



Cowboy Don't Go

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Description: Single mom, Shay Hardesty, thinks her life finally checks all the boxes: teenage son and semi-dysfunctional, but loving family, check. New ranch enterprise, check. Heartbreak free? Check. Then her brother hires her old secret crush, the sexy cowboy Cooper Lane to work on their Marietta Ranch. Uncheck! She fears the cattle rustling scandal that tore his family apart could hurt her fledgling business by association. Worse, his hard work and kindness toward her son are breaking down her carefully built walls, risking her cautious heart.

After years of exile training horses in Texas, Cooper returns to Montana to rebuild his life with his dad who's finally freed from prison. Working on the Hardesty ranch is a blessing and crossing swords daily with the beautiful Shay is a challenge. Changing her mind about him won't be easy, but he's loved her since they were kids, and he'll work hard for this second chance.

But when the ranch experiences break-ins and vandalism, Cooper wonders if the answers will bring him and Shay closer or snap the fragile trust he's worked so hard to build?

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Chapter One

If anyone had told Shay Hardesty years ago that at thirty-one, she'd be a single mother, standing in a pen full of throw-away horses trying to rescue a horse for her son, instead of living the career-driven, happily-ever-after life in a big city that she'd imagined, she'd have laughed. Oh, yes, she'd had plans. Big plans. But as of today, pretty much the only thing about her life that came anywhere close to perfection was Ryan, the fourteen-year-old kid, currently hanging over the metal auction fencing, watching her like a mother hen when the other horses got too close to her.

"I'm coming in," he threatened.

"No, you're not. Stay right where you are."

"That gelding over there's got his ears back," he warned. "Watch out."

"I'm watching. I'm fine." Shay elbowed her way past a pair of skinny mares, keeping watch on the bay gelding with the white blaze down his face.

Aiming instead at the Appaloosa filly they'd had their eye on for the last week online, Shay edged closer to the young horse who looked to be no more than two or three. This was no place for a horse that young, but so many of these unwanted horses ended up here, heading for worse fates. The whys were what concerned her now as she inspected the filly. But it was no real mystery. There were a thousand reasons for horses to end up here, but almost none of those reasons were fair or equitable. Finances were tight, people were too busy, or some injury happened that was beyond their means to fix. Behavior issues were often a direct result of those other issues. But

neglect and even abuse were often seen here as well, which always broke her heart.

The horses in the auction pen moved restlessly in the small enclosure, bumping into one another, half-trampling the smaller horses and ponies.

Shay pushed against the nearest mare who spooked and ran from her until Shay neared the smaller filly who stared at her with white-eyed panic. She had nowhere to go, trapped up against the metal fencing of the pen. At a little more than fifteen hands, she looked sound, if quite thin, except for the superficial but nasty-looking cut on her left, back leg from some interaction with one of these horses, no doubt. Yes, she was wild, but young enough to be trained.

“Can you get her?” Ryan called from outside the gate. “Is she okay?”

“She’s just scared,” Shay replied. “I need to get her out of this pen and away from these other horses before we’ll know if she has any real injuries.”

The young horse let out a high-pitched squeal, head raised, backing away from Shay.

“Ssshhh,” Shay whispered. “You don’t know this, but I’m gonna help you, little girl.”

“Hey! You!” called a gray-haired old man standing on the grated catwalk above the pen. Shay recognized him as one of the auctioneers she’d seen at other auctions here in Bozeman. “Hey, you in there, little lady! You’d best get on out of there.”

Shay ignored him.

“I mean it. Don’t go near that one. That filly is dangerous. She tried to take my head off earlier. Bit my partner in the shoulder.”

Probably deserved it. Fear was what was driving this horse’s reaction. Not meanness

from what she could see.

“You hear me, missy?”

“Thanks, but I’m good,” she said, undeterred. She’d heard this warning many times before, and given the situation, she might have just bitten him herself.

The man turned his attention to her son. “Boy? You gonna let your mama get trampled in that pen, for bein’ a bull-headed female?”

She caught sight of the restrained clench of her son’s jaw. Ryan directed his comments to her. “You got this, Mom.”

Times like these, she wanted to kiss that boy of hers for standing up for her. “Sir, please don’t talk to my son. If you have a problem, talk directly to me.”

“See here, that’s the thing,” the old coot said. “My problem is you, lady, and not wanting to call in the fire department here to pick up your broken pieces.”

The auctioneer gestured at another nearby man up there to come watch her fail. The second man was also an out-of-towner, a middle-aged cowboy who looked like he hadn’t been off the range in a good long while. “Oh, yeah,” he muttered just loud enough for her to hear. “I seen her before at some auction up near Flathead. What is it with girls these days? Thinkin’ they can just ignore the rules? Maybe she’s got a death wish.”

“That it, ma’am? You got a death wish?” the codger asked.

Shay paused, glaring up at the man and opened her mouth to retort, but another voice, from somewhere behind the man, spoke up instead.

“Leave her alone,” he said. “She’s doing just fine.”

Shay peered up into the sunlit skylight above and the halo-outlined form of the man who’d spoken. She couldn’t make him out, but his voice sounded sort of . . . familiar. Either way, she was sick and tired of men speaking for her, instructing her, when she knew exactly what she was capable of. “Excuse me, gentlemen, but I—”

“Says you,” the old coot replied to the stranger, ignoring her. “You wouldn’t be sayin’ that if you knew that filly she’s messin’ with.”

“I’ve seen her. Maybe if you weren’t flapping flags at her every other minute, she’d settle down,” the man in shadows said, and Shay wondered if he meant the horse or her. “Looks more like to me you’re having a little fun at Ms. Hardesty’s expense.”

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Shock skittered across her skin. He knew her name? She peered up at him as he moved, for the first time, to where she could get a half-shadowed look at him. Definitely familiar. Dark hair, dark hat, etched features, handsome in a rough and tumble way. He was cowboy, through and through, all bone and muscle and sun-burnished skin, but she couldn't place him. Maybe all those cowboys just blended together.

“If you three are done discussing the merits of me and my filly,” Shay said, “kindly bug off.”

That earned her an amused half smile from the stranger and a touch to the brim of his hat. The auctioneer and his cohort laughed.

Shay ground her teeth together, allowing the filly a good sniff of her palm before touching her neck. Fear caused the filly's flank to quiver, and the animal snorted out a loud breath. All these horses were haltered—some maybe for the first time in their lives and dragging a lead rope that could get easily tangled up with the legs of other horses.

Shay took hold of the lead and spoke softly to the filly. “It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. Promise.”

The filly's ears pitched forward for the first time. A good sign she was paying attention to more than just her own fear.

“Your funeral, lady,” the auctioneer muttered from above, before moving off with the older cowboy. Only the third man remained, watching her.

“Ryan, get the gate,” she said softly.

Her son obliged, cautiously opening the steel gate and allowing her to lead the nervous horse out without so much as a whinny.

“That’s right. Good girl. You can do it.” She rested her hand on the filly’s quivering neck which was damp with nervous sweat. “We’re gonna get you out of here.”

Generally, horses in these pens were terrorized into compliance, with men using long-handled flags, waving and slapping at them to direct them toward a chute, thus avoiding human contact inside the pens. As if they weren’t already terrorized enough.

For many, this auction was the last stop. This filly was likely headed to the kill pen next for bad behavior toward those same men who terrorized her. One could hardly blame her for biting. Or kicking. But Shay had a feeling about this one. She and Ryan had watched the pen live feeds for the last week and something about this filly just spoke to them. She needed a chance. Horses weren’t bad, intrinsically. They were reactionary creatures. Fight or flight creatures. Herd animals. And these horses had all been brutally separated from their family and from everything they’d known. Treated like the soulless numbers they wore attached to their flanks. They all deserved better than this from humans.

Outside the pen, Shay inspected the horse and found her thin, but sound. The cut on her leg would take time to heal, but it looked mostly superficial. She’d have a vet do a thorough inspection at the ranch.

She smiled up at Ryan. “We’re taking her,” she told him.

Ryan grinned back. He stroked the filly’s nose. That the horse allowed his touch was a good sign. “We gotta win the bid on her first. But she’s a pretty one, huh?”

“We will win.” She’d brought along plenty of cash to win the bid in the auction. Horses like her rarely fetched more than four to five hundred dollars.

This wouldn’t be Ryan’s first encounter with an untouched horse as he had watched her desensitize a few of the wild mustangs that pastured on their ranch for a couple of years now. But he was dead set on entering the Youth Horse Encounter contest this year, sponsored by the 4-H of Marietta. The kids had eighty days to gentle and train an untouched horse to be eligible to win a \$500 prize at Marietta’s annual autumn festival in late October. The contest was right up his alley despite his new passion for football. Horses had long been his fascination, and Shay had watched him sit for hours watching them in the Hard Eight’s pastures, learning their habits and moods. Maybe the love of these gentle, magnificent creatures was genetic. At least, she hoped so.

A few minutes later, the filly’s number was called by the auctioneer. One of the handlers came to snatch the horse away from her to take her to the ring. Shay’s heart sank as the man rough handled her into the ring.

“Number twelve-oh-nine is a spicy two-and-a-half-year-old Appaloosa filly,” the auctioneer called. “Unhandled. The bidding opens at two hundred.”

Shay raised her bidding paddle, hoping the price would stay low. But the bid rose to two-fifty. Again, she raised her paddle, searching the crowd for the bidder going up against her. Three hundred. She bid again.

Four, countered the other bidder. This time she caught sight of him. It was the old cowboy who’d stood beside the auctioneer on the catwalk. Oh, no. She couldn’t lose that filly to him. He was just bidding to spite her.

Four seventy-five, Shay countered, hoping to put an end to it.

Five-fifty. The man grinned at her past the toothpick between his lips.

Six was her limit. She couldn't go higher. She raised her paddle.

“Six, we have six hundred for the Appaloosa filly, lot number twelve-oh-nine. Do I hear six-fifty?”

No. Don't do it.

“Seven,” the cowboy answered, looking very pleased with himself.

Ryan sent her a desperate look. “Mom—”

She shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut. “I can't. That's too high.”

“But . . . Mom!”

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“Seven. I have seven now. Do I hear—” The auctioneer pointed across the room at a new bidder. “Thank you. I have eight-fifty. Eight-fifty. Any more bids? Eight-fifty.”

Crushed, Shay looked at the old cowboy who was shaking his head, no. Her gaze swept the room. Who was the other one doing the bidding?

“Eight-fifty once, twice?” He banged his gavel. “Sold! For eight-fifty to bidder number four-thirty-one. Thank you, sir.”

Disappointment rushed through her as she caught sight of the bidder dropping his paddle and standing to exit the row of seats. The stranger she’d thought she recognized from earlier got to his feet in the sunlight pouring down from the skylight above. With his face clearly visible now for the first time, she finally recognized him. Cooper Lane. Of course, it was. That voice. She should have known it. But she hadn’t seen him in years. Not since a few years after high school. He looked . . . different. Handsomer. Maybe . . . harder? But then, that was no surprise, considering what had happened to him eight years ago.

Now he glanced up briefly as he exited his row. Again, he touched the brim of his black hat to her as he settled it back on his head.

Shay scowled back at him. He knew she wanted that horse. Now he was just gloating. “I’m so sorry. Ry. I’m sorry I couldn’t go that high. We’ll find another. You’ll see.”

Disconsolate, Ryan stared at the old man who’d been baiting her with the auctioneer. “That old guy who bid against us first didn’t even want her. He just didn’t want you to have her.”

When you're right, you're right. "At least he didn't end up with her. Let's go. We'd better get back home. We'll try again at the Flathead auction next weekend. All right?"

Ryan just shook his head and headed down the bleachers.

Ryan was right. No one had wanted that horse before her encounter in the pens. The filly would have probably ended up in the kill pen. Nor was it the first time this had happened. Sometimes, she brought her brother, Liam with her just to avoid this scenario. Ranching was a good ol' boys' world and often they looked at her as an intruder. She knew that. But that didn't mean she had to like it.

Outside, she and Ryan walked toward their pickup truck with its empty two-stall trailer attached, an infuriating reminder she'd failed to keep her promise to her son.

Ryan walked a few steps ahead, already taller than her at five nine, even though he was only fourteen. He was going to be tall, like his biological father. She squeezed her eyes shut again. No, she corrected. Tall like his uncle Will, her twin brother. Height was on her side of the family as well. She tried to shove away thoughts of Ryan's father.

Lately, Ryan had been asking deeper questions about him, but Shay had put him off with vague answers. There were things she didn't want to talk about yet, but things he deserved to know. The time was coming soon when real, hard answers would be unavoidable.

"Mom," Ryan said, barging into that unpleasant thought. "What's the Hard Eight's truck and six-pack doing here?"

Confused, she looked where he was pointing. Sure enough, Liam's big black F-150 with their ranch's HARD EIGHT logo on the door sat across the parking lot with its

six-horse trailer attached. But there was no sign of Liam.

“What in the world—”

The trailer was already half-full of horses from the auction and none other than Cooper Lane was walking her filly—Ryan’s filly, number 1209—up the ramp and into their trailer.

Ryan cast a confused look at her as she started toward the trailer.

“Cooper? Cooper Lane?” she shouted as she approached. “What’s going on?” When no one answered, she said, “I know it’s you. I saw you there snatching up our filly.”

There he was, settling the nervous horse into her stall.

“What are you doing with the Hard Eight’s truck?” she demanded.

Cooper closed the gate behind the filly with a look at Shay. “Hey, Shay. I wondered if you’d finally remember me.”

