeral home.”

I don’t look up at her as she walks past me. I hear the back door open and close, signaling that she’s gone. Staring at my plate of breakfast, I haven’t eaten more than a couple bites and I’m no longer hungry. I run my hands down my face and let out a low, deep groan.

Having Jessica in the house is going to be so much harder than I thought it’d be. I thought I could handle her being here without constantly thinking about touching her, holding her. But if this morning is any indication of how the rest of her stay will go, I’m in trouble.

I place the last of the dishes in the dishwasher when there’s a knock on the door. I check the time. It should be my momma, but she doesn’t knock. If it were her, she’d come right in.

A sinking feeling settles in my gut at the memory of the last unexpected visitor who knocked on my door. If it’s someone else with bad news, I’d rather they just go away.

But I smile when I open the door. “Ryan!”

“Hey, man.” He opens his arms for a hug, and I welcome his tight embrace. Despite everything that happened between Jessica and me, I’m glad I’ve stayed close with her younger brother.

“It’s good to see you again. How was your trip?” I step back and wave Ryan inside.

“Crazy. It took three flights and over fourteen hours. I had to stay the night in Salt Lake City.”

“Where was your starting point?”

“Tampa. We were getting ready for a double-header when Richard called.” Ryan follows me into the kitchen just as Emmie runs down the stairs.

“Daddy, I’m ready.” She stops as soon as she sees Ryan. It’s been so long since she met Ryan.

“Emmie, this is Jessica’s brother, Ryan,” I say.

Ryan kneels next to her and smiles. “Hey there, Emmie. We met once a long time ago, but I doubt you remember me.”

She shakes her head. “Do you like horses as much as Jessica?”

Ryan looks up with raised brows. Probably because he’s surprised to learn Emmie knows his sister. “Jessica’s here already. She’s out for a walk. And Emmie here is a tad horse obsessed.”

Ryan nods, his eyes shifting from excitement to worry before he turns his smile toward Emmie. “Well, there’s nothing wrong with that. I like horses, but definitely not like my sister. I’m more of a baseball fan.”

Emmie rolls her eyes. “Baseball’s okay, but horses are way better.”

“Hello.” My momma’s voice rings through the house. She appears in the doorway of the kitchen before anyone has a chance to respond. “Ryan! It’s so good to see you. Get up here and give me a hug.”

“Hey, Rosie.” Ryan’s smile grows. He hugs Momma and she pats him on the back.

“How was your trip home?”

“Long. Very, very long.”

Momma smiles before she turns to me. “Where’s Jessica?”

I point toward the back door. “She went for a walk.”

“I think I better go find her,” Ryan says. His smile fades and a darkness casts over his eyes. “I’m guessing she and I need to talk anyway.”

I nod. “Yes, I’d say you’re probably right about that. Just leave your bag here. I’ll take it up to your old room for you. Momma cleaned it up yesterday.”

Ryan tosses my momma a smile and pulls her in for another hug. “Thanks, Rosie. I could’ve done that.”

“It was nothing.” Momma waves goodbye as he walks out the back door. She reaches down and picks up Emmie. “Geez, you’re getting too big for me to pick up. Are you ready to go to my house?”

“Yep.”

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Say goodbye to your daddy and let's go. We have a call with your grandparents in a couple hours and we have lots to do beforehand.”

“Yay!” Emmie’s smile grows. She loves Emily’s parents. They still live in Colorado, and they only get to see each other a couple times a year. These weekly video calls my momma schedules keeps them involved in Emmie’s life despite the distance.

Momma puts Emmie down and she rushes over to give me a hug. “You be good for Grandma. I’ll see you after work, okay.”

“Okay. Love you.” She wraps her little arms around my neck and kisses my cheek.

“Love you, too, kiddo.” I give her a kiss before I sit her down. I wave goodbye as Emmie and Momma walk hand-in-hand out the front door. I glance out the back window and see Jessica sitting next to one of the large trees in the backyard. A strong urge to go to her overwhelms me. But I see Ryan walking toward her and know this is not the time. He wasn’t kidding when he said they had things to discuss. I just hope Jessica isn’t in a worse mood when they’re done.

CHAPTER 9

JESSICA

Yesterday was the longest day of my life. Not the worst, but definitely the longest.

The worst day of my life was coming home for my parents’ funeral only to find out that the one person whose comfort I needed most married another woman the

weekend before. I'm not sure there's anything that could top that emotional roller coaster. Although yesterday was pretty damn close.

I stop next to the large oak tree in the backyard and lean against it. Glancing around the property, I'm hit with so many memories growing up here—most good, some bad. I'll treasure all those memories for the rest of my life, but I'm hit with the realization that I don't know if I can handle living here again. I always thought I'd come home to stay, but now I'm not so sure.

After my parents died, I still thought of this house as mine. Sure, I was hurting—who wouldn't be after losing both parents and the man they loved in one week? But I never expected running away would become permanent.

Even after Matthew broke up with me before we left for college, I still planned on coming home and marrying him. I saw him every holiday and break. Even though he broke up with me, he still made love to me like I was his forever. And I let him. I understood his struggle with self-worth. I held onto the truth that one day he would marry me. Our time in college was nothing more than a temporary setback. I believed that with all my heart. Up until the time he married Emily.

Being back home is harder than I expected. I didn't expect to still love Matthew so fiercely after all this time. There's a part of me that hates him—hates what he's done—and I certainly don't trust him. How could I after how he broke me? But all the pain, and hurt, and heartache hasn't even come close to diminishing my love for him. He's my soulmate.

With my letters clutched to my chest, I grabbed Matthew's hand. "Come on, let's go out by the big tree."

We ran out the back door and across the backyard. Matthew has his letters, too. We applied to the same two colleges, University of Washington and University of

Minnesota, and we got our letters for both schools this week.

We decided to wait and open them together. The anticipation of not knowing and being so close to the decision that would affect the next four years of our lives was agonizing. If we didn't get accepted into the same schools, I swear I'd die.

He really wanted to go to Minnesota. I didn't care which school we went to as long as we were together. The thought of being apart from Matthew was too painful.

When we reached the tree, I pulled him behind it so we were hidden from view. We came back here a lot and made out. It was far enough away from the house that as long as we were behind the wide base of the trunk, no one could see or hear us.

He pressed me against the tree and kissed me. Damn, could this boy kiss. Hard. Soft. Wet.

I parted my lips and his tongue dove into my mouth and every inch of my body went up in flames. Even after four years of kissing this boy—or man now, he was definitely all man now that we're eighteen—every kiss with him felt like the first kiss. His lips always left me all tingly inside and aching for more.

He broke away first and dropped his forehead to mine. "Shall we read our letters?"

I nodded, still too breathless to speak.

He stepped back and pulled his letters from his pocket. Mine were still in my hand and a little crumpled after that kiss. "Which one should we open first?"

"Washington."

Our eyes met, and we nodded in unison. We ripped open the ends and pulled our

letters out. Hesitating at the same time, we both took a deep breath before unfolding them. I scanned mine quickly and smiled when I read the word congratulations. I got in.

When I looked up at Matthew, my smile quickly faded. He stared at his letter with a scowl. “Well?”

“I didn’t get in, you?” He still didn’t look up at me, and that made my heart ache.

“I did, but hey, there’s still Minnesota. Let’s open those.” He nodded but he didn’t look so sure.

We opened those letters even faster and as soon as I read the first line, my eyes welled up in tears. After carefully reviewing your application, we regret to inform you that we are not offering you admission to the University of Minnesota.

I looked up at Matthew, his eyes glued to his letter with a huge grin on his face. “Oh, my God. You got in.” I shoved my letters into his chest and ran. I ran as hard as I could into the forested area that separated our family's property. There was only one place I wanted to be right now.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

I heard him calling after me—no doubt he was following me—but I didn't stop. I couldn't. My entire world just crumbled around me, and I didn't know what to do. How could I leave him in the fall? I couldn't. There was no way I could survive four years apart from him.

I reached the big rock next to the creek and fell to my knees. The jar from hitting the hard surface shot through my body but I didn't feel a thing. I'd pay for that later, especially since I was wearing a dress, and nothing was covering my legs.

A few seconds later, Matthew slid in behind me and wrapped his arms around me. "We'll figure this out, baby. I promise."

"But it's four years, Matt." I spun around until I was straddling his lap. "I won't survive four years away from you."

"Sure, you will." He brushed my hair behind my ear and gently kissed me. "It's not ideal, but we'll survive anything and everything this world throws at us. We're soulmates, remember?"

I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him close. "I'll never forget."

"And I'll never let you." His mouth found mine in a hard, claiming kiss. I melted into him as his hands ran down my back and cupped my ass. He pressed me closer to him; his need for me rock hard between his legs. When he rolled his hips and ran his velvety tongue down my neck, the ache between my legs intensified.

I couldn't imagine a time when I'd never want this man. He was my everything. As

much as it was going to suck, he was right. We'd survive this separation. It was only four years. And when compared to the rest of our lives, that would be nothing.

"Make love to me, Matt. Remind me how much we belong together."

He growled against the tender skin of my neck, sending every nerve ending in my body into overdrive. "Fuck, yeah. We belong together. You're mine, always."

"Always yours, always mine," I whispered.

With one hand, he pulled the strap of my dress and bra down, exposing my breast. He sucked my nipple into his mouth hard and gave it a gentle bite just like I loved. His other hand slipped between my legs and under my panties. He slid two fingers down my slit and pushed inside me.

I threw my head back and moaned. "Please tell me you have a condom."

"Yes." He released me just long enough to pull his wallet from his back pocket. While he fumbled to dig it out, I undid his jeans and grabbed his cock. He was so hard and thick and ready to fuck me.

Desperate to have him inside me, I quickly stood and slipped my panties down my legs. I tossed them aside and waited until he had the condom on before I repositioned myself on top of him.

Normally, we took sex slow. Him gently caressing my clit or pumping his thick fingers inside me while I stroked him. After a lot of heavy petting, sometimes I'd take him in my mouth or he'd fuck me with his tongue, but right now I needed him inside me.

I slid down on top of him in one swift movement. We both groaned once he was fully seated inside me. He didn't give me a chance to start riding him. Instead he grabbed my hips and held me in place while he thrust into me fast and hard.

It was the fastest he'd ever given me an orgasm. I came so hard around him everything else blurred and all that remained was him and me together forever.

Once we'd both come back down from our release and our breathing slowed, he cupped my cheeks and kissed me. "Make no doubt about it, Jess. One day I will marry you."

The light crunch of feet walking across the grass pulls me out of my memory. I shake my head and groan. "Can you not follow me for once?"

"Well, geez thanks. I thought you'd be excited to see me."

My head pops up at the sound of my brother's voice. "Oh, my God, Ryan." I jump up to my feet and throw my arms around him. "Sorry. I thought you were Matt."

"Nope, not Matt. He had to get to work." Ryan squeezes his arms around me and picks me up off the ground. "It's good to see you, Sis."

"You, too." I pat his back and smile. Ryan and I have always been close, but with our careers, getting together has been difficult. He's always traveling with his team and I'm always busy with meetings and fundraisers. "How long's it been? It feels like I haven't seen you in forever."

"It has been forever." Ryan puts me down, and we both sit under the tree. "It's been at least a year, I think."

"Damn, that's too long. We're gonna have to do better than that." If Ryan and I don't

change our priorities, even a little, our lives will be over, and we won't know each other anymore. That's unacceptable. "We're the only family we have left. I don't want to miss out on your life."

"I know." Ryan looks away from me. His eyes are full of sadness. "Losing Uncle Jimmy really puts everything into perspective, doesn't it."

"It does." Not that I think acknowledging this fact will change anything. Ever since Ryan was drafted to the majors, he spends most of the year traveling with his team. It's not like I can get away from Seattle often. I can't exactly run my business on the road.

"I know what you're thinking, Jess." He shifts his gaze to mine but looks away quickly. "That we don't have the time. But I'm thinking we need to start making the time."

"Yeah. You're right. That would be a hell of a lot easier if we had a central location to call home. Say something like this house." He cringes at my tone. He knows what I'm about to say. "Why would you agree to sell, Ryan? This is our home. I can't believe you knew about this and didn't tell me."

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

“I tried, Jess. Several times in fact. Any time I brought up Matt, you’d shut me down.”

“You should’ve tried harder.”

“Seriously? How many phone calls from Uncle Jimmy did you ignore? You even ignored me.”

“I didn’t ignore you guys. I’ve been busy.”

“Yeah, I get that. You’re a successful business owner. You’re always gonna be busy. But no busier than I am with my team, and I still called you. Your busy work schedule isn’t the reason you ignored us, and you know it.”

“You always wanted to talk about Matt. And I didn’t want to hear his name.”

“We only brought him up because of the house. None of this would’ve been a shock if you’d answered just one of our calls and given us the chance to speak.”

“So, you’re saying this is all my fault. That’s rich.”

“No. I’m just saying you should talk to me more. Let me help you with all this.” He reaches for my hand and gives it a gentle squeeze. “You’re not alone, Jess. You should even talk to Matt. It might help.”

“How can talking to Matt help?”

“Might help you not be so angry all the time. It’s worth a try, at least.”

I am angry. Very angry. And hurt. I haven’t talked to anyone except David and Blaire about Matthew. It’s easier talking to them about him than it is Ryan. As much as I hate it, Ryan and Matthew are still friends. There’s always going to be some part of him that defends Matthew and the decisions he made.

And that hurts even more.

“I don’t want to sell the house. We grew up here. This is all we have left of Mom and Dad.”

“Nah, this is just a place.” Ryan holds his hand over his heart. “Mom and Dad are right here. They go everywhere with me. They go everywhere with you, too. You just have to open your eyes and see it.”

I shift my gaze away, unable to look at the pain in his eyes. He’s being vulnerable with me right now, and I’m angry at how easily he can disregard the home we grew up in. Ryan and I hadn’t really talked about how we felt about losing our parents either. We’d been there for each other, silently providing support, but we didn’t talk about it.

“So, you’re on Matt’s side?” The words came out clipped and laced with all my anger.

“This isn’t about sides.” I start to pull away, but he doesn’t let me. He grabs a hold of me and pulls me into a bear hug. “I will always be on your side. We may not always agree on matters, but that doesn’t mean I’m not here for you.”

I nod, and for the first time today, I have to fight back tears. I’ve been good so far at keeping my emotions in check. Leave it to my brother to drag it all back out again.

“Come on.” He releases his hug and pats my back. “Let’s go get all this hard stuff taken care of. I take it we need to go to the funeral home, and start making all the arrangements?”

“Yeah, I didn’t make it there yesterday.” I wipe my eyes as we stand. “How long are you here for?”

“For however long this takes. I told my coach at least a week, but if it takes longer, then I’ll stay longer.”

Hearing him say those words brings back my tears. I pull him in for another hug and let him be there for me. It feels good to lean on someone else for a change. I’ve been the only one holding myself up for so long, I almost forgot what family support feels like.

“Thanks, Ryan. That means a lot to me.”

He wraps his arm around my shoulder and kisses the top of my head as we head back to the house. He’s tall and broad and his arms feel strong and safe. When did my baby brother get so grown up?

CHAPTER 10

MATTHEW

“Emmie! Let’s go or we’ll be late,” I yell up the stairs before I head back into the downstairs bathroom.

Standing in front of a mirror, I straighten my tie again. It’s been a week since Jessica arrived, and today is Uncle Jimmy’s funeral. There’s a short graveside service planned, but the main service is being held at Stocks and Stables, Uncle Jimmy’s

favorite bar. I've no doubt the place will be packed with everyone in town wanting to come out and celebrate his life.

I've hardly seen Jessica. She's remained relatively hidden from me all week. Aside from her first morning here, we haven't seen her at breakfast. I'm off to work before she comes out of her room, and she stays out past dinner time. Ryan joins Emmie and I most nights, but he said she preferred to eat in town. I think she just wants to avoid any more contact with me.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

When I asked Ryan where she's been going all day, he said when they weren't making funeral arrangements she was working out of Sweet Cakes. I don't know why she doesn't just work here all day. If her goal is to avoid me, she doesn't have to worry. I'm at work. She can have the house to herself.

I'd tell her as much if she'd stick around long enough for me to talk.

"I'm ready, Daddy." Emmie runs down the stairs and right into the backs of my legs.

I reach around and scoop her into my arms. "Let me get a good look at you." I wrinkle my nose and pretend to give her a critical eye. "How about I fix that ponytail you've made? Run back upstairs and get your brush."

I smile after my daughter. The things I never thought I'd do. But somehow over the past few years I've become the master hair braider and ponytail maker. The first time I tried to brush Emmie's hair was a complete disaster. First, I was too gentle and none of the knots and tangles would come out. Next, I was too rough and pulled her hair too hard and made her cry. When my sister, Leann, came over and handed me a bottle of detangler after hearing me breakdown one night at dinner, I rejoiced. That one little hair brushing product is a lifesaver.

After that, I decided if I was going to rock at being a single dad, I needed to learn a lot more than just how to brush Emmie's hair. I needed to know how to fix it, too. YouTube quickly became my best friend and Emmie ended up with the best hair in town. After learning a few quick tips and tricks, it turns out hair braiding isn't all that difficult. But ponytails are definitely way faster.

I'm waiting on the couch when she runs back down and hands me her brush. "Here. Sit down in front of me."

I brush out a few remaining tangles and quickly get it pulled into a neat ponytail. "Do you want to wear one of your bows?"

"Not today."

"You sure? You love your bows."

She nods and turns to face me with a serious expression. "My bows are too happy for today. I don't want to upset Jessica."

I smile and kiss her cheek. How did I get so lucky to have such a great kid? "You're awesome, kiddo. I'm sure Jess will appreciate your consideration."

She looks down at her hands and fiddles with the ribbon around her waist. She even insisted on wearing a black dress even though I tried to put her in one of her favorite pink ones.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?"

She shifts her eyes to mine. All I see is sadness and concern. "Is Jessica mad at us?"

"Oh, Emmie." I pull her into my arms and give her a big hug. "Why would you think that?"

She shrugs. "She hasn't been here since that first day. I thought she liked me and would ride with me."

"I know for certain that she's not mad at you. She's just been busy preparing for

today. Maybe she'll have time once we get through this day. Okay?"

Emmie nods, but she doesn't look convinced. "Why does Ryan have time for us then? Isn't he also helping with today?"

Damn. This kid is way too observant. Ryan and I had been careful with our conversations and made sure we never said anything about Jessica or the house until Emmie was in bed. I guess that wasn't enough.

"That has nothing to do with it. As the oldest, Jessica has taken on most of the responsibility. Plus, Jessica and Ryan are grieving differently. Ryan wants to be around others right now, but Jessica needs some time to herself."

She seems to be contemplating my last words and for a moment I think she's going to object to my explanation. But she shrugs and hugs me. "It's really sad losing people you love. I bet you were really sad when Mommy died."

I stiffen at the mention of her mom. I was sad when Emily died, but not for the right reasons. I was sad my child lost her mother. I was sad something bad happened to Emily. She didn't deserve to die or miss out on raising her child any more than Emmie deserved to miss out on life without a mom. I loved Emily in my own way, and I mourned her death, but I was never in love with her. I've only ever been in love with one person, and that person can't even be in the same room with me right now. "I was sad. But I was mostly sad that you'd never get to meet your mommy. I never wanted that for you."

"I know, Daddy. But I'm okay. I've got you."

"Yes, you do, kiddo." I kiss the top of her head and stand with her still in my arms. "You ready? I think we're officially late."

I grab my keys off the hook by the door and head out to my truck. I may not get the chance to talk to Jessica today, but at least she won't be able to hide from me. If all I get is the chance to look at her, I'll take it. But I'm hoping for a lot more.

The graveside service was short and to the point, but more people showed up than I think Jessica or Ryan expected. Several people went straight to Stocks and Stables to help prepare the final details for the main service, but most of the town paid their respects graveside.

Jessica cried almost the entire time. It killed me to not be the one comforting her. My arms ached to hold her close—to tell her everything would be okay. But I'm not sure everything will be okay after this.

So much of my life is balancing on the edge of a cliff and dangerously close to tipping over. One wrong move, and it'll all come crashing down into a pile of rubbish.

I still have no clue what she plans to do about the house. Ryan doesn't either. He said she refuses to talk about it anytime he brings it up. Because of that, I should be more concerned about losing my home and my business, but all I can think about is pulling her into my arms and making her feel better.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

But she doesn't want my comfort. Even if she did, she wouldn't accept it.

I'm the last of my family to arrive at Stocks and Stables. Momma was one of the ones to stay behind to finish setting everything up. Adam and Camille are standing with Momma. I don't see Joseph or Leann, but I saw them pull in before me.

Emmie let's go of my hand and runs across the room. "Uncle Adam!" she yells so loud most the eyes turn to look at what's going on. That kid loves him so much that sometimes I think she likes him more than she likes me. I get it. Adam is great with kids. It's a shame he never got to have kids of his own.

"Hey, munchkin." He picks her up and gives her a tight hug.

I walk up behind him and give him a pat on the back before I reach over and give Camille a hug. It's only been a couple of weeks since Adam and Camille made their relationship official, and I couldn't be happier for my big brother. If anyone deserves happiness, it's him.

"It's good to see you again, Cami. Is the house remodel complete now?" I ask.

Camille moved to Watercress Falls several months ago and hired my brother to remodel the old chalet she bought. She ended up gaining so much more than a remodeled home. They fell in love in the process.

"Yes. The main house at least. There are still a few small cabins scattered in the treeline behind the house that I'm considering updating for rental property, but I'm not in any hurry. It's not like Adam has time for that right now with the resort

project.” Camille looks up at Adam and grins. “I might need to find a new contractor.”

“Nonsense,” Adam growls in response. From the playful expression on Camille’s face, I’d say she’s teased him about this a few times just to get him worked up. “Just say the word and I’m on it.”

“How’s the resort project coming along? Any more problems?” A few weeks ago, Adam had to fly to Chicago to put out a few fires. Last I heard, everything was still a go.

“Not yet, but it’s still early. I think the main challenge is going to be keeping the Kingslands quiet. They’re very vocal about their opinions, especially with what they do on their land. They’re too new to the area and the locals are concerned about environmental impacts. They’re making more enemies than friends.”

“I haven’t met any of them yet. I thought I’d get the chance when Leann went out with Korbin, but that didn’t last long enough.”

“What didn’t last long enough?” Joseph walks up behind me and squeezes my shoulder.

“Leann dating Korbin Kingsland.”

“Ahh.” Joseph nods. “I never met him, but Leann said he was nice enough. Just no spark. Noah, however, that boy can’t stand the oldest brother, Keaton. I think that’s his name. Says he’s a real asshole, but I don’t know what gave him that impression.”

Noah Strong is Wyatt’s, one of Adam’s closest friends, youngest brother. And he went to school with Joseph. He can be a bit of a hot head at times, but Noah is a good man. If he doesn’t like Keaton, there’s a good reason for it.

“That’s the only one I met,” Adam says. “I liked him. Seemed like a real stand-up guy. Just talks too much when he should shut it.”

Joseph shrugs. “Maybe he said something that pissed Noah off.”

“Uncle Joe said a bad word.” Emmie scowls at him and everyone laughs.

My brothers exchange a glance and Camille reaches for Emmie. “Wanna come with me to get some cookies? I saw some yummy looking chocolate chip cookies over there that I’d like to try.”

“Yes!” Cami takes Emmie and I turn to face my brothers.

“So,” Joseph steps closer after they’re gone and leans in before he continues. “Leann says Jessica doesn’t want to sell. Says she’s thinking about staying here now that the vineyard is hers.”

My head snaps up, and I meet Joseph’s stare. I haven’t heard anything, and this news has my ears ringing and my stomach feeling like someone dropped a lead weight inside me. If she said anything to Ryan, he’s been closed lipped about it.

If she stays, then maybe I’ll get the chance to win her back. Then again, if she refuses me, I’ll have to live in the same town as her. Knowing she’s here and I can never have her would be the worst form of torture. “How would Leann know that?”

“You know Leann and Gracie Strong are close friends now. Apparently, Jessica’s been spending a lot of time with them this past week.”

Jessica and Gracie, Noah and Wyatt’s sister, were best friends back in the day so it makes sense that she would go to her for support. I hadn’t considered that as an option for her. “I thought she was hiding out at Sweet Cakes?”

“That, too. Apparently, she’s working hard to avoid you,” Joseph says.

“So, what’s the deal?” Adam asks. “Are you and Emmie gonna have to move out?”

“I don’t know. But it’s a strong possibility. I haven’t had a chance to talk to Jess about it. She’s succeeding at avoiding me. I haven’t really seen her since she arrived.”

“Well, here’s your chance.” Joseph nods behind me. “She’s coming right for us.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

I glance over my shoulder and sure enough Jessica is walking right for me. And not just Jessica, but the man I saw her with years ago when I surprised her by coming to her graduation when she finished her MBA. Every ounce of jealousy I've ever had resurfaces as I recall the way he hugged her and then kissed her cheek while I was waiting to surprise her.

I'd slipped my hand into my pocket so many times over the past hour to make sure the ring was still there. I've waited so long for this moment. Now that Jessica has finished her MBA and I was halfway through vet school in Colorado, I was ready to take the plunge and make it official. Today, I would ask her to marry me.

I would've done it years ago, but I'd been scared she'd decide I wasn't enough for her. I'd gotten so used to people walking away from me, there was a part of me that expected her to do it, too. She'd only ever told me how much she loved me, but it's hard to overcome childhood fears. I never knew my biological father and my mother left me for drugs. I was also shuffled from one foster home to another—none of them able to handle me and my issues—before I came to live with the Langdons. It was hard overcoming that shit and accepting I was good enough for someone like Jessica.

But after six years apart, and only seeing each other on breaks and the infrequent surprise visit, we still loved each other. If anything, the distance has made my love for her stronger. I thought that was true for her, too. Today was the day I'd find out.

I didn't tell her I was coming, but I made sure I arrived before the ceremony began so I could watch her walk across the stage and collect her diploma. With her MBA finished, there was nothing else stopping her from starting a life with me.

I hoped she still wanted that as much as I did.

I was waiting in the hallway outside the door where one of the organizers assured me all the graduates would exit. It was a crowded hall. There were a lot of other people waiting for their graduate to exit. I hoped I didn't miss her in the sea of faces.

Jessica's parents were waiting outside. They arrived this morning and decided to let me surprise her alone. I told them that wasn't necessary, but they knew what I had planned and wanted to let me do it without them as an audience.

A few minutes later the door opened, and the graduates started piling out. I waited for what felt like an eternity before I caught a glimpse of her radiant smile. I started to run toward her, but stopped when I realized she wasn't alone.

My heart dropped and every dream I had for our future shriveled up and retreated in on me. Another man had his arm around her shoulder. She looked up at him with the same smile that was always reserved for me. He whispered something in her ear, making her laugh. I hated seeing another man make her laugh. But then he kissed her on the cheek.

Was she blushing?

My first instinct was to punch him in the face and steal my girl out of his embrace. Instead, I spun around and ran my fingers through my hair. This wasn't happening. My worst fear had become reality. She'd moved on and found someone better than me. I always knew I wasn't good enough for her, but after all these years, I'd thought maybe I was wrong.

When I turned back around, the man was gone, and Jessica was headed right for me. Her smile grew when our eyes locked, and she broke into a run. She jumped into my arms and hugged me tight.

“Matt, you came.” She leaned back and kissed my lips. She looked happy to see me, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d just lost the woman I loved to another man.

“Matt. Did you hear me?” I shift my gaze toward Jessica’s voice. She’s looking at me with raised brows and I realize I missed the entirety of the conversation going on around me.

“I’m sorry, what?” I shake my head and look away from the man next to her. I can feel the scowl on my face, and I don’t want to explain my jealousy.

Jessica points to the man that accompanied her. His arm is around the waist of a woman I don’t recognize. “This is my business partner and friend, David, and his wife, Blaire. They’ll be staying at the house since there’s nowhere else to rent in town. I’m just letting you know so you’re aware.”

My eyes widen as her words sink in. “Did you say business partner and his wife?”

Jessica’s brows furrow. “Yes. I’ve known David and Blaire since before grad school. He helped me secure the investors to start my business. Once it took off, he decided to stick around and help me run it.”

David holds out his hand. I stare at it for a moment too long—creating an awkward air around us—before I finally take his hand for a shake. “Sorry. Where are my manners? It’s nice to meet you.”

“You, too.” David smiles, but his eyes suggest he knows what I’m thinking. He turns to the woman on his arm and kisses the top of her head. “We’ve both heard a lot about you. It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“You have, huh?” I shift my gaze to Jessica. “Because I’ve never heard anything about either of you.”

Jessica looks down at the floor and brushes her hair behind her ear. “I guess we lost contact before I ever had a chance to tell you about them. We didn’t talk a lot after you came to my graduation.”

I cross my arms over my chest. My anger is building, and I have so many questions running through my mind. I never told her I saw her with him. I stayed the night in Seattle, then headed back to Colorado first thing the next morning. We started drifting apart after that. It wasn’t immediate. We still texted and saw each other when we went home, but things between us were never the same. I’d assumed she moved on. I let her go without a fight. “True. But something tells me you knew him before that.”

I see David shift on his feet out of the corner of my eye, but I never take my eyes off Jessica. I don’t know what I expect her to say, nothing most likely, but I wait for it anyway. She doesn’t respond, so I look toward David and Blaire. “How long are you two staying? With Jessica in the guest room, I don’t have another room with a queen size bed.”

“Just for the night. We head back to Seattle tomorrow,” David says.

“I plan on moving to my old bedroom.” Jessica adds. Her voice is shaking, and she looks uncomfortable. “David and Blaire can have the guest room.”

“Sounds like you have it all worked out. If you’ll excuse me, I need to get some fresh air.” I walk toward the entrance as quickly as possible. My chest is tight, and I suddenly feel like my tie is choking me. As soon as I’m outside I fall against the side of the building and pull my tie loose.

Fuck. Did I have it all wrong back then? Did I assume she was with David when they were nothing more than friends? That one instance changed every decision I made after that. Because in my mind, I lost Jessica when I saw his arm around her.

CHAPTER 11

JESSICA

I rush into the guest room to start gathering my things with David and Blaire on my heels. I can tell they both want to ask me about Matthew's reaction to meeting them, but I don't want to talk about it. Especially not with an audience. Besides, I don't exactly understand his reaction either.

With the click of the door, I squeeze my eyes close. I count to ten to calm my nerves before I turn around. David is standing by the door with his arms crossed over his chest wearing a scowl. Blaire just looks worried.

"Question." David steps toward me. "I don't want to make this time harder for you than it already is, but why did Matt look at me like he wanted to beat the shit out of me?"

I drop my head into my hands and fight back tears. "I don't know. He's never met either of you before. His reaction makes no sense."

Blaire steps up behind me and wraps her arms around me. "Honey, his reaction suggests otherwise. No man looks that protective and territorial over a stranger."

"But that's impossible. I think we'd all remember meeting. He so rarely came to Seattle, and when he did, we never exactly went out."

"Sounds to me like you two have a lot more to talk about than just this house. There's something else going on there, Jess." David lets out a low breath and shakes his head. "I really don't like being at the other end of a man's fist, especially when I've no clue

why.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. Matt would never hit you.”

David’s head snaps up and his eyes widen. “Are you sure about that?”

Blaire rests her hand on David’s chest and some of the frustration inside him deflates. He meets Blaire’s gaze and nods. Blaire looks at me, her eyes calm and soothing. “Can I ask why you never told him about us? We became friends before you started grad school. That seems like something you’d tell the man you thought you were going to marry.”

I toss my head back and stare at the ceiling, unsure where to begin or even if they’d understand my reasonings. “You have to understand where Matt comes from. He had a lot of insecurities about our future together. The reason he broke it off with me the first time was because he was so certain I’d meet someone better than him in college. He wanted to give me the chance to meet that person and be with them if that’s what I wanted.

“No matter how many times I told him I didn’t want anyone else, he never listened. I was afraid if I told him about you two, he’d think I moved on—found new friends and a new life that didn’t include him. I couldn’t risk doing anything to cause him to pull away more than he already had.”

“So, you kept this entire side of your life a secret from him?” David asks.

I nod. “You saw what happened after I told him about the investors and the business start-up. After my graduation, I was so excited. I told him everything that was happening. He slowly pulled away from me after that. By the time he was done with vet school, we were hardly talking anymore. My worst fear had become reality.”

“I get that, I really do.” David paces in front of the door, clearly not happy with my past actions. “But we’re your friends, Jess. Let’s say things worked out with you and Matt. Did you ever plan on introducing us to him?”

“Of course, I did. I just needed to make sure he wouldn’t pull away from me first. I’ll be the first to admit, it probably wasn’t my brightest idea, but I was scared of losing him.”

“Newsflash, Jess. You did lo—”

“David, that’s enough.” Blaire holds her hand up to David before she pulls me into a tight hug. “There’s more going on here, Jess. I’m certain of it. You owe it to yourself, and to Matt, to figure it out. I hope you decide to talk to him.”

I let out a deep sigh and nod. “I’ll give that some thought. For now, let me take my stuff upstairs. I probably already have a full house.”

When I come back downstairs, the entire Langdon family plus several of my friends from high school are gathered in the kitchen. Ryan is hanging out in the living room with several of his friends plus a couple of the Strong siblings. I think I see Noah Strong, he’s a couple years younger than me, and one of the Strong twins, Iris or Cassia, but I don’t know which one. I never could tell them apart.

Emmie’s eyes light up when she sees me. She immediately runs toward me. “Jessica, I missed you. Will you be here more now that today is over?”

“Um.” My body stiffens as she wraps her arm around my waist and stares up at me with those familiar big green eyes.

“Emmie,” Matt scolds. “What did I tell you about giving Jess some space while she’s here?”

Emmie tightens her hold around me. It's a nice gesture but one that confuses me. My interactions with her have been so little since I've been here and her attachment to me now seems unwarranted. Then again, she's only four. I've no clue how four-year-olds view new people that enter their lives.

I squat down in front of her so I'm level with her face. "Sorry, I've been busy. But yes, I expect to be around more. I still have a lot to take care of, but we should be able to go riding before long."

Emmie clasps her hands. "On a big horse? Please say I can ride a big horse."

I chuckle at her relentless attempts to ride anything but the pony I hear she has. "That's entirely up to your daddy. You have to follow his rules."

Emmie's smile fades. She already knows her daddy's response without asking. I pinch her little nose before standing. "Just keep working on him, he'll eventually give in. My Daddy did."

She mumbles something I don't understand and turns to leave the room. I can't help but smile at her persistence. She reminds me so much of myself at that age. I head over to the table where Gracie Strong, my best friend from high school, is sitting at the table with Leann and Adam, and a woman I don't recognize.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Hey Jessie Cat.” Adam stands and gives me a hug. “It’s so good to see you, again. We’ve missed you around here.”

“I’ve missed you guys, too. It’s definitely good to be back.”

“Word is you’re thinking about staying. Is that true?”

I scrunch up my face and shrug. “Thinking about it. I don’t want to sell the vineyard, and if I keep it, I’ll need to be here. But there’s a lot to consider before I make a decision.”

“I imagine there is. Whatever you decide, just don’t forget, we’re all here for you.”

“Thanks. That means a lot to me.” Adam was always more like a brother than a neighbor. He looked out for me long before Matthew came to live with them. I’ve missed him and the rest of the Langdons more than I’ve allowed myself to acknowledge.

He turns to the woman sitting next to him. “Did you meet Camille earlier today?”

“No, I didn’t.” I reach out to shake her hand, but she pulls me in for a hug instead.

When my body stiffens, she chuckles. “Sorry. I guess I’ve lived here long enough now that I hug everyone.”

“That’s okay.” I smile and let myself relax in her embrace. “You’d think I’d be used to that since I grew up here. So, how do you know Adam?”

“Well, I hired him to renovate the chalet I bought and now we live together.”

For the first time since I arrived my smile feels genuine. I look at Adam and he’s wearing the same big grin. “You mean you two are together?”

“Yep.” He pulls Camille closer and kisses her cheek.

I clasp my hands in front of my chest and bounce on the balls of my feet. “I’m so happy for you. If anyone deserves to find happiness, it’s you.”

Adam glances over his shoulder at Matthew. To my surprise, he’s talking to David, and it looks like they’re having a pleasant conversation. I search the room for Blaire and she’s standing across the island from David. She turns toward me like she knows I’m watching and shrugs. I shouldn’t be surprised to see David seek out Matthew and make whatever was wrong earlier right.

“You know, I’m not the only one who deserves happiness,” Adam says, dragging my eyes back to him. He kisses Camille again, and the way she nods at him is like a secret conversation only they can hear. Matthew and I used to have that. Seeing it between Adam and Camille makes me sad. He releases her and wraps his arm around my shoulder, leading me away from the group.

“Adam.” I drop my head into my hand and rub my forehead. “I know what you’re suggesting, but it hurts too much to be near him.”

“Of course, it does. It always hurts when two people who love each other as much as you two do fight to stay apart.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It never is. I realize I don’t know what happened between you two, but I know he

loves you. And from what I see in you, you still love him, too.”

“Yeah, well,” I wipe a rogue tear off my cheek, “love isn’t always enough.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Love is always enough. Love is everything. You have to fight for the ones you love. Go to the ends of the earth and back again if that’s what it takes.”

His words hit me hard. Tears stream down my cheeks, and I’m struggling to not completely fall apart in front of Adam and whoever else is close enough to see me.

Adam reaches for me and pulls me close. “Oh, Jess. I didn’t mean to upset you. You know you’ve always been like a sister to me. I just want to see both of you happy. That’s never gonna happen unless you give each other a chance.”

“But how can I after everything he’s done? I don’t think I can ever forgive him.”

“Sure you can. You love him. That’s a fact you can’t deny. Lucky for you, love and forgiveness go hand-in-hand.”

I don’t have anything to say to that because deep down there’s a part of me that knows he’s right. Instead, I let him hold me until I stop crying.

I finish curling my hair and take one last look at myself in the full-length mirror on the back of my door. My long blond hair hangs in loose curls past my shoulders. I decided to wear my favorite white dress. It’s a halter style dress with a deep V that shows lots of cleavage. Add the A-line fit under my breasts and the flowy skirt that hits just above my knees and this dress accentuates all my best features. Not that I care that my features are on display. It’s not like I’m trying to catch anyone’s eye.

Keep telling yourself that, Jess.

I let Gracie and Leann talk me into a night out at Stocks and Stables. According to Gracie, it's still the place to hang out on a Friday night. She said everyone comes out to dance and drink a few beers to unwind after a work week—even Matthew. So yeah, I might be getting dressed up for him.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

After David and Blaire left yesterday, I decided to stay in my old bedroom. It's closer to Emmie's and Matthew's bedrooms, making it harder to avoid them, but it feels more like home. Emmie likes having me across the hall from her. She sneaks into my room when she knows I'm in here and talks my ear off about horses. She's a sweet kid, and as much as it pains me to admit, I'm starting to really like her. She's wormed her way into my heart, making it a lot harder for me to decide what to do about the house.

Ryan left this morning. He had to get back to his team before their next game. I wish he could've stayed longer. It was nice spending time with him. I hope we do a better job at making time for each other moving forward.

He thinks I should sell the house to Matthew. He also isn't opposed to selling the vineyard, but I don't think I can do it. The vineyard was always my dream, not his. Despite the success of my outdoors apparel company, it's still my dream. It'll be an adjustment, and my role in my company will have to change, but I know I can do both.

There's a loud knock on the front door downstairs, and I check the time. It's almost seven. We plan on grabbing dinner before we head to Stocks and Stables. I thought Matthew would be home long before now, and I'd see him before I left. A tinge of disappointment washes through me, and I scold myself for even thinking like that. I need to stop thinking about him so much and push him out of my mind, but I can't seem to get Adam's words out of my head.

Love and forgiveness go hand-in-hand.

Is it really that simple? I doubt it, but it's a nice notion, nonetheless.

Walking into Stocks and Stables on a Friday night is like going back in time. I'd hardly recognized the place when it was set up for Uncle Jimmy's service, but now it looks just like I remember. Same stage with a live band playing hit country songs, crowded dance floor of mostly girls attempting the latest country line dance, and a bar lined with cowboys watching the girls shake their hips.

I don't see him, but I know Matthew is here. I can feel him. I've always been able to feel when he's nearby. Even that first day by the creek when he tried to steal my horse, I felt someone's presence.

I follow Gracie and Leann toward an empty table along the wall. It's close to the dance floor and is positioned so we can see most of the bar without obstruction. I instinctively search the large open room, seeking one thing. My eyes land on his, and I suck in a breath. Matthew is standing at the bar with his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes glued to mine. Even from here I can see the heat in his eyes. My body has a mind of its own and my thighs clench together. I ache for this man. Every inch of my body still wants him, and only him, despite his betrayal.

"Earth to Jessica," Gracie calls from behind me. I turn around and she and Leann are both staring at me with knowing grins. "You good with a pitcher of beer?"

"Sure, that's fine." I take a seat beside Gracie. The waitress finishes with our order and leaves.

When I look up, Gracie and Leann are still staring at me. "What?"

Gracie shrugs and glances at Leann who leans forward with a grin on her face. "We're just wondering how long you're going to put yourself through this?"

“Put myself through what?”

“Denying yourself Matt,” Leann says in a very matter-of-fact tone. “It’s so obvious you still love him. And I know for a fact he still loves you. What I don’t understand, none of us actually, is why you two aren’t together?”

I cover my face with my hands and muffle a groan. From the way everyone’s been acting, I can only assume Matthew never told anyone what really happened between us. When I remove my hands, they’re both staring at me like they’re waiting for an answer. “Listen, Matt’s the one that broke up with me. He’s the one that went off to vet school, met another woman, and then married her. It’s kinda hard to be with someone when they marry someone else.”

“Did you ever ask him why he married Emily?” Leann asks.

I start to reply but Joseph walks up to our table with Matthew and another guy I don’t know. “Evening ladies,” Joseph says as he squeezes a chair in between me and Gracie. “Y’all feel like dancing?”

I roll my eyes and do my best to pretend Matthew isn’t standing behind me. The other guy with them sits down next to Leann and reaches out a hand. “Hi, I’m Sam. I don’t believe we’ve met. I work on the ranch with Joe.”

I take his hand and smile. “Nice to meet you.”

Before I have a chance to say anything else, Gracie and Leann jump up. “Come on, guys. Let’s go.” Gracie grabs Joseph’s hand and Leann grabs Sam’s and they head to the dance floor, leaving me alone with Matthew.

“Real subtle,” I yell after them. Gracie turns to me with a mischievous grin and waves her fingers in a playful motion.

Matthew slides into the seat beside me just as the waitress brings us our pitcher of beer. She sits a full mug in front of me. I pick it up, and down half of it in one drink. If I'm going to be forced to be near Matthew tonight, I'm going to need some liquid courage.

CHAPTER 12

MATTHEW

Jessica drinks half her beer before she drops it to the table with a loud clunk. She looks uncomfortable and maybe even a little angry that I'm here. If I were a smart man, which clearly I'm not, I'd leave her alone. But I can't make myself walk away. I never could resist that fire in her eyes. Plus, I want her back.

Her eyes roam the bar, focused anywhere except where I'm sitting. I shouldn't stare, but I can't take my eyes off her. The soft line of her jaw, her plump lips, thick eye lashes, and shiny blond hair are the only things I have eyes for tonight. I want to reach out and run my fingers through that hair. Maybe even clench my fist at the base of her neck, grabbing hold of it and pulling her to me. Damn, I bet that would feel good.

There was a time I could do that without repercussions. Before I fucked everything up and pushed her away. I'd been so stupid back then. But it was also a dark time for me. I struggled with my past and sense of self-worth. Basically, I didn't have any and didn't think I deserved her or the family that adopted me. I never talked to anyone about how hard those years were for me. It was something I had to work through alone.

She finally shifts her eyes to mine and scowls. "Are you just gonna sit there and stare at me all night, or do you think you might leave anytime soon?"

I lean forward and rest my elbows on the table. “Can we not fight? It’d be nice to have a civilized conversation with you.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

The anger in her eyes intensifies and her hands clench into fists. “If you wanted civili—”

I place a finger on her lips to cut her off before she says something that cuts too deep. “I know I’ve made a lot of mistakes that ultimately hurt you. I apologize for all of it. I will continue to apologize until the end of time. At some point, I hope you’ll talk to me about it. There are things I’d like to say. But it’s been one hell of a week, and tonight I’d really like to relax. Maybe enjoy your company, even dance with you, if you’ll let me.”

Her eyes widen and her anger subsides. “You want me to dance with you?”

“Yes.” I take a drink of my beer. She straightens her back and pushes her hands against the table. I can’t tell if she’s going to object or get up and leave. “Or ... we can just talk.”

“Talk?” She looks at me like I’ve suggested something truly outrageous.

“Yes, talk.” I chuckle, hoping it will calm her enough, so she’ll stay.

She sits back in her chair and crosses her arms over her chest. I relax. That is until my eyes shift down to her cleavage. My heart rate increases, and my dick perks up at the sight of her chest. I quickly divert my eyes back to hers. She still doesn’t look happy, but at least she’s not leaving. “What would we even talk about?”

I regard her for a moment. There are so many things I want to ask her about. We haven't spoken for five years and there's so much about her life that I don't know.

“How about your business? I’d love to hear more about what you’ve done with your company. I hear you’re quite successful.”

Her expression doesn’t change. She just stares at me like she expects me to disappear at any moment. Or maybe she just wants me to disappear. “You want to hear more about my business?”

I laugh. “Are you going to take everything I say and turn it into a question?”

She shrugs and picks up her beer. “No. I just didn’t think you were interested in it.”

“Of course, I’m interested. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“When we were younger, you always got antsy and acted like you didn’t want to hear about it. I tried so many times to tell you what I was doing and how it was going, and you always changed the subject.”

She’s not wrong. Her business dreams scared me. She was so ambitious, and I was afraid her career would take her away from me. I added that to the reasons why I pushed her away. “Clearly, I was an idiot when I was younger.”

She smiles and my heart soars. “Not gonna argue with you there.”

The live band takes a break and a slow song blasts through the speakers. Our friends and my siblings leave the dance floor, but they don’t return to our table. My eye catches Joseph’s as he heads to the bar. He nods as if telling me he’s giving me space and time with Jessica.

I shift my gaze back to the dance floor and it’s filling up with couples dancing to the slow music. All I can think about is holding Jessica that close and feeling her body next to mine. I want to press my lips to hers and run my hand down her back and

gently squeeze her ass. There was a time I could do that without question—a time when she was mine.

Her eyes meet mine again, and there's something softer in the way she's looking at me now. I know it's wishful thinking, but I really hope she's thinking what I'm thinking. That she wants to be close to me, same as I want to be close to her. She hasn't walked away from me yet, which is progress. So, I take a chance.

I hold out my hand. "Dance with me?"

She stares at my outstretched hand. The silence between us grows and I can feel the war she's currently having with herself. She wants to say yes, but she's fighting against it.

"Please, Jessica. It's just a dance." Her eyes shoot to mine. I so rarely call her Jessica. I only ever called her that when I was serious and really needed to get her attention. I got it now.

She nods and takes my hand. My nerves relax but my heart picks up speed. Her hand feels so damn good in mine. I lead her to the dance floor and pull her body flush against me. She gasps and her arms stiffen around my shoulders. I should probably leave more distance between us. We're more like strangers now than lovers, but I need her close to me.

With one arm around her waist, I take one of her hands and squeeze it with mine. I hold it close to my chest and drop my head next to hers. Her arm around my shoulder relaxes and she eventually drops her cheek to my chest and rests it against me.

It feels so good to have her in my arms again. It feels right. She belongs next to me—always.

We remain like this without speaking—slowly turning her around the dance floor—for the entirety of the song. When the next song starts, another slow one, she starts to pull away but I tighten my arm around. She lifts her head and opens her mouth to speak, but she stops when her eyes meet mine. I don't know what she sees, but whatever it is, it causes her to stay with me for another dance. I want to tell her what I'm feeling—put what she sees in my eyes into words. But I don't. Instead, I just hold her. Dance with her.

She drops her head back to my chest and I feel her take a deep breath like she's struggling to maintain some level of control. I hear a faint sniffle and I run my hand up her back and around the base of her neck. I don't want her to cry anymore, or ever again. Especially not because of my dumb ass.

The song ends and the next one is a fast one. She steps back from me, and I release her. She wipes her face—confirming she was crying—then turns and walks away.

I want to reach for her, to pull her back into my arms and tell her how much I love her. But this time, I don't follow her.

I let her go.

With Emmie situated at her riding lesson with Leann, I head to the main barn to find Joseph. Emmie is still begging me to let her ride a full-size horse. She's been riding her pony like a champ for months. She's tall for her age and could probably handle it, but I don't think I can. She's all I have. I've already lost the woman I love. I wouldn't survive if I lost Emmie, too.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

But I'd almost said yes. My mind is still preoccupied with thoughts of Jessica. We didn't talk again after the dance we shared last night, but my focus is shit because all I can think about is how damn good she felt in my arms. But it wasn't just how she felt. It was also how she smelled—sweet as a field of those wildflowers she used to love so much—and how she melted into my touch.

I find Joseph in one of the stables fixing a broken latch. He's crouched down on the ground while Sam holds the gate in place. Sam's our head foreman, and he's become more like family these past couple years. He even joins us for Sunday dinner every week. If he misses it without good cause, he gets the same reprimanding lecture we get from Momma. I pat Sam on the shoulder and lean against the frame. "I see Joe has you working on Saturdays now."

He shrugs. "Not usually. But we both want to get this fixed. We need the space for the new mare coming next week."

"You're getting another mare? Didn't you just get two last month?"

Joseph grins at me and winks. "I did, but this one's special. She's small, and very gentle."

I narrow my eyes on him, not quite sure where he's going with this. "And?"

"She'll be perfect for Emmie. Bigger than a pony, but not so big her daddy will worry."

I groan and shake my head. "I swear, the entire family is against me on this. I just

want to keep Emmie safe. She's only four. Give her time to grow a little."

Joseph tightens the last screw in place on the new latch and dusts off his hands. "She'll be safe, bro. Don't think for one second we don't want what's best for that girl. We do. Trust me, when you see this horse, you'll be fine with it. Emmie will be overjoyed and stop pestering you so much. It's a win-win."

I try to hold back the huff that wants to come out. I've been in a good mood all morning and I don't want to ruin it. "We'll see. I just wish everyone would support me instead of going behind my back and getting her what I said she couldn't have."

"We are supporting you, man. She doesn't know anything about it. If you don't like what you see and this new lady is still too big for Emmie, then we don't tell her about it. We'll stand behind your decision."

"Plus," Sam squeezes my shoulder with a grin, "this new horse is a trained jumper. She'll be great for the new program we want to start next year. If you decide she's not for Emmie, we still have a good use for her."

I toss my hands in the air in defeat. "Okay, I give. I'll check her out when you guys get her."

Sam gathers up the tools and starts for the storage room. "Do you need anything else from me today?"

"Nope," Joseph checks the latch a few times to make sure it's working before we follow Sam out. "You're good. Thanks for your help."

"All right, man. I'll see you both tomorrow at dinner." After putting the tools away, Sam heads out, leaving me alone with Joe.

Once we're alone, Joseph turns to me and grins. "I saw you dancing with Jess last night. You any closer to working things out with her?"

I shake my head and drop onto the bale of hay opposite from where he's working. "This is going to take a while, but at least she's talking to me now. That's progress."

"You two looked pretty cozy on that dance floor. I thought maybe things had progressed a little more." Joseph calls as he rounds the corner into the office. He returns a moment later with two beer bottles in his hand.

"No, we actually didn't talk after that." I take the one he offers before I continue, "She left before me, and was already in bed when I got home. I was up and out the door before she got up this morning. I'm here all day and won't be home until after dinner, so I don't know if I'll get a chance to talk to her until tomorrow."

I take a swig of the unlabeled bottle and smile. Joseph started brewing beer a couple years ago. His latest concoctions have been really good. "Damn, Joe, this might be your best yet."

"Thanks." His smile grows. "I really like making lagers. Got plans for several more varieties soon."

"Well, sign me up as your prime taster. This is good." I hold my bottle up and tip it in his direction. He returns the gesture with a nod.

"You still taking the horses out tomorrow?" he asks.

"Yeah, why?"

"Ask Jess to help. That'd cut your ride time in half."

A smile tugs at my mouth. “That’s a great idea.” And it is. I’ve got two horses that need exercise. Jessica loves to ride, and she’ll probably jump at the chance to get out. “How is it you’re still single?”

He gives me a sly grin. “You know me. I can’t settle down. There are too many girls out there to experience to limit myself to just one.”

“What about Georgianne? I saw you with her last night. She seems sweet on you.”

“Georgie?” He shakes his head and frowns. “Nah, she’s only good for a quick bit of fun. She’s not someone I’d ever settle down with.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Why not? You say that about every girl I’ve ever asked you about. One of these days someone’s gonna come along and steal your heart. You’re not gonna know how to handle it.”

His eyes glaze over and a far-off look overtakes his expression, but it only lasts for a second until his grin returns. If I hadn’t been watching him, I might have missed it. “Can’t see that ever happening, but I guess anything is possible.”

By the time we make it home, Emmie is sound asleep. We ended up staying later at Momma’s house than I planned, playing board games with my siblings. Emmie fought sleep the entire time we were there, and as soon as she was in her car seat, she was asleep. She doesn’t even make a fuss when I pick her up out of the truck to carry her inside. Between the late-night games, her riding lesson, and several hours playing with Leann, my girl is plum wore out.

The house is quiet, which doesn’t surprise me. It’s almost ten. The only light is coming from the kitchen, and it fills me with hope that maybe I haven’t missed Jessica today. I head straight upstairs, change Emmie into her pajamas and tuck her in.

I smile when I see Jessica’s bedroom door open. She hasn’t gone to bed unless she decided to move back into the guest room downstairs. Regardless, I’m hopeful this means she’s still up.

As I make my way downstairs, I hear her voice coming from the kitchen, but it’s not just hers that I hear. I stop just outside the kitchen entryway. She’s talking via video conference with David.

I can't believe I thought she was with him for all this time. After our awkward introduction at the funeral, he sought me out to explain their longtime friendship. He's been married to his wife since before he even met Jessica. I didn't tell him what led me to believe they were dating, but he seemed genuine, and I believe him. He also encouraged me to give Jessica more time because he believes she'll come around.

I wanted to ask him a million questions about why he believes that. The sliver of hope he gave me has kept me going the rest of the week. All I want is one more chance to prove to her that I deserve her.

Just one chance. I won't screw it up again.

I lean against the door frame and watch her. She doesn't seem to notice I'm here even though I've made no effort to be quiet. She's engrossed in her conversation with David. I don't want to eavesdrop, but his next question causes me to wait where I am unnoticed.

"So, you're not selling the vineyard?" he asks.

She shakes her head. "I can't sell it. It's all I've got left of my family. Plus, taking it over was always my dream."

"I know, and Blaire and I support you in whatever decision you make." He pauses for a moment before he continues. "Does this mean you're also staying in Watercress Falls? Permanently, that is?" he asks.

"I think so." Those three simple words make my heart stop. I had heard rumors that she was considering staying, but I'd assumed they were just that—rumors. I've been operating under the assumption that my time with her is limited, and that distance would soon be working against me again. Hearing her say it's a possibility she's staying out loud takes that sliver of hope I have and magnifies it. If she stays, my

chances of winning her back increase.

“There’s a lot to figure out if I do,” she continues. “I have no idea what to do about the house. Do I sell it to Matt? Stay here until I find someplace else? Run my business from here or step down as president? What would that look like? Do you even want to take on a bigger role? What if—”

“Whoa, whoa. Slow down, Jess.” David chuckles. “We don’t have to have all those answers tonight. Start with what you really want. Do you want to be there or in Seattle?”

“Here.” She doesn’t hesitate, and it makes me smile.

“Good. Let’s make that happen first, then we’ll figure everything else out.” Jessica nods and picks up a glass of wine. She takes a sip and starts to say something, but David continues. “You know, if you stay, this will make it so much easier for you and Matt to work things out and get back together.”

“David, I can’t get back together with him.”

“Why not?”

She drops her head into her hands and groans. “You know why.”

“No, I know what you keep telling yourself. I know you’re stubborn and will fight against something just to make a point, even if it’s wrong. I know he’s single. And I’ve no doubt there’s more to his story than you know. You just have to give him a chance.”

“I don’t know if I can trust him again. Not after what happened.”

“Jess, I’ve seen the way he looks at you. And I know you still love him. I also—”

“Shit.” It’s at that moment that she looks up and sees me standing in the entryway. Her eyes widen, and I can see the rapid rise and fall of her chest. “Uh, David.”

“He’s there isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” she says without taking her eyes off me.

David laughs, and Jessica turns her gaze back to him and frowns. “Good. I hope he heard everything I said. You two need a little push.” Without another word, the video chat ends, leaving Jessica and me alone in an awkward silence.

“I didn’t mean to intrude,” I finally say.

Her shoulders relax and she lets out a slow breath. “It’s fine. It’s not like you heard anything you probably don’t already know.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

I can't help but smile because she's right. It was nice hearing David confirm all the things that have been swimming around in my mind, but it's his last words that have my heart pounding and everyounce of my body begging for it to be true. I'm prepared to do the work required to earn her love again, but if she still loves me, then it's her forgiveness and trust I need to focus on.

Not wanting to make things any more awkward than they already are, I head to the refrigerator and grab a beer. I pop the top and lean against the counter opposite where she's sitting. She glances at her notes scattered across the island and starts gathering them up.

"Sorry. I kinda took over your kitchen."

I wave off her concern and try not to let my smile show at the fact that she referred to this as my kitchen. "You're fine. No need to apologize. Besides, it'syourkitchen."

"I didn't realize how late it was. I figured you'd be home by dinner time and need to feed Emmie, forcing me to take a break."

"Have you been working all day?" I toss my beer back for a pull and try not to stare. For the first time since she arrived, she looks peaceful and content.

She nods. "Since just after lunch."

I drop my arm and raise my brows. "Did you at least eat something for dinner?"

She wrinkles her nose and looks down at her laptop. "Not really. I had a snack

earlier.”

“Jess, you have to eat.” I sit my beer down and open the refrigerator. “Let me make you something.”

“No, you don’t have to do that.”

I glance back at her and she’s worrying her bottom lip. “Are you hungry?”

“Yeah, a little.” Just then her stomach growls, causing her to groan.

“A little, my ass.” I turn back to the refrigerator and look at what I have. My eyes land on the block of Jarlsberg cheese and I grab it and the butter. “I’ll make you a grilled cheese sandwich.”

“Matt, you don’t have to do that.”

“I know.” I shrug and pull a skillet out. “But I want to, and you need to eat. I assume Jarlsberg is still your favorite.”

She brushes her hair behind her ear and suddenly looks shy, maybe even embarrassed. It's more of a response I might expect from someone on a first date who's nervous. When her eyes meet mine, she smiles. “Yes. And Jarlsberg grilled cheese sandwiches are the best.”

“Good. Coming right up.” I smile and get to work slicing the cheese. I hear her behind me shuffling around papers and shutting her laptop. When I look back, she’s cleared most of her stuff away. “You didn’t have to stop working on my account.”

“I’m not. I’ve worked too long today anyway. I need to be done.”

“How about tomorrow?”

She pauses midway while putting files in her bag. “What do you mean?”

“Do you have to work tomorrow, or can you take the day off?”

“No. I mean, yes.” She stops, looks up at the ceiling, and takes a deep breath. “Sorry. I don’t have to work tomorrow.”

I smile. “Good. I could use your help.”

“With what?” She narrows her eyes, but her lips turn up into a slight smile.

“I have two horses that need exercise. It’ll be easier with a second rider.”

She gives me a puzzled look. “I didn’t think you had any horses here.”

“I keep them on the ranch. I need this space for the clinic. Plus, as soon as I keep a horse here, Emmie’s going to become even more relentless than she already is.”

Jessica laughs and it’s the sweetest thing I’ve heard in days, months, maybe even years. “That girl is more obsessed than I was at that age, and I was pretty bad.”

“Yeah, she was born ready to ride.” I smile and place a plate in front of her. I grab my beer and the sandwich I made for myself and slide into the stool across from her.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:08 pm

“Thanks for this,” she says before taking a bite. Her eyes roll back, and she moans. “This issogood. I think I’m hungrier than I realized.”

She takes another drink of her wine, and her glass is almost empty. I pick up the wine bottle and she nods, holding out her glass for a refill. After swallowing a bite of my own sandwich, I ask, “So, what do you say? Go riding with me tomorrow?”

She glances over at me but quickly diverts her eyes away. Hersilence has my heart pounding. When Joseph suggested I ask her, I thought it was a great idea. I prepared myself for her to say no, but now that I’ve asked her the only answer I want to hear is yes. If she says no, I’ll be crushed.

Her eyes shift back to mine and they’re softer, less worried than a second ago. “Okay, sure. I could use some time on a trail.”

A huge smile covers my face. “Great. I planned on heading over to the ranch around nine. Momma will keep Emmie. Then we can get the horses ready.”

“Sounds good. I’ll be ready.”

We finish eating our sandwiches in silence, each of us stealing glances at the other. Oddly enough, it’s not as awkward as most of our previous interactions. I’d go as far as to say it’s on the verge of being comfortable. I don’t sense her anger or her pain, which is new. If anything I sense acceptance and maybe even anticipation of what tomorrow might bring.

JESSICA

“Why can’t I go with you?” Emmie pouts. When she found out I agreed to go riding with her dad this morning, she begged to go, too. The first time she asked, I almost said yes. I wouldn’t mind having her sit in front of me on the saddle, but Matthew was quick to object.

“I already told you not this time,” he grumbles, and grabs the bag he’d packed from the kitchen counter. “We’ll be out for a few hours, and I want to take the horses on some of the steeper trails. They need exercise.”

“But when do I get to go riding with Jessica?” She crosses her arms over her chest and gives her dad a hard stare. I can’t help but laugh.

“Tell you what.” I kneel next to her. “Maybe I can join you the next time you have riding lessons with your Aunt Leann so I can get a feel for your skill. Then we can plan a morning ride. Sound good?”

She’s still frowning when she looks at me, but she nods. “Can it just be you and me?”

“If that’s what you want.” I look up at Matthew to see if he’s going to object. “As long as your daddy is okay with me taking you out alone.”

“Of course.” He narrows his eyes like he’s surprised I’d even suggest otherwise. “I trust you with my daughter.”

I look back at Emmie and her frown has lessened, but her deep green eyes are just as intense as Matthew’s. Sometimes I see so much of him in her it’s unsettling. I enjoy spending time with her, but her expressions are so much like his it feels like I’m with him instead.

This is one of those times, and I'm feeling the need to create some space.

I stand up and twirl a strand of her long dark hair around my finger. "I promise, we're going to have plenty of time to ride. Maybe I can take you to some of my favorite spots from when I was younger?"

Her face shifts almost instantly and her eyes light up. "Really? Oh, yes please! I'd love that."