“Well, of course, I remember you.” She remembered his short-cropped dark hair, the way his eyebrows slashed in a hard line over those green eyes and how, once upon a time, all had been right in his world. And in hers, for that matter. But that had changed and so had he. Even at thirty-one, there was a touch of gray at his temples now and crinkled tan lines around his eyes. And the well-groomed scruff that covered his jaw was new, too.

Okay, so she had to admit he was good-looking in a careless kind of way. But that didn’t temper her confusion as to why he was even here. With their trailer and her horse! “What exactly is going on here?”

“Here? You mean”—he gestured at the trailer full of horses—“all this?”

She exhaled an impatient sigh. “Yes. This.”

“I work for you now. Technically, your brother Liam hired me to work on your ranch yesterday. He didn’t tell you?” His black hat was pulled low over his eyes, but she could just make out the hint of a teasing smile around them as he hopped off the trailer and latched the back gate, banging it for good measure with his gloved fist.

The blue denim shirt he wore, worn around the cuffs and collar, looked like it had been around the block once or twenty times. So did Cooper, by the way. The brainy, nerdy kid who’d left Marietta almost a decade ago was no more. In his place, this formidable man with sharp edges and grit, who didn’t seem to care what she thought of him.

“No. He didn’t tell me.” And she would have words with her brother about it. “So . . . what? You just outbid me with the Hard Eight’s own money?”

“Looks to me like I got her for you and saved her from landing somewhere less accommodating.” He pulled off his heavy work gloves and slapped the dust off on his thigh. “And by the way, I didn’t outbid you. I outbid that other guy.”

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Fair point—that didn’t make it any less infuriating that she had lost in the first place.

“So, number twelve-oh-nine—” Ryan ventured, reaching up to stick his fingers into the open metal of the trailer near the filly. “She’s ours? I mean, mine?”

“Looks like,” he said. “I’d say you made a good choice. She’s got real potential. Once she settles in.”

“And these other horses?” Shay asked, still suspicious.

“Liam wanted me to pick up some riding horses to train up for future guests at your ranch.”

“He sent you to buy them?”

“Apparently so.” His expression darkened suddenly. “Look, if you don’t believe me, you can call him.”

She resisted the urge to do just that. Why else would he have her family’s truck? Surely, he hadn’t stolen it. Shay looked away, embarrassed for even thinking it. Just because his father was a convicted thief . . . “Fine. Then I guess we’re both heading back to the same place. You can follow me.”

She turned on her heel to go, but he said, “Or you can follow me. That way you’ll be certain where I’m going.”

Shay opened her mouth to—to what? Apologize for doubting him? But she decided

against it. No point in opening that Pandora's box. "Whatever you'd like," was the best she could come up with.

"See you there then." With a sardonic touch to the brim of his hat again, he swung into the pickup and took off toward the highway, a trailer full of horses in tow.

Shay turned to Ryan. "Well, that went well, don't you think?"

Ryan shook his head and headed for their truck. "At least we got the horse. You know that guy?"

"Sort of. From a long time ago." But did anyone really know Cooper Lane anymore?

They'd gone to school together, in Marietta, but he'd been gone for most of their twenties. What had brought him back? She had to admit, she was curious. He'd been dealt a bad hand by his father and the taint of what had happened had rubbed off on Cooper. The town's inability to separate what was true and what was purely conjecture about Cooper and his father was mostly why he'd disappeared in the first place, she guessed. Personally, she'd never believed he'd been involved in his father's misdeeds, but Liam's hiring him felt risky just as they were trying to pull this whole guest ranch thing together on the Hard Eight. Reputation was everything and they couldn't afford any scandal. Mostly, she couldn't afford this whole guest ranch thing to fail. Her future and her son's future depended on it. Struggling along on part-time accounting gig money would never pay for her son's college or her own survival.

She got in the cab of her truck and pulled out her cell phone, punching in the number for her brother as she started the truck. It took four rings for him to pick up. But before he could even speak, Shay said, "You've made some bonehead moves before, Liam, but hiring Cooper Lane? That really might just—"

“Uh, excuse me,” he interrupted, apparently prepared with his argument, “but I seem to recall that you, as project manager, put me in charge of hiring all the—”

“Maybe so, but not Cooper Lane! We’ve got one shot to make this guest ranch thing go. And you know how folks around here feel about Cooper Lane and his father.”

“Who is safely ensconced in prison.”

“I know very well where he is and so does everyone else. You need to rethink this whole Cooper Lane thing. Now, before this gets out of hand. People talk, you know.”

“Shay, I think you’re overreacting.”

“Am I? I’m not so sure. And he outbid me for Ry’s filly. Eight-fifty. Did you authorize him to do that?”

“I would have if I’d been there.”

“But you weren’t here,” she said. “That’s a lot of trust to put in a brand-new hire.”

“You’re wrong about him.”

“Perception,” she pointed out, “is nine tenths of the law.”

“I think you mean possession.”

“Mark my words. Cooper Lane,” Shay said slowly, “is gonna hurt us.”

There was silence at the other end of the line for a long moment. “I’m willing to take a chance on him. I think he deserves that.” He waited another beat. “Anything else?”

“No.” Shay hung up on Liam before sliding a look at Ryan. “Not a word.”

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Wisely, her son held up his hands in surrender. “I wasn’t gonna say anything.” But under his breath, he mumbled, “But he seemed like a nice guy to me.”

Shay stepped on the gas and headed home.

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“I hear you ran into my sister at the auction,” Liam said by way of hello after Cooper had off-loaded all the horses and sequestered them in the quarantine paddock, away from the other stock.

Liam was smiling, so he relaxed a fraction.

“She called you I assume?” Cooper asked, hooking the gate closed behind the last auction horse.

“You know she did. And eight hundred and fifty for Ryan’s filly? She worth that?”

“I’d say so. But it was either pay that or lose her. Shay bid up to six. You can take the difference out of my pay.”

Liam snorted. “Nope. I won’t be doing that.” And under his breath added, “‘Cause that’s what I would’ve done.” He perused the horses Cooper had brought back with him from Bozeman, in particular the one he’d purchased for Ryan. “Shay was dead set on buying that filly out of her own pocket for Ryan so he could enter the Youth Horse Encounter this year, not for lack of me trying to convince her that we—the ranch—could afford to get a horse for him to train, but because my older sister is

stubborn as hell. Probably why she's still single."

It surprised Cooper to hear she wasn't married up.

Liam lifted off his hat and wiped his forehead with a bandana he pulled from his pocket. "I thought she was going next week to the Flathead auction. I didn't realize you two would run into each other or I would've warned you. Don't get me wrong, I love her to death. But she can be prickly. You and Shay were in the same graduating class, weren't you, at Marietta High School? And my brother, Will, too?"

"That's right." Cooper remembered Shay's twin brother, Will Hardesty, the star of the football team.

The local kid who'd made it big in college ball and the NFL. According to Liam, Will was living in Marietta again with his girlfriend, but was off on some buying trip for the ranch this week. Cooper looked forward to seeing him again. With his sister, it hadn't gone so well.

"I wasn't sure she'd remember me."

"A lot's happened since you two saw each other last. For us all, I guess."

That much was true. He knew he'd be running into her here on the ranch, but he'd been surprised to see her at the auction. Seeing her brought back memories of a time when everything lay ahead of him instead of behind.

He'd known her and crushed on her throughout their school years, as the school in Marietta was pretty small. Everyone knew everyone. Maybe that was the worst part of becoming a personal cautionary tale in a small town.

But Shay raising her son alone? Still? And living here at her mother's home, instead

of on her own? Not that he was judging. Because his life was about to look eerily similar.

“You happy with the horses?” he asked Liam.

Liam touched the quivery flank of a Palomino gelding. “You probably know more about them than I do. I’m a cow man, mostly. Although, the wild horses here on the ranch via the BLM are the pet project of myself and Shay. Shay mostly. She’s the horse whisperer here. She gentles them, but she’s not really a trainer.” He turned to Cooper. “By the way, so you know, I called your previous employer, down at the Four Sixes in Texas. Due diligence, you know. And they had nothing but great things to say about you. They were real sorry to lose you, in fact, and said you’d be welcome back anytime.”

“Good to hear.”

“I hired you for your construction experience,” he said, gesturing at the nearby land that had been readied for building. “It’s been a little bit of a road since we made the decision a year ago this summer to expand the Hard Eight to a guest ranch, what with architectural plans, getting infrastructure readied and getting set for construction. Now, all that’s in place, I guess we’re ready to build. But the Four Sixes said you’re a wizard with horses. With training, breeding, and selection. Which is why I sent you up to Bozeman. Seems you undersold yourself. Wizard isn’t a word people throw around very often. So, while I do need help with construction, we also need someone who can train this bunch. Maybe even some of the mustangs we’ve got pasturing here, young enough to be trained. Adopted out.”

“Today was a test, then?”

“Call it what you want.”

“I’m good with horses,” he admitted. “I like working with them. But I need the work. Any work. Whatever you need.”

Liam nodded. “Obviously, none of these auction horses are fully ready for that kind of training. We need them to put on some weight, get healthy. But we’ve got time for that. You did good. Thanks for going today.”

Cooper nodded. “Yeah, boss.”

Liam frowned. “No. It’s just Liam, okay?”

Personally, he preferred to keep business and familiarity separate, but he said, “Sure. Okay.”

“Good.” He shook Cooper’s hand. “I know you said up front that you’ve got something personal to do tomorrow. So, since it’s Friday tomorrow, you’ll officially start for us on Monday. That work for you?”

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“Yessir. Yes. Thanks.”

“Okay then. See you Monday.” As Liam turned back to the barn, Cooper caught sight of Shay’s truck and empty trailer pulling into the driveway. For a long moment, he lingered beside the paddock, watching her park and head into the house. Her son, however, made a beeline to the paddock to see his new horse.

“Ryan!” Shay called from the doorway of her house when she realized he was not behind her. “Come inside!”

“In a minute!” he shouted back, sneaking a look at Cooper as his mom admitted defeat and went inside.

Cooper debated speaking to the kid at all, but Ryan spoke first. “She’s a beauty, isn’t she? I mean, she will be when we feed her up a little. Get rid of that awful coat with some good grain and grooming.”

“She your first horse?” he asked.

“Nah.” Ryan puffed himself up, trying to look older and cooler. He climbed on the bottom rail and leaned over the top. “Well . . . kind of—to call my own. But I’ve been riding since I was a kid.”

Cooper hid his smile. “I hear you’ve got big plans for her.”

Ryan looked surprised that Cooper knew this, but he nodded. “The Youth Horse Encounter is in October at Marietta’s autumn festival this year. We get one hundred

days, but I've already missed a bunch. I've got until the festival to gentle her, train her, and show her."

An ambitious eighty days from now.

"But when I win," Ryan continued, "I get five hundred dollars. And whatever the auction brings in for her."

"When you win? I like that confidence."

Ryan shrugged. "My mom always says you either find a way or you make one."

"Does she, now?" Cooper smiled at the boy. "Wise woman, your mother."

"Mostly," he admitted, staring at the filly. "Do you think she's already got a name?"

He considered that. "She's two. Maybe she does. But you should give her one that suits her. One you pick. Names are important. Animals are particular about such things. Give them the wrong name and they'll learn to embody it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, give a horse a name like Chaos or Diablo and that's pretty much what you'll get. But Charmer or Baby? Like putty in your hands."

"Really?"

"I've seen it. Speaking of names, I'm Cooper, by the way. My friends call me Coop."

Ryan held out his hand to him. "Ryan. My friends call me Ry."

“Nice to meet you.”

“And don’t worry about my mom. She’s not really mad. She just kind of likes to be in charge, even when she’s not. But that’s only because she’s always taken care of me and her on her own.”

“Yeah?” he answered, amused. “I’ll try to stay out of her way then.”

“Good luck with that,” he retorted. “Maybe you should date her.”

Shock made him laugh out loud.

Ryan grinned. “Don’t tell her I said that.”

He ran an invisible key across his lips. This kid . . .

“I’ll think about a name for the filly, then,” Ryan said, as a text buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out to look at it. He nodded to Cooper. “I gotta go. My friends are starting a Fortnite session. Later.”

Too cool for school at fourteen.

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“Later.” Cooper watched him go and caught sight of Shay watching him out the window. She ducked behind the window frame when he saw her. Date her. That kid’s fourteen going on twenty. But it wasn’t as if he’d never considered doing just that.

It felt like those days were long gone though, and Shay really seemed to want nothing to do with him. Fair enough. He would try not to take it personally.

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“Is that Cooper Lane you’re watching out that window?” Shay’s mother, Sarah asked, casually rinsing a cup in the sink.

“What? No. I mean . . . Ryan was out there with him, is all.” Her mother had eyes in the back of her head apparently.

“Uh-huh. A good-looking man, that Cooper Lane.”

“Mom.”

“I’m just saying. He reminds me of his father, if I’m honest.”

“You knew Ray Lane?”

Sarah moved to the window to look out at Cooper. “Oh, yes. I knew him. Once upon a time, I knew him.” At Shay’s curious expression, she said, “In passing, of course. He always kind of reminded me of Sam Shepherd. The actor? If memory serves.”

“He’s a convict, Mom. And Cooper was also implica—”

“Yes, dear. I think I hear the washing machine beeping.” And with that, she excused herself, leaving Shay alone in the kitchen.

Why was no one listening to her about Cooper?

She peeked out the window again to spot him walking toward his beat-up pickup truck, with long-limbed strides and a confidence she couldn’t remember from their days as classmates in high school. Or definitely after. So, maybe he had grown into his looks a little. A lot. But while she had sort of crushed on him for a while, way back when, nothing ever came of it because Shay had stupidly set her sights on the absolute wrong person—Ethan Bradley, an older, college boy visiting for the summer. A reality she’d acknowledged only after he’d left her eighteen, pregnant, and alone to face the consequences of what they’d done that summer.

Ryan’s father had never been in the picture for him. In fact, Shay had no idea where he was now. Oh, she’d told him about the pregnancy, but he denied it was his, advised her to get rid of it. Then he disappeared. Of course, Ryan was his. He looked just like him, with his light brown hair and blue eyes and that smile that said he was routinely cooking up mischief. Ethan’s parents had eventually tried to throw money at her to get rid of the problem for good, but she sent it back after getting their son to sign away any claim to Ryan. She was happy with that decision, but for a long, long time, resented him for so quickly washing his hands of the child they’d made together. But she’d come to realize that Ryan was better off with only her rather than a father who couldn’t love him. Ryan only knew what it was to have a single mother and it was only in the last few years that he’d begun feeling that hole in his life where a father should have been. But for her, it wasn’t Ethan’s abandonment that scarred her. It was that she’d actually believed his lie when he’d told her he loved her that summer. She’d been a fool to trust him and that had been the hardest part to let go. She’d be the first to admit she didn’t trust easily. Or well.

It also didn't escape her that once she herself had been the focus of some judgment here in town when she'd become a single mother at eighteen. Her own father could hardly accept it. Tom Hardesty had taken his sweet time accepting his grandson, but eventually he had, mostly. But that was her father. Hard. The polar opposite of her mother.

Raising her son alone, aside from the help of her family, had been hard and lonely. But at least she had family. Cooper was alone in the world. Eight years ago, his father's trial for cattle rustling had been the biggest crime Marietta had seen in years. Everyone talked about it and more than a few ranchers were affected by what he'd done. Hard feelings still lingered hereabouts and likely would forever. Cooper's flight from Marietta years ago had been, perhaps, equally unfair, and she supposed she shouldn't hold what his father had done against him. If there wasn't so much at stake with the ranch, with her son's future . . .

She sighed. She supposed she should try to be more generous. Besides, it seemed there was no getting around Liam anyway, so she'd just have to make the best of things.

Ryan came through the kitchen door smiling. "Hey, Mom."

"Hey, Ry. You . . . were talking to Mr. Lane?"

"Coop? Yeah. He's nice."

Coop? "Oh?"

"Yeah. We were talking about names for the filly."

That seemed doubtful, but Shay went along. "Do you have some names in mind?"

“Just one. Coop said names matter and horses try to live up to the name you give them. Even if they’re bad names.”

Cooper, Cooper, Cooper.

Her son looked out the window, considering the filly prancing around the pen near the others. She desperately needed a bath and a good brushing and that would have to happen soon. Baby steps. That was what this contest was all about, after all. Teaching patience and fortitude. And the kind of skills—working with sensitive creatures like these horses—that would translate in ways none of the kids training them could even imagine into their ordinary lives.

“I was thinking about Kholá.”

“As in Coca-Cola?”

He laughed. “No. K-h-o-l-á. You know my friend Jacob Whitetree from school?”

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She nodded. They'd known each other since the sixth grade and had become close as teammates on the middle school football team.

"His family is mostly Lakota, and we were talking one day about how the Sioux are losing their old language and how he didn't really know it very well at all, so we looked up words on the internet to try to learn some. And I found the word kholá which means friendship, like a really strong friendship. Like the never-ever-betray-you kind of friendship."

Shay's throat tightened. "That's a really good word."

"Yeah. And I was thinking," Ryan went on, "that if I gave the filly that name, maybe she'd start to trust me a little more. Maybe she'd live up to that name."

"I like it. Kholá. It's a pretty name for a pretty girl."

"Yeah." Ryan grabbed an apple from the bowl on the counter. "Okay, later."

"Okay." But he was already gone. "Nice talk." Mostly about Cooper. She slumped down onto a kitchen chair and took a sip of coffee as the man himself got in his truck and spit gravel down their driveway on the way out.

She sighed. Okay, so he was nice. And helpful and, fine . . . good-looking. He'd grown into his looks—a lot. No longer the boy who'd gone to school with her, the gangly kid whose passion was horses and math and getting into an Ivy League college. He was a man now, fully grown and prematurely gray at the temples with a few more lines around his eyes.

But none of that meant he belonged here on the Hard Eight. She was scared. Not only of what she imagined his reputation could do to their upcoming guest ranch. No, what scared her most was how she reacted to him—with knee-jerk judgment and close-mindedness. But if she was right, then woe be it to him that hurts her family.

Chapter Two

The next morning, Cooper leaned his backside against his old, blue Ford F-100 pickup truck outside the Shelby Montana Crossroads Correctional Center, waiting. He'd gotten here early but the nine a.m. scheduled release time had come and gone twenty minutes ago and there was still no sign of his father.

Behind the high, stark stone walls to his left, he could hear the hum of voices coming from where he remembered once seeing the exercise yard. There was little to no equipment in that yard now. Just grass, a few bleacher seats, a walking path and incarcerated men with nowhere to go. Cooper had often thought of him on that yard amongst those men—many of them violent—a place he didn't belong or deserve. Five years ago, he'd forbidden Cooper to visit again. Told him to sell that ranch and forget about him.

Of course, he'd done neither.

Pulling his lone emergency cigarette from his shirt pocket, he stuck it between his lips, sucked in the taste for a moment before flicking on the red Bic lighter he also kept handy in case of moments such as this. The flame hissed near the cigarette tip for a long moment before Cooper swore and flicked the flame back out, crumbling the cigarette in his hand. The breeze scattered the dry tobacco across the cracked parking lot.

No good would come of taking up smoking again. It had taken too long to kick the habit five years ago. But if there was ever a moment to cave, this was that moment.

It had been half a decade since Cooper had seen him in person—the last time he'd been in Montana to visit him here. Five years, one month and four days to be exact, though every Sunday night, without fail, they'd spoken on the phone—the old man's reluctant concession. Today, the nightmare of his incarceration was finally over. Though none of it was ever going to be really over. Not for either of them, he supposed.

Eight years here in this hole and all that time had gone by in a flash. At least for Cooper, who'd ended up on the Four Sixes in Texas for most of that time, as far away from judging eyes in Marietta as this old truck could take him. That, too, was over now. He'd quit that job to come back here and had managed to get hired on at the Hard Eight. Somehow, between the two of them, he and the old man would start again.

The heavy steel doors across the parking lot made a haunting sound when they opened, and Cooper saw a man walking toward him, head down.

He blinked. For a moment, he thought it must be someone else. Some other man's much older father. But he was the only one waiting.

No, it was him. A diminished version of him, to be sure, much thinner than he was when he'd last seen him and walking with a strange gait. Limping almost. He didn't look well.

Cooper pushed away from the truck and walked toward him, meeting him halfway across the parking lot. His father stopped short, shocked to see him. "Coop?"

"Dad." He opened his arms to his father who stepped into them briefly, embracing him.

"What are you doing here? I told you to stay put in Texas."

He clapped his father on the back before letting him go. “Like that was gonna happen. C’mon. I’m your ride.”

His eyes were still cornflower blue, but his skin had a gray cast to it that was concerning. His hair had turned salt-and-pepper gray. He reminded Cooper of a broken fence post, not the strong, healthy man who’d been confined to this place eight years ago.

“I could’ve taken the bus into town. You didn’t have to come.”

“Like hell you would.” Cooper opened the door for him with a rusty squeak. “And we’re not going to Shelby.” Which was the closest town to the prison.

Raymond Lane’s hand shook as he opened the bottle of water they’d given him on the way out, took a sip and turned to Cooper. “Where are you taking me?”

“Home. To Marietta.”

The old man frowned. “We’ve got no home in Marietta.”

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“Yeah, we do. Your home.”

“My—” he began, his voice shocked, “but . . . I told you to sell the place.”

“Yeah? Well, I didn’t. So, get over it.”

Four hours later, his father’s first look in almost a decade at the land that had raised him brought actual tears to his eyes. Tears he tried to hide from Cooper but failed. He’d barely spoken the whole trip back and Cooper had let him be. Today was a lot for him, Cooper guessed, and he fell asleep after the first hour of the drive. It was, perhaps, the first time in a very long time that his father could actually relax. Let go. But before that, Ray had watched the Montana countryside slide by, drinking in every tree and river and vista along the way.

Cooper had moved back here from Texas a little over a month ago to get the place ready for his homecoming. All the painting and cleaning, now—with that look on his father’s face as they pulled up to the house—felt worth it.

“But you were in Texas,” his father said, climbing out of the truck.

“I was . . . I had a caretaker living here until last month, taking care of the place. But I paid what was left on the mortgage. I paid the taxes. It’s all up to date. It’s all yours.”

His father’s gaze traveled across the old ranch house with its board and batten front and bricks that lined the rest. Except for the huge spruce trees anchoring the house, the landscaping, what there had been of it, had long since died. Patchy grass still stubbled the yard, but it was mostly weeds. Beyond, lay the fenced pastures that had

once supported a healthy herd of black Angus. Those, too, were gone now.

Ray Lane turned back to him, relief mixed with disbelief contorting his expression. “Why didn’t you sell this place? I never wanted it to be a burden on you.”

“No burden. I kept it so you’d have a place to come home to. When you got out. I knew if I told you, you’d just argue with me. So, I didn’t.” He couldn’t read his father’s face anymore, so he wasn’t sure how he was taking it. “If you don’t want to be here, if it’s got too many memories, I get it. But let’s not decide that now. I got a job,” he told his father. “Construction. Maybe working with the horses. You don’t have to worry about anything. You just need to rest and get your feet back under you.”

His hand shook as he held onto a dining room chair. “I never thought I’d see this place again. I never thought I’d see you again, either.”

Cooper frowned. “No matter what, Dad, I got you. I’ll always have you.”

Then his father, who was not a man given to showing emotion, hugged him. Hard. And he didn’t let go for a full minute. “I never thought this day would come.”

Cooper fought back his own emotions. “Hey. What do you say we go inside?”

“Yeah.”

Inside, Ray looked around in wonder as if seeing the place for the first time. There was a welcome home banner Cooper had hung from the rafter that divided the living room from the kitchen and some late-summer flowers in a vase on the counter.

Touched, Ray turned to him. “You spruced the place up.”

“A little bit.” He’d painted this living room a neutral color, repainted the kitchen area and bought some new furniture and updated all the bedding in his bedroom. There were still family pictures here and there, photos of the three of them before his mother passed, years ago. Ray picked one up and held it for a long minute before setting it back and walking to his old bedroom. He just stood in the doorway, staring.

“I had some of your old clothes cleaned and they’re hung up in the closet. Might be a little big on you until we put some weight back on you,” Cooper told him opening the closet door to show him. “You just need some good food.”

“That was kind of you. All of this, Coop. You didn’t have to.”

“Of course, I did. I’ve missed you, Dad. I’m really glad you’re home. And I’m here to help make this whole thing easier.”

His father said, “You really think this place, this town will let go of my past? Let me live here in peace?”

“You’ve done your time. And once we clear your name—”

“Let that go, son. You’ve got to let that go. It’s never going to happen now.”

He’d heard this refrain over and over again from his father, and it still sat like a mystery between them. Though he’d always claimed he was innocent of the charges that put him in prison for the last eight years, he’d done little to help himself during his trial, refusing to testify in his own defense. That had sealed the deal against him. Cooper had never questioned that his father was innocent. It wasn’t in his nature to break the law. No matter what the incentive. He knew that as well as he knew himself. “I got rid of the investigator I hired before. I’ve got someone new.”

His father looked him squarely in the eye. “Don’t.”

Frustration burned in Cooper's chest. "This is for both of us. For you and for me." If he wouldn't listen to reason for his own sake, maybe a personal appeal would do the trick. "In a couple of months—"

"In a couple of months," Ray interrupted, "I may not be here."

Cooper blinked and turned back to him. "What'd you say?"

Ray stood and walked to the window to stare out at the pasture. "I didn't mean to blurt it out that way, but I guess I've lost some finesse behind bars. I'm dying, Cooper. It's cancer. It's bad."

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The blood drained from Copper's face and his throat closed up. He reached for the doorknob beside him. Suddenly the way his father looked—his thinning hair, his gauntness—it all made sense.

A rush of emotion flushed his face and threatened to spill out from his eyes. "No!" came his guttural denial. Not after all this. Not after all he's gone through. "Why . . . why would you keep something like that from me? H-how long have you known?"

The lines in his face deepened. "Four months. Five. I forget. Could be a year. Time slides by in that place when you're not looking."

Suddenly, the room felt small and stifling. "Did they . . . have you been treated for it?"

"I wasn't exactly a guest of the Mayo Clinic. They did what they could, but none of it seems to have worked."

Shock filtered through his system. "Then we'll get you in to see someone else. An oncologist up in Bozeman. Or . . . or here in Marietta."

Ray lowered himself onto the chair near the living room window. "No."

"What do you mean, no? We're gonna fight this."

"I did that. I'm done now."

"No, you're not," Cooper insisted sitting on the coffee table opposite him. "You're

not. You're still young. You're only fifty-eight. You've got a whole life still ahead of you. And you still have this place. We're going to clear your name. Start over. We're close. I can feel it."