My smile grows, and I nod. Before I can say anything more, she jumps up and wraps her little arms around my waist. It surprises me at first, but then I melt into her. She's so sweet and loving, making it impossible not to love her. At this rate, this kid is going to own me.

"Come on, girls." Matthew smiles as he walks past us. "Let's get going before it gets any later. I don't want to be out there in the afternoon heat. Plus, they're calling for rain later today."

We head out and pile into his truck. Once Emmie is secured in her car seat, we head the short distance to his family's ranch.

Rosie is waiting on the front porch when we pull up. She waves at us with a huge smile and Emmie takes off for her. Matthew follows her, exchanges a few words with his mom, hugs Emmie, and heads back toward me.

"Ready?" He smiles as he reaches around me to grab the bag he packed. His arm brushes up against my shoulder and I shudder. I quickly step away, putting as much distance between us as I can without looking too obvious. It clearly doesn't work because his smile grows, and his expression turns mischievous.

He places a gentle hand on my arm, and I suck in a breath. "Let's go. Joe said he'd

get the horses ready for us.”

All I can manage is a nod. I follow him into the barn, all the while having a private conversation in my head about my self-control. I’ve done so well over the past week and a half around him, and I can’t let myself screw it up now. Granted, I avoided him at all costs for the first week. Now that I’ve allowed myself to be near him, I’m failing. Miserably.

And all because he made me a grilled cheese sandwich.

He’s not doing anything out of line. The sandwich last night was a nice gesture. But the way he touches me—as light and seemingly insignificant as it is—is too much. It reminds me how much I miss him and still want him. A week ago I’d argue to my last breath that he was doing this on purpose, but I don’t know that he is. It feels natural, unplanned, fantastic.

Maybe I should have insisted we take easier trails and bring Emmie along. At least with her around, I wouldn’t have to worry about giving into my need to feel his touch.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

Because I do need it. More than I ever realized.

I follow several steps behind Matthew to avoid any chance of touching him. Before we make it inside the barn, Joseph walks out leading a horse—saddled, and ready to go. His eyes meet mine with a huge grin.

“Hey, Jessie Cat. I hope you’re up on your riding skills. Matt’s planned some tough trails today.” He pats Matthew’s back with a chuckle.

“Don’t you worry about me. I may live in the city, but I ride every weekend.”

“You don’t say? You got a horse then?” he asks.

“Yep.” I step up to the horse he’s leading and pet her mane. “A retired jumping horse. I keep her boarded just outside Seattle.”

“Then Pippi here should be a good fit for you. She’s gentle and still jumps. If Matt ever relaxes, she’ll be a good ride for Emmie.”

“Don’t start.” Matthew groans. He disappears into the barn. I assume to get the other horse.

Joseph laughs. “He’s so easy. Maybe one of these days he’ll stop being so grumpy.”

He winks and hands me the reins. I gently introduce myself to Pippi, letting her take the time to see me and smell me before I get on. She’s a dark chestnut color with a bright reddish mane and tail. Her muscular form and elegant stance are a dead

giveaway for her jumping skills. A part of me would almost rather take her to the ring and test her abilities than ride the mountain trails.

“Do you need help getting up?” Matthew’s voice is right behind me.

When I turn to look at him, he’s watching me with a raised brow. And too close. So close I can touch him. My instinct is to reach out and rest my hand on his chest—to run it around his shoulder and into his dark hair. He looks too good, too tempting. His black t-shirt fits snug around his toned chest and solid arms. He’s wearing a cream-colored hat which is a nice contrast to his tanned skin and dark brown hair. My eyes betray me, and they roam down his body, past his abs and waist. I swallow and squeeze my eyes closed at how damn good he looks in jeans.

I shake my head and step around to the stirrups, putting distance between us before I do something really stupid. “Just getting familiar with Pippi before I hop on.”

He clears his throat and looks away. I catch a glimpse of Joseph near the barn with his arms crossed over his chest still wearing a big grin like he’s in on some secret. I roll my eyes and adjust my hat. I grabbed an old cowboy hat I used to wear when I was younger from my room. It needs to be reshaped, but it fits well enough for a Sunday ride.

Once we’re both seated, Matthew leads the way toward the old trails that run along the base of the mountain behind his family’s ranch. If he’s taking the one I think he’s taking, it ends up joining a trail on my property and leads to a small lake. It’s a challenging trail, but a beautiful one.

Choosing this trail isn’t a coincidence. He knows it’s my favorite path to ride. Anytime he’d asked for my ride preference when we were younger, I always chose this trail. It may be a tough one with steep slopes, but it’s got gorgeous views of the mountains. Not to mention, the reward of the secluded lake at the end is more than

worth it.

Between the brief conversation and the dance at the bar, cooking for me last night, and now leading me onto my favorite trail, this man is up to something. I just wish I knew what it was so I could protect my weak heart.

Too much more of this, and I'll give into him—consequences be damned. No questions asked.

We take our time getting to the lake. It's steep in several places and Matthew said it's been a while since either horse has been pushed this hard. Plus, I want to enjoy the view.

There's an overlook point just before reaching the lake where the trees part providing a perfectly clear view of the vineyard. When I was younger, I'd stop and sit there for hours imagining what my life would be like once the vineyard was left to me. From here, the rows of grapevines appear to go on for miles. I can see the winery and all the outbuildings used for processing and storage. It's grandiose and beautiful and everything I ever wanted.

But I don't have the life I once imagined.

I'm not married to Matthew with four kids running around. I'm not managing the vineyard and making my own unique, limited varieties of wine. I don't even officially live here. I live in Seattle and run a successful outdoors and sporting goods apparel company.

With the vineyard under my management, part of that imagined life can be mine. I think I've made up my mind to stay, but I don't know how to do that and keep my heart safe from more pain.

Staying to run the vineyard doesn't solve my problems with the house. Do I kick Matthew and Emmie out or make a new home somewhere else? Would I survive living this close to Matthew knowing he can never be mine again? There's too much pain lingering in our past to ever find our way into a happy and blissful future.

Isn't there?

Loving him isn't the problem. Trusting him is.

My love for him is everlasting, but I don't know if I'm strong enough to forgive him like Adam suggested.

I pull myself away from the overlook and continue down the last trek of the trail. Matthew didn't stop when I did, and by the time I reach the lake, he's setting out lunch.

I tie Pippi next to Jaguar, Matthew's horse, and take a deep breath. He's put down a blanket and has unpacked a picnic lunch. It's very romantic and in another time, I would've been swooning over his preparation. But considering our circumstances, I'm nervous.

"I made your favorite, turkey with Swiss." He hands me a wrapped sandwich, and I sit down on the blanket.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“Thanks.” My voice trembles and I struggle to steady my arm. I don’t want him to see the effect he has on me, even though I’m pretty sure he already knows.

I glance out over the small lake situated on a narrow plateau between two mountain peaks. I’m bombarded with memories—most good, one bad. This is where Matthew brought me to break up with me. I didn’t think about that during the ride up, but seeing the lake brings it all back to the surface. Not wanting to ruin this day, I focus on my surroundings instead.

The forest looks denser than what I remember, but I can still see the narrow hiking trail that leads to the waterfall that feeds the lake. The waterfall is actually bigger than the lake. The depression in the landscape isn’t that large and the water drains into another smaller waterfall that feeds the creek that divides our two properties.

“Whatcha thinking about?” Matthew’s question draws my attention to him. His bright green eyes are darker than usual and filled with concern.

“Just looking around. Not much has changed since I was last here.”

“No, I don’t suppose it has.” He looks out toward the waterfall, and I can’t help but wonder if he’s recalling the times we’d spent together behind that wall of water. There’s a small cave and a shallow pool of water behind it. The water is cold, but that never stopped us from taking advantage of the privacy it provided.

“I’m sorry, Jess. For everything.” He looks down at his hands and hesitates before he reaches over and takes mine. “I know it doesn’t fix anything, and it’s not nearly what I owe you. But I am sorry for how I handled everything and the impact it had on

you.”

My eyes are glued on his, but he keeps his trained on our joined hands. My heart beats faster than a stampede of racehorses—so fast in fact, he can probably feel it beating through my hand.

“Matt, I know you’re sorry.” My voice cracks, giving away every bit of my nervousness and fear. I pause to take a breath before I continue. “But saying so doesn’t change anything. It doesn’t take away the years of pain rooted in my heart.”

He squeezes my hand and pulls it close to his lap. His eyes meet mine for a moment before he gazes out over the water, but I keep my eyes on him. I really should pull away. Instead, I find myself leaning into him. Our shoulders lightly brush, and his chest quickly rises and falls. Every ounce of me wants to lean all the way in and rest my head on his chest—sink into him. But I need to remain strong. There is still way too much hurt between us to give into our physical desire for each other.

Before I can even consider forgiveness, I need to know why he did what he did. He always struggled with self-worth when we were younger. Who wouldn’t after being shifted from foster home to foster home before he finally found a family who welcomed him unconditionally? His father’s abandonment and his mother’s death impacted him deeply. Rejection from multiple foster families before the Langdons only fed those insecurities more.

But none of that mattered to me. It still doesn’t. I love him for his heart and soul—the kind, tender, and passionate way in which he loved me back. I thought he understood, even back when we were kids, but then he pushed me away at a time when I thought our life together was just beginning.

When he looks up at me, I see nothing but pain and sorrow in his eyes. My heart betrays me, and it breaks even more—for him. “I wish I could take it all back, Jess. I

was young and stupid. I had no idea how to deal with all the shit in my life. I didn't think I was good enough for you. Hell, I still don't. But pushing you away was the biggest mistake of my life.”

He releases my hand and lifts his to my cheek. He gently brushes his fingertips along my jawline and I visibly tremble. He leans closer, further luring me into him. The logical part of my brain is sending warning signals throughout my body telling me to run, but my heart is fighting back with a vengeance and keeps me rooted in this spot next to him. No matter how much pain he’s caused me, my body, heart, and soul remembers how much love we shared—how much I still love him.

“Maybe I'm crazy. Maybe I'm holding on to something, I can never have because I destroyed it beyond repair. If that’s the case, then I’ll just have to live with that. But all I want is one more chance to prove to you that I deserve you. If you'll give me that, I promise I’ll spend the rest of my life making up for the mistakes of my past.”

I suck in a breath. I’ve spent most of my adult life waiting to hear him say something along those lines to me, and now that he’s said it I don’t know how to react. I thought those words would bring me so much joy. I imagined running into his arms and losing myself to his kisses. But so much time has passed and the hurt between us has magnified to levels that restrain me in shackles—like an inescapable jail cell.

Regardless, I don’t pull away. I let myself go to his pull on me. Because I want him. Despite all the heartache and pain, I want him so badly.

He inches closer to me, and his eyes shift from mine to my lips. Even as his hand slips around my neck, tugging me closer, my mind is screaming at me to stop. But I ignore it. I’m completely lost to him in this moment.

Then the sky rumbles and raindrops fall down on us. It’s not enough to get us wet, but just enough to bring me back to my senses.

I pull away and shake my head. “I don’t know if I can do this,” I whisper.

I push to my feet and head toward the hiking trail that leads to the waterfall. I’m desperate to put space between us. When he’s close to me like this, I have no self-control. And I’ll give him anything he asks of me.

CHAPTER 14

MATTHEW

Like the idiot that I am, I watch Jessica walk away. Again.

We keep having these moments where I think I’m breaking past all the hurt and pain I’ve caused her. Those moments give me so much hope. I start to think there’s a chance for us. Then she secures the walls she’s built around her heart to protect her from more pain—pain that I’m responsible for—and runs away.

But I can’t give up on her—on us.

Once I regain some control over my emotions, I’ll chase after her again, too.

Hell, I’ll chase after her for however long it takes to prove to her I’ll never hurt her like that again.

Because no matter how much she pushes back, I have to try and win her back. I made the mistake of letting her go years ago and not fighting for her. If it takes the rest of my life to prove to her just how sorry I am, I’ll do it. She’s worth it and more.

Pushing up to my feet, I run after her. “Jessica, please.” She shakes her head and swats her hand behind her like she’s waving me off. “Please, stop running from me.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

She spins around and faces me. The look on her face is a mixture of anger, hurt, and need. “Matt, I can’t do this. You don’t understand why this is so hard for me.”

I stop within reach of her. The tears welling up in hereyes slay me. I hate that I’m the reason she keeps crying. “Then help me understand.”

“You broke me!” she yells. Her body trembles and her hands shake at her sides. I want to reach for her, but I wait, letting her say what she needs to say. “My heart hurts constantly—like every single second of every single day. Because ofyou. My only means of survival has been distance. Because when you’re near, I can’t breathe or think or stay calm.”

She’s shaking so hard. She looks like she’s about to crumble to the ground. I step into her and cup her cheeks, supporting her body against mine. Her tears flood around my fingers as she squeezes her eyes closed. “Jessica,” I whisper and drop my forehead to hers, “I never meant to hurt you like that. Everything I did, I thought I was doing for you. I was so young and damaged back then. I only wanted what was best for you, and I didn’t think that included me.”

She takes a deep breath and steps out of my embrace. Wiping her tears dry, she sighs. “Why did you bring me here?”

“What do you mean, here?”

She lifts her arms and waves them around her. “The lake.”

“This was your favorite trail? I thought you would enjoy it.”

Her eyes are focused on our surroundings rather than me, but I can see the pain magnifying in her gaze. “Did you forget what you did the last time we were here together?” She looks back at me, the fire in her eyes is intense, like she’s ready to blow. “Do you remember what you did?”

I stumble back. Her words cut deep. Because I do remember. I remember like it was yesterday. She steps toward me, rests her hand in the middle of my chest and pushes me back. “You broke my heart right here. You took one of my favorite places—a place we shared so many happy memories—and you destroyed it. Our love grew beside this lake, and our souls became one. Then you brought me here and broke up with me.”

Sitting next to the lake with Jessica had become one of my favorite things to do. We rode out to this spot every chance we got ever since we started dating four years ago. The intimate moments we’ve shared here would be forever ingrained into my memory. I would miss this the most once we left for college. Tomorrow.

She was curled up in my arms with her head resting on my chest. Her light blond hair flowed over her shoulder and tickled my arm where the wind gently blew around us. All I could think about was how much I wanted to lay her back on this blanket and show her just how much I loved her. But I couldn’t. Not with what I was about to do.

I should get it over with—say what was on my mind—but I couldn’t bring myself to say the words. Not yet at least.

In another effort to put off the inevitable, I pulled my pocketknife out of my pocket and wrapped a lock of her hair around my finger. She looked up at me with a suspicious eye. “What are you doing?”

I kissed her forehead and smiled. “Cutting a small lock of your hair so I’ll never forget its golden color or how soft it feels against my skin.”

She gave me a soft smile, leaned up, and kissed me. It was light and sweet and full of so much hope that it made me feel worse instead of better. “You make it sound like we’ll never see each other again. We’ll both be home in a couple months for the holidays.”

I nodded because there wasn’t anything I could say to that. I would see her in a couple months for Thanksgiving, but most likely it wouldn’t be a good visit.

I wrapped my arms tight around her and stared out over the water. The mountains were already bringing in cooler weather despite it still being summer. Another month and this very spot might see its first bit of snow.

With another deep breath, I went back to my task of clipping a lock of her hair. She chuckled and shook her head as I tied it in a knot and slipped it into my wallet.

“Laugh all you want, but in a couple weeks, I’ll be grateful I have this.”

She twisted in my arms until she was facing me, straddling my lap. She slid her arms around my neck and kissed me, only this time deeper and with enough force to make sure I never forgot what she felt like.

I easily lost myself in her lips and took control of the kiss. There wasn’t much else in this world that I enjoyed more than the feel of Jessica’s lips and tongue tangled with mine. Maybe my dick buried deep inside her, but that was a different experience altogether.

Her hand slowly ran down my chest and cupped my already hard cock. This woman drove me crazy, and I was quickly losing sight of what I was supposed to do.

I grabbed her hands and flipped her over, so she was pressed beneath my body. I held her hands over her head and kissed her like it was the last time I was ever going to

taste her, feel her, love her.

Because it might very well be.

Jessica was the love of my life, my soulmate, and I was about to break her heart.

I broke our kiss and dropped my head to her chest, struggling to regain control of my hormones. I hadn't been able to keep it in my pants since the first time we made love. We waited until we both turned eighteen before we finally had sex. It'd been a hard wait—for both of us—but it was a decision we'd made together. If we could make it until we were both technically adults, then we knew our love was real.

And our love was real, no doubt about it, which was why I had to do this now before it got harder.

Jessica ran her fingers through my hair and let out a slow breath. “Why did you stop?”

I swallowed hard, knowing I couldn't delay a moment longer. I lifted my head and looked her in the eyes. She deserved nothing less from me. “Because we need to slow this down. Take a break.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

She furrowed her brows and frowned. “What do you mean, take a break?”

“I mean exactly that. Take a break.” I pushed back on my heels, breaking all physical contact. “We both leave for college tomorrow, in separate states, and I think we should take a break. Allow each other to have fun in college.”

She pulled her arms under her and lifted up on her elbows. “Are you breaking up with me?”

“No. Maybe. Not really.” I dropped my head in my hands and groaned. I knew this would be hard, but I couldn’t even say what I needed to say, and I planned it out word for word.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean? Either you are or you aren’t.” Her voice rose higher and higher with each word she spoke. The desire and love I just saw in her eyes were gone and replaced with anger and confusion.

“Jess, calm down. This will be—”

“Calm down,” she yells. “How am I supposed to calm down when it sounds like you're breaking up withme?”

“I just don’t want you to look back and feel like you wasted all this time waiting for me when you could be having fun and enjoying college.”

“Our relationship has nothing to do with whether or not I have fun at college. The two are not related.”

“Come on, Jess. How could you possibly enjoy college the way you’re supposed to if you’re still tied to me?”

“Tied to you? Is that how you see us? As an obligation or something weighing each other down. I thought you loved me.”

“I do love you. That’s why I think we should break up while we’re in college. So you can really experience college and make sure you want this with me.”

“Oh, so you’re doing me a favor. Well, fuck you.” She slammed her fists into my chest, tears running down her cheeks. “Go off to college and fuck all the women you want. Just don’t expect me to be here when you change your mind.”

“Jess.” I reached for her arm, but she moved out of my grasp. “I’m not doing this for me. I’m doing it for you. You deserve better than me.”

“What I deserve is for you to let me make my own decisions, and to trust that I know my heart.” She spun around and rushed toward her horse. I run after her calling her name, but she doesn’t stop. This didn’t go anything like I’d imagined. I really thought she’d understand my point of view.

“Please don’t leave like this. This isn’t what I wanted.”

“Well, tough shit. This is what you’re gonna get. I never thought you’d do something like this.” She climbed up on her horse and glanced back at me, her face wet with tears. “I hate you for doing this.”

Looking backon that day now, I see how stupid my logic was. I was a scared boy who still didn’t know his place in this world. So, I hurt the one person who loved me the most.

Jessica.

I brought her back to this place without considering the lasting impact that day had on her. I cringe at my poor judgment, and when I look back at her, she's glaring at me like I'm the biggest fool she's ever met.

She might be right.

"Jess, I'm sorry. I didn't think about it like that. I just wanted to do something nice for you. If you'll just give me a chance, I'll prove to you that I deserve you. Please."

She shakes her head and crosses her arms over her chest. "You don't get it, Matt. When you broke up with me, I didn't just lose the love of my life. I lost my best friend. I've had to live with that loss for fourteen years. You don't have to prove anything to me. I'm not yours anymore."

I straighten my back and shorten the distance between us. "That's where you're wrong. You can fight me all you want, but I'm not giving up on us. You've always been mine, and I've always been yours. I just fucked things up a bit."

She holds her eyes on mine, a fire burning deep within. She's angry at me, but there's more to the look in her eyes. There's lust bouncing around with those flames. I take advantage of her desire for me and step into her space. She doesn't push me away.

"I was so stupid back then. I didn't even know who I really was and that terrified me. I was nothing more than an abandoned orphan who thought I didn't belong in your world. I was wrong. I know who I am now, and I know what I want. All I need is for you to give me a chance to fix it."

I reach for her hand, fully expecting her to pull away or push me back again. But she doesn't. Instead, she laces her fingers with mine. My breathing increases as I slip my

other arm around her waist and tug her close until our bodies are flush.

“Matt, this is so hard for me,” she whispers.

“I know, baby. I’m sorry I made it that way.” I stare at her lips, desperate to kiss her, but I hesitate. There’s nothing I want more right now than to taste her, but if I move too fast, she might run away from me again. Now that I have her in my arms, I never want to let her go.

While I’m debating with myself on whether to kiss her, she makes my internal conflict pointless. She wraps her arm around my neck and threads her fingers in my hair. Every inch of my body erupts into flames and despite the fact that our bodies are pressed together, she’s not close enough.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

She takes it a step further and pushes up on her toes and presses her lips to mine. I'm so surprised by her boldness that I turn rigid under her touch. But I recover quickly and take control of the kiss she initiated. She melts into me when I part her lips with my tongue and finally get the taste I've been hungry for. My entire body shudders from this one touch.

I slowly back her up against a tree behind us. As soon as I press her against it, she rolls her hips into mine. I'm already hard for her, but this small action nearly causes me to explode in my jeans from want and need.

"Jess," I manage through our locked lips. "You're in control. Tell me what you want."

"Touch me." The words come out breathy and desperate. "Please. I haven't been touched in so long."

"Yes, ma'am." I slip my hand down her front and unbutton her jeans. "Whatever you need. I'm yours to use."

She moans against my mouth and when my hand slips inside her panties she kisses me harder. It's like she can't get me close enough and every molecule of air between us is too much.

My finger slips easily inside her and I nearly die from the feel of her. She's wet, warm, and tight as hell. "My God, Jess. You're soaked for me."

"Please," she moans and lifts her leg up around my hip, opening her up to me. I fuck

her with my fingers while rubbing her clit with my thumb. I barely get started before her body explodes with pleasure and she's screaming a string of profanity.

It's hot, intense, and over way too fucking quick. It's been years since I touched Jessica like this, and I want it to last. She may be letting me touch her now, but I don't know if or when I'll get another chance like this.

I really want to replace my fingers with my dick, but even if she begs me for it, I don't think that's what she really needs. If she fucks me right now, I'm afraid she'll regret it later. So, I remove my hands from her pants and refasten her jeans.

When I look into her eyes, they're filled with tears. Her desire for me is gone, and all her hurt and pain has resurfaced. "Jess, please don't cry."

My acknowledgment of her pain is enough to push her over the edge and her tears break free. "I shouldn't have let you do that."

She pushes me back and slips out from between me and the tree. She heads back toward the blanket and picnic lunch I packed. Once again, I'm watching Jessica walk away from me.

CHAPTER 15

JESSICA

Every emotion known to man is currently coursing through my veins. So much so, I'm in a state of emotional overload and I can't stop these damn tears from running down my face.

I'm no longer the powerhouse, badass CEO that I've gotten used to being. Matthew has turned me into a sniffling hot mess, and I'm about to crumble into the pit of

despair.

I make it back to the blanket where we ate lunch and toss my head back to the sky. The light sprinkle of rain is picking up, and it's starting to soak into my shirt.

I don't care. Right now all I can think about is how good it felt for him to touch me again. It had been so long since I'd been touched by him that I almost came the second his finger brushed across my clit. I want more of him—all of him. My body aches for it.

I feel him behind me before his hand rests on my back. He's so close that I can feel his breath on my neck. "Jess, can we talk about what just happened?"

I drop my head into my hands and groan before I spin around and face him. "Like I said, I shouldn't have let you do that."

He steps closer and slips his arm around my waist. I involuntarily sink into him. I feel so betrayed by my body. No matter how many times I tell myself to resist him, it doesn't happen. My body is begging for more of his touch and does what it wants.

"I disagree." He leans in close to my ear and kisses my neck. "I think that was exactly what you needed."

"It doesn't matter what I needed." My voice is so weak, giving my words no weight, but I say them anyway. "We can't do that again."

"You can try to fight our connection all you want, but it doesn't change a thing. Our bodies, hearts, and souls will always be one."

Despite the truth behind his words, they still bring me so much pain. I squeeze my eyes closed and drop my head to his chest. His hand slowly runs up my back until

he's cupping my neck. It feels so damn good to be in his arms again, but also so fucking painful. I fight back my tears and swallow hard before I look up at him. His own eyes are glassy and for the first time since coming home, I can see this is equally as hard for him as it is for me. But that doesn't stop me from asking the one thing I need him to answer.

"If that's true, then why did you marry her?" My voice cracks, but I get it out despite my difficulties.

His hand on my neck stiffens, and he looks away from my gaze. "I didn't have a choice. She was pregnant."

I'd suspected that was the case ever since I found out his wife died in childbirth, but hearing him confirm it makes it hurt even worse than it did at the time I'd found out he was married.

I wiggle out of his embrace. I can't be this close to him while we have this conversation. "So you knocked up some girl and forgot all about me. Is that how it was?"

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“You know that’s not how it was.” He practically growls as he furrows his brows. The look in his eyes is so intense, I’m forced to look away. “I could never forget about you. Shit happens, and I stepped in it big time. I did what I thought was right. Besides, at the time I thought you had moved on.”

My head snaps back to him. “Whatever gave you that idea?”

He sighs and wipes the rain from his face. It’s raining harder now and whatever food we had left is now soaked. “When I came to your graduation for your MBA. I saw you walk out with David’s arm wrapped around you.”

“David is just a friend. He and Blaire were married long before I met either of them.”

“I know that now.” He snaps. “But you two looked cozy. Too cozy. I made an assumption.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and think back to that day. David and I walked together. He stood beside me throughout the ceremony. He was never one to shy away from hugs and affection. If Matthew saw his arm around me, he got the wrong idea. “You talked to David.”

“More like he talked to me. I guess he didn’t like the way I looked at him at the funeral. He went out of his way to set things straight.”

I nod because that sounds just like something David would do. “So, after that you started dating Emily. Why? To get back at me.”

“It wasn’t like that. She was the first woman I dated since you. She was the only woman I’d been with besides you. I thought I’d lost you.”

His admission surprises me. I’d assumed he’d been dating girls all through college. Especially since he was the one that broke up with me. “Did you love her?”

His eyes close and his shoulders sag. “She gave me Emmie. How could I not love her?” My throat tightens and my eyes well up with tears again. I expected him to say that, but it still stings. “Jess, I wasn’t in love with her. The only person I’ll ever be in love with is you.”

That last part should make me happy, but it doesn’t. He loves me, same as I love him. But our love wasn’t enough. He didn’t trust in me. If he had, he would’ve never assumed I’d ever be with anyone but him. I wipe my eyes and take a deep breath before meeting his wounded gaze.

“Jess.” He steps into me and laces his fingers with mine. “Talk to me, baby. Where does this leave us?”

I dig deep and find my strength. The past couple of weeks have been rough to say the least. I’m done crying, and I’m over feeling sorry for myself. I have no idea what the future holds or where I’ll end up. And that’s okay. I cup Matthew’s cheeks and lightly kiss his lips. His hands clench into fists at my waist and I feel his entire body tighten into a hard knot.

“This feels an awful lot like a goodbye,” he says.

“I don’t know what this is. All I know is you didn’t lose me until you married another woman.” My voice cracks, and I clear my throat. I refuse to cry again. “If only you’d trusted me enough to talk to me, then maybe none of this would’ve happened. But what’s done is done. Now you have a little girl who needs you. I can’t compete with

that.”

I press my lips to his one more time before I release him and walk away. I head for our horses, needing to put some distance between us so I can think. I untie Pippi and my foot slips when I try to hop into the saddle. I’ve been so absorbed in Matthew. I didn’t notice how hard it’s raining.

“Sorry, girl.” I run my hand down Pippi’s mane and whisper soothing words in her ear. “We’ll get you back and, in the stables, soon enough.”

I glance back at Matthew, and he still hasn’t made a move to leave. He has the same sorrowful expression he did the day I found out he was married. Seeing so much torment in his eyes brings that horrid memory that I’d worked so hard to bury back to the surface of my mind.

Driving up the familiar road leading to Matthew’s childhood home brought me a comfort I didn’t expect. Growing up as neighbors to the Langdons, I’d spent almost as much time here as I did at my own home. Rosie and Leo Landgon were like second parents to me.

I typically loved coming home from Seattle. There was no place on earth that made me happier than being on the vineyard, riding horses, and enjoying the fresh mountain air.

But nothing about this trip had been happy.

My parents were killed three days ago in a tragic car accident, leaving me alone with no other family than my Uncle Jimmy and my younger brother, Ryan. Ryan came home from college yesterday and he’s been nothing but a zombie. We both have. Our house didn’t feel like home anymore without Mom and Dad. The house was filled with so many memories and materialistic things that reminded me of my parents, but

now it felt like an empty shell.

I couldn't stay in the house for another second. After waiting all day for Matthew to come see me, I finally decided to go to him. I texted him last night to let him know I'd arrived, and he said he couldn't make it over then. He was working as a traveling vet right now. I understood his job took him away a lot, but I needed him, to be in his arms, and feel his skin next to mine. If anyone could help alleviate this pain clenching around my heart, it was him.

I pulled up outside his parents' house, my home away from home, and a calmness washed over me. I hadn't seen Rosie in a little over a year. My startup company was keeping me pretty busy and made it hard to come home for visits. Last holiday, my parents came to me because I couldn't get away from work.

Things were changing too much around here. Even the Langdon house wasn't the same since Leo passed away, and that was at least five years ago. But Rosie was a saint and the strength of this entire community. She pushed her pain aside and held her family together. I had no doubt she'd help me do the same thing now.

I stepped out of my rental car and headed toward the front porch. There was a young woman, about the same age as me, sitting in the swing drinking tea. I didn't recognize her as anyone from around here. Then again, it had been almost ten years since I moved away. Who knew how many new people moved to town while I was gone.

She sat her glass down and walked to the edge of the porch with a pleasant smile on her face. She was pretty with blond hair similar to the shade of my own.

"Hi, can I help you?" she asked.

I swallowed and struggled to not cry again. Just thinking about seeing Matthew had me all choked up. "I'm looking for Matt. Is he around?"

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

Her smile faded and she nodded. “He’s out in the barn unloading from a day's work. Should be done soon.”

There was something about the way her expression changed when I asked for Matthew that bothered me. My defenses immediately shot up and built a wall around me. “I don’t believe we’ve met.” I reached my hand out to offer her a shake. “I’m Jessica. I live next door.”

She took my hand, but I noticed a slight tremble in her grasp. “I’m Emily, Matt’s wife.”

I froze. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

The front door opened, and Adam came rushing out. He whispered something to Emily, and she let go of my hand before she went inside.

“Hey, Jessie Cat. How you hanging in there?” Adam wrapped his arms around me and held me close. His hug was so much more than a condolences hug. He held me like he was trying to protect me from the world of hurt that was about to bury me. But Adam had always been that with me. He was a lot older than me and had filled the role of protective older brother long before Matthew was adopted by the Langdons.

“Did she ... say wife?” The words stumbled out on a sob. Matthew couldn’t be married. He was supposed to marry me. This had to be a mistake.

“Dammit. He didn’t talk to you, did he?” Adam kissed the top of my head and tightened his arms around me. I shook my head and let myself fall into him as that

one question confirmed her words were true. “I’m gonna kill him.”

The world around me faded into darkness and a loud ringing filled my ears. I felt myself slipping out of Adam’s embrace despite his tight hold on me.

“Jessica.” I heard Matthew’s voice close by, but I didn’t have the strength to look up or respond. Adam said something, but I couldn’t make it out. Some angry words were exchanged, but my mind was a jumbled mess, and I couldn’t concentrate on what was actually being said.