"I said no."

"What's that even mean? No. How can you just give up?" He realized he was shouting now.

"You still don't listen to me. Still the same stubborn kid."

Cooper shook his head, confused. He was hardly a kid anymore and he'd done nothing but listen to his father for years now. But that didn't mean Cooper had to accept what he was saying now. He had just survived eight years in prison for a crime he didn't commit and, understandably, that had taken its toll. But this . . . no. He couldn't accept it.

"You really believe," his father said, "I can start over here? Have any kind of life in this town? Where everyone thinks I'm . . . a cattle thief? What future do I have? What's the point of it all?"

"You're not a thief."

"Your opinion doesn't matter to any of them. And it will only keep ruining you in the process. You didn't learn that well enough the first time?"

Yes, he'd left town. Got a fresh start. But time had a way of making people forget. Maybe. "I got hired out at the Hard Eight ranch," he said, as if that proved something.

Curiously, his father's already pale face got paler still.

“Dad? You okay?” Cooper asked, concerned.

“Why there?”

He shrugged. “They had an opening. Suited me.”

“That all?”

He couldn’t read the look on his father’s expression. “Yeah. That’s all. You must remember them. Will and Shay, the Hardesty twins were classmates of mine. Their younger brother, Liam, is running the show over there now. Since their father’s death.”

That turned his head. “Tom’s dead?”

“You knew him, right?”

Ray suddenly looked unwell.

“Hey. You must be hungry. Let me make you something.” His father said not a word as Cooper put together grilled cheese sandwiches and a small salad for the two of them.

As he grilled them on the stove, he watched his father stare out the window at their now fallow land. Cooper had allowed himself expectations about today—a happy reunion, relief that part of his father’s life was over, and hope for the future. But gone was the robust, engaged man—father—who’d left this place eight years ago. In his place, this shadow of his father instead. What had happened all those years ago was like a bomb had gone off in their life, scattering pieces of their history and their futures like so much shrapnel. Putting those pieces back together into any recognizable semblance of what once was seemed now likely impossible.

They ate at the small kitchen table, the same one where they'd always eaten after his mother's death when Cooper was only five. Just the two of them. The dynamic duo. That was what his father had always called them. The table was French pine, now sporting the divots, old remnants of crayons, Magic Markers, and scars of his childhood. Here, his father had taught him to read, and write, how to build models of space monsters and how to balance a budget. Right here, he'd learned what hard work could earn him. And how much his father meant to him.

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But the light that had once been in his dad's eyes seemed nearly extinguished. Cooper needed to find a way to ignite it again.

Despite that, his father ate everything. A good sign. At least Cooper could feed him. The cake he'd bought him seemed antithetical at this point, but he brought it out anyway. He'd had the cake decorated with a nail file as a joke and a celebration.

Ray smiled, seeing it. "Now he gives it to me. Where was that file when I needed it?"

"If I thought you would've taken it, I'd have definitely smuggled one in," he joked. They shared a heaping slice of chocolate cake and sipped from glasses of milk, remembering other celebrations at this table.

"You staying out at the Hard Eight?" Ray asked finally.

"They offered. But I thought I'd hang here with you instead."

"You don't have to take care of me, you know. I can manage." He took another bite of cake. "But if you want . . . I'm good with you here." He hedged for a minute before asking, "So, the family is still on that ranch? The rest of them, I mean?"

"Yeah. Liam, Shay, Cami. Even Will has come home from the NFL. But he and his girlfriend bought a place outside of town. They're getting married on the ranch over the holidays this year, I hear. They're actually doing weddings at the Hard Eight now. It's become a regular—what do they call it? A venue. And of course, Mrs. Hardesty's still there, too. Sarah."

Ray's eyes flicked to Cooper's for a moment, but he immediately snuffed his reaction.

Interesting.

"Hardesty—senior—Sarah's husband, died almost three years ago now. Heart attack. Did you know him?"

"Hardly. Is she okay? Sarah, I mean?"

The mention of Mrs. Hardesty was the first spark of interest he'd shown in anything all day.

"I think so, mostly. They're turning their cattle operation into a guest ranch. I guess they've been struggling some since her husband died. They hired me to work construction, but looks like I'll be working with the horses, too. So, I'll be bringing in money. You can just rest and get into treatment. But we can talk about that later."

"Not doing treatment," he repeated, getting up from the table.

"Dad—"

"I'm tired. I'm gonna lie down now."

There was no point arguing with him now. "Okay. You do that. I'm going to drive into town and pick up a few things. I'll be back."

*

Shay finished up her work doing the weekly books at the best little bakery in town, The Copper Mountain Gingerbread and Dessert Company, packed up her things, and

decided to get a late lunch at the Main Street Café.

“Thanks a million, Shay,” Rachel Vaughn, the bakery’s owner, said as Shay left the shop’s office. “I really don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You say that every time,” she said, giving the other woman a hug. “It’s just numbers, Rachel. But, hey, I’m glad to be useful.”

“Just numbers? Might as well be hieroglyphics,” she quipped, tying back her thick, dark hair. “You know how they told you in school that algebra and calculus would come in handy some day? Well, I didn’t believe them. And my books prove my point. That is until I hired you.

“But,” she mused, looking around the spotless shop filled with gorgeous cupcakes, gingerbread, and cakes, “give me a good recipe and I’m gold. I can multiply fractions in a mixing bowl like nobody’s business.” She pulled a ribbon-tied box from behind the counter, no doubt filled with her beautiful goodies for Shay. “Take them. Ah-ah! Don’t say no. I know the rest of the crew out at the Hard Eight will eat them, even if you don’t.”

“Oh, I’ll eat them, too,” Shay retorted, laughing and accepting the gift. “That’s the problem.”

“That is not a problem. Not enjoying the sweet things in life, now that’s a problem. These cupcakes? Nah. They’re just gateway sweets—sweets by way of friendship.”

She hugged Rachel again. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome. See you next month? Oh, unless that wedding gets in the way—I know Daniel Creighton and his fiancée are tying the knot out there. These cupcakes are practice for the big event. They’re doing a cupcake-cake.”

“Oooh! Well, they’re going to love them. So, if I need to come a day or two early next month, that’s okay, right?”

“Of course. Or after if need be. See you then?”

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Shay waved goodbye as she headed out the door. She had four local businesses she did books for—a part-time job that paid fairly well and allowed her plenty of time to work as project manager at the ranch as well. She'd been doing freelance accounting for years here in Marietta. Not exactly the Wall Street finance job she'd imagined herself in someday, but it sufficed. And she got to work with people like Rachel, which was a bonus. Once the guest ranch got going though, it would turn things around for her, financially.

The town was busy as usual, the angled parking spots nearly filled as tourists and locals shopped the quaint boutiques and stores on Main Street. It was great to see how well Marietta was doing even in late summer as a destination, which could only mean good things for the plans for the ranch.

Lost in thought for a moment about the future, Shay stopped suddenly at the window of Big Z Hardware, with its signs for the upcoming Marietta rodeo and rodeo paraphernalia. The hair on the back of her neck rose. She couldn't even explain the sudden chill that ran through her, except for the feeling that she was being watched. In the window's reflection, she caught sight of a ragged-looking man with long hair sticking out from his black baseball cap, standing at the corner of Fourth and Main, staring in her direction.

She turned abruptly, but just as quickly, he turned the corner with his back to her and disappeared. Surely that was just a coincidence. And she probably only noticed him because he seemed out of place here. The unhoused tended toward warmer climates than Montana. If he was that. Maybe he was an out-of-work cowboy? No, not by the look of his clothes.

At any rate, he couldn't have been looking at her. She felt silly but spooked at the same time. Shaking it off, she hurried up the street to the Main Street Café, which was nearly empty at almost three o'clock. The lunch rush was over, and the dinner rush was still to come. She took a table near the window and ordered a quick salad from the young waitress working the tables while Flo, the long-time café lead waitress and manager, readied the dining room for dinner.

As Shay sipped her iced tea, she opened the box Rachel had given her. Inside, the most gorgeously decorated cupcakes, each a different realistic-looking flower. They were too pretty to eat, really. But history dictated that they would be eaten and soon.

She looked up as a couple exited the restaurant and accidentally locked eyes with the only other person still in the restaurant.

Ugh. It had to be Cooper Lane.

Seeing him gave her a start and she quickly looked back at her cupcakes, pretending to study the intricately decorated tops. But after a moment, she realized the futility of ignoring him and glanced back his way. He tilted a nod at her and went back to his sandwich.

For a heartbeat, she imagined she could get away with pretending they could just ignore each other. But, sighing deeply as he flicked another look at her again, she reluctantly motioned for him to join her. Following a ridiculous, ten-second mime of invitation and false surprise, he gathered up his plate and sauntered over to her table—looking all hot and . . . and sure of himself. Shay tried not to notice the way his jeans hugged his muscular legs or how the sleeves of his black tee shirt clung to his impressive biceps.

He set his plate down opposite her and slid into the booth. "Fancy meeting you here."

“Right. Seems silly, seeing how we’re the only two in here to . . . pretend we—”

“Don’t know each other?”

“Yes. Though,” she continued, “in reality, we hardly do anymore. Know each other, I mean.”

“I guess that’s true. Times change. People change.”

“You’ve certainly changed.” She nearly bit her tongue for saying it.

“Have I?”

“I mean . . . obviously,” she said, avoiding looking at him directly.

The waitress brought her salad, took a look at Cooper, and stated the obvious. “Oh! You moved!”

“Uh-huh,” they both said in unison.

“Aw. Isn’t that cute?” she exclaimed, twisting her blonde ponytail. “You two know each other.”

They side-eyed each other without explanation.

After a few beats waiting for one, the waitress said, “O-kay. Well, y’all enjoy your lunch.”

Cooper took a large bite of his sandwich and stared at Shay while chewing. God, how was it that men could actually look sexy with a mouthful of food?

“So,” he asked, picking up where they left off, “how exactly do you think I’ve changed?”

Delicately, she picked at her salad, only to realize she wasn’t hungry anymore. “Um, oh, I don’t know. You look different. Older.” Better.

“You look the same. You look great,” he replied.

Don’t be nice to me. “I-I meant older in a good way,” she amended. “I know the last decade or so hasn’t been an easy one for you.”

He lowered his head to another bite of sandwich. After a minute, he said, “Ryan seems like a great kid. You must be proud of him.”

She warmed to his words. “I am. Very. He’s amazing. Sweet. A horse lover, too. I hear that’s one of your passions as well. Liam . . . mentioned it in passing.”

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His dark, slashing eyebrows lifted in surprise. “Did he?”

She swallowed hard, fishing around in her salad for something to say. “Uh-huh. So . . . you’re back in Marietta. For, um, how long, you think?”

He stared at the remnants of his sandwich, then laid them down on his plate. “I’m not tied to any timeline in particular.”

“Ah.”

“But I thought,” he began, “I’d manage at least a couple of weeks before you were ready to kick me out of a job.”

She felt her cheeks go hot and she tucked her hair behind her ear. “No, no. I-I’m not trying to—” Yes, you were. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. I’m used to it.” His eyes, green as the moss that grew on a stone, burned into her with something akin to humor, as if he was enjoying her discomfort.

“Ugh. I’m no good at small talk. I spend way too much time around cattle.”

He was grinning at her now. “I guess that makes two of us.” He gestured at the pink bakery box with Rachel’s logo. “I like that bakery. Discovered ’em last week.”

Relieved, she pushed the box toward him. “Me, too. I do some accounting work for them, and Rachel, in turn, tries to fatten me up.” She opened the box full of cupcakes decorated with purple and yellow pansies, Gerbera daisies and delicate pink-petaled

roses. “Please, take one.”

His eyes widened. “Oh, no. They’re too pretty to eat. They’re practically works of art.”

“That’s what I thought, too.” But she lifted one out and sliced it in half, handing him one. “There. Problem solved. They’re too good not to eat.”

With a grateful nod, he accepted. He moaned with the first bite. “Mm-mm. Wow.”

“See what I mean?” She took a bite of hers, too. Forget the salad. This encounter called for copious amounts of sugar and carbs.

He moaned with pleasure again and the sound spread through Shay like melted butter. Fascinated by the way his eyes closed with pleasure and how long his dark lashes were, she forced her gaze away from him, ignoring the rushing tingle of awareness his closeness inspired. What in the world was wrong with her?

“Wait,” he said suddenly. “You’re an accountant?”

“Hmm?” She nearly squeaked, pulling her gaze from the way he crumpled the cupcake wrapper in his fist. “Oh, yes. Freelance. For a few businesses around town. Pays the rent.” She gestured at the frosting bit stuck to his lip. “You’ve got a little . . . on your—”

He licked at it with his tongue, then wiped it off with a napkin, his gaze fixed on her.

With a sinking feeling, she realized that she was . . . attracted to him. Uh-uh. Nope. That will not do.

“Rent, huh?” he repeated. “But you live at the ranch, right?”

She plucked at the neck of her denim shirt. “Since my father passed. I . . . my mother wanted us to come. Stay with her. So, we did. We’re still there. Ryan and me. It’s worked well.”

“You never married?” he asked.

“No,” she said with a dismissive laugh. “You?”

He shook his head. “Married to my job, maybe. Yeah. I like what I do.”

Shay had to file that into the what a waste category. Cooper Lane had been the smartest kid in their high school class. Valedictorian, in fact. He’d given a speech at graduation that had inspired everyone, then headed off to a prestigious Ivy League college back East. But all that had changed a year or two into his college career with his father’s arrest.