The next thing I knew, Adam swept me into his arms and carried me to my car. My entire body was numb. I couldn’t walk right now if my life depended on it. He slipped me into the passenger seat and fastened my seat belt.

Just before Adam put the car in reverse to drive me home, I looked up and met Matthew’s tortured gaze. He looked just as miserable as I felt. But then he lifted his hat off his head and ran his fingers through his hair. I caught a glimpse of his wedding ring and my heart shattered into a million tiny pieces.

By the time I make it back to the barn, I’m soaking wet and freezing. I don’t see anyone around to ask which stall belongs to Pippi, so I tie her up outside one of the empty stalls until I find someone. At least I can still get the tack off her and dry her off.

I work quickly to wring my hair out and get the saddle off Pippi. Even with my old hat on, my head is soaked.

Once I have the saddle and blanket off and slung over the railing to dry, I hunt down some towels. I don’t make it more than two steps before Rosie walks in hunched underneath an umbrella holding a cooler.

“Hey, Jess.” She smiles and heads straight for the small office inside the barn. “I saw you come in and thought you might like some hot cocoa.”

I force a smile, even though smiling is the last thing I feel like doing right now. “Thanks. Hot cocoa would be great actually.”

She looks around the barn and back at me with a frown. “Where’s Matt?”

“He packed up the picnic stuff while I headed out. He should be here soon.”

She smiles and unpacks the cooler. A couple travel mugs, marshmallows, and something to eat.

“Is that your banana bread?” I glance over her shoulder with raised brows, this time my hopeful smile is real.

“It sure is. If I recall, it's your favorite.” Rosie hands me a piece and one of the travel mugs.

I take a bite and groan. “Oh, my God. So good.” I take another big bite. I didn’t eat all my lunch before things got intense with Matthew, and I’m hungry. “Still the best I’ve ever had.”

She pats my arm, her eyes watching me carefully. “I made it just for you.”

“Thanks.” I take a sip of the hot chocolate and let the warmth of it fill me up. “Any idea where I can find a towel to dry off Pippi? Poor girl is as wet as me.”

“We have some in the back. I’ll go get them. You finish that snack and drink your cocoa. You have to be cold.” She doesn’t wait for me to answer before she leaves the office and heads around the corner, opposite the main entrance.

I finish the banana bread and hold the travel mug close to my chest thankful for the small bit of warmth it provides. Rosie returns a few minutes later with an arm full of towels. “Here you go. This should be enough for you and Matt.”

“Thanks.” I sit the hot cocoa down and take a few of the towels. I head back out to Pippi and get to work drying her off. “Which stall is hers?”

Rosie nods and points to the one two doors down from where I’m standing. “Need any help with her?”

“Nah, I’ve got her taken care of. She’s a sweetheart.” I smile and run my hand down Pippi’s mane, and she nuzzles her nose into my chest.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“You always were good with horses.” Rosie steps up beside me with her own hot cocoa held close. “We’re all glad to have you back. You think you’ll stick around?”

My smile fades and I shrug. I thought I knew the answer to that, but now I’m not so sure. “There’s a lot to consider before I can make a decision like that. Between my business and the vineyard, I’ve got a lot to work out.”

“I imagine you do.” I can feel Rosie’s eyes on me, but I don’t lift my gaze to meet hers. Rosie can be a formidable woman, and I’m not ready to deal with what I know is on her mind. “I know Matt would be very happy to see you stay.”

And there it is. Rosie never was subtle with her thoughts on matters, especially when they involved her children. “Well, Matt and I have a lot more to work out than my work situation.”

I finish drying off Pippi and toss the towel to the side. Rosie hasn’t responded yet, but from the few glances I allow myself to make in her direction, she’s thinking hard about what to say next.

I start to untie Pippi’s bridle so I can lead her to her stall when Rosie’s hand rests on my arm, stopping me. “He never stopped loving you. You know that right?”

Tears immediately well up in my eyes, and I look away. I don’t want her to see how hard this is for me. I shake my head because I don’t know that. How could he love me and marry Emily?

“Jess.” Rosie’s arm reaches around me, and she turns me so I’m facing her. “I hated

the decision he made, and I always thought he made the wrong one. But I understood why he thought he had to marry Emily. He's struggled far more than anyone ever should to find his place in this world. It took him even longer to accept that he deserved the happiness he's been given. I know it doesn't fix anything, nor does it take away the pain living in your heart, but losing you is his biggest regret."

I nod and wipe the tears away that escape down my cheek. Before I get a chance to respond, Matthew rides in even more drenched than I did. When Rosie turns to greet him, I take the opportunity to clean up my face while I take Pippi to her stall.

I can hear them talking but I can't make out the words. I get Pippi locked up, give her one more pat on her neck and head backout. Rosie greets me with another smile while Matthew looks like he hasn't slept in a thousand years.

Rosie leans in for a brief hug before she says, "Don't forget your hot cocoa and come to the house to dry off before you catch cold. I'll leave you two to finish this up."

She turns to Matthew, pats his cheek, and smiles before opening her umbrella and heading back to the house. Matthew and I stare at each for a moment too long before I break away and start for the office. But he grabs my arm and stops me before I get past him.

"I didn't think I had a choice, Jess. After my father abandoned me and my mother died from a drug overdose, I swore I'd never walk away from a child of mine."

I place my hand on his chest and he visibly relaxes. I hate seeing him this afflicted over how our lives turned out. "I understand why you thought that's what you had to do. But that doesn't do anything to lessen my pain."

His eyes dart around the barn like he's struggling with where to look before he breathes in deeply. "Will you ever find a way to forgive me?"

“I don’t know.” I close my eyes and sigh. I recall what Adam told me after the funeral about love and forgiveness. My love for Matthew is strong. It’s so strong and runs so deep within me that I want to forgive him. I really do. But I’m terrified of opening myself up to more pain.

When I open my eyes, he’s watching me. He looks so haggard, like he’s in agony over what happened to us. “I’m trying, Matt. But it’s not easy for me. In the meantime, there is one thing we can do for each other.”

“Anything,” he sighs and drops his forehead to mine. “Just tell me what I can do, and I’ll do it.”

My mouth craves to kiss him again and with his lips mere inches from mine it makes me want him even more. I rotate my head sideways to avoid the inevitable. He fists my wet shirt in his hands and lets his head drop to my shoulder. In slow languid motions, he kisses his way to my neck. When his lips find my earlobe and he nibbles, I shudder. The way he’s kissing my neck and ear might beworse than if I let myself take his mouth again. I’m quickly losing all my strength and surrendering to this man.

Then he stops, and pulls back to look me in the eyes. He looks even more conflicted than a moment ago. “Sorry, I can’t resist you. You had something you wanted to say.”

I nod and swallow hard. I step out of his embrace and run my fingers through my hair. “I don’t want to fight anymore. Fighting with you is torture. It has to stop.”

A faint smile tugs at his lips. “I’m in complete agreement with that.”

“Good. Now finish up with your horse so we can head home. I need some time alone to think.”

I don't wait for him to respond. I head straight for the office to grab my hot cocoa and head to the house like Rosie suggested. I'm freezing and dry clothes sound really good right now.

CHAPTER 16

MATTHEW

I woke up early to make Jessica her favorite breakfast—cornmeal pancakes with strawberries. As rough as our Sunday ride was, I feel like she and I reached a turning point. If I don't keep the positive momentum moving forward, she'll revert to avoiding me. I can't let that happen.

“Can I mix it up?” Emmie looks up at me with bright eyes. She's more than eager to help me make Jessica happy. My little girl has taken to Jessica more than she's taken to anyone outside our family. It both pleases and terrifies me. If Jessica stays in Watercress Falls, then it'll be fine, even if things don't work out between us. I'll never deny my daughter a relationship with someone I trust. Emmie looks up to her like a role model, and she couldn't have picked a better one.

But if Jessica decides to go back to Seattle, my little girl will be crushed. She'll put on a strong front—she always does—but it'll be hard for her to accept.

I add the last of the dry ingredients to the bowl and sit it in front of Emmie. “Let me get the buttermilk, then you can stir.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

I ruffle her hair and she groans as I walk past her toward the refrigerator. She hates it when I do that to her. She says it makes her feel like a baby. But she's growing up way too fast. Hearing her say she's not a baby anymore triggers every one of my daddy instincts to argue otherwise.

I measure out the buttermilk and slowly pour it over the cornmeal mix while Emmie stirs. "Don't over stir. Remember we want some of those clumps."

"I won't." She swirls the wooden spoon in the bowl with a determined look on her face while I crack the eggs. She loves helping in the kitchen, and at this rate, she's going to be a better cook than me before she hits double digits.

I kiss the top of her head and walk back to the stove to check on the bacon. A few seconds later I hear Emmie squeal. When I turn around, she's got her arms wrapped around Jessica's waist. Jessica enthusiastically returns the hug and kisses her cheek. "What are you two up to in here? It smells wonderful."

"I asked Daddy what your favorite breakfast was, and he said cornmeal pancakes. So we're making you some." Jessica's eyes shift to mine, and I smile. That's not exactly how it happened, but I love Emmie for taking the credit, and therefore, the pressure off me.

"He's right. They are my favorite. And are those strawberries by the sink?" Jessica's eyes widen and her smile grows.

"Yep!" Emmie looks up at Jessica like she's searching for approval. "You love those too, right?"

“Oh, girl. You’re pulling hard on my heart this morning. Not much makes me happier than strawberries dipped in maple syrup.” Emmie’s smile grows wider than I’ve seen in a long time. Jessica ruffles her hair the same as I did a moment ago, but instead of groaning, Emmie leans into Jessica for a side hug. I chuckle and shake my head before checking on the bacon.

“See, Daddy? I told you strawberries and maple syrup belong together.” Emmie’s voice is firm, like she’s ready to argue her point until I concede. Jessica laughs as she grabs a mug from the cabinet and pours herself a cup of coffee.

She leans against the counter next to me, and pins me with a teasing smile. My entire body comes to life. “Yeah, Daddy. Please, tell me you haven’t been trying to convince this girl otherwise.”

Her teasing tone alone is enough to get my body worked up, but hearing her call me Daddy nearly did me in. It was always supposed to be her who bore our children and spent the rest of her life doing this with me and our kids.

Our eyes lock and from the way her eyes shift I think she realizes what she said and how it’s impacting me. She’s close enough that I can reach out and touch her, pull her into my arms, and kiss her. But dammit, I resist. I can’t do that in front of Emmie. It will only confuse her.

I clear my throat searching for something to say when Emmie pipes up. “The batter is ready. Can Jessica braid my hair?”

We both turn our eyes to Emmie, and at the same time I say, “As long as she wants to,” and Jessica says, “Sure, I’d love to.”

“Yay!” Emmie hops off the stool and runs out of the kitchen leaving us alone.

The air instantly thickens, and I feel the weight of awkwardness and desire all mixed into one as Jessica watches me. All I can think about is holding her and kissing her like I did yesterday by the lake. Based on her body language, I don't think she'd mind.

Deciding to take a different path, I ask, "Did you sleep well?"

She snorts. "No. You?"

I smile and shake my head. "Worst night of sleep in a long time."

Our eyes meet again and the heat I see in hers causes my heart rate to kick up like a stampede of wild stallions. Is she thinking the same thing I am? That if we spent the night in each other's arms, we both would have slept better.

"I got my brush and a couple hair ties." Emmie comes running back into the kitchen and wedges her body between us. She looks up at Jessica with so much adoration and excitement it makes my heart squeeze. Emmie hasn't been without female role models and support in her life, but seeing how she's responding to Jessica has made me realize it's not enough. Or at least, not what she deserves.

Jessica hugs her close, smiling down at her like doing Emmie's hair is the best gift she's ever received. God, I'm fucked.

I grab the bowl of batter and focus on breakfast rather than watching the girls I love the most bond. It's pure torture since one of them hasn't decided to forgive me for my past mistakes.

They whisper and giggle the entire time, and I can't hear a damn thing they're saying. It's driving me crazy. Whatever they're talking about, they both seem to be having a good time.

I try to keep my mind on cooking, but it's hard. Seeing them together like this is a dream come true. After Emily died, I'd hoped beyond hope that Jessica would come home and give me another chance. Now that she's here, and I see how much Emmie adores her, all I want is to keep her.

"Hello!" Momma calls from the front door.

"Still in the kitchen," I answer back. We just finished eating and Emmie is still hammering Jessica with a million questions about her experience in competitive jumping and riding. To Jessica's credit, she's handled it like a champ. I think she's enjoying this way more than any normal person should. Then again, Jessica is just as horse obsessed as Emmie.

I tilt Emmie's glass so I can see inside. "Drink the last of your juice before you go brush your teeth. I think Grandma plans to take you to the park today."

Emmie doesn't hesitate to do as I ask. She finishes her juice, hops off her stool, and runs out of the kitchen. I hear Momma let out a low oomph as Emmie probably runs into her for a big hug before running upstairs.

Momma steps into the kitchen, looks back and forth between Jessica and me, before her smile grows. She walks up to Jessica and gives her a hug "Well, don't you look happy this morning? It's good to finally see you smile."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

I look at Jessica, and Momma is right. Her smile this morning is radiating. I wish I could say it's because of me, but I expect it's Emmie that's given her that smile.

I don't know how it's possible, but Jessica's smile grows. "What can I say, Emmie's been lively this morning, asking me questions about jumping and riding." She pauses and waves her hand across the island. "Plus, I'm a sucker for cornmeal pancakes with strawberries. Who wouldn't smile after all this?"

Momma shifts her gaze to me and gives me a slight nod. "Well, good food and fun conversation is always a great way to start the day."

Her acknowledgment of my effort to earn Jessica's forgiveness—and one day her heart, again—makes me nervous. I don't want Jessica to think I'm trying too hard, or that my intentions aren't sincere. I wanted to do this for her even if she doesn't forgive me.

I get up to refill my coffee mug. "Anyone want more coffee?"

Jessica turns her smile to me. "Yes, please." Our eyes meet as I fill her mug. Her smile fades, and the joy in her eyes shifts to desire.

I clear my throat and turn to Momma. "How about you?"

"No, thank you. I'm good." Momma slides into the stool next to Jessica, seemingly unaware of the mood shift between us. "When do you have to go home, Jess?"

My body turns rigid at my momma's question. She's already been here for a couple

weeks. She seems to be working fine remotely, but I figure Jessica has to go back to Seattle at some point. She said she wants to keep the vineyard and stay, but she hasn't confirmed with certainty that she's moving back to Watercress Falls.

I watch her intently as she takes a deep breath and avoids looking in my direction. "I haven't decided, but I'll need to head back soon." Her eyes shift to mine, but she quickly looks down at her hands before she continues. "I don't want to sell any of the property, but if I'm not going to stay in Watercress Falls, it makes more sense to let them go. I still have a lot to think about."

Her response isn't exactly what I was hoping to hear, but it's way better than an outrightNo, I'm never coming back. Those are the absolute last words I want to hear from her.

"Well, dear." Momma pats her back before standing up. "I'm sure you'll figure it out. Just don't forget, no matter what you decide, this is always your home."

Jessica nods and her eyes gloss over. She doesn't get a chance to respond before Emmie comes barreling back into the kitchen excited to start her day with her grandma. She gives Jessica and me a hug goodbye before her and Momma head out.

"Did you get enough to eat?" I ask before I start clearing my dirty dishes.

"Yes, I'm stuffed. Everything was delicious." She stands and takes her own dishes to the sink. "Thanks for making this. I really enjoyed it."

I clear the rest of the dishes while she starts rinsing and loadingthe dishwasher. Once I have everything by the sink, I lean against the counter next to her. "So, you're going back to Seattle?"

Her chest rises and falls quickly. I don't miss how her hand shakes as she sets a plate

in the dishwasher, either. “I’ll have to at some point. I have a business to run.”

I drop my head into my hand and rub the bridge of my nose. The thought of losing her forever is agonizing. If that’s what happens, I have no one to blame but myself. I just wish I could explain all these feelings and emotions running through me in a way she’d understand. Like how I can’t breathe normally when she’s not around. I don’t know how I made it all those years without her, because now that she’s back, I need her next to me to feel calm and at peace.

She’s the first person I think about when I wake up and the last face I see before I fall asleep at night. She even makes an appearance in my nightly dreams. She holds my heart in her hand, and has the power to squeeze the life out of it or take complete ownership of it. She makes me want to be a better man, a better father. She illuminates the darkness and the thought of losing any of this is soul crushing.

Just hearing her say she has to go back has me spiraling further into the darkness. I feel like I’m losing the light she brings to my life with every passing second and she’s still right beside me.

Her hand slips around my face, and she pulls me toward her until I’m looking at her. “Hey, you all right? You look a little pale.”

I rest a hand over hers and loop my other arm around her waist, pulling her into my embrace. She gasps, leans into me, and rests her head into the crook of my neck. Her soft lips brush against my skin. She plants light kisses on my neck, down my jawline and then my chin.

And it’s the best fucking thing I’ve felt in years.

“Tell me what you’re thinking, Matt.” She cups both hands on my cheeks and forces me to look into her eyes. I drop my forehead to hers and clench my hands at her

waist. She feels so good, and it's driving me crazy. I need her more than I need air.

"I'm so—" I start to tell her I'm sorry again, but I stop myself. She doesn't need another apology. She needs my heart and soul. "Thevery idea of you leaving, even temporarily, is making it hard to breathe. I can't stand the—"

Her lips crash into mine—urgent, hungry, demanding. Her fingers slide around my head and tangle into my hair, tugging me closer to her. Her kiss catches me by surprise, but in the best way possible. I slip my hands around her waist and down her ass. Gripping her tight, I lift her into me, then slowly walk her to the counter opposite where we're standing.

Her arms tighten around me, and our kiss is so intense, it forces all the air from my lungs and I feel light-headed. I refuse to release her and take in more oxygen. I need this—I need her—more. It's overwhelming and comforting and terrifying all at once. She could break me with one wrong word.

I sit her on the counter and slowly slide my hands beneath her shirt, letting my hands span around her ribcage. My thumbs rest dangerously close to her nipples. I want to touch her everywhere—feel her bare skin against mine—and taste every inch of her until my senses only remember her.

She lets out a long heady moan. It's hot and makes me even harder than I already am for her. It's been years since I've had sex and having her in my kitchen like this is almost too much. If I don't regain some control, I'm going to come in my jeans.

"Matt," she whispers against my mouth, effectively pulling me out of my lust-filled trance. I break the kiss and drop my forehead to hers. We're both breathing heavily and struggling for air. "We can't keep doing this or else I'm never going to get my head on straight."

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“I’d apologize, but I’m not sorry about this one.” Thankfully, she laughs, making me smile.

She rests her hands on my chest and lightly kisses me before pulling away. “No more apologies. You’ve apologized enough, and honestly, it’s past time that I accept it. I still have a lot to work through, and I’m a long way away from truly forgiving you for everything. But I am trying.”

I nod and squeeze her tight against me. “Just tell me what to do, Jess, and I’ll do it.”

“Be patient.” There’s a nervousness in her eyes even though she smiles. “And don’t give up.”

A smile spreads across my face as I kiss her forehead. “I can do that. I’ll wait for you for however long this takes.”

CHAPTER 17

JESSICA

I park my rental outside The Wine Room and an overwhelming sense of belonging washes over me. Despite Ryan’s insistence that we sell the vineyard, the thought of letting this place go makes me nauseous. No matter what happens between Matthew and me, this is home.

If I stay, I have to sort out my feelings and decide what kind of future the two of us have. I can’t keep kissing him like this—leading him on—without first forgiving him.

It's not fair to either of us.

When we're together, and he's kissing me like I'm the only thing he needs to stay alive, I can't think straight. I lose all sense of reason and logic. I want to forgive him and try to make a go at a relationship, but my fear holds me back. He's hurt me so many times in the past, and if he does it again, I don't think I'll survive.

I drop my head to the steering wheel and groan. "You're such a chicken shit, Jess."

I'm letting my fear dictate my decisions. I've been doing it for years, and I don't know how to change.

I take a deep breath, grab my purse, and head inside. I'm not going to find the answers today, so I might as well meet with Nick and deal with the vineyard's business. Maybe once I have a status update, I'll be better equipped to make a decision about what to do with it.

My shoulders sag when I see Nick waiting for me in the back corner booth—the one where Matthew first kissed me.

"Hey Jessie Cat." Nick smiles and slides out to give me a hug. "It's about time you showed your face around here. I was starting to think you'd already given up on us."

"Nope, just super busy. Between the funeral and keeping my own business afloat, it's been a little much to maintain." We sit down, and he starts shuffling around some folders. I let out a deep breath and drop my head back on the seat. I'm exhausted and confused and extremely unfocused today. "Trust me, I would've much rather spent time here last week than deal with all the business meetings I had to sit through."

"Then why do you do it?" he asks.

“What do you mean?” I furrow my brows and frown. “It’s my business. I kinda have to keep things moving forward.”

“I get that, but you sound like you hate it.”

I sit up straight. Every defensive instinct in my body fights to come to the surface. “I don’t hate it. How could I hate something I created? I’ve poured my heart and soul into my company.”

Nick squeezes my hand. “I’m not trying to upset you, Jess. Just trying to understand why you do what you do. You don’t seem happy, and I don’t like that.”

I rub my eyes and sigh. He’s not wrong. I do hate it.

I’m not happy, and I haven’t been for a long time. I was so excited when my business first kicked off. Success was inevitable and fast. At first, I loved every second of it. But as time went on and more and more of my time was sucked into work, my happiness waned. I’ve been doing it for so long now, I don’t know how to do it anymore.

“I just want to see you happy.” Nick reaches around me and pulls me in for a side hug. “If you’re happy and want to sell, I understand. But before you make that decision, I hope you’ll at least spend some time on the vineyard again. This place is in your blood. You were meant to run it. I still believe that with all my heart.”

I sigh, no longer able to hold onto the lie of my false happiness. “I didn’t even realize how unhappy I am until I got here. But I don’t know how to fix it.”

He tightens his hold around my shoulder. “Jess, you’ve been here for two weeks. Is your company still running?”

I look up at him, confused. “Yeah.”

“Is it falling apart? About to crumble to the ground and cease to exist?”

“Well ... no.”

“And why is that?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

I narrow my eyes. “I see what you’re trying to do.”

“Well, am I right?” He smiles and waits for me to answer.

“I suppose. I have great people working for me. And someone I trust to keep the company moving forward if I’m not there.”

“Then what’s the problem? Sounds to me like you’re in the position to grab hold of your happiness and own it. All you have to do is decide to take it.”

“You’re right.” A lightness settles over me unlike anything I’ve felt in years. Could it really be that simple? It sure as hell doesn’t feel like it. “Why does it feel so complicated, though?”

“It’s only complicated if you make it that way.”

“But Matt and his daughter are living in my house. If I choose the vineyard, then I choose to stay in Watercress Falls. I can’t kick them out. It’s not fair to Emmie.”

“Oh. So Matt is what’s holding you back?” Nick smiles.

“Of course, he is. My decision impacts him greatly.”

“You do realize how much land you own, right? I know you love that house, but if you don’t want to make them move, you can build a new one. Hell, you could convert the back rooms behind us into a living space. Your options are limitless if you only open your eyes to see them.”

My eyes widen as I let his words sink in. I've been looking at this through a filtered lens and not seeing all the possibilities before me. If I stay, I don't have to live in my house. I just have to decide what's more important to me—hanging onto the house for the memories it holds or Emmie's happiness. "You're right. I wasn't thinking about it that way. Thanks."

"Anytime kiddo." He kisses the top of my head and picks up one of the folders on the table. "Now, what do you say we get down to business?"

I nod. For the first time in two weeks I feel like I might have some answers to all my questions. Nick's right, I don't have to be the one running the day-to-day operations of my company. I have no doubt David would be more than happy to step up and take over in my place. He'd do a fantastic job at it, too.

Hopefully, David will be fully on board with a drastic change in leadership.

My jaw drops when I pull up outside Adam's office. I knew he was a talented architect, but I've never actually seen any of his work. His office blends perfectly in with the mountain landscape. The way it flows with the natural curves and slopes makes it look like it belongs here. Even the stone used matches the rocky slope behind it. It's remarkable and just might be one of the most beautiful buildings I've ever seen.

As I'm getting out of my car, Adam steps outside. "Hey, Jessie Cat. I'm glad you called."

He pulls me in for a tight hug which I gladly return. "Thanks for seeing me on such short notice. I know you're busy."

"I am, but I'm never too busy for family." My smile fades and I drop my eyes to the ground. I know he didn't mean anything by it, but his remark about family makes me

sad. Because he should be family—my brother-in-law—but he’s not. He must sense my thoughts because he lifts my chin and smiles. “Hey, none of that. You’ve always been more like family, even before you and Matt started dating. Don’t ever think otherwise.”

“Thanks, that means a lot to me. Especially now that ...” My voice cracks, and I can’t get myself to finish that statement. My last remaining blood relative may be my brother, Ryan, but Adam is right. Family comes in all forms and the Langdons have always been more like family than friends.

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?” Adam opens the door to his office and waves me in. I’m grateful for his quick change of subject and steering it back to the reason I came in the first place.

“I wanted to talk to you about converting some of the space behind The Wine Room into living space, and maybe even designing a house on my property.”

He stops and turns to face me. “Does this mean you’re staying?”

I smile and twist my fingers together. I haven’t told anyone except Nick yet of my plans. I’m a little nervous about how Matthew is going to take it. “I am. I want to keep the vineyard. It’s always been my dream to run it. It’s time I start living for myself.”

He smiles and pulls me into a hug. “That’s great to hear. It’ll be good to have you back permanently.”

“Thanks. But I haven’t told Matt yet. Do you mind keeping this between us until I talk to him? This news should come from me.”

“Of course.” He releases me, and the joy in his eyes vanishes. “But why build a new

house? You already have one.”

I drop my head and sigh. “I can’t kick Matt and Emmie out. Not after getting to know Emmie. That’s her home now. I can’t break her heart by making them leave. Not when I have other options.”

Adam nods and pinches his lips together. He’s got that big brother look of disappointment in his eyes that says he doesn’t agree with my decision. “Adam, I can’t stay in that house with him. If I’m going to stay in Watercress Falls, I need my own space.”

“I get it, but the selfish side of me was hoping for a different outcome. Despite everything that’s happened, you and Matt belong together. But if your own space is what you need, I’m happy to help you out.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that. A lot has happened, and I’m not saying there’s no chance for Matt and me. But I’m too emotional to jump back into this thing with Matt too fast. My own space will help me think and work it all out.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“Okay.” He pats my shoulder and leads me toward his desk. He sits behind it and waves to the chair opposite him. “Tell me what you want, and I’ll squeeze it in.”

“I don’t need much for now. There are several offices and storage rooms behind The Wine Room. If we can convert some of those to living space—a bedroom, bathroom, and small living room—that would be great. I can use the bar’s kitchen, so I won’t need that.”

“All sounds doable.” Adam makes a few notes before he pulls out a calendar. “This shouldn’t take too long to do. What kind of time frame are you hoping for?”

“Well, I’ll have to head back to Seattle soon to take care of business and pack my apartment. I have no clue when I’ll leave or how long I’ll be gone. But it would be nice to at least have a bedroom when I get back.”

“I’ll see what I can do to make that happen. The bathroom will take the longest. It depends on the plumbing and how much piping we need to put in. But once I’m able to start, it should take no more than a month at most.”

“That sounds awesome. Thank you.”

“Of course.” He makes a few more notes before he clasps his hands together and looks up at me. “Do you have time to pick out what you want in the bathroom before you leave?”

“I trust you. Just get something nice that’s readily available. It’ll be a temporary home anyway.”

“You got it. That’ll make it go even faster. As soon as I have a start date, I’ll let you know.” We both stand and he walks me back out to the front. When we reach the exit, he holds the door open for me and sighs. “You know, he bought a ring for you.”

I gasp. “What? When?”

“Before he went to your last graduation. He saved up for months to buy an engagement ring for you. He planned on asking you to marry him after you walked. When he left here, he was so excited. We all were. Even your parents knew. He was very old fashioned about how he handled it. He asked your dad for permission. When he returned, he wasn’t the same. All he said was that you two weren’t getting married, ever. Whatever happened when he was in Seattle that weekend, it broke him. We tried to get him to talk about it, but he wouldn’t. Next thing we know, he’s dating Emily.”

Tears sting my eyes as I recall what Matthew said about that weekend. “He saw me with David and misunderstood our relationship. He thought I was dating him.”

“And you weren’t?”

“No. He’s always been a great friend and business partner, nothing else. He was even married then. We graduated together. Matthew saw me walk out with David’s arm around my shoulder. He jumped to conclusions. He didn’t bother asking me about him. I didn’t even know he saw that until he told me recently.”

Adam takes a deep breath and crosses his arms over his chest. “That makes sense. That was at a time when he still struggled with his self-worth. It was probably a blow to any progress he’d made.”

I shrug and struggle to keep my eyes dry. “Not much I can do about that now. What’s done is done.”

“I suppose, but that doesn’t mean it’s too late for you two.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” I pull Adam in for another hug. “Thanks for telling me this. I have no clue what to do with it, but it does make me feel a little better.”

“Good. I wasn’t sure if I should say anything. Maybe I’m being selfish, but I want to see you two together.”

We say our goodbyes and I head back to the house.

For the first time, I’m finally starting to see my own role in why Matthew and I didn’t work out. I should’ve been more open with him about my life in Seattle. I hid so much from him because I was afraid he’d think he wasn’t good enough for the life I was creating. Turns out, he thought that anyway, despite my efforts. If anything, my secrets only made it worse.

CHAPTER 18

MATTHEW

“Hey, Naomi, you in here?” I call into the small office attached to the barn. I just got back from a supply run to Kalispell and I need to talk to her. Naomi has been working as my veterinary assistant since I started the clinic. If it weren’t for her, my business would probably have failed a long time ago. She manages to keep me on track and new business coming in. Now, I need her to do her magic again, but this time to find us a new location.

“I’m out back.” I hear her voice yell from around the corner.

Leaving the office, I cut through the barn and out the back door.

Even though Jessica and I had a breakthrough recently, we haven't talked about her plans for the house. As much as I want to believe we're going to work this thing out, I need to be smart and prepare for the worst-case scenario.

"Hey," Naomi says as she brushes her hands off on her jeans. "Do you need help unloading the truck?"

"Nah, I've got that. I needed to talk to you about something else."

She must sense from my tone that what I'm about to ask her isn't the best news because her smile drops, and worry fills her eyes. "What's wrong?"

Page 51

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“Nothing, yet. But I think we need to be proactive. Jess still hasn’t agreed to sell me the house. And honestly, at this point I’m not sure I’d take it from her even if she said yes. It just doesn’t feel right. Doyou think you could start searching for an alternative location to run the clinic?”

Naomi eyes me cautiously before she speaks again. “No chance you two are going to work things out?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I’d like to, but I’ve made so many mistakes. Unless she can find a way to trust me again, chances are slim.”

This is the first time I’ve said those words out loud since Jessica returned. Now that they’re out, I want to take them back and forget I ever said something so awful.

“Can do, boss. But I don’t imagine I’ll have an easier time now finding a place ready with a house and a barn to use as a clinic. Not much has changed around here over the past couple years.”

“I know. If we have to, we can build a barn. I’m more financially sound than I was when I started. So, I don’t think our options are as limited as they were three years ago. Besides, it may not be necessary. Like I said, I think it's best we’re proactive, weigh all our options. I don’t want to be stuck without options if she decides to evict us.”

Naomi nods and I spin on my heels and walk away before she can say anything else. Having this conversation feels a little too much like an admission of failure where Jessica is concerned. But I have to be realistic and think about my business and my

child. No matter how much I want to let my heart rule all my decisions right now, I have to be smart.