Now, he was a handsome, charming, loaded-down-with-history cowboy, hiring out for construction jobs and training horses no one wanted. No doubt he’d spent the last near decade trying to reinvent himself.

Just as she had.

Alone.

Outside on the street, Carol Bingley—the town’s inveterate gossip—walked past the window, glancing in and double taking at the sight of Cooper. And her. Her step only hitched for a moment, but long enough, to connect the two of them. Oh, here we go, Shay thought. Give her enough time and she’ll hang Cooper for just returning to the scene of his father’s crime. Shay straightened and narrowed a you-got-something-to-say? look back at her before she hurried past them on the street. No doubt looking for someone to pass this alarming information to. It wouldn’t surprise her if Carol

Bingley had been the responsible party for driving Cooper out of town on a rail in the first place.

Searching for a safe place to look, she settled her gaze on Cooper's hands, strong and tanned, and turning the fork around in his fingers as if he was as nervous about this interaction as she was. He had gentle hands with long fingers and surprisingly clean nails—for a cowboy—and unbidden, she wondered if his palms were calloused or smooth.

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Change the subject!

“So, how does it feel to be back in Marietta? Did you miss it?”

“In a way, I did,” he admitted. “The place has changed some, but . . . some things never change.”

Flo, the older, long-time waitress with the big hair and sweet smile wiped tables nearby and nodded to Shay. “Hi, darlin’! How you doin’ today?”

“Great. Just great.” She forced a smile at the woman who was surreptitiously checking out Cooper.

“That’s not—” Flo began. “Well, I’ll be. Cooper Lane. Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?”

Nervously, Cooper turned to her. “Hey, Flo.”

Everyone knew Flo. Everyone who grew up here spent copious amounts of time with friends here, sharing sodas and french fries after school. And Flo had always been a big part of that experience. She never judged anyone, not even Shay when she’d gotten pregnant with Ryan. Maybe that’s why she’d been here for so long.

“Welcome back to Marietta. So good to see you again,” Flo told Cooper.

“Thanks, Flo.”

“Here for a while or just passing through?”

He glanced at Shay. “A while. Maybe. We’ll see.”

“That’s good to hear. Enjoy your lunch now you two, you hear?” Not wanting to interrupt, Flo moved on to other tables, leaving them to stare awkwardly at each other for a long moment.

“She’s nice,” Shay murmured.

“Always was.”

“So,” Shay said, searching for something safe to talk about. “Where are you staying? Liam said you didn’t want to bunk at the ranch.”

“Our old place. I kept it going all these years. Had a caretaker on it until recently. It’s a little worse for the wear, but it’s still there.”

“Really?” She studied him for a long minute, gauging how curious she was allowed to be. “I thought—”

“What?”

“I guess I assumed you’d sold it. It has been a long time. Somehow, I didn’t imagine you’d ever come back.”

“Wishful thinking?”

She blushed. “No.” She probably deserved that after their first meeting yesterday. “I just didn’t think you had many good reasons to come back here. But it is, after all, your home.” She nearly winced. That didn’t come out at all how she’d meant to say

it.

He narrowed a look at her. “Mine and my father’s.”

She toyed with her salad. His father who had been gone longer than Cooper had. “I know how it feels to want to protect what’s yours. Obviously. I’d do anything to protect my family. And . . . I’m a single mother. I’ve had a fair share of gossip and innuendo coming my way. I don’t hold what your father did against you personally.”

He set down his fork, his expression bereft of the ease she’d seen only moments earlier. “Kinda feels like you do. Just so you know, he was innocent. I’m innocent. And someday you’ll know that’s all true. But if you don’t want me on the Hard Eight, Shay, just come out and say it. I’ll go right now.”

She blinked at him. “No. I—” Searching for the words to explain herself, she came up short. “That’s not what I meant. At least, I didn’t mean to—You don’t have to worry. Your job is safe. I’m sorry. Just ignore me, Cooper.”

Slowly, he got to his feet and settled his black Stetson on his head. “That won’t be easy. But I thank you for the cupcake and the company. But I’m about to be late for a meeting.”

“Cooper, I—”

He cut her off. “See you on Monday.”

Deflated, she leaned back in her chair. Now she’d done it. She watched him pay his tab with that cute little waitress at the cash register and leave the café. She’d hurt him. And even her attempts to backtrack had backfired.

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But she wasn't wrong about his father's reputation. The ranchers in Marietta had naturally taken his father's crimes of stealing their cattle very personally. He had not only hit their bottom line, but for some ranchers, his thievery had meant ruin. That would not be forgiven easily, even if Cooper personally had nothing to do with them. In this day and age of online reviews and Yelp, a business like the guest ranch could be destroyed by a few bad actors. She had no doubt that word would get out about him working for them, just as they were trying to get their business up and running. Maybe it was unfair, but she would do anything to protect her family. Even from him.

Her hand shook as she tried to finish her salad and finally, she gave up, her inner critic revving up.

On the other hand, that other voice argued, should the Hardestys cave to idle gossip and innuendo or even a cynical review? Cooper wasn't part of his father's crime. And to paint him with that same brush made her look no better than those who had harangued him years ago into moving away.

Yes, she was protecting her family, their future success, and the ranch itself. But Cooper Lane was the same person he'd been when she'd known him in high school and to assume he'd do anything to hurt their family just because his father's reputation followed him was like saying she should somehow be ashamed of having had Ryan without a husband. Cooper didn't deserve that. And somehow, she'd figure out a way to fix this.

At the cash register, she pulled out her wallet to pay for her food, but the cute waitress just smiled.

“Oh no, didn’t he tell you?” she said. “That gentleman sitting with you? He paid your bill, too.”

Shay sighed, turning to stare out the Plate glass window at the front of the café. That was either the nicest thing anyone had done for her lately, or a power move to put her in her place. Which one was perfectly unclear. One thing, however, was plain. She was going to have to deal with Cooper Lane one way or another.

How did the old adage go? Keep your friends close and your enemies closer? Which one he was remained to be seen.

Chapter Three

Trey Reyes, a local private investigator who had worked for Marietta’s Canaday Law Firm for years since leaving the military, had a well-earned reputation for getting to the bottom of cases where others had failed. Cooper had spoken with him on the phone several times from Texas, but today was their first in-person meeting.

If central casting had submitted Reyes for the job, they couldn’t have cast anyone who looked the part less. The muscle-bound thug Cooper had somehow imagined was, in reality, a handsome, six-foot-something tall guy with intelligent, dark eyes, an easy smile and an offhanded manner that put him at ease. He wasn’t the first private investigator Cooper had hired to investigate what had happened to his father, but he hoped Trey would be the one to finally bring some closure to the case.

“You up for a walk down by the Marietta River?” Trey asked as they met on the corner of Main and Court Street. “There’s a nice walking path and it’s quiet there. We’re not likely to run into anyone at this time of day.”

“Sure.” He could both walk off that cupcake and the conflicting feelings he was having about Shay Hardesty.

He should be used to people throwing their attitudes at him by now, but the subtle digs from Shay about his father had cut him. Then again, for all the protestations about his father's innocence, he'd not been able to do a thing to clear his name in all these years. Even though Cooper knew his father could never have done what they'd accused him of. And, personally, he knew that not a dime of the money his father was alleged to have made in that scheme ever found its way to their lives.

Cooper and Trey walked down a path by the courthouse, beneath the oak and pine trees that lined the walkway talking about the case as they reached the river and the wide path that followed the meandering current. The late August air smelled sweet, and the first hints of autumn were in the air.

"My wife, Holly, and I walk down here all the time with our dog, Digger," Trey said. "Clears the mind. Puts everything in perspective, I think."

Cooper could use a little perspective right now. "You married long?"

"A few years now," Trey said, looking pretty damn happy about it. "You?"

He shook his head. "Nah. Not in the cards for me."

Trey chuckled. "I used to think that, too. But glad now I changed my mind. My wife, Holly, wasn't an easy catch, that's for sure, and to this day, she challenges me in all the best ways. But I'd be lost without her."

Cooper looked sideways at him, surprised Trey would share something so personal. Then again, why not? He seemed to have found his path in life with this detective business and the rest of his life had apparently fallen into place as well. He had the kind of confidence Cooper was looking for in an investigator after going through a series of detectives who wouldn't or couldn't get behind his father's innocence.

Cooper's thoughts strayed to Shay and their conversation of a few minutes ago, only confirming his feelings on the subject of settling down with a woman. She was an all-too-familiar scenario, with some preconceived notion of him. At the same time, he saw that his perception of himself was blurred by all his shifts in direction. He was most definitely not where he imagined he'd be at thirty-one—alone, still fighting for respect, and still drifting from one job to the next. Or here, making one last-ditch effort to uncover the truth about his father's case.

“So, let's talk about coming steps in your case. As you instructed,” Trey began, “I've done some digging into the bank transactions that took place on your father's business accounts, beginning in 2012 and ending in 2014. You're right. The money—a significant amount in total—was moved through his business account in modest deposits and quickly shuttled to some offshore account in the Caymans. Two point five million dollars to be precise.”

“That account was opened by his business partner. He forged his signature—very well, I might add—and my father wasn't even aware of that account until the whole thing blew up in his face. My father never saw a penny of it. Never took a penny.”

“Right. So, it's been nine, ten, eleven years since these transactions took place. Even then, the cops were unable to learn the final destination of that money. It came and went out of your father's bank account, just as the police claimed and it landed in a Cayman account in your father's name, again. From there, it was paid out to some shell corporation, tied to about three or four others, and most likely ultimately laundered through some real estate scheme. But that doesn't make it a dead end,” Trey said, “I just happen to know a guy.”

Cooper stopped walking. “What kind of guy?”

“The hacker kind. He can find pretty much anything you want as long as it resides in the digital universe. He practically invented the means to trace a digital fingerprint,

which is what we need here. If there's a trail, any trail—and I guarantee you one exists—he can find it.”

For the first time in a very long time, Cooper felt an inkling of hope. “If he can tie that money to my father's partner, Evan Clulagher, then we can prove my father's innocence. Maybe vacate his conviction. And if that money was withdrawn after Clulagher's alleged disappearance and death, and we can tie him to it, then we'll have some answers. I'm convinced he faked his death.”

“They never found his body in Flathead Lake, correct? Just his boat and his personal items?”

“Right. You would have expected eventually they would have found him. But it was too much of a coincidence, him drowning just then. They found nothing. No body. Just his car and some personal things washed up along the shoreline. I believe he's alive and living in the Swiss Alps or Brazil, or somewhere no one knows him. And since he's the one who set my father up, it was the perfect crime, really. And when he disappeared with no wife or kids left behind, everyone just . . . moved on to my father.”

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“I, too, have found no trace of Evan Clulagher’s name attached to accounts there,” Trey said, continuing down the trail, “but he likely used an assumed name. He likely got out of the country that way, too.”

“I’d practically given up the idea of finding him,” Cooper admitted. “My father definitely has. He doesn’t want me doing this. He’s done.”

“Any idea why?”

“If I didn’t know my father so well, know that he is as honest as any man you’ll ever meet . . . I might think it’s because there were things he didn’t want me to know.”

“About his part in the cattle rustling?”

Cooper shrugged. “He swears he’s innocent. But I guess every man who’s ever gone to prison swears that, right?”

“Some do,” Trey said. “Yet he never caved. Never confessed. Even though that might have shortened his sentence with cooperation.”

“Exactly. He had chances. But that’s where I hit a brick wall. It’s like he was protecting someone. And it wasn’t Clulagher, that’s for sure. But if he’s innocent, who would he be protecting?”

“That’s part of what I mean to find out. Here’s what I know. Cattle rustling isn’t what it used to be. It’s not riding in, cutting a bunch of cattle and riding off into the sunset. Nowadays, there are no brands to alter, the ear tags they use on feeder cattle are often

equipped with GPS. Now, tighter books and head counts are kept at all ends because of losses that tend to happen in transferring cattle from one place to another. Even pasture to pasture. Nine, ten years ago, all that scrutiny was just becoming the norm precisely because of the schemes going on. Cattle rustling is a more subtle art form than it once was and rarely involves physically stealing cattle from another man's ranch. And if that did happen, it happened in transport. But as partners in a cattle shipping-trucking business, Clulagher and your father were both positioned to mess with numbers."

"My father's end of the shipping business was feed shipping—grain, alfalfa, hay, etcetera. Not cattle. He had nothing to do with whatever they were doing with the cattle."

"Still, ask anyone. Rustling cattle isn't a likely solo operation. Unless it's a pure Ponzi scheme—i.e. strictly embezzlement or taking money from investors and then reinvesting it without purchasing said cattle—rustling cattle requires a team. There were two other men who went to prison with your father. Both of them cowboys who worked wrangling cattle for Clulagher-Lane Trucking. They knew what the story was. But there was a drawerful of evidence pointing to your father that said he knew, too. It seems pretty clear that those two men weren't at the top of the food chain, so they didn't necessarily know your father's involvement."

"He told the police it had to be Clulagher's operation, but with him missing and presumed dead, there was nowhere to look but at him. They even looked at my father for the murder of Clulagher, but they never found enough to take that to trial."

"Either way, I mean to find out how and why that money got moved. And if his partner is, in fact, alive, where he ended up."

They stopped at the river's edge where tall grass—brown now at the end of summer—billowed in the afternoon breeze. Across the way, a hawk circled the river,

darting between the branches of the tall trees along the banks. The air was still hot from the day but promised to cool to the sound of the river flowing nearby.