And the smart thing to do is to be prepared for the worst possible outcome—losing Jessica forever.

It's late afternoon and blazing hot outside. I'm working in full sun, which doesn't help. The fencing on one side of the corral was rotted and needed to be replaced. It's hard work, but by the time I'm finished, I feel better. Sometimes all I need is some hard manual labor to work the stress out of me. And Lord knows, I've been dealing with my fair share of stress lately.

I wipe the sweat from my brow and gulp down some water. I only have about thirty more minutes of work and then I can call it a day.

I start packing up my tools when I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. I look up, and Jessica is walking toward me.

"Hey," I say. She looks like an angel floating toward me with the way the sun shines behind her. Her blond hair has a golden glow around it and her pale blue sundress flows around her legs in slow wisps that show off her sexy curves. She smiles and my heart stops. If I wasn't a sweaty mess, I'd pull her into my arms and kiss her senseless.

As she nears, her eyes rake down my body. The heat in her expression is evident, making me rethink my decision to keep my hands and lips to myself. I tossed my shirt hours ago because it's hot out here. I may be sweaty and dirty, but based on her reaction, I'm guessing Jessica likes the look of my bare chest.

"Hey." She clears her throat. "Sorry to interrupt, but I was hoping we could talk without little ears around to hear."

I nod, not sure if this is a good or bad conversation. She doesn't look upset, but if she doesn't want to risk Emmie overhearing it, it could be bad.

"You look busy, so if you want to tell me when would—"

"Now's fine." I point to the bench behind the barn. "I could use a break anyway."

I grab my water and lead the way. She sits down next to me and sighs. She doesn't look at me and fidgets with the skirt of her dress. She opens and closes her mouth at least three times but still doesn't speak. Whatever is on her mind, it's not easy for her to say.

I reach over and squeeze her hand. She shifts her eyes to mine, and I smile. "Just spit it out, Jess. Whatever it is, I'll deal with it."

She swallows hard and nods. "I talked to Adam a few days ago. He told me something about you, and I'd like to know if it's true."

"All right." I look away and my breathing increases. I can't imagine what Adam would tell her that would cause her to come here like this. "I'll be honest with you. Ask me whatever you want."

"That weekend of my graduation, the one where you saw me with David and assumed I was dating him."

She pauses, and I tense. I know where this is going. Adam had no right to tell her what I think she's about to ask me. He and I will have words later.

"Is it true you bought a ring?" she asks.

I drop her hand and push up from the bench. I never planned on her finding out about

that. This isn't a conversation I ever thought we'd have. But I told her I'd be honest, and I meant it. "Yes, I did. I saved every penny I'd made for two years to get it for you. I even asked your dad for your hand in marriage."

I turn around to face her. She's still sitting on the bench, watching me with sadness in her eyes.

"I waited in the hallway for you to exit the stage after your graduation. I planned on dropping to my knees as soon as you saw me. Your parents were waiting outside for us to come out together so we could celebrate."

"And when you saw me with David, you assumed I'd moved on."

"I did. My heart dropped out of my chest. I couldn't propose to you if you were happy with someone else. And trust me when I say you looked over-the-moon-happy."

"Of course, I was. I just graduated. It was a great reason to be happy."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“I know. You were so happy you didn’t even notice the look on your parents face when we walked outside. They were ready to congratulate us. Your dad took one look at me and knew something was wrong. It was the most awkward dinner I’ve ever sat through, and you didn’t notice any of it. That just made my assumption feel so much more real.”

She walks over to me and takes my hand. “I’m sorry. You must have thought me the most insensitive person ever.”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for. This was all my fault for jumping to conclusions. You were moving on with your dreams—a dream that I didn’t think had a place for me in it.”

She leans forward and lightly kisses me. “You were my dream, Matt. You were all I ever wanted. Sure, I love my business, but that’s just a job. I wanted you more.”

“Then why did you stop calling me?”

She shakes her head. “You’re the one who stopped calling me.”

“Only after you were always too busy to talk to me. We were always playing phone tag. You never answered, and then you never returned my call. When you didn’t come to my graduation, I finally accepted that I was right, and you were done with me.”

She squeezes her eyes closed and wrinkles her nose. “I had an investor meeting in New York the same day as your graduation. I knew if I missed it, I wouldn’t get another chance with them. God, I am so stupid and so sorry.”

“Stop apologizing. You did nothing wrong. I’m responsible for the damage from those years. I started dating Emily right after your graduation, and well, we know how that turned out.”

“Yeah, well, as much as that whole thing kills me, Emmie is pretty great. It’d be a shame if she weren’t here.”

I smile and squeeze her hand. “Thank you for that.”

She nods quickly and clears her throat. “You’re wrong about one thing, though. I do owe you an apology.”

“What could you possibly have to be sorry for? This is all on me.”

“No, it’s not. I purposefully never told you about my friends or business plans. I’d known David and Blaire for years and never once mentioned them to you. I never told you about my success because I was afraid it’d create a deeper wedge between us. I was afraid if you saw my life in Seattle, you’d use it against me as a reason why you didn’t belong in my world. It was dumb, but there you have it.”

I can’t help but chuckle at her logic because she’s right. I would’ve pulled away more to give her the space to grow.

She looks up at me with a nervous smile. “I guess we suck at communication, huh?”

“Yeah, I suppose.” I tug her closer and drop my forehead to hers. “Where does this leave us, now?”

“God, I wish I knew. I wish it were easier for me to let it all go. But maybe ... maybe we can ...”

She shakes her head and runs her hands up my chest. Her hands are cool against my hot skin, and her touch sends a shiver through my body. She feels so damn good that I can hardly stand to keep my hands to myself.

“What is it Jess? Just say it, please.”

She leans back and looks up at me, hope in her eyes. “Maybe we can start over. Date again and see where things go. I’ve decid—”

I don’t give her a chance to finish. I wrap my hand around her neck and kiss her. Hard, deep, completely. I don’t wait for her to decide to let me in, I plunge my tongue into her mouth and claim her like I’ve been wanting to since the day she came back into my life.

I’m sure whatever else she had to say is important, but I heard all I needed to hear. She’s willing to give us a chance, and I’ll take it.

I slow the kiss down and cup the sides of her neck with my hands. I want her so badly, but this isn’t the time or place. If I keep kissing her like that, I’m going to be so hard and turned on, I’ll come in my jeans.

“So, that’s a yes.” She smiles against my lips.

Pulling back, I grin. “Baby, that’s a hell yes.”

Her smile grows and she gives me another light kiss. “Any chance you can come out tonight?”

“I always meet my siblings and a few friends at The Wine Room on Thursday, but if you want to do something else, I can change my plans.”

She shakes her head. “No, that’s perfect. That’s where I was planning on asking you to meet me. I’m making an announcement tonight, and I’d like for you to be there.”

I search her eyes and all I see is happiness. Her lips tick up into a playful grin and I know. “Fuck, you’re moving back. Is that what you were going to say before I cut you off?”

She laughs. “Yes, but I rather enjoyed being cut off this time.”

I no longer care that I’m all sweaty and gross. I lift her into my arms and spin her around. We still have a lot to work through, but Jessica just made me the happiest man alive.

CHAPTER 19

JESSICA

Every nerve in my body is on high alert. My hands won’t stop shaking and I’ve tripped over my own feet a half a dozen times since I arrived.

I personally invited all my local friends to join me for tonight's tasting. Everyone who’s important to me is here. Adam and Joseph are sitting at a table with some of their closest friends and significant others, and Gracie and Leann are sitting at the bar in front of me. In fact, Gracie’s family, the entire Strong Clan—all ten of them—is here for this soon to be celebration where I announce I’m moving back home.

But my nerves have little to do with announcing my plans to stay in Watercress Falls. Instead, it has everything to do with the man that just walked through the front door.

Matthew has never looked better in his tight-fitting jeans and snug t-shirt. Even with a shirt on I can see every curve and ridge of the muscles on his arms, chest, and abs. Matthew always had a great body, but the years have definitely been kind to him. Seeing him earlier shirtless and all hot and sweaty had been the sexiest thing I’d seen in years. Maybe even ever.

He makes a beeline for me like a man on a mission. At least three people call his name to say hi, but he doesn't acknowledge any of them. It's as if I'm the only person in the room even though we're packed tonight.

He stops next to the bar in front of me and leans close. His bright green eyes darken as they rake down my body, leaving a trail of heat in their wake. My entire body feels like it's been licked by flames. "Baby, you look amazing. I really want to kiss you right now."

Feeling bold and so ready to take our relationship to the next level, I come back with, "What's stopping you?"

He lets out a low rumbling growl before he straightens and walks around the bar. He marches right for me, swoops me into his arms, and kisses me. It's hard at first, but as soon as I run my fingers around his neck and into the back of his hair, he melts into me, and the kiss softens.

I'm completely lost in him. Until he breaks the kiss and sits me back down on the ground, I don't hear all the whoops and cheers of support. When I glance around, all our friends are standing and clapping.

Joseph is the first to reach across the bar and slap Matthew on the back. "Well, it's about fucking time!"

More cheers erupt, and I bury my face in Matthew's chest to hide my embarrassment. While this is exactly what I wanted him to do when I practically dared him to kiss me, I didn't actually think he'd do it. He slips his hand under my chin and lifts my face to his. He kisses me again before he whispers in my ear. "Never be embarrassed, baby. When you know what you want, own it."

My face heats at his words, because he's right. I know what I want, and I want him. I

don't care who knows it. This may not have been how I planned on telling our friends and family we were giving our love another shot, but it works, and it makes me feel good.

I glance around the room, and all I see are smiles. Everyone is happy for us, just as they should be. My eyes meet Adam's, and his smile grows. He lifts his glass of wine and nods his approval. I still haven't fully learned to trust Matthew again, but I have forgiven him just like Adam said I needed to. He was right. My love for Matthew is stronger than the pain I've lived with over the years. That love helped me forgive him, and with time, he'll earn my trust again. I know it.

"So, is this why you invited us all out here?" Joseph stood with a smirk on his face. "To tell us you're back together."

I rest a hand on Matthew's chest and look up at him with a grin. "Not exactly." He takes my hand and squeezes it. I look back out at the crowd and smile. "My real announcement is to tell you all that I've decided not to sell the vineyard. I'm moving back to Watercress Falls permanently to run it myself."

More cheers erupted. Again, Joseph is the first person to raise his glass in a toast. "Thank God for that. At least now we don't have to worry about you selling to some weird Frenchman that'll come in here and mess up a good thing."

"Now why would a Frenchman mess it up?" I chuckle. Not that I had any intentions of selling the vineyard to a foreigner if selling had ever really been an option. "Aren't they supposed to be good at wine making?"

"Who knows?" Joseph barks back. "Regardless, we don't need them barging into our town and trying to steal all our women."

"Well, I don't know," Gracie pipes up. "After meeting my sister's French boyfriend, I

think the young ladies of Watercress Falls could use the variety.”

A darkness passes over Joe’s eyes before he smiles. My gaze shifts back and forth between them, and I can’t help but wonder if there’s more to Joseph’s protests. “Well, if you like snooty dicks, I guess we men can change our approach to flirting.”

Gracie snorts. “Joe, please. Your idea of flirting is a little wham bam, thank you ma’am. I think a Frenchman could teach you a thing or two.”

He growls before taking another drink of his wine. The room erupts in laughter again because everyone knows Joseph is about as romantic as a wilted flower. But he is a charmer, and from what I understand, he’s never had trouble picking up women.

I arrive at the house before Matthew does. We left at the same time, so I assume he had to pick up Emmie before coming home. Disappointment washes over me. I was hoping to have the house alone with him tonight.

I head to the kitchen to get a glass of water. I’m by no means drunk, but I’ve had enough wine that I need to rehydrate or else I’ll wake up with a headache. I hear the front door open and close, then the soft sound of footsteps heading toward me. Matthew stops at the kitchen entrance—alone—and leans against the door frame.

“No Emmie?” I ask.

He shakes his head and stares at me with so much heat I have to clench my thighs together. “She’s staying the night at Momma’s. She won’t be home until after work tomorrow.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

I nod and take a sip of my water. I'm both glad and disappointed that the center island separates us. Something tells me if it weren't here, Matthew would've already crossed the room and pressed me against the wall. As much as I want that, I'm nervous. It's been far too long since I've had sex and I don't want to disappoint him.

I sit my glass down and splay my fingers out on the island counter. It's an action I meant to relax me but it seems to have the opposite effect on him. A sexy low growl escapes him as he takes no more than four strides across the room and wraps his arms around me. His mouth is hot and heavy on mine. When his hands run down my spine and under my ass, I let out a garbled moan.

He lifts me up and sets me onto the island counter without breaking our kiss. He jerks me close to him and presses his hard cock into my center causing me to moan even louder. With his tall stature and long legs, he fits perfectly against me in this position.

"Matt." I manage to get out between breaths and the demanding swipes of his tongue. He doesn't slow his assault on my mouth. If anything, me saying his name intensifies our kiss. "Matt, please." I drop my head back and his mouth presses against my neck and down my chest. When he lightly licks along the line of my dress, I nearly come right then.

I grab his face and force him to look at me. His eyes meet mine and are instantly filled with worry. "What's wrong, baby? If you're not ready, we can stop."

"It's not that." I drop my forehead to his. "I want this. It's just ... It's been a long time since, you know ..."

His hand runs up my back and cups the back of my neck. He presses a gentle kiss on my lips. “It’s been a long time for me too. Not since, well.”

I nod because I know what he means. He doesn’t need to say her name. “But it's been even longer for me.”

“That’s okay. We can go slow or wait. It’s your call.” He rubs my back and kisses my neck.

“I don’t want to wait, but I need you to know I haven’t been with anyone else. Ever. Only you.”

His head shoots up and his hand tightens around my neck. “What? The last time we were together was like ... five, no, six years ago.”

I nod and drop my head to his chest. He wraps his arms around me and holds me tight while pressing soft kisses on my neck and along my jawline. “How is that possible? You’re such a kind, beautiful woman. All this time I’ve tortured myself with images of other men having you.”

“You’re the only man I’ve ever wanted. The only man I ever needed. And I need you now.” His mouth claims mine again, and I tremble at his fervent touch. His tongue slips between my lips and tangles with mine. He tastes like wine and chocolate and something else I can’t identify—something that is uniquely him.

I tug at his shirt, needing to feel his bare skin against my hands and my body. As soon as it’s untucked from his jeans, I slip my hands underneath and run them up his chest. He lets out a guttural growl when I squeeze his pecks. The sound is so hot and sexy my core clenches in anticipation of his touch.

He pulls back and looks at me with a fiery gaze so intense it steals my breath. In one

swift move, he rips his shirt over his head and tosses it aside. Then he tugs at the hem of my dress and shimmies it up my thighs, under my ass, and over my head.

The fire in his eyes deepen and is accompanied by something that looks a lot like admiration as he takes in my nearly naked body.

“You’re fucking gorgeous, Jess,” he says as his hands trail up my sides and cup my breasts. I suck in a harsh breath when his thumbs swirl around my nipples. Even through my bra, his touch sends a chill through me. He runs his hands behind me, unfastens my bra, and slips it off my shoulders. He’s hyper focused on my chest and his eyes widen like they’re the best thing he’s ever seen. “Fuck, I want to taste every inch of you.”

“Yes.” I involuntarily arch my back to him, and he doesn’t hesitate to answer my plea by sucking one of my nipples into his mouth. There’s no gentle easing me into his assault. He takes it into his mouth with ferocious intent that sends a spasm straight to my core.

I feel my body start to fall back, but he runs an arm around my waist and holds me tight. He releases my nipple and moves to the other, this time sucking and nibbling. His teeth feel like intense torture devices intent on making me come, and he hasn’t even touched methereyet.

He slowly eases me back on the counter, releasing my nipple and kissing his way down my stomach. His hands clamp around my hips and he gives me a tug until my ass is right at the edge.

He looks up at me with so much want and need in his eyes. I suck in a breath because I know that look. I love that look.

He smiles, and I know that means he plans on taking his time, savoring me the way

he did when we were younger. We rarely ever rushed sex, taking our time to explore each other and really learn what we each liked. He knows how much I love his tongue on me and he intends on giving me just that.

Hooking his fingers through my panties, he pulls them down my legs in a slow torturous motion. I groan in frustration, but secretly I love how slow he's taking this.

He sits down on one of the stools and lifts my legs, resting my feet on his shoulders. He takes me in, laid out before him completely bare, and groans out his pleasure. "Fuck, Jess. I can't wait to make you come on my mouth."

He runs one hand up my stomach and to my hardened peaks, while his other hand holds me open to him. He slowly kisses and nibbles his way up my leg while he pinches my nipples and squeezes my breasts. With each rake of his teeth across my thigh, jolt after jolt of lightning shoots to my core in anticipation of the arrival of his mouth.

I'm about to beg him for mercy when he finally runs his tongue up my center and brushes it across my clit. My back instantly arches, and I let out a barely discernible curse. He chuckles, and the vibration of his laugh sends another rush of sensations through my body.

"You like that?" I feel his grin against my bare sensitive flesh.

"You know I do." My response comes out breathy and lust-filled even though I'm trying to sound irritated. He laughs and licks me again, only this time he sucks on my clit causing me to cry out.

"How's that, baby?" He doesn't wait for me to respond and repeats the action. Again and again and again. With each stroke of his tongue and suck from his lips, I writhe more and more, close to completely losing control.

I splay my hands out beside me, desperate for something to grasp but find nothing but the smooth countertop. Matthew must sense my need because he reaches for my hands and laces his fingers with mine. “Hold onto me, baby. I’ve got you.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

And he does. He holds my hands tight while he licks and sucks and fucks me with his tongue. It's intense and hot, and when I come, my entire body arches off the counter and a string of unintelligible words and curses escape my lips.

His mouth remains on me until my orgasm subsides, and my body begins to still. Only then does he release my clit and kiss his way up my stomach. "Oh, my God, Matt. That was ...fuck."

He chuckles as he lightly kisses and nips at my skin, slowly moving up my chest until he reaches my neck. "And we're only getting started, baby." He presses his hard cock against my center and groans. Even through his jeans, I can feel how hard and excited he is for me. "I need to be inside you."

"Yes." I buck my hips up in response.

"Let's take this upstairs. I don't have a condom on me." He reaches for my hands, and I shake my head.

"No, I want you. Just you. Nothing between us." He freezes, his eyes widening.

"What are you saying?" He loops his hand around my neck and lifts me up for a kiss.

I cup his cheeks and hold him, so our eyes are level with each other. "I'm still on birth control to keep me regular. I want to feel you inside me. Just you."

"Fuck, Jess. You're going to be the death of me." He kisses me hard, plunging his tongue deep inside my mouth. This man takes my breath away, and it feels so fucking

good.

I make quick work of undoing his jeans and starting the process of shoving them down his hips. He releases me and I moan at the absence of his body, his heat.

“Don’t worry, baby. This will only take a second.” He strips his jeans and boxers off quickly. When I look up and see his hard cock bounce against his stomach, I gasp. I’d been with him so many times when we were young, and yet I don’t remember him being that thick and long.

I reach for him, needing to feel his silky, hard cock in my hand. When my hand wraps around him, he growls like a bear ready for the hunt. “Fuck, baby. I hope you’re ready for me.”

“Yes, past ready.” My gaze travels over his entire body. Every muscle is tight and hard. He’s stronger and more defined than he was when we were young. He’s all man now and my body aches to know him again, to learn how his lovemaking has matured. I tighten my hand around his cock and give it a tug.

He digs his hands into my hips and pulls me closer to him. I release him and lay back on the counter. His tip immediately finds my entrance like it’s a homing device and I’m its target. His tip nudges my entrance, but he doesn’t push inside me. “I hope you’re ready for this. I’m gonna fuck you hard. No mercy.”

“Oh God, plea—” My words are cut off when he slams fully inside me. All the air is pushed out of my chest like I’ve been sucker-punched. I pull in a sharp breath, and his eyes narrow on me as if asking if I’m okay. I nod and he slowly pulls out which equally steals my breath. He moves in and out of me in slow languid motions, each one more tortuous than the one before.

Then he slams inside me again and takes my mouth with his, consuming my cries of

pleasure. He fills me so completely, every inch of my body feels him, aches for him, needs only him.

He moves again, slowly at first, but then he picks up the pace. “Fuck, you feel so good. I’m trying to go slow, but I really don’t want to.”

“Then don’t.” I whisper against his neck. Apparently, that’s all the encouragement he needs because he pushes up to a standing position, pulling out of me. I moan at the loss of his body and cock buried deep inside me. He tugs me back to the edge of the counter and slowly pushes inside me.

“Reach your arms above you and grab hold of the edge of the counter.” I do as I’m told. As soon as I have a good grip, his hands dig into my hips, and he thrusts hard inside me. He shows me no mercy, just like he promised. His powerful thrusts are like flames scorching my body in pleasure and pain. He’s relentless and my body answers him in agonizing trembles of pleasure.

My body tightens around him and my release builds. He lets out a muddled curse, and his thrusts grow more frantic. Unbridled. I’m so close, but so is he. I can feel his cock harden more and more with each forceful plunge inside me.

“Come for me, baby. Now.” He presses his thumb against my clit as he pounds into me. My body obeys his command, and I come undone. He doesn’t last two more thrusts before he’s coming with me. Our bodies are completely in sync, and for the first time in years I feel whole again.

I feel whole again.

My emotions are in overdrive and take control of me once again. Tears sting my eyes, and a sob escapes me before I grab hold of it and swallow it deep inside me.

Matthew scoops me into his arms and cradles me against his chest. “Did I hurt you?”

I shake my head and take a deep breath before I look up at him. “It’s just, I’ve missed you so much.”

“I know, baby.” He holds his gaze on mine as he kisses me lightly. “I’ve missed you, too. More than you can possibly know.”

He picks me up as if I weigh nothing. With one arm under my ass and the other wrapped around my shoulders, he heads for the stairs. I cling to his neck, unsure how he’s holding onto me considering how sweaty and spent we both are, but he doesn’t waver once.

He heads toward his room and gently lays me on the bed. Pulling me flush against him, he cups my face and stares down at me with so much intensity it takes my breath away. “I know we still have a lot to work through. But I need you to understand, I will do whatever it takes to prove to you that I am worthy of you and your love. I love you. Always yours. Always mine.”

I nod because words escape me. He gently kisses me and rolls me over on my back. He nudges my legs open and settles between me. I let out a soft moan when I feel his excitement pressed against my thigh. I can’t believe he’s already hard for me again.

“Now that I’ve fucked you hard, I’m going to make love to you. Slow and easy. Okay?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

He slowly slides inside me, not waiting for me to answer. My body is still ultra-sensitive from my last orgasm and I instantly clench around him as he fills me completely.

“Matthew.” His name is no more than a whisper from my lips.

“Yeah, baby?” He slowly moves in and out of me, and he feels so damn good. As much as I love how he fucked me hard, there’s something magical about this slow appreciation of my body.

“I love you, too.”

“I know, baby. I know.” He kisses me lightly. First on my lips, then my cheeks, down my neck and to my chest. He spends the next hour slowly showing me just how deep his love for me runs with his dick, his hands, and his mouth. I lose count of how many times I come undone, but I know with certainty that he only came once more. The entire experience had been all for me.

CHAPTER 20

MATTHEW

Waking up with my arms wrapped around Jessica feels like a dream. I’ve longed to have her back in my life—and my bed—for years. Now that she’s finally here, I never want to let her go.

Her face is buried in my chest and her soft, sleepy breaths tickle my chest hairs in the

most delicious way imaginable. I give her a gentle squeeze and brush the hair from her face. She lets out a low moan that hits me right between the legs. I just opened my eyes, and my morning wood is already aching for a release.

Her hand trails across my chest then down my abs, stopping dangerously close to my cock. My arms tense around her as her fingers run little circles on the sensitive skin near my thigh. One of her fingers lightly brushes up my hard shaft and I suck in a breath. She instantly giggles.

“You’re awake?”

She lifts her head up and rests her chin on my chest so she can look at me. “Yep. I was so comfortable I didn’t want to move.”

Her hand wraps around me and gives me a tug. I growl before I kiss her forehead and hold her tighter. “And what about now?”

She swings her leg over mine and sits up so she’s straddling me. She’s still holding onto my cock, gently stroking it up and down. In the morning light, her naked body hovering over mine just might be the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen.

“Now ... I think I’m ready for a little ride. What do you say, cowboy?” Her sweet smile turns devious and my cock twitches in her hand.

My fingers dig into her hips and my growl turns positively feral. “Fuck, woman. Whatever you want. I’m yours to use.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” She pushes up on her knees and aligns my tip with her entrance. Moving at an agonizingly slow pace, she slides down on me. This time we both moan as she takes all of me in. She grinds her hips, giving them a little swirl, forcing my eyes closed. “Fuck, baby. You feel so damn good. Do that again I might

explode.”

She chuckles. “Go ahead. I like seeing you lose control.”

I growl, something she’s made me do often in the last twenty-four hours. “Not a fucking chance. You first. Always you first.”

I tighten my grip on her hips and slam up into her until she tosses her head back in pleasure. She lifts her arms to brush her hair out of her face and when she does, her slender body stretches out on top of me—every one of her curves on display. Her breasts bounce and I get a perfect view of my cock thrusting inside her. It’s almost my undoing. I force myself to think about anything else except how amazing she feels.

She slips her hand between us and starts rubbing her clit, and all thoughts are on her. Her mouth forms a little O, and I feel her body clench around mine. “That’s it baby. Come on my cock.”

I love seeing her let loose like this and give in to her needs. She always was uninhibited during sex, and I’m glad to see that hasn’t changed. A few more hard thrusts into her and she falls onto my chest, her release completely taking her. I chase after her, finally letting my own body go. It’s quick, hot, and fucking amazing.

We both lay there for a minute, catching our breath, before Jessica hops up and runs into the bathroom to clean up. When she returns, she curls into my side. She fits perfectly next to me like she’s always been there.

“Do you have a busy day today?” She looks up at me and grins.

“No, I need to go check on a horse that stayed overnight but other than that, my day is clear.”

“So,” she waggles her brows at me, her grin turning mischievous, “you can play hooky today?”

I flip her over onto her back and hover over her. I pepper light kisses around her face and down her neck. “What did you have in mind?”

A shiver runs through me as she drags her hands up my chest and over my shoulders. When her fingers weave into the hair on the back of my head, I groan my approval.

“If you don’t need to get Emmie anytime soon, I was thinking we could ride out to the lake. Spend a little time swimming and hiding out under the waterfall like old times.”

She captures my mouth before I have a chance to answer her. She kisses me fast and hard like she’s trying to lure me into her web so I can’t escape. What she may not fully understand is that I don’t want to escape her. She owns me. Completely.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

When she finally breaks the kiss, we're breathing heavily again. "Damn woman, you're killing me."

She laughs, securing even more ownership of my heart. "No, just trying to steal a day alone with you."

"I'd love nothing more." I kiss her again before hopping out of bed. "Let me go check on this horse, then I'll make us something for breakfast."

I tug on my jeans then sit on the edge of the bed to pull on my socks. She sits up on her knees and leans against my back. "I can make breakfast."

"Are you sure? I don't mind cooking if you want to wait."

"I can cook, Matt." She kisses the back of my neck, sending another shiver through me. "I still remember your favorites."

I pull her around so she's sitting on my lap. "All right. This shouldn't take me more than twenty minutes."

"Perfect. That's plenty of time for me to pull something together." She slips off my lap and grabs one of my button-down shirts thrown over the chair. My dick gets hard again just watching her put it on. She looks so damn sexy with the way my shirt hangs just past her ass, showing off her long shapely legs.

"You better hurry up and get before I pull you back down on this bed and we never leave this room."

She chuckles and hops out of my reach. With a slight shimmy, she shakes her ass at me. “What’s the matter there, cowboy? Seesomething you want?”

I growl and jump off the bed to grab her, but she runs out of the room squealing. By the time I reach the door, she’s halfway down the stairs, laughing the whole way. “Go ahead and run. I’ll catch you soon enough.”

I lean against the door frame, unable to hide my smile. God, I missed this with her. I hope like hell it’s a sign of more good things to come. Now that she’s back in my life, I can’t lose her again.

This might have been the longest twenty minutes of my life. I’m starving, both for sustenance and more of Jessica. I’m ready to devour whatever she made us for breakfast then take her back to bed.

I finish up with the wounded horse that arrived two days ago. She’s a lively mare, not fully broken. She’d gotten herself tangled in some barbed wire fencing and then took a tumble down a rocky hillside before the owners were able to get her free. She’s damn lucky she didn’t break anything. Just lots of deep cuts, bruises, and a nasty sprain that already seems better.

I update the file and leave a note for Naomi that she can be released today and that I’d be taking the rest of the day off. That’s something I haven’t done in a really long time. Even if I don’t have patients, there’s always stuff to do around here, but one day off won’t hurt. Plus, I need this time with Jessica.

I head into the mud room just off the back porch and kick off my boots. Jessica’s voice filters through the door, and I stiffen at the sound. She doesn’t sound happy.

“That makes no sense. Our second quarter numbers are solid, and this quarter is looking even better. Why do they care where I am?”

Her voice rises higher and higher with each word she speaks. Whoever she's talking to is not making her happy. I hate hearing her upset like this, and I want to rush in there and hold her close. But this sounds too important to distract her with my own selfish needs.

“Well, they don't get to make that decision. There's nothing in the company bylaws or articles of incorporation that dictates where I have to live. It's my company for fuck's sake.”

I cringed at her last words. She finally made the decision to stay, and now that's being threatened by someone in her company. The idea of her leaving, even temporarily, makes my stomach turn.

I step into the kitchen and lean against the wall opposite where she's standing. She's next to the stove with her back to me. Her back is ramrod straight and even underneath my too big shirt, I can see the tension in her shoulders.

“Since when does the board call emergency meetings? They're stepping out of line.” I can hear someone responding to her through the phone, but their voice is too muffled to make out the words. “Fuck, this is such bullshit.”

She tosses her hands in the air and spins around. Her eyes meet mine. Her anger wanes and is replaced with panic. She clearly wasn't expecting to see me standing here listening to her conversation. I can't tell if her shift in emotions is because I'm listening or the result of whatever the person on the line is saying. She lets out a long sigh, and her shoulders sag. “Fine. But this is happening on my terms, not theirs. You understand?”

She nods a few times before she continues, “Okay, I'll be there. Send me the itinerary when you have it ... You, too ... Bye.”

Her eyes are still trained on mine. Neither of us speaks for a few seconds until the silence finally becomes too much for me. “When do you leave?”

She drops her head, breaking eye contact.

“Today,” she whispers.

I huff out a deep breath, push off the wall, and walk toward her. “Why today?”

“My board called an emergency meeting for 8:00 am Monday to remove me from my position. I have to be there, and I need time to prepare.”

When I reach her, I place a finger under her chin and lift her face so she’s looking at me. “Can they even do that?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“No.” She leans into my hand and her shoulders relax a bit from my touch. “But they’re still gonna try.”

“If they can’t do it, then why are you rushing back?” She jerks her head back at my question and pushes back with a firm hand on my chest.

“It’s more than that.” Her voice is just as firm as her hand on my chest. “I’ve poured everything I’ve got into this company, and there’s no way in hell I’m going to let them, or anyone, attempt to destroy it. If I don’t go now, I’ll look weak. They may not be able to remove me from power, but they can certainly taint my reputation. And in business, reputation is everything.”

“Hey, hey, hey.” I wrap my arm around her waist and tug her closer to me. “Don’t pull away. Not now.”

She squirms in my arm until she breaks free and steps back, putting too much distance for my liking between us. “Then stop acting like I have a choice here.”

I sigh and lean against the counter. “I’m not. I’m just trying to understand what’s going on. You leaving today is a complete one-eighty from where we left things thirty minutes ago.”

Her expression softens and she leans against the counter next to me. “I know, and I’m sorry. I have to go.”

“I understand.” I did, and I didn’t. I know she’s worked hard for her career, but if she’s planning on staying in Watercress Falls, why is she running back so quickly

without including me in the decision? I thought we had a breakthrough and agreed to work on our relationship. Is this how it would always be? Her with one foot out the door, ready to run at the first sign of trouble? Maybe I'm not being fair to her right now, but her leaving scares the shit out of me. "I don't want you to go. If you leave, I'm afraid you might never come back."

"Matt." She spins so she's in front of me and wraps her arms around my waist. She presses a light kiss against my lips before she drops her chin to my chest. "I told you I plan on moving back, and I meant that. I just have to take care of business in Seattle. I will come back."

I nod and kiss the top of her head. I want to believe her. I really do. But she left once before and never came back. What's to stop her from making that same decision again? I hold her close and try like hell to push all the fear and negative thoughts out of my mind. I can't help but feel like a new wedge has just worked its way between us again.

I need her. More than she'll ever know.

CHAPTER 21

JESSICA

The morning sun shines brightly through my bedroom window. It's a view that used to always bring me joy, but not this morning. I'm too depressed to enjoy much of anything.

It's been almost twenty-four hours since I left Matthew and the warmth of his embrace. I already miss him so much it hurts.

I may miss him, but now that I'm not with him and constantly reminded of my

attraction to him, my mind is clear to think. Thinking isn't always a good thing for me. Especially where Matthew is concerned.

The past pain he caused me is way too close to the surface of my mind. And that pain boiling inside me has me terrified.

All I can think about is the pain I felt the day he broke up with me, or the day I found out he was married. There were lots of other bad days tossed into the mix, but those two days were by far the worst.

I'm trying really hard to focus on the good days instead. If I'm honest with myself, the good days far outweigh the bad. It's just that the bad has a way of grabbing hold and never loosening its grip.

I close my eyes and push pain out of my mind and pick my favorite days to focus on. I recall the day he kissed me for the first time, and told me that he'd marry me. That memory is strong in my mind and will never fade. The day we told both of our parents we were officially dating is another great memory. It always makes me smile when I think about how happy our parents were that we chose each other.

The best day of all is the day we gave ourselves to each other for the first time. We'd both been virgins and nervous. But it was special and something he and I had talked a lot about before we decided to do it. Despite the pain he later caused me, I regret none of it.

My body shook with nerves as I watched Matthew sneak around the back of my house and onto the back porch. My parents were gone. They went to support my brother at one of his out-of-town baseball games. They trusted me at home alone. I was eighteen and could be trusted, but what I was about to do made me feel guilty.

I wasn't throwing a party or anything like that. But I was inviting my boyfriend into

my bedroom.

Not that Matthew and I hadn't already done lots of stuff. We spent a lot of time alone by the creek and the lake. And during those times we touched each other a lot. But we hadn't yet had sex.

We talked about it often and both agreed it should be special. We didn't want to lose our virginity while hiding outside at one of our favorite spots. We both wanted to take our time and make love in a bed, even if that meant we had to wait.

Today, the wait was over.

I opened the back door before he had a chance to knock. As soon as he slipped inside, he wrapped his arms around me and took my breath away with a kiss so deep it reached my soul. When he broke the kiss, he dropped his forehead to mine and breathed in deeply.

"Do you want to watch a movie or something?" he asked.

I shook my head and took his hand in mine. "I don't want to wait another minute to be with you."

"Okay." His voice croaked and he let me lead him up the stairs and to my bedroom.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

I let go of his hand and he shut the door behind us. We both stared at each other with a nervousness I don't think either of us ever experienced with each other before.

"You sure you're ready to do this? Because I can wait." He took me into his arms and hugged me close. I loved that he was always thinking about me and my needs, but I was more than ready for all of him.

I looked up into his gentle eyes and smiled. "I'm ready."

He didn't hesitate to kiss me and slowly walked me back toward the bed. He stopped just shy of the edge and slipped his hand beneath my shirt. I gasped at the feel of his strong hands against my bare skin. He'd touched me like that so many times before, but now it felt so much more intimate and intense. The anticipation of what we were about to do had every nerve ending in my body on high alert.

He lifted my shirt over my head and tossed it aside. His hand lightly ran up my side and rested just below my breast. "I want to see all of you. With nothing between us."

I swallowed. Hard.

My nervous factor kicked into overdrive. We hadn't actually taken our clothes off around each other. At least not much of it. But if I was ready to give him all of me, then I should also be ready to let him see all of me, too.

I reached behind my back and unhooked my bra. The straps fell off my shoulders, revealing my generous breasts. His eyes widened as he took them in. His hand slowly inched up until he cupped a breast completely.

“So fucking beautiful.” His eyes shifted back to mine. “Can I kiss them?”

I nodded, and he dropped his mouth to my hardening nipple so fast I didn’t have time to prepare myself for the onslaught of feelings that rushed through me. At first his lips were light against my skin but then he sucked me into his mouth making me moan. My thighs clenched together, and I felt my excitement as my panties dampened.

He lifted his head and the look on his face was one of complete awe. “I want to see the rest of you.”

He stepped back and took his own shirt off. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a roll of condoms before he started undoing his jeans. I did the same and slid my pants down my legs, leaving me in nothing but my underwear.

He slipped his boxers off and stood before me completely naked. His erection stood hard and long against his stomach. I’d touched him plenty of times in the past, but I’d never actually seen it. Seeing him like this made my heart rate kick up and my breathing quicken.

He stepped closer to me and rested a hand on my lower back. “You okay?”

“Yeah.” I kissed his chest because I didn’t know what else to do. “I guess I’m just scared. I know it’ll hurt.”

He lifted my chin and kissed me lightly. “I hear there are things we can do to ease that pain. Make it so it doesn’t hurt as much. Do you trust me?”

“Completely.”

“Good. Now let me make you feel good.” He backed me up to the bed and slowly

laid us both out across it. The feel of his skin against mine put me at ease, but only a little. “I’m going to touch you first, okay?”

I nodded and he leaned over me and took my breasts into his mouth again as his hand slowly moved down my stomach and between my legs. My knees fell open as his finger slid between my folds and gently teased my entrance. He only gave me a little pressure before he pulled back and swirled his finger around my clit.

“That feels good,” I sighed, my breathing increasing.

He hummed against my skin and rolled over until he was on top of me. He increased the pace at which he kissed and licked and sucked on my breasts as he slowly slid his finger inside me. He moved his finger in and out of me a few times before he started to nudge a second finger in too. I gasped as my body stretched when his second joined the first.

He froze and looked up at me with concern on his face. “Is this, okay?”

“Yes. A little tight, but it doesn’t hurt.”

He kissed me before he started moving his fingers again. “I just want to make you feel good, baby. Let me know if anything hurts or doesn’t feel good.”

“I will.” He peppered kisses down my chin, neck, chest and kept going until he reached my thighs. I lifted myself up on my elbows in surprise. “What are you doing?”

He looked up at me just as he got settled between my legs. “Just relax, baby. I think you’ll like this, and I really want to do it.”

He pressed his lips against my inner thigh mere inches away from my center. I gasped

and fell back against the bed when his tongue swirled around my clit. “Oh, my God.”

“Good?” he asked, a hint of concern in his voice.

“Yes, very good.” He put his mouth on me again, this time licking from his fingers to my clit. He did it a few more times while pumping his fingers inside me. He’d made me come before with his fingers, but this was an entirely different experience. A much better experience.

The roughness of his tongue swirled around my clit again and then he sucked me into his mouth. My back arched and I cried out in pleasure as my body clenched around his fingers. It was intense and powerful and the best thing I’d ever felt in my entire life. When my body settled down, I glanced down at Matthew, and he was staring at me in awe.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“That was good, right?” He sounded unsure, making me giggle.

“That was amazing. We can totally do that again. That is if you didn’t mind doing it.”

A huge smile covered his face. “Are you kidding? I could do that to you all day long just to see and feel you come like that. But first—”

He pushed up on his knees and grabbed the condoms, ripping one off. “I really want to be inside you.”

“I want that, too.” I watched with rapt nervousness as he fitted himself with a condom. He looked so big—thick and hard—as his fingers rolled the condom into place.

He must have sensed my concern because he slowly slid his fingers between my legs again and kissed me lightly. “Don’t worry, baby. I’ll fit. And I’ll go nice and slow.”

“I know. I trust you.” He moved his fingers in and out of me until my core was wet and slick. Then he positioned his tip at my entrance and pushed. The pressure was intense, and he barely entered me before I sucked in a breath.

He stopped. When I looked up at him, his eyes were closed tight.

“You okay,” I asked.

“Yeah,” his voice was strained, “it’s just so tight. It’s kinda intense.”

He pushed inside me a little more and we both cried out. He pulled out slightly, and that one movement relieved some of the pressure, but then he pushed in again and tears filled my eyes. He stilled and kissed my tears away. "I'm hurting you."

It wasn't a question, but rather an acknowledgment of how this felt for me. "It's okay. I hear the pain only lasts a minute and then it's over. Just keep going."

I opened my legs wider for him and tried to relax my body. He didn't move though, so I slid my hands down to his ass and nudged him further inside me. He groaned as he slid all the way inside me, and I stopped breathing. The pressure of him in me was almost too much. At first it felt like I was being ripped apart but then I shivered as a different sensation washed over me. His cock hardened more inside me, stretching me but also hitting a part of me that no one else had ever touched.

He slowly moved in and out of me. It hurt at first, but after a couple movements, the pain subsided and was replaced by pleasure.

"Fuck, Jess. You feel too good. I'm going to come."

I lifted my hips to meet his thrust for thrust and welcomed his release into my body. I felt the moment his orgasm hit him as he grew and tensed inside me. He stilled and let out a low, sexy growl that made all the pain I felt worth it.

He collapsed on top of me, and I wrapped my arms and legs around him, holding him tight.

He pressed up on his arms and stared into my eyes. "If that's how you felt when I made you come then we're going to have so much fun."

I giggled and he kissed me hard, wiping the smile right off my face. And he was right. We did have a lot of fun. After we rested, we did it again only this time we both

came with him buried deep inside me.

Every time I think of my first time with Matthew, it makes me smile. It doesn't matter how bad my day has been, it will cheer me up. We may have been young, but we knew our love was real.

Even now, I know our love is real. Unfortunately, that doesn't change how scared I am for our future. We still have so much to work through before we're back in a good, safe place with our relationship.

The timing of my trip back to Seattle isn't the greatest. We had just agreed to date again and see where our relationship would go. Now I have this added stress with my business making me second guess everything. I feel trapped between two different lives that are both fighting for my full attention. The hardest part of all of it is that they're both important to me.

The beep from my coffee maker drags me out of my thoughts. I really need to get my head together if I hope to survive this board meeting without consequence.

I head to the kitchen and pour myself a cup of coffee. There's a knock on my door and it makes me jump. I feel silly because I know it's David. I expected him any minute so we could strategize how to address the board's concerns so I could head back to Watercress Falls.

I open the door and smile. "Hey, it's good to see you."

He pulls me in for a hug and sighs. "You, too. Ready to figure this thing out?"

"I am. I made a full pot of coffee and baked some scones." I lead the way to the kitchen where I've set up my laptop. "So, how bad is it?"

“Bad enough. It’s really just two board members making all the noise, but they’re swaying the minds of several others. We need to assure them that the company is still in good hands, and has the full attention of the president.”

“It's not really about me, specifically, but the attention of the president?” I ask, curious to know if I’m hearing him correctly. I hand him a cup of coffee and plate up a couple of scones.

“I think so, yes.” He takes a sip of his coffee before he continues. “We just have to convince them that you can do the job remotely without issue.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“Or ...” I pause, taking a moment to catch my breath, “we give them a new president.”

David shakes his head. “We’re not going to let them push you out. This is your company. It wouldn’t be where it is today without you and your vision.”

“I’m not suggesting we let them push me out.” I eye him carefully as he takes a bite of his scone. We’ve never talked about what would happen to the company if I ever decided to step down. Up until this moment, I don’t think either of us ever thought that was an option. “I’m suggesting we give them a new president.”

He chokes on his food and hits his chest a few times before he looks at me. “Who?”

He barks out his question like I’ve just suggested we kill a puppy. I can’t help but laugh. “This isn’t funny, Jess. No one else is qualified to run this company. How could you even entertain such an idea?”

“Because that’s not true. You’re qualified.”

“Me?” He furrows his brows and shakes his head.

“Yes, you.” I can’t help but laugh at his surprise. David has always been too modest about his contributions to this business. He’s just as invested in Flathead Apparel as I am. “You’ve been with me since the beginning. No one else knows this company better. It may have been my vision, but without you, it never would have become reality.”

“But ... I can’t take this from you. It’s your dream.”

“You’re not taking it from me.” I reach across the counter and squeeze his hand. “I’m willingly giving it to you.”

He stares at me in silence, his eyes wide and his jaw tense. He’s more surprised by this suggestion than I expected. I knew it would throw him off a bit, but he has to know he’s the most logical choice.

“Are you sure about this?”

I smile. “I’m positive. I want to be in Watercress Falls. I want to run the vineyard and it needs some serious attention. I don’t want to completely walk away from Flathead Apparel, but I want to reduce my role. I need to reduce my role. You in?”

He eyes me like I’ve spoken a foreign language and he has no idea what I’ve said. “Only if you’re one hundred percent certain this is what you want.”

“I’m one thousand percent certain of it.”

He smiles for the first time since we started talking. “Well, all right. Let’s get it done so we can get you back to where you really belong.”

“That sounds perfect.” I pull him in for a hug. “Thank you, David. There’s no one else I’d rather hand the reins to.”

We spend the rest of the morning planning our transition and how best to sell it to the board Monday morning. Once we have our plan in place, we start working out the details of moving my life to Watercress Falls. Permanently.

CHAPTER 22

MATTHEW

I take a long pull from my travel mug of coffee. It's way too early to be up, and I haven't slept worth shit since Jessica left two weeks ago. We've texted daily, and we've talked several times since she left.

I hate that she's so far away. It feels like she's slipping out of my grasp, and if I don't latch on soon, I'll lose her forever. I've asked her several times when she plans on returning. She's not given me a clear answer. Only that she's working on it but it could take up to three weeks.

I can't imagine how much work it takes to transfer leadership roles of a company like hers. I'm sure it's not easy. Plus, she's packing up her life. That takes time.

I'm trying not to worry, but it's hard.

Taking another sip of my coffee, I focus on the task at hand. I got an early call this morning from one of my clients that a pack of wolves attacked their herd. They lost one cow and have three others that are badly injured.

I finish loading up my medical supplies in the back of my truck when Joseph pulls in beside me. I called him right after I hung up with my client, asking if he could go with me. I'll need another set of hands for this one, but I can't call Naomi. She's got young kids at home to care for and last-minute early morning calls aren't easy for her. Joseph may not have medical training, but his instincts are spot on, and he's great with the animals.

"Hey, man. Thanks again for doing this," I say as he steps out of his truck.

He grunts before he turns around and gathers his coffee and hat out of his truck.

“Too early for you little bro?” I laugh. “After all these years on the ranch, I’d think these early mornings would be easy for you.”

“It’s not that,” he mumbles. “Stayed out too late last night at Stocks and Stables.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“Thought you knew better than that on a work night.”

“It hadn’t been the plan.” He yawns before taking a drink from his mug. “Georgie was being possessive last night, and I had to break up a fight.”

“Georgianne Lewis?” That woman has been hot after Joseph for years. She’s a nice girl from a nice family, and if Joseph would grow up, she’d make him a good wife.

“Yeah, that’s the one.” He shakes his head and sighs. “I never should have gotten mixed up with her. She wants more than I can give. Now I have to deal with it every time I go out.”

“Maybe it's time you settle down.” I look at him out of the corner of my eye to watch his expression. To my surprise, he doesn’t look defensive.

He rests his arms against the bed of the truck and looks right at me. “I would for the right woman.”

“Are you sure Georgie’s not it? She's a good girl.”

“She is, but she’s not the one for me. I’m not sure I’ll ever catch the one for me.”

I lean against the bed of the truck opposite Joseph and clasp my hands together. “You never know. I’m sure she’s out there somewhere.”

“Oh, she’s out there all right, just not in Watercress Falls. But she doesn’t want me.”

I rear my head back and narrow my eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means exactly what I just said.” He pins me with a stare that makes my heart ache. I’ve never seen Joseph look so defeated and sad.

“Did something happen?”

“Nah.” He takes another drink of his coffee and turns away from me. “I’m just being a jealous fool.”

“Jealous of who?”

“You and Adam. Don’t get me wrong, I’m happy for both of you. But I had come to accept that we were all going to grow old together. Alone, grouchy old men.”

I snort, mostly to stifle the laugh that wants to escape. “Be jealous of Adam all you want, but I’m a long way away from getting the girl.”

“What are you talking about? I thought you and Jess got back together.”

I spread my arms out to my side. “Do you see her here?”

“Not at the moment, but she’s coming back, right?”

I let out a deep breath and pinched the bridge of my nose. “I hope so. She says she is, but she can’t give me a return date. I feel like I’m losing her again.”

“Well, shit. Sorry bro.”

I wave off his concern. “It’s fine. I’m probably just being paranoid. Tell me more about your problem. What did you do to make the girl of your dreams not want you?”

And who the hell is she?"

He laughs and opens the truck door. "There's not enough alcohol in this county to get me to talk about that one."

He slips inside and shuts the door, leaving me with my mouth wide open. Aside from the girls he flirts with and occasionally hooks up with down at Stocks and Stables, I've never seen Joseph serious about anyone. This little tidbit of info has my head spinning.

I let out a low chuckle and grab my coffee. "Well, I'll be damned. Joe's got a girl."

Five exhausting hours later, we pull up outside the clinic. I groan when I see a truck with a horse trailer attached sitting in my parking space.

"What the fuck, man? I'm too exhausted for another emergency today."

Joseph slaps me on the back and laughs. "That's what working for yourself is like. Thought you'd be used to it by now."

"Yeah, well. Call me hopeful. I really just wanted to sit on the porch and drink a few beers after the morning we had."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

When we arrived, the three cows were in much worse shape than I hoped. We worked as quickly as we could to save them, but still lost one. The poor girl had already lost too much blood by the time we arrived. I had to perform surgery on another, and they both needed more stitches than I could count.

We hop out of the truck. Joseph comes to my side of the truck and helps me unload the medical supplies.

“Hey.” He nods his head in the direction behind me. When I turn around, Jessica is standing in the doorway of the barn next to Naomi.

A grin spreads across my face. The sight of her alone is enough to revive me and chase away the exhaustion from my morning.

Joseph chuckles and says, “Looks like you got the girl to me, bro.”

“Oh, shut it.” I elbow him as he walks by. All he does is snort and keep walking.

“Hey, Jessie Cat,” he says as we near the barn. “I’d hug you but as you can see ...” He holds his arms out to his side so she and Naomi could see the full effect of the morning we had.

“Oh, my God.” Jessica gasps and covers her mouth. “What in the hell happened to you two?”

Her eyes dart between us, widening more with each pass she takes. We’re both covered in blood and probably look like something that just stepped out of a horror

movie. When her gaze finally holds on mine, I answer her. “Wolf attack on some cows. It was bad, and involved surgery and lots of stitches.”

We stare at each other in silence for what feels like an eternity. I hear Joseph clear his throat next to me before he speaks. “Well, I’m gonna head home and shower. It’s good to have you back Jess.” He turns to me and smiles. “See you at Sunday dinner.”

I nod but don’t take my eyes off Jessica.

“I’m heading out, too.” Naomi says as she points toward her car. “The rest of your afternoon is clear.”

Within seconds, both of them are pulling out of the driveway, leaving me alone with Jessica.

“You came back.” I step toward her, stopping when I’m only inches away from her.

Her breath hitches and her throat bobs as she swallows. “I told you I would.”

“I know, but you’ve been so ... I don’t know, vague about your return date. You had me worried.”

Her shoulders sag. “I didn’t mean to worry you. I wanted to surprise you.” She looks around us and holds her hands up out to her side and smiles. “Surprise!”

Her action causes me to smile and shake my head. “God, I want to kiss you right now. But I need a shower.”

“That you do.” She cups my cheek, leans up, and kisses me, careful not to touch my blood covered clothes. When she pulls away, her eyes are filled with desire. “I’ve been driving for hours and could use a shower myself. What do you say we head

inside and take care of that?”

My jeans tighten at her suggestion, and my smile grows. “I can get down with that.” I look behind me at the truck in my spot. “Is that yours?”

“Yeah. Naomi helped me unload my horse. We put her in the empty stall in the back.”

I turn back to her and frown. “You drove here with your horse? Alone?”

“Well, yeah.” She chuckles. “I’m moving here and couldn’t very well leave her behind.”

“You should’ve told me. I would’ve flown out and drove back with you. That had to be hard by yourself.”

She pops her hip out and puts her hands on her hips. “I’m more than capable of pulling a trailer from Seattle to here. I’m not helpless.”

I growl at her sass. “Jesus woman, I’ve missed you.” I thread my fingers into her hair and tug her lips to mine. I take her mouth hard and fast. When I pull away, I smile at the pinkness in her lips and the way her eyes flutter open. “I know you’re capable. Hell, you can do any damn thing you put your mind to. That’s not the point. The point is you should’ve let me help you.”

“A little late for that now,” she says, breathless.

I release her and study the drunken expression in her eyes. It’s a look I’ll never tire of seeing on her. The look that says I’m all she needs and wants and desires. “Come on, let’s go see about that shower.”

I adjust the temperature of the shower until it's hot enough to soothe my aching muscles. I pull my shirt over my head and turn to toss it in the laundry basket by the door. Jessica is leaning on the door frame watching me with a heated gaze. I undo my jeans and shimmy out of them, leaving me in nothing but my boxers.

“Come here.” I wave her toward me, and she obeys. When she stops in front of me, I slip my hands beneath her shirt and lift it over her head. My eyes rake down her body and my cock responds instantly. “So beautiful.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

I slip my fingers around the button of her jeans and unsnap them with a twist. She pushes them down her legs along with her panties and kicks them aside. With one hand, she reaches behind her and unhooks her bra. My heart beats faster and my breath quickens at the sight of her naked body. “Did I mention you’re beautiful?”

She laughs and steps closer still. “You did.” She slips her hands into the waistband of my boxers and tugs them down. “But I like hearing you say it.”

I lift my feet, one at a time, so she can take them off me. Once we’re both naked, she takes my hand and leads me into the shower. As soon as the hot spray hits my skin, I sigh. “Damn, this feels good.”

With a grin, she grabs the bar of soap and a washcloth. “Let me clean you.”

She works slowly over my body, starting with my neck, arms, and chest. Then she turns me around and washes my back. When her hands make their way down my ass and legs, I shiver. “I think I’ve been showering wrong my entire life. I could get used to this.”

She laughs and rotates my position, so my back is facing the shower head. “You ain’t seen nothing yet, cowboy. I’m just getting started.”

She presses her mouth to mine as her hand holding the washcloth slides down my front and over my very hard cock. The roughness of the cloth causes me to suck in a breath, but when she drops to her knees and takes me in her mouth, I choke on my air.

“Fuck, Jess.” She chuckles with me in her mouth, and I nearly buckle over at the vibrations it creates. She wraps her arms around my legs, cups my ass, and presses me deeper inside her mouth. In gentle, unhurried movements she takes me in and out, licking along my shaft. Every few movements, she sucks me deep down her throat, making me moan. It’s torturous and amazingly gratifying at the same time.

She picks up the pace, sucking me harder. I try not to buck my hips and let her maintain all control, but it’s hard. This feels so fucking good, and I don’t want her to stop. But I also don’t want to come in her mouth.

I pull out of her hold and lift her into my arms. “Why did you do that?”

“Because I want to come inside you.” I growl and she wraps her legs around my waist as I press her against the shower wall. My cock finds her entrance without guidance and as soon as I have my footing, I slam inside her. The sudden sensation of me filling her has both of us crying out in pleasure. “I’m gonna fuck you so hard, baby.”

“Yes, please.” She breathes against my neck.

I slam into her over and over again, relentlessly fucking her while she screams my name. I don’t stop until we’re both spent and collapse on the floor of the shower, letting the hot spray of water soothe our aching bodies.

CHAPTER 23

JESSICA

The warmth that blanketed me all night is gone and the bed beside me is cold. Matthew is already up. I lift my arms over my head and let my legs stretch out across the mattress. I let out a long, deep yawn just as the bathroom door opens. A freshly

showered Matthew, with water slickened hair and skin, steps out with nothing but a towel around his waist.

My mouth waters at the sight of him. Droplets of water run down his chest, flowing over every ridge and curve of his chest and ab muscles. All I want to do is lick those droplets off his body. The hint of scruff he had yesterday is gone and his hair is a wet tousled mess. He looks so good. My body clenches at the memory of him inside me last night, and all I can think about is having him again.

“Good morning.” His voice is low and rough as he sits on the edge of the bed next to me.

“Morning.” I roll over and prop myself up with my elbow. “What time is it?”

“A little after six.” He leans over and kisses me on the forehead before he stands and slips his boxers on under his towel. “Emmie should be up soon. I figured I’d make us breakfast before I got to work. I have to go check on those cows from yesterday. How about you?”

He picked Emmie up after dinner last night. By the time he returned with her, she was asleep and still doesn’t know I’m back. Hesits back down and pulls me into his lap, hugging me close. “Run some errands in town and then head to the vineyard. That place needs a lot of improvements.”

Matthew furrows his brows. “Business is good, though. Right?”

“Yeah, it's been profitable so no worries there. But it's been years since any improvements or upgrades have been made. All the buildings need work. The Wine Room could use a facelift, inside and out. And I’ve been considering rebranding to bring the business into this decade. The business relies solely on local support and tourists. I’d like to expand that—join forces with Flathead Apparel. Our website is

shit and we have zero social media presence. With some improvements and changes, I think the profits could increase considerably.”

Matthew’s smile grows and he plants a soft kiss on my lips. “Sounds like your wheels have been turning.”

I shrug and nuzzle my head into the crook of his neck. “Yeah, I’ve been thinking of ideas ever since I arrived. Just needed to pull the trigger on a major life decision. Now that I’m staying, I’m ready to get to work on it.”

He squeezes me tighter and groans. “I really hate to let you go right now, but I’ve got to get moving. I have a lot of work to catch up on since I played hooky all afternoon yesterday.”

“Okay.” I look up at him with a grin. “But first a little something to remember me.” I run my fingers up the back of his neck and fist his hair. I pull his mouth to mine for a deep, hard kiss. When I run my tongue across his bottom lip, he groans and parts his mouth, taking control. By the time we break apart, we’re both breathless.

“Damn, woman.” He growls against my neck, and his fingers dig into my hips as he struggles to maintain control of his desire. “I’m gonna be walking around hard all day for you.”

I chuckle as I slip off his lap and he stands to adjust himself. “Oh, I think you’ll live. It just builds the anticipation of what’s to come later.”

He lets out a huff and another low growl. He must catch a hint of my bare breasts at the edge of the sheet I have wrapped around me because the heat in his eyes intensifies. “Fuck it. I can be late.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

He slips his boxers off, his cock hard against his stomach, and jumps back in bed. I squeal as he pulls me underneath him, spreads my legs, and slowly slides inside me. It's intense, quick, and fully satisfying. And I'd be more than happy spending every morning for the rest of my life just like this.

I pull up outside my family's attorney's office and throw the truck in park. I guess I should call him my attorney now since I'm taking on the responsibility of the vineyard, but I don't like the sound of that. I'm not a fan of Richard but there aren't many options around here. Watercress Falls is small, and if I want a new attorney, I'll have to look beyond this town.

For now, I'll deal with it. At least I'm confident Richard will do the things I ask. He may not like it and push for a different outcome, but in the end, he'll listen.

I open the door to his office and am immediately greeted by a young perky receptionist. "How can I help you?"

"Jessica Evans, here to see Richard." I smile in return and start to sit in one of the chairs in the waiting room when she speaks up.

"You can go on in." She points to the closed door behind her. "He's expecting you."

"Thanks." I nod and walk past her. I knock on the door and wait until I hear Richard call me in.

"Hi, Jessica. Glad you're finally ready to make some decisions about the property." He smiles but it doesn't feel genuine. Nothing with Richard ever feels genuine.

“I have, but I’m not sure they’re the decisions you’re hoping for.” I don’t bother beating around the bush and just tell him what I think. “I’m keeping the vineyard.”

His smile fades and he leans forward onto his elbows. He narrows his eyes and pinches his lips together until they disappear. He lets out a long breath before he speaks. “And how exactly do you plan on running a vineyard as large as this one from Seattle?”

“Well, that’s the thing.” I smile, refusing to let him intimidate me. “I’m not going back to Seattle.”

He straightens his back and furrows his brows. “What do you mean, you’re not going back?”

I chuckle which draws out more of a scowl on his face. “It means I’m moving home. I’m staying in Watercress Falls.”

“But why? Your life is in Seattle now.”

I shake my head and roll my eyes. “Well, now my life is here. Where it always should have been. Things change, Richard. This is my home. I love the vineyard, and I’ve always dreamed of running it someday. Granted, not quite under the current circumstances, but life doesn’t always go as planned. But I am here to stay.”

He huffs and runs his fingers through his hair before he shuffles some papers around on his desk. When he finds what he’s looking for, he scribbles a few notes then pins me with a stare. “What about the house?”

“Well, that’s a bit more complicated. I’d like—”

“Now, you just wait a minute. Jimmy had a deal in place with Matt. Denying him that

house is just cruel.”

“Will you relax and let me finish?” Remarkably, my voice remains calm. He sits back in his chair and has the audacity to look offended after how he just spoke to me. I knew this would be a difficult meeting, but he could at least let me talk before he goes off half-cocked. “I’m going to sell Matt the barn and land behind it. That way he’ll always have security in his business and have room to grow if he needs it.”

“He’ll be pleased to hear that. I’ll let him know he can stop looking for a new location to relocate to.”

“What?” My jaw drops and my palms turn sweaty. I feel a hint of betrayal sinking its claws into me again. Why didn’t he tell me this? “He’s planning on moving?”

“Well, he was. He couldn’t exactly risk losing his livelihood because you’re being selfish.”

My anger spikes. “Did he say that?”

Richard shrugs and makes a few more notes before he looks up at me. “In so many words, yes.” My expression must have given away the war of emotions swirling around inside me because he continues. “Don’t act so surprised. You waltz back into this town after being gone for nearly two decades and disrupt everyone’s lives. Matt has to put Emmie first. You must know that.”

“I do.” I shift my eyes away from his and stare out the window. Have I misread everything that’s been happening between Matthew and me? Richard may be a lot of things, but he’s not a liar. I can’t imagine that he’d be making any of this up. I thought Matthew wanted to make another go at things with me. But now I don’t know. A million doubts are running through my mind. Did he lie and betray me yet again? Maybe he’s just using me to get what he wants to keep his daughter happy.

“What about the house?” Richard asks. When I look back at him, he’s watching me like he’s oblivious to my current emotional state.

“The house is a bit more complicated.” I answer. I don’t elaborate as I stand. I have to get out of here and clear my head—make sense of everything he just told me.

“Complicated how?” He barks.