Cooper was glad they'd left town for this talk. Walking near this river reminded him of the reasons he'd loved this, his hometown, once, when his father and he would fish for hours along the banks of the Marietta River or the Yellowstone, setting flies and catching fat rainbow trout. He decided he would take his father out fishing again as soon as he got a free day. Maybe it would remind him that this life that remained was worth fighting for.

He and Trey walked back to town, promised to keep in touch and parted ways. Cooper felt good about the man. Hopefully, he'd be able to solve the mystery that those before him could not. He was probably their last chance. With almost nine years gone now since the day of his father's arrest, the case had gone stone cold. Soon, possibly none of this would matter anymore. At least to his father.

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A week passed as Shay pushed forward on the ranch development, meeting with their architect, Joel Lawrence Shaw, finalizing the plans for the luxe guest cottages that would be going up soon. Cooper and Liam disappeared every day together, doing construction on the glamping platforms and bath builds alongside several other specialized contractors for stonework and plumbing.

The plan for the guest ranch had always been to begin modestly and build their clientele and reputation over the next year or two. The many barn weddings they'd already hosted here over the last year had been wildly well received. Soon, they'd have glamping tents for summer, honeymoon cottages, and one luxury cabin for larger parties or families for all the other seasons to offer. With their first clients being old friends of Liam's, Carolyn and Jess Brody, booking a glamping tent for their honeymoon late in September, it would be a good test of all the aspects of their

program. Starting small appealed to her sense of order and wouldn't overwhelm them right out of the gate.

Every day, after a long, hard day working construction, Liam and Cooper, and sometimes Will, would return to the house, laughing and chatting like old friends, and, with little more than a nod in her direction if they happened to cross paths, Cooper would get in his truck and go home.

As the days passed, she felt worse and worse about the way they'd left things at the café, knowing her words had hurt him, but not knowing how to fix it. Watching his truck barrel down the long road leading away from their ranch, she thought maybe he had no feelings about her at all, and she was just making up problems out of whole cloth. Maybe she always did this—living in her head, rewriting history, blaming herself for opening her mouth when she should have kept it shut. But protecting her family and their future had always come first for her, and she couldn't—shouldn't have to—apologize for that.

However, the longer he worked side by side with Liam, seemingly unconcerned with her feelings, the more she realized that she'd been wrong about letting him work here. He was a hard worker, and skilled. Liam raved about the work Cooper was doing, and Ryan had started hanging around them, too, seemingly as taken with him as her brother was.

Two days ago, she'd caught sight of Ryan and Cooper in the quarantine pens, giving treats to the newest horses, with Cooper watching over her son as he made progress with his filly. The rescues were eating well on special diets and starting to show signs of filling out. They'd all been vet checked and a farrier had come by to see to their hooves. The filly's fetlock wound had gotten attention and was healing well. They'd need at least another week in quarantine before they could be cleared to move with the other horses on the ranch.

As she'd watched, she couldn't help but notice the easy way Cooper had with her son as well as the way Ryan—her quiet, reticent son—lit up with his attention. Emotion stung her eyes as she'd turned away from the window. She couldn't tell if what she was feeling was fear or happiness.

For so long, there had been so few men in Ryan's life to look up to. Only Liam, who loved him like his own. But even he had been so caught up trying to keep the ranch afloat after their father had died, he'd had little time to spend with his nephew. She had dated a few men over the years, but rarely brought them home to meet her son for fear of setting him up for disappointment. With her ex-pro football player brother Will's arrival last summer, Ryan had started coming out of his shell. Will had spent a lot of time with him throwing footballs and volunteering as an assistant coach on his school team.

Now, here was Cooper.

Maybe it was Ryan's age or teenage hormones, or maybe it was the fact that all of them felt so hopeful for the first time in years. But whatever had happened, her son was doing well, and she couldn't argue with that at all.

All of that had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that she found herself secretly ogling Cooper Lane, all the time. Something she never did. In fact, it had been so long since she'd paid any attention to a man—any man—she felt herself blush realizing it.

That he was handsome came as no shock. He'd always been good-looking, she supposed. Even though, as a kid, he'd had a bit of a nerdy reputation, because he was smarter than everyone—an underappreciated fact when you're a kid. She couldn't help but wonder what might have happened to Cooper's life had it not imploded because of his father's misdeeds? Where would he be today? Surely not working for the Hard Eight as a cowboy-construction worker.

She had zero regrets about becoming Ryan's mother fourteen years ago. Zero regrets about not ending up with his biological father. And for the longest time, she didn't allow herself to wonder what might have become of her otherwise. If she hadn't, for instance, chosen a careless, rich, summer boy to lose her future with. If she'd chosen, instead, someone like the smartest boy in the class, the one with a future. Someone who might have desperately needed her someday in the near future. Someone who might have stuck around.

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Water under the bridge, so to speak. She'd made none of those choices and now that time had passed. The most she could hope for was to call a truce in this self-inflicted war between her and Cooper Lane. She was wasting way too much brain space worrying about it. Once she did that, she could get back to business as usual.

The door to the great room opened and Cami, Shay's younger sister, breezed in from her long day at Marietta Elementary School. She tossed aside her bags and flopped dramatically down on the couch.

"How is it even possible to be so exhausted when school's only been in session for two weeks? I spent the first half of the day fighting a software glitch in all of my students' new Chromebooks. Then answering twenty-thousand versions of the same question about our long-term project this semester. All that was before lunch. Plus, my assistant chose today to have her baby so there was that." Cami laughed. "I kid. I'm happy for her. But this particular class is a two-man operation. Oh, and did you know that hiccups cannot actually be cured by drinking a full glass of water upside down?"

"Really," Shay said, grinning.

"Oh, yes. That it will, in fact, simply soak your clothes and cause unwarranted hilarity in your classmates which will, in turn, lead to a random rash of fake hiccupping throughout the class for the rest of the day? But not until three other students got excused to the office for also soaking their clothes. Yeah. That happened, too. Gotta love 'em though."

Cami sighed, sweeping her long hair into a messy bun. "But I managed to convince at

least two thirds of them that multiplying fractions wasn't the hardest thing ever invented, and I think we crossed the Rubicon there. Just in the nick of time, I might add, before I started to pull out all of my hair."

Shay giggled into her coffee mug. Having watched Cami teach elementary school for a few years now, Shay understood that teachers were hypothetically expected to be in ten places at once, work eighty hours a week—much of it without any extra pay—smile, and make it all look effortless. But Cami loved her job, as did most teachers Shay had known. The youngest of the four siblings, Cami had always been the mediator, the family fixer, the levelheaded one who let things roll off her instead of holding onto them. When the rest of them were losing it, Cami was always there, holding things together. It was a role she'd assumed willingly, and she was so good at it the rest of them just let her have it. There were times, however, when Shay wished Cami wouldn't worry so much about everyone around her and take time for herself. Like, find a boyfriend, for instance.

Shay lifted her coffee cup to her lips and glanced out the window at Cooper, who was showing her son how to tie a fancy knot around a fencepost.

"Did I tell you our PTA is doing a silent auction at the week of the autumn festival this year as a fundraiser?" Cami said, perking up.

"A silent auction? How fun!"

"I said the Hard Eight can probably throw in something cool to bid on."

"And this is why we put you in charge of marketing our new enterprise," Shay said. "I think we can definitely manage that."

"I was thinking a guided trail horseback ride—with Will—or a fly-fishing excursion with a guide—Liam—or, if we want to get really extravagant, a campfire s'mores

roast and cowboy singalong.”

“Hmm. All we’d need is the singing cowboy.”

“Right. I’ll have to hold auditions. Maybe at the upcoming Marietta rodeo. Surely there are some singing cowboys amongst that bunch.”

“Good luck with that,” Shay said. “You may need to fork over more money than we can afford for one of those guys. By the way, are we all going again this year?”

“For sure. I can’t wait, and I’ll keep my eyes peeled out for the money cowboy-singers.” She laughed at the idea. “But I’m liking this idea more and more.”

“Well, the silent auction sounds great. Especially that the PTA is doing it and not you.”

“Oh,” she said, fiddling with the couch pillow. “Well, I did sign up to help with decorations and setup.”

“Cami—” Overcommitted was her sister’s middle name.

“Hey! Is that Cooper I saw outside with Ryan?” Cami asked, diverting.

Why yes. Yes, it is Cooper.

“Liam said you’re not happy he’s here,” she teased.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Good, because I was just about to question your sanity. Have you looked at Cooper Lane since he’s gotten back?” Cami made googly eyes at her.

Shay laughed. Oh, she'd looked. More often than she wanted to admit. "Well, if you're so taken, maybe you should ask him out."

"Me? I do not have time for dating. Besides, I saw him watching you the other day when you weren't looking—getting into your car and driving to town? Yeah, it's not me he wants to ask him out. It's definitely you."

"That's ridiculous. He barely makes eye contact with me."

"Maybe he doesn't want you to know he's looking."

She glanced out the window again, at her son with Cooper. They were laughing at something. "I will admit, having all these guys around has been good for Ryan. And Cooper in particular. Even if I was against it at first. Ryan has been so happy lately."

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“Boys need each other, even if they don’t want to admit it,” Cami said, joining her at the window. “Something happens when boys become men and so many of them think they don’t need each other anymore. But when they put all that lone wolf stuff aside, they really do blossom in each other’s company.”

“That’s a pretty deep insight for a lone wolf teacher,” Shay teased.

Cami blushed. “Okay. But I have a unique view of boys before they get ruined by the world and nine-to-five jobs. Men need friends, too. Even Cooper.”

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The next day, Shay left town after running a few errands and finishing up an accounting gig with a boutique owner in town. It was nearly dark by the time she’d finished. All of the windows in town were decorated with flag buntings, signs, and banners strung across Main Street advertising the Marietta rodeo the second week of September. The rodeo was a big deal in Marietta, and though they’d often attended, she was secretly glad Ryan wasn’t interested in participating. He was more focused on training horses than riding broncs or bulls. The autumn festival and the Youth Horse Encounter competition that Ryan would be entering would be happening only a few weeks later. Too soon, she worried.

He was behind on the training, and she hoped he wouldn’t be disappointed if Kholá wasn’t quite ready when it came time for the event. Even with Cooper’s guidance, she was afraid Ryan had bitten off more than he could chew, entering this year with both football, school, and the contest. But she wasn’t about to tell him that. She didn’t believe in setting limits about what he could accomplish and often he surprised her.

That might have said more about her own boundaries than his.

Yep. It probably did.

She pushed those thoughts aside and cranked up the radio, singing along to Taylor Swift's "You Belong with Me" as she drove. This stretch of road was empty as usual, so she rolled down her window and belted the lyrics out loud to the Montana countryside, letting the cool evening breeze hit her face and tug at her hair. It wasn't often she got to let loose, but sometimes, singing in the car was just what she needed. No one could hear out here but the cattle she passed, who eyed her with comical surprise as she drove past them.

Which was when it happened.

A loud bang! sounded at the back of the truck and jerked her wheel hard to the right. Shay practically screamed as she fought the truck to stay on the road, tires squealing and skidding. Nearly a hundred feet later, she managed to pull to a stop.

She turned off the engine and pressed her forehead against the steering wheel for a long minute to gather her wits. Then, she cursed. It was a flat. Pretty sure it was the back right tire, which meant she would have to change it herself, somehow jacking up the heavy pickup. One look at her cell told her she was, naturally, in one of the two dead zones between town and the ranch. No service. No roadside service that she paid dearly for. A good three miles from home here, she was also an equal distance from town.

She sighed deeply as she looked at the rapidly setting sun.

This sucks.

Quickly, she pulled the car manual from the glove box and looked up changing a flat

tire. She knew she had a spare, and that it was under the truck, but she had no clue how to detach it from there. Ugh. Where was Liam when she needed him?

She pulled the tire changing kit from where the manual informed her it was, beneath the back seat, then stood staring at the mysterious back end of the truck. Why hadn't she learned how to do this before? Why hadn't she at least had Liam explain the rudiments? But more than understanding the situation, getting the thing on would certainly require muscle.

By now, she'd drawn an audience of black Angus cows who had gathered at the fence line to watch her. One of them mooed.

"Oh, you think this is funny, do you? Well," she said. "I hope this is entertaining, because I have no idea what I'm doing." She took a bow. "Thank you. Thank you very much. I'll be here all week."

The cows just stared, chewing their cud.

"Not helpful," she muttered, inserting her key inside the little door behind the license plate where there was allegedly a magic place for the rod thingy to go. After fumbling with it for a good two minutes, she managed to insert said rod, crank the spare tire down to the ground and was in the process of figuring out how to get it unhooked entirely when she heard a car pull up on the road beside her.

Scrambling out from under the truck, a hundred awful thoughts ricocheted through her mind before she saw who it actually was.

"Cooper!" The wave of relief that washed over her made her knees suddenly weak. Bracing a hand on the tailgate she tried to look . . . cool. A fail by any standard. "Hi."

He leaned out his truck window. "Havin' some trouble?"

“Oh, no. I’m just entertaining the troops here,” she said, pointing to the cattle who mooed at him and started wandering away. Traitors. “You?”

“Just on my way home. But I think you’re losing your crowd over there.”

“Yeah, they were a bunch of hecklers, to be honest.”

He chuckled and pulled his truck over to the side of the road and parked. After taking a long gander at the right rear flat tire that had nearly shredded into ribbons, he whistled. “Lucky thing you didn’t go into that ditch.”

“Yes. Thank you for pointing that out.”