I turn my back and wipe my face clean of the tears I feel trying to escape my eyes. I let out a deep breath before I turn back to face him. “Complicated in that I thought I would be living there, too. But maybe I was wrong. Start with the barn and the land he uses for his clinic. I need to talk to Adam first about creating living space for me behind The Wine Room before I commit to selling the house.”

He says something else, but my mind has already shut down. I race out to my truck and peel out of the parking space like it’s on fire. I need to clear my head and give myself time to process what he just told me. I need to lose myself in something else. I head to the vineyard since there’s no way in hell I can go back to the house and risk seeing Matthew right now.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

I've been walking the rows of the vines all afternoon and am no closer to reconciling the Matthew I spent the night with, and the one Richard painted for me this morning. I've gone from flaming red mad to complete devastation and back again multiple times while walking. None of it makes sense.

Why would he tell me—beg me, actually—that he wanted a second chance and then say those things to Richard about me? His actions have been sincere and honest—heartfelt even. If all he wants is the house, he could've just talked to me about it instead of creating this facade where he made me believe he still loved me.

I'm so insecure in my relationship with Matthew that I'm letting Richard's words have too much of an effect on me. I know it, but I can't do anything to stop the spiral of negativity dragging me down.

He probably exaggerated his conversation with Matthew, but I doubt he was lying about him looking for a new location for his clinic. That seems perfectly plausible. What I don't understand is why Matthew didn't tell me he's looking to move himself? That seems like something we should talk about.

I turn the corner at the end of the row and head back in the direction I just came. I glance up at the setting sun and see someone walking toward me. As they get closer, I can tell it's Matthew. His body looks stiff, and he keeps fisting and unfisting his hands at his sides. He's unhappy about something.

My shoulders tense, and I take in a few deep breaths. I can't imagine what he has to be upset about. It's me he's been accused of talking ill about. I stop, cross my arms over my chest to hide the nervousness coursing through my veins, and wait until he

reaches me.

“What the hell, Jess?” He huffs as he comes to stop in front of me. “You decide to sell me the house and barn but don’t bother to discuss it with me? You wanna tell me what’s going on?”

I push my shoulders back. His harsh tone gives me the strength I need to hold my ground. “I thought that’s what you wanted.”

He steps closer and narrows his eyes. “I thought we agreed to work on our communication?”

“Me, too.” I poke him in the chest, causing him to lose his balance. He recovers quickly and steps into my space.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I throw my hands into the air. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe something about me being selfish by putting your livelihood at risk and forcing you to move. Why didn’t you tell me you were moving? That’s something you should’ve told me.”

His scowl drops and he takes a step back. “I’ve never said that about you. I’d never call you selfish.”

“Then why did Richa—” My mouth snaps shut, and my eyes widen. I spin around and drop my hands to my knees forcing myself to take slow even breaths. “Of course, I’m gonna fucking fire his ass.”

Matthew steps around me and grabs me by the shoulders. He lifts me up and forces me to look at him. “Don’t blame this on Richard. What’s your plan, Jess? If you’re selling me your house, where the hell do you plan to live?”

I push him away and take several steps back. My temper flares and I can't stop the next words from coming out. "If this is how you're going to act because Richard exaggerated the situation, then not with you."

His shoulder's drop and all the anger leaves his face. "So, it's true?"

"Is what true?"

"You asked Adam to create living space for you at The Wine Room. I thought you wanted to keep the house?"

"Does it matter? It's just a fucking house." I freeze at the words I just spoke. I love that house, always have. But saying those words are so freeing. "Oh, my God. Ryan's right. It's just a house. I don't need it to remember my parents." I laugh, maybe a little too hard considering the fight we're having. Matthew looks at me like I've lost my mind, and honestly, maybe I have. I push my shoulders back and smile. "Yes, Matt, I will sell you the house and the barn. I'll start packing my stuff and be out tomorrow. Clearly, we still can't communicate worth shit. I really don't know why we thought this could work."

I spin on my heels and walk away.

"Jess, stop." He runs in front of me and blocks my path. "You cannot blame this on me. There was nothing to communicate on my end. I stopped looking for a place to move as soon as we decided to give us another chance. You cannot begrudge me the opportunity to look for a secure home for my child and business before we even got back together. Maybe you should get your facts straight before you get all pissy and judge me."

Matthew turns around and barges off, leaving me standing alone in the middle of the vineyard. Tears prick my eyes, and my stomach feels nauseous.

What just happened?

How did everything go to hell so quickly? This morning I was ready to start my life over with him. I made plans to discuss co-owning the house together and creating more permanency in our relationship.

Now, I'm left heartbroken and alone. Again.

CHAPTER 24

MATTHEW

Islam the shot glass down on the bar. My eyes blur and my body sways on the chair.

“Another.” I nod at Parker, the bartender. He eyes me curiously before he shakes his head. He's new around here, and I don't know him well. But he seems like a stand-up guy. I'll continue to think that as long as he keeps feeding me drinks.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“I think you’ve about had enough, man.” Parker says, but he still pours the shot.

I pick it up and hold it out for a solo cheers. “Probably.” I toss it back, no longer feeling the burn from the whiskey.

Yeah, I’m drunk. I can’t remember the last time I drank this much.

I sit the glass down with a lot less force than the last time, silently hoping he cuts me off even though I want to drink more. I’m going to pay for this tomorrow. But right now I don’t give two shits. I want to drink so much I forget all about Jessica and the stupid fight we had earlier. Because it was the stupidest of stupid fights in the history of fights. I don’t even really know what we were yelling about. Nothing worth fighting over, that’s for sure.

So what, she didn’t tell me she was going to sell me the house. And why does it matter if I started looking for a new location to run my business before we got back together? Hell, she refused to sell me the house. What in the hell did she expect me to do? Squat forever like she didn’t say no.

Well, I fucked up good this time. I may have started that fight, but she sure as hell finished it.

I’m about to ask Parker for another drink when someone sits down next to me. I glance over to see Leann’s bright red hair framing her smiling face.

“Hey, big brother.” She pats my shoulder and chuckles. “What’s dragged your ass out on a work night?”

I drop my head in a slow nod and point at her. “I could ask you the shame ting.”

A cough overtakes her. She waves her hand in front of her face as if to ward off a horrible stench and winces. “I come out to dance with my girls all the time. But I don’t drink. Not like this at least.” She waves her hand in an up and down motion at me. “Why are you shitfaced? I don’t think I’ve ever seen you like this before.”

I drop my head, letting my forehead hit the bar. “I had a fight with Jesh.”

“Oh yeah, what’s new?” she laughs.

I lift my head and glare at her. “Snot funny. Sheesh mad.”

“What did you do this time?” Leann leans back in her chair and crosses her legs.

“Don’t know.” I hiccup and tap my fist into my chest. “Beshides, doesn’t matter. She’ll never trush me again.”

Leann rolls her eyes and sighs. “Jesus Christ, will you stop whining? You sound worse than a girl.”

“Don’t care. I love her.”

She snorts. “Have you told her that?”

“She knowsh.”

She leans forward so she’s eye level with me, a stern look on her face much like the one Momma gives us when we’re in for a lecture. “You sure about that. The way I see it is men think they explain adequately to women how they feel when in reality they don’t say shit. If you haven’t actually said the words I love you, then she doesn’t

believe you do. Especially after all the shit you've put her through."

I stare at my sister like she grew two heads. It couldn't possibly be that simple but what do I know. "Already told her I love her and everything 'snot fine."

She chuckles and slaps my shoulder. "I didn't say it would be, but it will certainly help. Might even get you laid."

Now, I wince. "Don't talk like that. You're my little shister."

"I'm also a grown ass woman. So get used to it."

I sigh and lean on my sister's shoulder. She wraps her arm around me for a side hug and it's the best thing I've felt all day. "I jush wan'er back, Leann. Tell me what to do."

"Grovel. Embarrassingly sweet and sickening cute groveling. She'll eat it up."

"Or she'll punch me."

She laughs. "Yeah, that's a possibility, too."

I eye my sister before looking around the bar. Gracie and a few other of her girlfriends are on the dance floor having a good time. Yet here she is talking to me. "Why'reyoushingle?" I ask instead of the question that was on the tip of my tongue. I wanted to ask her why she wasn't dancing with her friends.

She exchanges a few words with Parker that I don't catch before she looks at me with a fierceness in her eyes I've never seen. "That's a loaded question, Matt. Short answer, men are assholes."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“Yesh,” I nod, “Yesh, we are. You should schtay clear of us.”

Her eyes soften and she smiles. “Hopefully, not forever. One day I’d like to meet someone that catches my eye and keeps it. I don’t really want to live my life alone.”

“And you shouldn’t. You desherve a nice guy. No asssholes for you.”

“Assholes like you, or the garden variety scum that has no clue how to treat women?”

“Both. You desherve way better than the likesh of me.”

“Matt, don’t say that.” She squeezes my shoulder and gives me a sympathetic smile. “You’re one of the good ones. As soon as you start believing that you’ll win her back.”

“How you know that?”

“Because she loves you, you big dope.”

When I look into Leann’s eyes, I see nothing but hope and promise. It loosens the chain currently twisted around my heart just enough that her hope slips in and gives my heart a flutter. “Did she tell you that?”

“No, but she doesn’t have to say it. A fool could see all the love that woman carries for you.”

“Then what doesh that make me?” I narrow my eyes and give my sister my best

wounded look. It must have come out all wrong because she laughs.

“A blind fool, brother, a blind fool.” She pats my back and nods to Parker. They pass a secret conversation that has me sitting up straight. “Come on, let’s get you home. You’re gonna need as much sleep as this night can afford. You’re gonna have one hell of a hangover tomorrow.”

I look at Parker and he waves me off, silently telling me I’m good. Leann must have settled my tab. I’ll have to pay her back once my head is no longer fogged by whiskey and beer.

She tosses my arm over her shoulder, waves goodbye to her friends, and somehow manages to guide my drunk ass to her car.

The drive from Stocks and Stables to my house seems to go by in a flash. When Leann throws her car in park, and I shift my gaze to her. “I need to gesh Emmie.”

She chuckles. “Not tonight you don’t. She doesn’t need to see her dad fall apart like this.”

“But she’s sh shpecting me.”

She sighs and squeezes my hand. “Did you forget she’s sleeping over at Momma’s. All you need to worry about right now is getting inside, up those stairs, and into bed. Think you can handle that?”

I nod.

“Good, now let’s go.” She hops out of the car, runs around the front, and opens my door. It’s awkward, and I’m as clumsy and heavy as a loose boulder rolling down the mountainside, but Leann manages to get me out of the car and onto the front porch. I

dig in my pocket for my keys, but before I find them, the front door opens.

Jessica stands there in short sleep shorts and a lacy tank top. My eyes travel up the length of her legs and settle on the swell of her breasts. Her long blond hair is pulled around her neck to one side and rests just above her breast. The urge to pull her into my arms and kiss her like my life depends on it is strong.

“What’s going on?” she asks.

“Found this one at Stocks,” Leann answers. “He’s drunker than a skunk.”

I stumble as we walk through the door. Leann lets go of me, and I fall to the floor. I roll over on my back and groan.

“Just leave him,” I hear Jessica say. There are more words exchanged between them, but I can’t make them out. They’re whispering.

“What are you two talkin’ ‘bout o’er there?” I mumble.

Leann kicks my foot and laughs. “Just how much of a dumbass you are.” I look up at my sister and her grin is a mile wide. “Goodnight, bro. Good luck getting up those stairs.”

She gives Jessica a hug and I wish it were my arms wrapped around her. I glance behind Jessica and my heart drops when I see a pile of boxes in the front room. She did what she said she’d do and packed her things.

They exchange a few more words before Leann leaves. After Jessica locks up, she turns to me with her hands on her hips.

“Think you can stand?” she asks.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

I nod and push up until I'm sitting. It takes a lot more effort to get me to my feet, but with her help I manage. I stagger and fall into her. I didn't mean to but now that my body is against hers, I don't want to let go.

"Pleash, stay with me?" I whisper.

She sucks in a breath and turns rigid. "I can't. Not tonight."

I release her and stumble back until I fall into a seated position on the bottom step. I probably shouldn't have done that, because now that I'm down again, I might not make it back up until morning. I look up at her, and she's wearing a scowl with her arms crossed over her chest. "Will you e'er forgive me? And I mean, truly forgive me?"

She sighs and drops her arms. "I do forgive you."

I let my head fall to the side and hit the wall. "But I'll ne'er earn your trush again, will I?"

Her shoulders sag and she sits next to me on the bottom step. "I honestly don't know. But I meant it when I said I was trying."

"I can't change what I did, Jessh." I close my eyes because the room starts to spin. I should probably keep my mouth shut and wait until I'm sober for this conversation, but I can't seem to stop talking. "All I can do ish try to do right by you now. I can affect the preshent and the future, but I can't change the pasht. If I could, Lord knowsh I would. But you have to trusht me before thish can work."

She lets out a low breath. “Listen, I think we rushed into all this too fast. We clearly aren’t ready for any kind of relationship yet. Look at you. You rushed out and got wasted. Today proved we both still have way too much baggage.”

When I open my eyes and focus on her, my heart breaks. She looks so defeated and sad. I lift my hand and brush her hair behind her ear so I can see her face more clearly. She holds her gaze on mine and the look of sadness shifts to something more like disappointment and that makes me feel even worse. “Please don’t give up on me. I love you. Always have. I don’t know how yet, but I will earn your trust again. That’s a promise I won’t break.”

She clasps her hands together in front of her and tears well up in her eyes. She opens her mouth to speak but then closes it. The pain and anguish in her expression is too much, and all I seem to do is make everything worse.

I grab hold of the handrail and pull myself up. My body sways but I manage to remain standing. This entire interaction has sobered me some, but I’m still going to regret drinking this much come morning.

I turn to head up the stairs, taking each step slow. When I reach the top, I look over my shoulder. Jessica is still sitting on the bottom step staring at the empty space before her.

“Jessh.” At the sound of her name, her head snaps around and looks up at me. “Don’t let a stupid misunderstanding get in the way of us. All I need is one honest chance to prove to you that I deserve you.”

She just stares at me, her expression unreadable. I let out a long breath and turn toward my room. I shut the door behind me with more force than is required, but I don’t give a fuck. When my legs hit the edge of my bed, I let myself fall, face first, into my pillows.

As soon as my eyes close, sleep takes me.

CHAPTER 25

JESSICA

For the hundredth time since leaving the vineyard, another person passing by looks at me like I'm death walking. I haven't slept worth shit since Matthew came home drunk three nights ago. It didn't help that I've been sleeping on the small sofa in my father's office. I couldn't stay in the house any longer. Not until I sort out my emotions. Being close to him scrambles my brain, and I need a clear head.

My uncomfortable sleeping arrangements combined with restless thoughts about Matthew weren't exactly a recipe for a good night's rest. No amount of makeup would cover the dark circles under my eyes, so I didn't even bother. I guess I should have. Maybe then everyone would stop looking at me with cautious stares.

I'd been wandering the streets of Watercress Falls for about an hour now. I've walked up and down every sidewalk more than once and still can't get the fight we had out of my head.

It was a stupid misunderstanding. We both lost our tempers and said things we didn't mean. The hopeful romantic in me wants to run to him, throw myself in his arms, and say all is forgiven. But my rational, injured soul can't quite let myself believe in us.

We've proven time and time again that we suck at communication. If we can't communicate, then there's no hope for a relationship. Right? We didn't even make it a week before all our same problems surfaced and we were fighting. Maybe we should leave our love in the past. Tears prick my eyes at even thinking such a thing.

Tired of walking, I open the door to Sweet Cakes. The familiar ring of the bell

announces my arrival.

I head to the counter, thankful a young woman I don't know is manning the register. If Rachel were here, she'd ask me questions I'm not prepared to answer about my appearance. I order an espresso and strawberry Danish before opting for the open sofa over a table.

A few minutes later, the young girl calls my name and I get up to grab my order. I head back to the sofa and curl up in the corner, cupping my espresso in my hands. I let the steam from the top wash over my face. The heat feels good on my aching skin and relieves a bit of the tension from the puffiness under my eyes.

I take a sip and the bell rings again. When I look up, I'm greeted by Rosie's smiling face and Emmie's frowning face.

"Well, lucky us running into you here." Rosie's upbeat tone gives no indication she sees the sadness in my expression or the dark circles under my eyes. "I need to talk to Mrs. Kerns for a few minutes. Do you mind if Emmie sits with you?"

"Not at all. I'd love the company." I rotate so I'm sitting up on the sofa and pat the empty space beside. Emmie doesn't exactly look thrilled with the idea, so I add, "That is if she wants to sit with me."

Emmie shrugs and takes the seat. "I guess."

Page 70

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

Her voice doesn't sound very convincing, but Rosie doesn't seem to notice. Or if she does, she's choosing to ignore it. "Great. I shouldn't be too long. We just have to work out the details for this year's baking contest."

Rosie leaves us, and I watch Emmie carefully. She's not her normal bubbly self, and she refuses to look at me. "Do you want something to eat or drink? Maybe a hot cocoa?"

She shakes her head and drops back on the sofa.

"Do you want to talk about what's bothering you?"

She shakes her head again and follows that up with crossing her arms over her chest and sticking out her bottom lip. She's definitely upset about something and from the way she's acting, I'm thinking it has something to do with me.

I lean back into the sofa, copying her position. "All right, kiddo. Spill it."

She looks up at me with a scowl that makes her look so much like her daddy it takes my breath away. "You left without saying goodbye."

Her words are harsh, and even worse, true. I close my eyes and let my shoulders sag. I left so quickly that day, and I gave no consideration to how that would make anyone feel, not even Matthew. In retrospect, I should've taken the time to speak to those I care about.

"I'm sorry, Emmie. I had to leave quickly for work, but that's no excuse. I should've

talked to you before I left. Can you find it in your heart to forgive me?"

Her expression softens and her eyes gloss over. "You promised to take me riding, too. You never did."

I cringe at the sadness in her voice. As much as I dislike seeing that scowl, I prefer it over seeing her hurt like this. "You're right. I did. I'm a bad friend, and I shouldn't have done that."

"You don't like me anymore." Her tears escape and her shoulders shake.

I pull her into my arms and hug her close. I can't stand to see her upset like this, and hate that my sudden departure made her feel unwanted in any way. "No, no. I think you're awesome, Emmie. Why would you even think such a thing?"

Slowly, her shoulders still, and she lifts her eyes to mine. "You and Daddy had a fight. You're going to leave, aren't you?"

"Oh, sweetheart. Sometimes adults fight, but that has nothing to do with you."

"Can you fix it?"

I tighten my hold around her. This girl is way too perceptive. I can't imagine Matthew would talk in front of his daughter about what happened between us. "I wish I knew the answer to that one. But whatever happens between me and your dad, it won't affect the two of us. We can always be friends."

She nods but doesn't look convinced. "But Daddy's really sad now. I think he misses you."

Her words bring tears to my own eyes, forcing me to look away. I hate that the issues

between Matthew and me are impacting her. I don't know how to respond to her to make her feel better about the situation, so I opt with being honest about my feelings instead. "I'm sad, too."

She shrugs and gives me a small smile. "Then you should fix it."

Her simplistic outlook makes me smile. If only it were that easy. "I'll give that some thought. In the meantime, you know what would make me happy?"

She shakes her head.

"I brought my horse back with me, and she needs exercise. Will you go riding with me next week?"

She sits up and bounces in her seat. "Really?"

"Yep, we can go on Monday if your daddy says it's okay."

"He will. Yes, yes, yes!" She claps her hands before she throws herself into my arms and gives me a bear hug.

"Well, it's about time both you girls smiled." I look up to find Rosie standing next to us with a big grin on her face.

Emmie jumps up and hugs her grandma. "Jessica is going to take me riding on her horse on Monday if Daddy says it's okay."

"I think that's an excellent idea. You girls could use some bonding time." Rosie gives me a sympathetic nod of approval. She knows how hard this has been for me. "We'll let you get back to your day. Plus, we have more errands to run. If you're free, I'd love to see you for Sunday dinner."

“Thank you. I appreciate the offer.” She gives me a closed lip smile and nods. I can tell from the look in her eyes that she interpreted my answer as a no. She’s not wrong. Until Matthew and I work this out—if we work this out—there’s no way I can handle dinner with him and his family.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“Well, all right then,” she sighs. “We’ll see you later.”

We say our goodbyes, and I lean back into the corner of the sofa as they walk out the door. This isn’t at all how I imagined feeling when I made the decision to move back home. Three weeks ago I thought everything was finally working out the way I’d always dreamed it would. Now I feel like my life is in a worse place than it’s ever been.

Maybe moving back to Watercress Falls is a mistake.

Adam stares at me through narrow eyes as I sit down in the chair opposite his desk. It’s not the same concerned or fearful look I’ve been getting from everyone else. His gaze is filled with disappointment, maybe even disapproval.

I look away, no longer able to take the expression on his face. He sighs, and out of the corner of my eye, I see him lean forward and rest his elbows on his desk. “You’re really going to go through with this?”

I nod. “I can’t stay there.”

“Maybe you should give—”

I snap my head in his direction, fighting back the tears. “No. I’ve given this more consideration than I should have. I need my own space.”

He tosses his hands in the air. “All right. I can get started as soon as you’re ready.”

“I’m ready. The rooms to be renovated have already been cleared out. I’d appreciate it if you could get the bedroom done first so I don’t have to keep sleeping on the sofa.”

“That’s easy enough. Shouldn’t take but a few days to put down new flooring and paint. I can start tomorrow if that works.”

“Perfect.” I stand and turn toward the door, but I don’t make it two steps before he speaks again.

“Jessica. Can I say one last thing before you leave?”

I stop and drop my head. The last thing I want is more advice on how I should be handling my relationship with Matthew, but I turn around anyway. I actually want to know what Adam has to say.

“He’s not going to take your house from you.”

I snort. “Yes, he will. Emmie’s too important to him. He’ll do what’s best for her no matter how it impacts me.”

He stands and walks around his desk. He gently rests his hands on my shoulders and leans down until his eyes are level with mine. “That’s where you’re wrong. While he will always take Emmie’s best interest to heart, he won’t hurt others to keep her happy. Especially not you.”

“His past actions prove otherwise.”

“Stop living in the past.” His words are firm and force my back to straighten. “When are you going to forgive him for that?”

Anger shoots through me. “I did forgive him, just like you said. Fat lot of good that did me.”

“Bullshit. You may have said the words. But up here,” he thumps the side of my head with his finger, “You haven’t forgiven anything. Because if you did, you wouldn’t be letting a little miscommunication interfere with your relationship.”

“You don’t even know what happened.”

“The hell I don’t.” I retract even more at his harsh tone. Adam has always been gentle with me, and his sudden disciplinary tone is a surprise. If he’s trying to get my attention, it’s working. “I probably know you and my brother better than anyone else. You’re being a stubborn, temperamental fool. You’re more than earning your nickname right now. You’re letting your anger make all your decisions and he’s reverting into the recesses of his self-doubt. You both need to get your heads out of your asses and talk.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“Yes, it is.” He sighs in frustration and steps back. He runs his fingers through his hair before he relaxes. “Listen. You have every right to be upset and protect your heart. But so does he. There’s two sides to every relationship, and intentional or not, you’ve both done your fair share of hurting the other.”

I open my mouth to respond but shut it. He’s right. I can’t exactly place all the blame on Matthew. My decisions and actions have hurt him just as his hurt me. My resolve starts to weaken, but then I shake myself out of it. “No. It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t change anything. All we ever do is end up fighting again. I need to protect myself and my heart from further pain.”

I turn around and leave before he can say anything else. But I don’t make it out

before I hear him yell, “Every couple fights, Jessie Cat.”

I ignore him and keep going. I can't do what he's asking of me. Protecting my heart is my number one priority right now. Until I overcome the current pain attacking it, I can't risk introducing more.

I swat at my head again, but the annoying fly landing on my forehead won't let me sleep. I finally roll over on the couch and pull the blanket up over my face.

After leaving Adam's office I came straight back to The Wine Room and crashed on the couch. I don't know how long I've slept, but it was a hard, deep sleep accompanied by zero dreams about Matthew.

Page 72

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

Something hits my head in three light taps. I toss the blanket down and kick my legs straight. “What the hell?”

When I open my eyes, Gracie and Leann are standing over me.

“Hey beautiful.” Gracie smiles.

“Why are you here?” I growl. The last thing I want right now is company. I’m too exhausted for more conversation. All I want to do is sleep.

“Because you need friends right now.” Gracie grabs my hands and pulls me up to a standing position. “Plus, Adam called and said we better get over here before you do something really stupid like run back to Seattle.”

I roll my eyes and shake off her hands. As soon as I’m free, I grab my blanket and curl back underneath it.

“Oh, no you don’t.” This time it’s Leann that pulls the blanket off me. “We don’t have to talk about my stupid brother or your problems, but we’re having a girl’s night whether you like it or not.”

“I don’t want to go out,” I whine.

“We don’t have to.” Gracie shrugs. “We can stay right here and drink all your wine. I even brought my laptop and projector so we can watch sappy rom coms.”

I raise a brow at Gracie. “A projector?”

“Yep. We got it a while ago so we could watch movies outside during summer months. It’s cool. We can project the movie on the white wall opposite your couch.”

“Really?” I frown. “That sounds cool. Have you been doing that long?”

She shrugs. “Three or four years now. So what do you say? Girls’ night?”

“Fine.” I stomp my way over to the mini fridge and grab a bottle of water. “Did you bring food, too? I smell food.”

Leann holds up a bag of Chinese takeout and smiles. “We’re not stupid.”

“In that case, I’ll forgive you for waking me up.” I take a drink of my water before I sit it on the desk. “You get set up. I’ll go get the wine.”

“That’s my girl!” Gracie calls as I walk out to the cellar.

By the time I make it back to the cramped office, the food is laid out across the desk, the couch has been moved to the back wall, and my blanket is spread out in front of it. The opening credits to *Sweet Home Alabama* are projecting onto the white wall opposite the desk.

“Just in time.” Gracie takes one of the wine bottles I grabbed and uncorks it while I sit the glasses on the desk. “You grabbed my favorite.”

“I also grabbed the white that Leann likes, but it needs to chill.” I put it in the mini fridge. When I turn around, Gracie shoves a full wine glass in my face.

“Thanks,” I say, and take a sip. Gracie and Leann both pile Chinese food on their plates and take seats on the blanket. I’m too busy staring at the movie currently projecting onto my wall. “Do we have to watch this one?”

“Yes,” they both call out in unison.

I groan and grab my own plate of food. I’m not sure if I’m ready to lose myself in a movie about childhood sweethearts reuniting, fighting, and falling in love all over again. It hits a little too close to my own story with Matthew. Minus the marriage and child with another woman. Then again, the heroine almost married someone else.

Gracie smiles at me and pats the space between her and Leann. They both seem oblivious to the movie's correlation to my own situation. I smile in return and join them on the blanket.

True to their word, they never once bring up Matthew or my current living situation. We watch two movies, eat too much food, and drink too much wine. It’s exactly the kind of girl’s night I need to relax and take my mind off my problems. If only the morning would take an eternity to arrive so I can hibernate in this moment of almost-normalcy for a little while longer.

CHAPTER 26

MATTHEW

I stare at my phone for far too long before I finally open my contacts and pull up Jessica’s number. Momma all but begged me to invite her to Sunday dinner and so far, I’ve put it off. I haven’t talked to her in almost a week. She disappeared after my drunken night, and she hasn’t been back to the house. I don’t even know where she’s staying.

My finger hovers over the call button, hesitant to talk to her after the way we left things between us. I begged her for another chance. Her disappearance is all the answer I need. Calling her to invite her to a dinner I’m sure she’ll say no to feels a little too much like desperation.

But I promised my momma I'd do it, so I hit that button and hold my breath.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

After the fourth ring, I start to hang up, but then her voice comes over the line. “Hi, Matt.”

The way she says my name suggests she’s not exactly happy to hear from me. I swallow hard and press on. “Hey. Umm, I just wanted to call and ask you to join me and my family for Sunday dinner.”

She’s silent for a few minutes, then sighs. “Did your mom ask you to call me?”

“Yes,” I answer, deciding honesty is best. “She said she invited you but you didn’t give her an answer. She asked me to follow up. So, I am.”

I can hear the wheels spinning in her head even through the phone. Jessica always did overthink things, but this time I don’t blame her. I’d overthink any decision involving me, too. “It’s just dinner, Jess. I can pick you up or you can drive yourself.”

“Thanks, but,” her voice is shaky and unsure, “I think I’ll pass. Please tell your mom I appreciate the offer but tonight isn’t good for me.”

I nod like she can see me, but I just can’t seem to find the words. I knew she’d say no, but I’m consumed with disappointment anyway. I clear my throat and force myself to respond. “I understand. If you change your mind, dinner is at six.”

“Thanks. I better go.” I hate that she’s in such a hurry to get off the phone. A part of me had hoped she’d be glad I called but that’s clearly not the case.

“I miss you.” The words just spill out against my will.

I hear her suck in a breath. “Matt,” she pauses, “I miss you, too. But this is too ... Shit, I don’t know. I just need more time.”

She hangs up before I can respond. I let out a deep sigh and shove my phone in my back pocket. I didn’t expect much from her right now, but I’d hoped she would at least talk to me.

I head downstairs to find Emmie so we can leave. Might as well get this day over with. She’s sitting on the floor in front of the coffee table drawing in one of her notebooks. “Come on, Emmie. Let’s head over to Grandma’s house.”

“Okay, Daddy.” She hops up, jumps into my arms, and wraps her little arms around my neck. The unconditional love I get from this little girl causes my chest to tighten. I just hope she still loves me this much after today. Once I tell her and my entire family the bad news, I’m afraid I’m going to break her heart, too.

By the time I pull up in front of Momma’s house, everyone else is already there. When I walk inside, I only find Momma and Camille finishing up dinner in the kitchen. “Where is everyone?” I ask.

“Hey, Matt.” Momma stops what she’s doing and gives me a hug. “On the back porch.” She looks behind me and frowns. “No Jessica?”

I shake my head. “She said she couldn’t make it but asked that I thank you for the invite.”

“That girl is too stubborn for her own good.” She turns back to the oven and grabs a mitt. “Do you mind telling everyone dinner is ready?”

I nod and head outside. Within minutes, the food is on the table, and everyone is sitting. I sigh at the empty seat to my right. Momma had held out hope that Jessica

would come and set her a place. Seeing it empty is a reminder I don't want right now. Despite how hard I tried to make things right with Jessica, I still managed to screw up.

I clear my throat and take a drink of my beer, another one of Joseph's lagers. I might as well get this over with now. "I have something important to discuss tonight."

The room falls silent, and every eye turns to me. I glance down at Emmie and she's looking up at me with a hopeful gaze. Fuck, I hate myself for what I am about to do. "I'm really sorry, sweetheart, but I've gotta tell you something that's not going to make you happy."

Her face drops and tears immediately fill her eyes. "What is it, Daddy?"

"Remember how I said we were going to buy the house." She nods and a few tears escape her eyes. "Well, I'm afraid that's not going to happen now. We have to move."

"But," her lower lips trembles and her tears turn to waterworks, "You said it was ours forever."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, I was wrong."

"You ... You lied!" She jumps up out of her seat and runs out of the room.

I stand to go after her, but Leann raises her hand and stops me. "I got her. She needs to cry it out for a bit. Let me calm her down."

I nod and sit back down. The mix of emotions I see in my family only makes me feel worse. Momma looks like she's about to cry. Adam looks like he wants to strangle me. Joseph looks at me like I'm a dumbass. Camille and Sam simply look confused

like they don't know how they should feel. I think I prefer their response over everyone else.

"But you can't." Momma is the first one to speak. "You and Jess belong together."

"Unfortunately, you're wrong. It's past time I let her go. She deserves better."