He smiled, tugged off his Carhartt jacket, and handed it to her. It was still warm from his body heat, and she couldn’t help but get a whiff of him. Some delicious, very male scent that belonged only to him. Before she full-on lifted it to her face to get a nose full, she draped the thing over the side of the tailgate, like any sane woman would.

Without a word, he climbed under her truck and released the spare, which probably would have taken her until long after dark to accomplish. He had it off and propped beside the blown tire before she could offer to do more than shine her cell phone flashlight for him. Then he jacked up the back of the truck.

“You ever change a tire before?” he asked, kneeling down near the tire.

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“Honestly, no. But I do have a manual.”

“I can see how that’d be helpful. See this little key notch here? You’ve gotta unlock it to get your lug nuts off.”

“Ahh.”

He’d rolled up his sleeves and she was fully distracted by the way the muscles in his forearms flexed.

He waited. “You got a key?”

“Oh! Of course.” She dug her keychain out of her pocket and handed it to him.

“Thanks.” He actually winked at her then and she felt heat creep up her cheeks. But that didn’t keep her from staring at him as he got to work. She just stood there admiring the way the twilight shadowed the curve of his jawline and burnished the scruff of his beard.

Handsome. Yes, he was. Okay, hot. Not even up for debate. Just knee-wobblingly good-looking, even with the brown ranch dirt ground into his jeans and a little bit of sawdust still in his hair. And especially with his big hands around the wheel of her truck. He worked the lug nuts off the blown tire like he was buttering toast. She was fascinated by how effortlessly he seemed to do everything.

It was annoying, really.

As he worked, she tried to think of something intelligent to say. Lacking that, she blurted, “So, do you do this often?”

“Change tires?” He grunted with the effort of loosening the last nut.

“No. Yes. I mean—”

“You mean help a stranded woman on the side of the road? No. Not very often. Just lucky timing, I guess.”

“It was. For me.” She fidgeted with the cell phone flashlight, trying to get it closer to the wheel. “Why don’t you come back to the house for dinner? Let me thank you for helping me.”

“Thanks, but I can’t. I’ve . . . got someplace to be.”

Good thing it was dark because she blushed furiously. “Oh, I’m sorry. Of course. You have a date. I should’ve known—”

“No. Not a date.”

“Oh, that’s okay. You seriously don’t have to explain.”

He looked up at her for a long, excruciating beat, then turned back to the wheel.

“Listen, about the other day . . .” she began again.

He paused again in his effort. “Which day is that?”

“You know. At the café.”

“What about it?”

“I just wanted to say, first, thank you for buying my lunch, but you didn’t have to, you know.”

“I didn’t have to. I wanted to.”

A man of few words, Cooper Lane’s voice made her want to lean in to catch all the nuance. He was a hard read and she couldn’t really tell if he was catching her meaning.

“I’m really not sure why you would, after I know I-I probably made you feel—totally unintentionally, mind you”—she took a deep breath—“bad or misjudged or unwelcome on the ranch.”

“Totally unintentional.” He nodded disbelievingly at the shredded tire, then grinned.

Staring at the ground, she answered, “No. Not exactly. I mean, I might as well come clean and admit that I had my doubts when Liam hired you. For all the wrong reasons. But I’m a big enough person to admit that, too. And it wasn’t fair of me to judge you based on . . . innuendo.”

“Can you shine that light a little closer?” He looked at her now, lifting his brows in expectation.

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She did, feeling foolish for even bringing this up here on a dark road as he was doing his best to help her. But he wasn't giving her an out, or much of anything in the way of absolution.

"Anyway," she babbled on, "I just wanted to say I'm sorry. And thank you for helping me tonight."

"You're welcome," he said, lifting the spare tire onto the truck like it weighed literally nothing. "And just so you know innuendo and I got real chummy years ago out of pure necessity. I just try to ignore it now."

"Very sensible." She handed him the lug nuts one at a time. He tightened them up and locked the last lug nut with her key. "As a single mom, I've certainly dealt with small-town minds and it's not very pleasant. Certainly not something I would wish on anyone else. Including you."

She waited for what seemed like minutes before he replied and then it was something inane like, "Like I said, no harm, no foul." But when he finished and stood up, less than a few inches separated them.

She could feel the heat from his skin on hers.

He'd pulled a rag out of his pocket and wiped his hands on it, but his gaze was fully on her. "This tire should get you home," he said finally. "But you'll need to get someone to drive you into town to get a replacement tire tomorrow. I wouldn't drive on this spare too far."

“Okay.”

His gaze slid down her face, landing on her mouth, where it lingered for longer than a moment or two. Then he met her eyes. Even in this dim light with the flashlight still between them, his eyes were beautiful and full of all the things he thought of saying but seemed to leave on his editing room floor.

For a minute, she thought he might—kiss her. He reached an arm out past her shoulder toward the edge of the truck’s tailgate, and she stopped breathing as his face came within inches of hers. Her eyes nearly slid shut in anticipation and her heartbeat rang in her ears.

But instead of kissing her, he pulled his arm slowly back holding the jacket she’d draped over the tailgate in his hand. Her heart ka-thumped in her chest as if to say, idiot.

“I’m gonna follow you back home,” he told her stepping back.

She edged away from him, too, tucking her hair behind her ear in self-defense. “That’s totally not necessary. I can get home from here.”

He nodded, still watching her. “Maybe so. But I’ll feel better.”

She swallowed thickly. “Really, no. You’ve got somewhere to be. Thank you, Cooper. You saved the day. My day. At least my night.” She hurried toward the truck cab, then remembered he still had her keys. With a sigh, she turned and reached out for him to toss them to her.

Instead, he walked up and placed them in her hands with a smile. His warm fingers brushed hers. “Drive safe then.”

As she pulled away from the edge of the road, she glanced in her rearview mirror. He was standing there still, watching her go for a long time before getting in his own truck and U-turning back toward his place.

Night had truly fallen out here on the Montana prairie. Darkness here was an animal all its own. No streetlamps to light the road, just the slash of headlights and the stars overhead. That and another pair of headlights coming from the direction of the ranch.

That car seemed to be moving especially unhurriedly and a weird chill chased up her spine. Like the blink of a film reel, she'd watched the car approach as if in slow motion. And as its blinding lights slowly passed, she got her first look at him. The man behind the wheel.

Blink. Scruffy.

Blink. A cluttered dashboard.

Blink. Black baseball cap pulled low over his eyes and half-covering too-long hair.

But as he drove past her, there was no mistaking his menacing scowl as he met her gaze.

Menacing. That was the word. Creep. Another shiver coursed through her.

If she wasn't mistaken, it was the same man she'd seen in town a few days ago when she'd felt someone was watching her.

And he just happened to be on this road at night, same as her? Where was he coming from? What if she'd been alone out here and Cooper hadn't stopped to help her? And why hadn't she let him follow her home?

Stupid pride, Shay.

She'd driven this road at night alone a thousand times and never once had she felt what she'd just felt from that brief encounter. Scared.

With an eye on the rearview mirror, as the stranger's taillights faded in the distance, she stepped on the gas.

Chapter Four

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The next day, her twin brother Will drove her into town to put a new tire on her wheel, and as they waited for the mechanic to change it, they walked to the Java Café for a coffee. They sat talking and nursing their drinks by the front window overlooking the street in a pair of comfy armchairs. Thick velvet curtains framed their view of the street and seemed to insulate their conversation.

Will's deep auburn hair, his cornflower-blue eyes only highlighted that smile that melted hearts everywhere. Though he was her brother, even she could appreciate the man he'd become. It didn't hurt that a woman like Izzy had made him feel adored and had put some of his broken pieces back together again after a few tough years, including a divorce and the loss of his NFL career to injury.

Though Will was still something of a celebrity around Marietta after his storied football career, the locals mostly just accepted him now as one of their own after being back in town for the past year. Which was good because Will didn't love the spotlight here. But he still loved football, and last fall and this, he'd volunteered in his spare time to help coach the players at Marietta high school and middle school—including Ryan—which had endeared him to the community and the many football-loving parents in town. So, he'd earned a little privacy when he came to local places like the Java Café.

Shay loved this place and came here often by herself when she was in town between jobs. There was something intimate about it, even though the place was usually filled with the regulars, working on their laptops or phones and indulging in a moment's peace. The place's old, red brick walls felt like they'd been here forever and practically had, as it was one of the earliest buildings in Marietta.

But today, Shay still felt distinctly unpeaceful after last night's adventure on the dark road.

"I'm telling you, it unnerved me," Shay said, agitating her mocha latte with a stir stick. "I swear I saw him in town the other day, too. I felt like I was being watched but as soon as I turned, he walked around a corner. I decided I imagined it but . . ."

Will took a long sip of his coffee, considering what she'd told him about last night. Shay had missed these kinds of talks when he'd been gone for so many years. Having him back in Marietta with Izzy, his fiancée, felt like all was right with the world again, as if a piece of her had been lost and found again. That was what it had always been like between them. Maybe it was the twin connection, something more spiritual than physical. But she only knew that his steady presence in their lives had, in the last year, turned things around in so many ways.

"Maybe it was just a coincidence?" he offered. "This is a small town. Sometimes, just becoming aware of someone can make you noticed them more."

"True. But I just know I've never seen him around here before. And he certainly didn't look like a tourist," she said.

"Sounds like a guy like him would kind of stick out like a sore thumb here in Marietta and be noticed by more than you. I'll ask around, see if anyone has noticed. But could it just be your imagination running wild that he was looking at you any sort of way, what with everything that happened last night? The tire. Nearly running off the road. Cooper."

She looked at him askance. "This is not about Cooper."

"Maybe it is a little bit? Maybe he threw you off your game? All that knight in shining armor stuff?" Will's clear blue eyes twinkled as he teased her.

“Hey. I was not a damsel in distress for heaven’s sake. I would have gotten that tire changed,” she assured him. “Eventually. It was just lucky he happened by. But truthfully, I am glad I wasn’t alone out there when that guy drove past. Anyway, it’s over now.” She took a long sip of her coffee, shaking off her paranoia. “Tell me, how’s the wedding planning coming for this Christmas with you and Izzy?”

Will’s expression visibly brightened. “I’m just trying to stay out of her way. She’s got that all under control. Her grandmother is coming out for a visit soon to help her with some of the details. But we’re excited to have the ceremony on the ranch. The old round barn up the road is starting on renovations between all the other chaos going on. When it’s done, it will really expand our ability to have year-round celebrations on the ranch.”

“It’ll be perfect for weddings in all seasons. Cozy and warm in the winter. Cool and airy in the summer. And it will free up our large barn for more important things. Like our horses.” She laughed. “She-Ra and Lulu have been a little bent about getting kicked out of their stalls every other weekend because of weddings.”

Will chuckled, too. “And Izzy can’t think of a more perfect answer to her parents’ desire for a splashy, expensive Dallas wedding than setting it in a rustic round barn in the middle of Montana.”

“It’ll be great. They’re coming, though, right? Her parents?”

“Assuming they can drag themselves away from politics for the weekend,” he said with not a little sarcasm.

Izzy’s divorced parents were mutually unhappy about her running off with the limo driver—namely Will—on her wedding day to another man, no matter how justified. They were only slightly mollified to learn that Will was a former NFL player who didn’t survive on a limo driver’s—or a cowboy’s—salary and that their daughter was

madly in love with him. Just the thought of that made Shay smile.

“And Isaiah?” she asked, meaning his partner in the limo company. “Will he be able to come?”

“Oh, yeah. He’ll be standing up with me. And Emma, his wife, will come, too. And his kids if they want. I’ve asked Liam to be my best man and he said yes. I’d like to ask Ryan, too, to stand up there for me, if that’s okay.”

Shay bit her lip, emotion crowding her lashes. Ryan would be thrilled. “He’ll love it. Thank you, Will.”

“And don’t think you’re left out. But I’ll let Izzy tell you that.”

“Really?” She swallowed thickly, so happy he was home for good and so happy for another sister in Izzy. “I can’t wait to see you two married.”

“Thanks,” he said, covering her hand briefly with his. “I guess I don’t have to say this, but I want the same for you, Shay.”

She winced and shook her head. “Probably would’ve happened by now if it was going to happen at all.”

He leaned back in the chair. “After my divorce, I was pretty sure that was the end of it for me, too. But clearly, I was wrong. Hey, love rarely comes at you directly. It’s usually a sideswipe when you’re least expecting it and doesn’t exactly announce itself until you’re under the wheels and wondering what the hell hit you.”

“I guess. Maybe I’m just too old.”

“You’re thirty-one!” he argued, his eyes sparking with humor.

She grinned at him. “Should I warn Izzy she’s about to marry an old man?”

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“Call her crazy, but I think she knows exactly what she’s getting into,” he said, chugging his last sip of coffee. “And far be it for me to dissuade her from marrying into the dysfunctional chaos known as the Hardesty clan.”

“But it’s a lovely chaos, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “It definitely is.”

*

After a day split between working on the glamping tent site with Liam, which they’d nearly completed, and training the newly adopted dun mare they’d named Delilah for her long, dark mane, Cooper had watched Ryan work with Kholá as evening crept over the ranch. With days growing shorter and Ryan’s early mornings taken up with football practice for his school team, he’d already made remarkable progress with the filly considering his time with her.