"Donotstart with that bullshit again." Adam points his finger at me. "Momma's right. You two belong together."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“What the fuck am I supposed to do, Adam? She doesn’t want me.”

“Language, boys,” Momma scolds.

“You fight for her!” Adam slams his fist down on the table, causing everyone to flinch. He so rarely loses his temper, so when he does, it surprises us all. Camille rests her hand on his forearm, and he immediately calms. He closes his eyes and when he opens them again, he looks sad instead of angry. “What you two have is rare, and you’re both being stubborn.”

“I’m not being stubborn. Trust me, if she would have me, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. I threw everything out there for her, and she turned me down. She’ll never forgive me for the things I’ve done. I have to accept that and move on with my life.”

“But she said she forgave you. I hoped that meant you two could work this out.”

“When did you talk to Jess?”

“A couple days ago. She came by my office to discuss renovating some of the back rooms at The Wine Room into living space.”

I shake my head and groan. “Of course, she did.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Adam rears back like he’s offended.

“Nothing.” I wave him off. I don’t want to explain to my entire family how Jessica

and I can't seem to communicate. "You can tell her that's not necessary. By the end of this week, I'll be out of her house." I glance over at Momma. "Assuming you'll let Emmie and me stay here until I find a place to live."

Momma reaches over and squeezes my arm. "Of course, you can stay here. But Matthew, what about the clinic and everything you built?"

"I'm gonna have to move it, too." I take another sip of my beer and frown when my drink comes up empty. I really need more alcohol for this conversation. "I'll probably buy some land and build. I'm in a better position than I was three years ago so I can afford it now."

"I hear Old Man Tate is looking to sell some of his land," Sam says. It took months after Joseph hired him as the ranch manager for him to be comfortable at our Sunday dinners. But now he's just like one of the family.

Joseph punches him in the arm. "You're not helping, man."

"Ouch." Sam rubs his arm. "Why did you do that?"

"Thanks, Sam. I'll check that out." When I look back at Momma her worry only deepens. "Don't worry, I'll be fine."

"But you're my son. I'll always worry about you." The tears in her eyes break me. I reach out for her and pull her into a tight hug.

"Momma don't cry. I know this looks bad now, but it'll all work out. Emmie is young, and she'll forgive me. But Jess, she'll never find it in her heart to truly forgive me if I take her house. I don't have a choice."

She nods and leans back in her seat. She wipes her face dry but doesn't look

convinced that I'm right. I glance around the table, and everyone just stares at me like they don't know what else to say. What is there to say? I fucked up with Jessica and can't fix it. Time to move on.

"Listen, guys. I'm just trying to do the right thing. It's not easy because I really don't know what the right thing is. If you have a better suggestion, I'm all ears."

The room remains silent. I glance at each person around the table, and no one offers any help. I open my mouth to speak, but Momma beats me to it.

"Only you can answer that, sweetie. We can't tell you want to do. So, search your heart for the answer and do that."

I nod and give Momma a weak smile. "Well, that's what I did, and my heart tells me I can't take her house. So, if you all can spare some time this week, I could really use some help moving."

My brothers and Sam nod, but no one seems happy about it. Hell, I'm not happy about it. But it's what I have to do.

CHAPTER 27

JESSICA

The sound of light footsteps walking over gravel causes my entire body to stiffen. Even before turning around, I know it's not Matthew. My senses are too attuned to him. I know when he's near, even if I can't see him.

Caring for my horse this week has been a challenge. We never ran into each other, but he was near every day. I felt him. It disappointed me that I never saw him.

Every ounce of my being craves him, needs him. I can't stop my body's reaction to a potential run-in with him. But the stubborn voice whispering in my ear continues to tell me to be cautious.

I mostly want to crush that voice and put it to rest, but it has a strong hold on me. Too many years of living with it, I guess. That voice is the same one that has kept me sane for all these years. It's helped me focus and grow my business into what it is today. And it's the same voice that will guide me through this next phase of my life and create something wonderful with the vineyard.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

When Emmie catches sight of me, she breaks out into a run. I crouch down to her level and open my arms to catch her as she flies into me.

“Well, aren’t you a little ray of sunshine this morning.” I smile at her, and find it’s natural, not forced. I’m looking forward to spending the morning with her.

She giggles and squeezes me tight. Every small—in this case big—affection from this girl steals a little more of my heart. I lean back and brush a strand of her hair out of her face. “You ready to go riding with me?”

“Yep.” She turns to Rosie and grabs her pack. “Grandma packed us some snacks.”

Rosie pats Emmie on the top of her head and smiles. “Just a few things in case you girls get hungry. Come here, sweetie,” she opens her arms to Emmie, “give me a hug before I take off.”

Emmie crashes into Rosie like her offer of a hug is the greatest gift in the world. And I guess, it kind of is. A little more of my defenses soften when Rosie lets go of Emmie and pulls me into a similar hug. I welcome it. It’s been so long since I had this—the affection of a family—and I don’t want to lose it now that I have it back.

“I’ll leave you girls to it. When you get back, just bring her up to the house.” Rosie points at my parents’ house next to the barn. Or should I say, Matthew’s house. Once he signs the papers, this will no longer be my home.

“We’ll probably be out a couple hours, I’d say.” I tug at a strand of Emmie’s hair. “Maybe a little longer depending on how this little rider does.”

Emmie's smile grows and she claps her hands. "I can ride all day."

"All right then, let's go see what you're made of." We wave goodbye to Rosie before I turn to introduce Emmie to my horse.

"Emmie, this is Flight. She's very gentle and loves little girls." Emmie walks up to my mare and pets her shoulder because she's a little too short to reach her mane.

"She's beautiful," Emmie whispers.

When I first decided to get a horse in Seattle, it was Flight's reddish bay coat and deep brown mane and tail that first caught my attention. She's a gorgeous horse for sure, but her personality is what ultimately won me over. She's a sweetie with a giving, fun heart. She loves to play and snuggle, my favorite combination.

"Is she fast? Is that why you named her Flight?" Emmie asks.

"She is fast, but that's not what earned her that name. You see, your da—" I pause, stopping myself from finishing that sentence. Emmie doesn't need to hear what I was going to say about how her dad makes me feel, so I alter my words.

"It's symbolic really." I crouch down next to Emmie and squeeze her hand. "You know that feeling you get when something really amazing or great makes you feel like you're on top of the world." She nods, but I'm not sure she understands where I'm going. "Your insides feel light and free—like you could just take off and fly, because you feel so good."

Her eyes widen and a huge smile takes over her face. "Like how I feel when I'm on my pony. Or how Colt makes me feel safe and happy." She holds her snuggly stuffed horse to her chest and kisses it like it's the only thing in this world that will make her happy. In that moment, I know she understands.

“That’s exactly it.” I stand and nuzzle my face into Flight’s neck. “That’s why I named her Flight. As soon as I met this girl, I was overcome with that lightness and hope. I was ready to fly again—to love and dream. And every time I need to be reminded of what that freedom feels like, I come to my girl, and she fills my heart up with so much joy I have no choice but to fly high and free.”

“Wow.” Emmie’s mouth is open, and she looks up at me with so much reverence it’s intimidating. “I can’t wait until Daddy lets me have my own horse so I can name her something that nice, too.”

I chuckle, recalling how I was at her age. I drove my daddy nuts over wanting to ride horses. It was all I thought about until I met Matthew. He’s the only person who managed to compete for my affection.

“Come on. Let’s get going before the morning gets away from us.” I take her pack and attach it to the side saddle before my mind keeps wandering down these dangerous paths. “I’ll get you up in the saddle first, then I’ll swing in behind you, okay?”

She nods and holds her arms up so I can lift her. I get her situated and hop up behind her. Once we’re both secure in the saddle, I navigate Flight out of the barn and onto the path that leads to the creek.

“I thought we’d ride out to the creek, maybe I could share one of my favorite spots with you. Has your daddy ever taken you out there?”

She shakes her head. “He told me about it, but I’ve never seen it.”

I smile. “Good. I’m glad I get to share this spot with you first.”

She looks back at me with awe in her eyes. “Does this spot make you feel like you

can fly?”

I tap her nose with my finger. “It sure does.”

We ride at a slow pace, taking our time to navigate the narrow forest trail. It’s starting to get a little overgrown from years of limited traffic, but it would only take a few trips out to open it back up again. Emmie chats my ear off the entire way, telling me about her friends, her love for her stuffed horse Colt, and her dream of jumping just like I did when I was young.

The more she talks, the more of myself I see in her. I only met Emily that one time. It was brief enough that I have no reference of what she was like, but I can’t help but wonder if we shared a lot of similar qualities. I see too much of myself in Emmie for it not to be the case.

I shake the thought out of my head. It doesn’t matter if Emily and I shared similar qualities. She’s gone, and that’s Matthew’s past. I said I forgave him, now I need to truly do it.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

I suck in a breath and squeeze my eyes close. Shit, Adam's right.

I didn't want to believe him when he said it, but I keep living in the past instead of letting myself absorb the present and dream about the future. I can be such a stubborn fool sometimes. I snort as I recall Adam saying exactly that to me as well. That's something else I need to work on if there's any hope of me finding happiness in this small town.

I open my eyes, and the creek comes into view. I steer Flight toward the tree close to my favorite spot. When we reach it, I slide off, tie her to a branch, and help Emmie down. I grab the pack of snacks and take Emmie's hand. "Come on. Let's go sit in my most favorite spot in the entire world."

She giggles and skips as we make our way to my rock. "It's so pretty out here."

"It is, but that's not what I love best about this spot. It's so calming and peaceful. Anytime I was upset or just needed a breather, I'd come out here and this place would wash all my worries away. I think this creek has magical powers. The water flowing from the mountains rushes past and takes all of our troubles with it, leaving behind nothing but peaceful bliss."

Emmie's eyes widen and her little mouth falls open. She watches the water for a moment, then looks up at me. "I can feel it."

I smile. "Totally magical."

I open the pack full of snacks, and smile when I see brownies. "Your grandma knows

the way to my heart. She packed my favorite.” I pull out a brownie and hand one to Emmie.

“They’re my favorite, too.” I smile and pull out the bottles of water Rosie included as well.

We eat our brownies in silence and my mind wanders back to my childhood. I had so many great memories on this rock, most of them included Matthew. “You know, I met your daddy for the first time right here at this spot.”

“You did?” Emmie’s eyes light up.

I don’t know why I tell her that, but now that I brought it up, I keep talking. “Yep. We were twelve. He tried to steal my horse.”

Emmie laughs. “Did he get it?”

“Nope.” I grin. “He’d never ridden yet at that point, and well, I was an expert rider. All I had to do was whistle and my horse stopped. Your daddy went flying over my horse’s head and landed on his back.”

Emmie laughs even harder. Matthew’s a great rider now, but back then, he didn’t have a clue. “I wish I could see Daddy fall. Were you mad?”

“Furious. I almost punched him.”

“But didn’t you?”

I shake my head. “He looked like he was already hurting enough. More his pride than his body, I think. After that, we became best friends. We were inseparable until we headed off to college.”

Emmie sighs and leans into my side, winning over a little more of my heart. She's such a sweet kid. I hate that my problems with Matthew are making her life more difficult.

"I wish you were my mommy." Her words cause me to freeze.

"What?"

"I know I shouldn't think that. I had a mommy, but I never met her. She's not real to me." Emmie looks up at me with tears in hereyes. "But you're real, and I like you. And I know Daddy loves you. If you loved him back, you could be my mommy."

Something I don't recognize tightens around my heart. Panic is the first emotion to wash over me, but that's quickly squashed as I realize this little girl has been slowly weaseling her way into my life, and I don't mind one little bit.

When I look at her, I no longer see everything I lost. I see everything I could have if only I'd choose to trust Matthew again. I no longer feel pain, betrayal, and heartache when I look into Emmie's eyes. All I see is love and joy.

Something in my expression must upset Emmie because she lets her tears fall. "It's okay if you don't love my daddy."

I pull her into my arms and let my own tears fall. "It's not that. There's just ... a lot more to it than love."

She sniffs and wipes her eyes dry. "I know he was supposed to marry you. But then I came along and ruined everything."

I gasp. I grab her shoulders and turn her so she's looking at me. "Who told you that?"

The urge to murder someone for even thinking about saying something like that to Emmie consumes me. How dare anyone make this sweet little girl feel responsible for how my life turned out.

“No one. But I have ears, and I’m smart. I figured it out.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“Listen to me.” I rotate so I’m facing her. “You had absolutely nothing to do with why your dad and I broke up. Any pain between us, we caused ourselves. I don’t ever want you to question that. You hear me?” I stare at her until she nods in understanding. “And even if we never get back together, I still want us to be friends. You mean a lot to me.”

She nods but doesn’t look convinced. “Hey, tell me what you’re thinking. I can’t help make it better if you don’t talk to me.”

“He says we have to move. He said I’d get over it because I’m still young, and that he can’t take your house from you.”

I let out a low breath, drop my head into my hand, and rub my eyes. “I told him I’d sell him the house. I don’t want you to have to move.”

She shrugs. “He doesn’t care.” She looks up at me with so much sadness in her eyes. “Why can’t we all live together?”

“Come here.” I pull her onto my lap and hug her tight. “Give me a chance to fix this, okay? This isn’t what I want, please believe that.”

She nods and lets me hold her until her tears dry. Once she’s calm, we load up and head back to the house. All I can think about is finding Matthew and changing his mind. I can’t be responsible for breaking little Emmie’s heart.

Emmie runs inside before me, leaving the front door wide open. Matthew and Rosie are in the kitchen arguing, and Emmie runs into the middle of it before I can stop her.

I don't catch enough of the argument to know exactly what's being said, but I hear a few keywords that let me know the subject matter. Moving. House. Mistake.

"Daddy, I don't want to move." Emmie cries and I freeze at the doorway. I don't belong in the middle of this conversation. This is Matthew's family, not mine.

"Emmie, we talked about this. We can't stay." He sounds so exhausted. All I want to do is wrap my arms around him and tell him it'll be okay.

She stomps her little foot and balls her hands into fists at her side. "But she said we could stay. Why won't you listen to her?"

"Emmie, enough." His voice is firm, almost angry.

Emmie's shoulders sag in defeat. "I hate you, Daddy!"

She turns on her heels and runs past me. Matthew's eyes meet mine, just now realizing I'm standing here.

Rosie sighs and shakes her head. "Will you two please figure this out before you completely break my granddaughter? I'll go get her and take her home with me. I don't want to hear from either of you until this thing between you is resolved." She turns to Matthew and pins him with an angry stare. "Do you understand me?"

He gives her a single nod, then she rushes past me. Neither of us make a move until Rosie has Emmie in her car and is starting down the driveway.

Without a word, Matthew rushes past me and heads up the stairs. A few seconds later I hear a door shut. My shoulders slump as the reality that he's doing this for me washes over me. For the first time since we reached adulthood, Matthew is choosing me. Even over his own daughter's happiness. He's willing to break Emmie's heart to

give me what I always wanted—my home.

I can't let him do this.

I slowly ascend the stairs and make my way down the hallway to the closed door at the end. I rest my hand on the doorknob and hesitate. If I open this door, it means I'm choosing him. Am I ready for that? To let the past go and welcome whatever the future has to offer. Because once I open this door, there is no going back.

I take a deep breath, and whisper, "Yes. Yes, I am."

When I open the door, Matthew is sitting on the opposite side of the bed with his head in his hands. I make my way around the room and drop to my knees in front of him. He doesn't move or give any indication that he knows I'm here, but I notice a slight increase in his breathing.

I reach for his hands, and pull them away from his face. His eyes are red, and his cheeks are wet with tears. My heart breaks all over again. Matthew and I have shared so much over the years, but I've never seen him cry. Knowing these tears are for me creates a shift inside me not unlike an earthquake opening the ground and changing the landscape.

I wipe his tears away before I cup his face between my hands. "Matt, don't do this."

He covers one of my hands with his and slides the other around my neck. He pulls me to him. Every ounce of my being trembles, but I welcome his embrace. "I'm not living in this house another day without you."

His words are the final catalyst to completely break me apart. My entire world has been under constant pressure, just waiting for the moment an eruption so significant and powerful hits, that it changes everything. This is that moment. Every bad thing

that happened over the past fourteen years was nothing more than warning tremors, minor disruptions in the flow that was my life. Everything inside me tumbles around before it settles into a new place. A better place.

I lock my eyes on his and lightly brush my lips across his mouth. “Okay.”

His hand tightens around my neck and his eyes widen slightly. “Okay?” He repeats as a question.

I swallow hard, my nerves sending a lightness through my entire body that makes me feel like I’m about to fall. But Matthew removes his hand from mine and wraps his arm around my waist as if he knows. “I know we have a lot to work through. It’s going to be hard at times. But Emmie has stolen my heart.” His arm tightens around me, and he sucks in a breath. “And you,” I kiss him again. “You have always owned my heart.”

A sob escapes him, and more tears run down his cheeks. I pull him into my arms and hold him as close as I can. The quake inside me draws him in, takes all his pain and love and hope and combines it with my own. My own tears break free at the way this man is crumbling in my arms. We tumble together, letting it all go until our souls reunite as one. We hold each other, neither of us speaking, until our tears slow.

He lightly kisses my shoulder blade, then my neck, and upward until he finds my lips. It’s a slow, gentle kiss filled with so much love and intention. With every brush of his lips and light stroke of his tongue, he’s telling me how much he loves me. And for the first time in years, I welcome that love and the promise of the future it brings.

“I’m so sorry, I’ll nev—”

I rest my fingers on his lips. “No more sorries. From this moment on, we leave the past where it belongs, in the past. There is only today, and every tomorrow in our future. Got it?”

He nods, and takes my mouth with his in a hard, deep kiss. “I love you, Jessica. And I’ll earn every single tomorrow I spend with you. I’m never letting you go again.”

My breath catches and my heart flutters. “I love you, too. Always yours. Always mine.”

He presses his lips to mine with a smile. “Always, baby. Always.”

CHAPTER 28

MATTHEW

Jessica’s soft breath brushing across my chest puts a smile on my tired face. Despite how late we stayed up last night, my body still wakes up before sunrise. Lack of sleep isn’t enough to break these old patterns established since I was a teenager working the ranch with Dad.

Honestly, I don’t mind. I may spend the day yawning, but these few moments I get to watch her sleep in my arms are totally worth it.

It’s been three weeks since I thought my entire world was crashing down around me

with no indication of recovery. And it's been three weeks since Jessica swooped in and saved me. Her forgiveness is the best gift she's ever given me. I still work every day to earn her trust. She's starting to relax, and give it to me more freely, but I can still see the hesitation in her at times. That's okay, though. She's mine, and that's all that matters.

I stretch forward and kiss the top of her head. She lets out a soft moan and spreads her hand out on my chest. My dick immediately hardens.

Her soft lips brush against my chest, delivering light kisses. Her hand slowly slides down to my stomach, bringing out a smile. "Did I wake you?"

She nods and shifts her sleepy eyes to mine. "But that's okay."

She wraps her hand around my dick and gives it a squeeze. "Fuck, woman. Do you see what you do to me?"

She chuckles and gives me another tug. "You were already like this before I woke up, so don't blame me."

I roll her over onto her back and settle between her legs, pressing my arousal against her thigh. She looks up at me with a wicked grin, and I growl. "You are solely responsible for my morning wood."

"What are you going to do about it, cowboy?" She wraps her legs around my waist. A movement that opens her up to me completely. Before I have a chance to respond, she lifts her hips just enough that my tip nudges her center. She's already so wet for me that I slide in with ease.

"Fuck, baby." I struggle to catch my breath as her tightness clamps around me, taking me deeper.

“Feels so good,” she breathes, digging her nails into my back just the way I love.

I slowly rock in and out of her, her body coming alive beneath mine. Being with her like this is so easy and effortless, it makes me wonder why we ever fought. “How did I live so many years without you?”

She presses a kiss to my lips. “Because you’re a stupid man.”

I laugh and kiss her back. “Not gonna argue with you there.”

“Good. Now hush and make me come before Emmie wakes up.”

“With pleasure.” I lift her leg up over my shoulder and increase the speed and force of my thrusts. I started locking the door at night once Jessica moved in. Emmie sometimes wakes early and interrupts us. It’s to be expected with kids, but this morning I have no intention of leaving either of us unsatisfied or frustrated.

It’s not long before her breathing increases and I feel her body contract around me. She’s so close. I reach a hand between us and rub my finger over her clit. One stroke and one hard thrust of my cock inside her and she comes undone. I claim her mouth with mine and swallow her cries.

I continue to pump inside her, dragging out her release. I take every ounce of pleasure she gives me, stockpiling it and storing it in my heart.

“Matt,” she cries out. Hearing my name through a moan is all it takes to break me. I come inside her, hard.

My body collapses onto hers and I struggle to catch my breath. To keep from crushing her, I prop myself up on my elbows. I hold my gaze on hers and kiss her. “You’re mine, Jess.”

She smiles and kisses me back. “Yes. And you’re mine.”

“You better believe it, baby.” She laughs and my entire body comes alive again. This woman is it for me, and I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with her.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

If I do it right, it'll be the best life imaginable.

Emmie goes running through the door ahead of us. She disappears into Momma's kitchen before we can even get the door closed.

"There you are." I hear Momma call. When I round the corner, I see Emmie wrapped up in Momma's arms for a big hug.

"Sorry, we're late, Momma." I kiss the top of her head. "We went riding today and stayed out later than anticipated."

"That's okay." She pats my cheek and smiles. "You're here now." She turns to Jessica and gives her the same hug. "Everyone is already around the dinner table. Why don't you go ahead and join them?"

I nod and lift Jessica's hand to my lips as I lead her away from the kitchen.

"Uncle Adam." I hear Emmie cry out in joy followed by a loud oomph. That girl never could restrain herself where Adam is concerned.

"Hey, munchkin. Where's your dad?" Adam asks.

"I'm right here." I say as I walk up behind him with Jessica in hand.

Adam lifts Emmie up in his arms and hugs her close. "I was beginning to think you three weren't going to make it."

“And deal with Momma’s wrath? Never.” The room erupts with laughter. Not because what I said was particularly funny. But because they all know I’m right. None of us were allowed to miss Sunday dinner at Momma’s without a really good excuse.

“Sorry, you can blame me,” Jessica says as she wraps her arm around my waist. “We were having such a nice ride today. I didn’t want it to end. Plus, it was a special day for Emmie.” Jessica reaches out and tugs at a strand of Emmie’s hair. “Tell everyone what you got to do today, sweetheart.”

I tense beside her and let out a low growl. “For the record, I was completely against this.”

Jessica laughs and playfully slaps my chest. “Oh hush, let Emmie tell them.”

Emmie’s smile grows and she wiggles in Adam’s arms. “Jessica let me ride Flight today. All by myself.” Her smile grows and she kicks her feet in excitement. “I rode my very first big horse, and I didn’t get hurt.”

The room breaks out in a series of whoops and cheers. With each congratulations and declaration of how big she’s getting, Emmie’s smile grows bigger and bigger. I lean down and whisper in Jessica’s ear. “You do realize there is no turning back now. She’s never going to let up on me until I get her a big horse of her very own.”

Jessica’s grin turns mischievous. “Yep. And I’m gonna enjoy every single second of it.”

I growl, mostly for show, and kiss her lips. I’ll always worry about Emmie, but I can’t deny she’s a very capable rider for such a little girl. And with Jessica by my side to help her with her riding skills, I know Emmie will be just fine.

We take our seats at the table. Emmie hops from person to person telling them each individually about her ride on Flight. And everyone listens to her with rapt attention like it's the first time they've heard her tell the story.

Momma finishes setting all the food on the table and takes her seat at the end. I look at Jessica and smile. Finally, she's right where she belongs, and I have everything I ever wanted.

I lean over and whisper in her ear. "Thank you."

She looks up at me with a raised brow. "For what?"

I kiss her below her ear before I continue. "For coming back to me. For making my life complete and perfect."

Her eyes gloss over as she cups my cheek with her hand. She lightly kisses me with a smile. "You're my soulmate. Despite how hard I tried, it was kinda hard staying away."

"I'm glad." I kiss her once more before I turn back to my family. Adam is watching us with a smile on his face. My eyes meet his and he lifts his beer to me with a nod. I do the same. We don't need to exchange words. Our silent acknowledgment is all we need to let the other know how happy we are to finally find the one we intend to spend the rest of our lives with.

EPILOGUE

MATTHEW

Thanksgiving

The smell of roasted turkey has my mouth watering, and the sound of my family laughing and enjoying the holiday has me smiling.

Joseph is cutting up with Sam in the dining room, something about some girls they picked up last night at Stocks and Stables. I shake my head but can't stop from smiling. He and Sam have a lot of fun together outside work. I'm glad Joseph has a friend besides us to count on, but I wish he would find a woman he cares enough about to settle down. He acts tough, but he has a huge heart and so much love to give. It would be nice if he shared that with someone special.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

Leann is sitting with my girls at the table, decorating cookies. This is something Camille wanted to do for Emmie. It took Camille weeks to finally convince Momma to let her host Thanksgiving at her house. I'm glad she finally did, because this house is amazing.

Adam outdid himself with the remodel. As soon as Jessica saw the kitchen, her mind started spinning with ideas on upgrades we could make to our house. Not much has changed about her childhood home other than necessary maintenance. I'm sure Adam would be more than happy to help us out and update the old farmhouse.

Laughter in the kitchen draws my eyes back to right in front of me. I've been leaning against the counter listening to Adam give Lizzy's boyfriend, Josh, a hard time. Adam stepped into the role of a father figure for Camille's daughter with ease. I always knew he'd be a great father. Lizzy may be an adult, but there's still so much Adam can give her.

Camille hugs Lizzy tight, making me smile. I can't imagine ever living that far away from a child of mine. The distance between those two has to be hard, but I'm glad Camille chose our small town for her new home. She makes Adam happier than I ever thought I'd see him.

"Leann, tell Sam he's crazy." I hear Joseph's rough voice call from the dining room.

"And why would I do that?" Leann tosses back.

"Because this fool thinks Gracie and I have a thing. Tell him he's fucking crazy."

“Language!” Jessica scolds, making both me and Emmie laugh. I love how protective and motherly she is with her. It’s so much more than I could ever have asked for from her. She’s truly an amazing woman.

Joseph leans down and kisses Emmie on the top of her head. “Sorry, munchkin.” He turns back to Leann with a scowl on his face. “Just tell him so he’ll shut it.”

Leann looks up at Sam and gives him a fake smile. “Trust me, there is no way Gracie would ever give this manwhore the time of day.”

Jessica slaps Leann’s arm.

“Ouch!” Leann turns to her and frowns. “Why did you do that?”

Jessica nods in Emmie’s direction. My girl seems oblivious to the conversation around her. The cookies and icing in front of her are way more interesting. Leann rolls her eyes and waves her hand around the room. “That poor child has heard way worse from these heathens.”

“I don’t care.” Jessica wags a finger at her. “She’s not going to hear it from you. At least not while I’m around.”

Leann rubs her arm and sticks her tongue out at Jessica. “Fine.

A sudden lightness fills my chest and I’m overcome with the urge to go to Jessica. I need to tell her again how much I love her. I tell her multiple times a day, probably more than she needs to hear it, but I don’t care.

I lean down beside her and whisper, “Hey, can we talk?”

She looks up at me in confusion. “Of course, what’s up?”

“In private?” The words come out more serious than I intend, but I’m nervous.

She nods and furrows her brows. “Everything okay?”

I hate how worried her voice sounds, but it can’t be helped. I didn’t plan on this. My feelings for her are taking over, and if I don’t get this out of me, I might explode. “Yeah, everything is fine. I just need a minute alone with you.”

I take her hand and weave through the crowd that is my family. Thankfully, Adam and Camille’s house is huge, so it’s easy to escape them. Leaving the dining room, I guide her to the large window in the living room. The views of the mountains from this spot are spectacular, and I decide it’s as good a place as any to say what I need to say.

“Matt, you’re scaring me.” Jessica squeezes my hand and looks up at me with nothing but concern. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing if you say yes.” The statement just spills out.

“Huh?” She looks even more confused.

“Jessica, I didn’t plan on this today, but I can’t wait another minute to ask. Marry me? Please. Make me the happiest man alive and agree to be my wife.”

Her eyes widen and her mouth falls open. Clearly, she wasn’t expecting this today. Then again, neither was I. “I know it’s only been a few months since you moved back, but I don’t want to wait. Please, will yo—”

“Yes.” She smiles, tears filling her eyes. “Oh, my God, yes.”

I pull her into me and kiss her hard, my own tears spilling out of my eyes.

When we break the kiss, we're both breathing heavily. I kiss her forehead and she melts into me as I pull her body flush with mine.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 2:09 pm

“Oh, wait.” I release her and pull my old, tattered wallet out of my back pocket. I’ve carried this thing since college and Lord knows it’s seen better days. But I’ve never been able to part with it. I dig into an inside pocket until I find the small envelope I’m looking for. When Jessica sees it she narrows her eyes in confusion.

“What’s that?” she asks.

“I’ve carried this around with me for years, never once taking it out of my wallet.” I look up at her and smile. “This carries the lock of your hair that I cut that last night we spent together before we left for college.” I slip out the light blonde lock, held together by a small rubber band. She takes it into her hand and smiles.

“I can’t believe you kept this.” With tears in her eyes, she leans forward and kisses me.

“That’s not all that’s inside here.” I take her hand and turn it so her palm is up. Lifting the envelope, I dump the contents into her hand. The solitary diamond in a platinum setting tumbles out. She gasps. “This is the ring I bought when I planned to propose after your graduation. I kept it with me always because ... Well, it made me feel close to you even when you weren’t near. And I guess I always hoped this day would come, and I wanted to be prepared.”

I lift her hand and slide the ring on. It’s a perfect fit. When I look up at her, tears are streaming down her cheeks. “I’ve dreamed of seeing this on your finger ever since.”

She lets out a sob before she wraps her arms around my neck and presses her lips to mine. “I can’t believe you kept this.”

“Always, baby. I may have lost my way for a few years, but my heart and soul has always belonged to you.” I lift her into my arms and swing her around. I kiss her like it’s our first, last, and every kiss we’ll share in between. Slow. Passionate. Loving.

“Daddy?” I break away from Jessica and my eyes immediately land on Emmie. She’s standing about five feet away from us with a worried look on her face.

My eyes shift up and my entire family is now gathered in the living room. My brothers are wearing grins and every woman in the room is crying.

“Well, so much for privacy.” I chuckle.

“Why is Jessica crying?” Emmie’s concerned voice draws my eyes back to her. I crouch down and wave her over.

I look up at Jessica and she wipes her face dry with a smile. I take her hand in mine—the one I just put a ring on—and give it a kiss. I pull Emmie into my arms and give her a hug. “These are happy tears, sweetheart.” She looks at me like she’s not convinced. “I just asked Jessica to be my wife.”

Jessica crouches down next to us and focuses on Emmie. “And I said yes. I hope you’re okay with me marrying your dad. Nothing would make me happier than to become a permanent part of your family.”

Emmie’s concern fades and a smile covers her face. “Does this mean I can call you Mommy?”

We both laugh, and more tears well up in Jessica’s eyes. “That would make me so happy.”

Emmie jumps out of my arms and into Jessica’s. My girls hug and cry and laugh. I wrap my arms around both of them, struggling to fight back my own tears.

“Oh, Lord in heaven. It is about time.” Momma tosses her hands in the air with the biggest smile I’ve seen on her face in years. A series of congratulations and cheers fills the room.

I thought I was happy before Jessica agreed to be my wife, but I was wrong. I didn’t know what true happiness was until this moment when my family became complete.