The days spent in quarantine were not wasted on Kholá as Ryan had spent the time earning the horse’s trust. The filly had come with some trust issues, mostly a fear of being struck, and Ryan had worked a lot with her to convince her that she could trust him not to hurt her. All this had to happen before any attempts to train her were possible and, while Ryan had watched Cooper work with the other horses, he’d never seen such a quick study as Shay’s boy. He had a natural affinity for horses and seemed to have some instinctive ability to calm them.

Training a horse from scratch, Cooper had learned long ago from Birdy, his old mentor at the Four Sixes, wasn’t simply about getting them to do what you wanted

them to do. It was really about getting them to want to do what you wanted them to do. By the end of quarantine, Kholá was following Ryan around the ring like a puppy. Sure, he had treats, but more than that, she was learning to trust the hand that fed her and began to let go of whatever she'd suffered through at the hands of her previous owner that had sent her on a path to the kill pens.

After watching Cooper working with Delilah to get her over her fear of the rope by brushing it over her everywhere as she would tolerate it, Ryan had gotten Kholá to the point where he could throw the saddle blanket over her back now without spooking her. Next would be the saddle and the cinch. For now, he worked with just the halter. The reins and bit would come later. Ryan wanted the filly to learn the feel of his body on her first and not fear a bit in her mouth. If he could have competed in the Youth Encounter bareback, he would have preferred it. Cooper had to hand it to him, the kid had no fear. But he was enjoying watching Ryan's training process grow and develop.

After Ryan had put Kholá up and fed her, he lingered in the barn as Cooper groomed Delilah with a curry comb and then cleaned out her hooves. He did this as much for himself as for the horses, who loved getting fussed over. They craved attention that didn't involve actual riding. They enjoyed the touch and the grooming and even the affection human bonds could bring. So often, horses were viewed as utilitarian animals, born to simply work and earn their keep.

Which was true of ranch horses to a large degree, just as it was true for the humans who worked the ranch. But often forgotten was this simple, extra effort that strengthened the bond between human and horse. And if, as often happened, that quality was lost in the shuffle of everyday labor and busyness, then he was happy to spend a little time after work filling in that void with a little grooming.

He ran a hand over Delilah's jaw and stroked her soft nose, enjoying the contented quiver of the horse's skin in response. Delilah's eyes were half closed with pleasure.

“There’s a good girl,” he murmured. He tossed the curry comb at Ryan who caught it handily and dropped it in the bucket beside him.

“You did real good today with Kholá, Ry,” he said. “Your plate’s pretty full these days. How’s school going?”

“Okay.” The word was more of a sigh than an endorsement. Ryan was usually tight-lipped about whatever was going on in his life, but he seemed to be wanting to talk.

“That sounds a little less than enthusiastic.”

“I guess. School sucks.”

“Can you be any more specific?”

“We have check-ins coming up in two days for team sports and I’m failing math. If I do, I can’t play, and if I can’t play, I lose my position on the team.”

“Math, huh? That’s a tough one. How close is your grade to failing?”

“Two points. I have a math test tomorrow and, really, there’s no point. I just can’t do it. So, I’m just gonna fail.”

Cooper put Delilah up in her stall. Ryan had already filled up her water and alfalfa. “I was pretty good at math when I was in school. Maybe I can help you.”

“Nah. I’m just no good at algebra. It probably won’t help.”

“There’s always that chance. But on the other hand, what have you got to lose? And two points? Phhfft! You got this. What’s got you stumped?”

“X,” Ryan said, and laughed. “Basically, X.”

Cooper laughed, too, remembering solving equations in beginning algebra. There was a chalkboard there in the stable they used for keeping track of medications, feedings, etc. and he erased last week’s entries to make space for an equation. “Okay,” he said, putting one on the board. “Let’s see you solve this for X.”

*

That was where Shay found them as she came looking for Ryan a half hour later, huddled together in front of the chalkboard, scribbling equations. Damned if Cooper wasn’t actually teaching Ryan some complicated strategy for solving compound equations—something her son absolutely wouldn’t attempt with her. Because . . . why? Because she was his mom.

But with Cooper, there Ryan was, shoulder to shoulder, his face alight with concentration, solving the equation like a pro. After, the two high-fived each other like bros on the football field.

Shay covered her smile with her fingers, not wanting to break this scene up, but they turned and saw her standing near the doorway, watching. Ryan grinned up at her as he pointed to the equation as if he’d mastered quantum physics.

“I see,” she said, smiling now. “That’s awesome, Ry. I knew you could do it.”

“Cooper just showed me a different way of looking at it.”

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“Did he?” she asked, noting the pleased look on Cooper’s face. “I’m not surprised. I bet you didn’t know he was our class valedictorian back in high school.”

Ryan slid a surprised look at Cooper. “He was?”

“Oh, yeah. And very, very good at math. Don’t be fooled by his mild-mannered appearance. Under all that cowboy paraphernalia lurks a true brainiac.”

Cooper got to his feet, brushing chalk dust from his hands. “I definitely wouldn’t go that far.”

She exchanged a knowing look with Ryan. “Mimi’s got dinner ready, Ry. Why don’t you go on in the house. I’ll be up in a minute.”

He turned to Cooper. “Thanks for the . . . you know, help.”

“You’re welcome. Good luck on your test tomorrow.”

“Thanks. I think I got this,” Ryan said with new confidence, and headed up to the house.

She stood there for a long minute, arms crossed, shaking her head. “How did you manage that?”

“What? Helping him solve for X? He kind of asked.”

Shay bit her lip. “Well, thank you. I mean that. I try to help him, but I’m his mom and

there's like this . . . chasm of—I don't know—not wanting to need me, I guess? It usually ends in a frustrated stomp up to his room.” She rolled her eyes. “Teenagers. Anyway, thank you. You're really the perfect one to help him. He doesn't see you as a threat to his . . . independence, I think.”

“He's fourteen,” Cooper agreed with a smile.

“He sure is. But you're good with him. Kids, horses . . . What's your secret?”

“No secret,” he said, gathering up his jacket. “Just helping out where I can.”

“Where did you learn about training horses the way you do, anyway?” she asked, really wanting to know. “You didn't really grow up with a big operation like ours.”

“No, it was small and contained. My dad had another business—” He cut himself off and shrugged into his Carhartt jacket. “I mostly learned what I know in Texas,” he admitted. “The ranch I worked at had an ornery old cuss called Birdy, who was head wrangler and was, by all accounts, an actual horse whisperer. He claimed to be part Comanche, though which part was hard to say. Still, he had a special gift with horses, and he didn't believe in the traditional way of breaking them.

“He was convinced that a horse needed his spirit intact to be a trustworthy mount. And once you earned that trust, you couldn't buy a better partner on the trail. Years ago, as a young man, he managed to convince the ranch's very reluctant owner to try his methods with a handful of his unbroke broncs. Turned out he was right. They never went back to the old way. And after he taught me, neither did I.”

Shay nodded, watching him, fascinated by how getting to know him was like peeling an onion, layer by layer, only to learn that she might have completely misjudged the man and his motives.

“That’s not to say there aren’t other methods out there for making rideable horses,” he went on, patting Delilah through the bars of her stall. “I’ve just changed my thinking in general over the past few years about what’s possible, I guess.” He turned back to her. “Ryan’s got a little bit of Birdy in him, I think. He’s a special kid. He’ll do great with Kholá, I think. And hopefully, his math test.”

She grinned. “If he does, it’ll be thanks to you.”

He wasn’t likely to accept compliments like that and he ducked his head. “I’d better get—”

“Do you want to come up to dinner?” she blurted, cutting him off. “Mom made fajitas. I mean, she makes really great steak fajitas.”

If she wasn’t mistaken, she heard Cooper’s stomach growl. But he said, “That’s real tempting and kind of you, but I can’t. I’ve got somewhere to be.”

“Another date? You work fast, Lane,” she teased.

“Still not a date,” he said, but looked everywhere but in her eyes. “But I do have to go. See you tomorrow?”

“Okay,” she said, smiling, “but rain check on the dinner.”

He slid his hat on, touched the brim and walked out the barn doors, into the gloaming night.

Shay just stood there for a minute, shaking her head, feeling unreasonably disappointed that he was already dating someone even though he’d just moved back to town. Even though he’d denied it. She was pretty sure that was it.

Crazy.

That was the word that cropped up in Shay's mind as she left him in the barn, heading toward the house. These feelings she was starting to have for him were crazy. Irresponsible, too. And while we're at it, let's call it what it really is—foolish.

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She kicked at a rock in the driveway and sent it spiraling down the road and pain shooting up her toe. Limping a few steps, she swore and kept going.

Good grief. She'd just been alone too long. That was it. The fact that Cooper Lane was making her feel things that she hadn't felt in a long, long time, should have made her step back. Think twice. Be reasonable.

Instead, she'd intentionally put herself in that barn with him, alone. Close enough that even the heady scents of horses and a hard day's work on him had her imagining what it would be like if he just leaned a little closer and . . . kissed her!

What?

And there she was, apologizing for her sense of self-preservation, for heaven's sake. For imagining the worst in him.

But that sensible voice that she had always listened to before Cooper Lane had arrived and disturbed the Fforce was suspiciously silent these days.

And she wasn't sure what she was going to do about that.

*

That night, Cooper got home with his arms full of groceries, ready to cook a good meal after a long day at the ranch. But, setting the food down on the counter, his father was nowhere in sight. "Dad?"

Nothing.

He called again. Still nothing. Cooper thought maybe he'd gone out to the barn, but since there was no stock there anymore, there was no real reason to—

A sound from the other side of the house caught his attention. A thump. A loud thump.

He found his father on the bathroom floor, unconscious. Pale. Breathing shallowly.

“Dad!” He lifted the old man’s head onto his own lap and cradled him there for a minute, trying to wake him before dragging his cell from his pocket to call 911.

Chapter Five

The ambulance arrived after an agonizing twenty minutes, and he followed them to the hospital in his truck. He should have known. He should have seen this coming. Ray hadn’t been eating well or even trying for that matter. He should have seen how weak he was getting and forced him to see a doctor. But his father didn’t want any part of doctors. Or hospitals. Or getting well. He was determined not to fight whatever was happening to him. He’d given up.

There were a hundred tests and reams of questions for Cooper; many of which he didn’t have the answers to. It was a miserable feeling to know so little of your own father’s life, having been separated for as long as they had been. The attending doctor seemed to recognize Ray but said nothing. For that, Cooper felt grateful.

But he felt helpless watching them work without being able to help. The antiseptic smell of the hospital reminded him of the last time he was here, when his mother died. He’d been very young. It had been late at night and his father had scooped him out of bed and rushed him to the hospital. There had been a car accident. He saw her

once. But only long enough to kiss her hand goodbye. The shock of seeing her that way pretty much erased his memory of that night for a long time. But the smell of this place brought that night back, like a pounding heartbeat behind his eyes.

“He’s awake,” Dr. Rigby, the attending ER doc said when he emerged from the curtained-off room. “But we need to keep him overnight. His electrolytes are all out of balance and his numbers are all skewed. He doesn’t want to talk about the cancer, but we can’t not consider that in our treatment. I’m going to work on him a bit more, see if I can elicit some more information. He’s going to be here overnight. Maybe—probably—for more than one night. I’ve given him a sedative and some palliative care for his pain. He’ll be asleep again soon. Do you want to see him first?”

Cooper nodded. But he was too late. His father was already asleep when he got in the room. For a long time, he just stood by his bedside and watched his chest rise and fall.

“This isn’t enough,” he whispered to the old man. “Not nearly enough time. I’m not ready for you to go, Dad. Do you hear me? I’m not letting you go this easy. We—you and I—are going to work this out. We’re gonna get through this.”

Maybe he imagined that his father squeezed his hand. But he tightened his fingers around his father’s for a long squeeze.

In the hallway, after, he dialed the Hard Eight, hoping Liam would answer. Instead, Shay did.

“Is Liam around?” he asked her.

“Just me. Everyone is outside doing chores.”

The sound of her voice made him suddenly aware of his heartbeat in his ears. “Can

you give Liam a message for me?”

“Sure,” she said.

“I can’t make it in tomorrow. Maybe not for the next few days.”

“What? Are you okay?” She sounded worried now.

“I’m fine. It’s . . . personal. I just need—”

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A code blue sounded over the intercom and, all around him, the sound of orderlies, nurses and doctors rushing down the hallway jerked his pulse again. He followed them halfway, until he saw them go into someone else's curtained-off area. It wasn't his father.

"Cooper, where are you?" Shay asked. "Are you at the hospital? Are you sick?"

"No. It's not—Listen, just tell Liam—I've got to go."

"Wait. Do you need someone to come? Cooper? I'm coming. I'll be right there."

"Please. Don't," he warned.

No one knew about his father yet. He hadn't told anyone he'd come home. He wasn't sure why. He'd wanted to give him time. Both of them time.

But she'd already hung up.

Cooper cursed, rubbing his forehead. It was one thing to hire him on, eight years past the whole scandal that had taken his family down. It very well might be something else entirely if they knew his father was fresh out of prison and living back in Marietta. With Cooper. Maybe they'd fire him. He needed that job. But how could he keep any of this a secret now?

Fifteen minutes later, Shay appeared at the entrance of emergency, scanning the waiting room for him. When she met his eyes, she exhaled, as if she'd been holding her breath.

He got to his feet as she approached him, thinking how glad he was to see a familiar face. Not just any familiar face. Hers.

“Cooper—” she said, stopping in front of him. “You’re okay.”

Was he? He wasn’t sure.

“What’s going on?” she asked. “What are you doing here?”

“You shouldn’t have come,” he said. “But I’m . . . grateful that you did.”

She nodded, waiting for him to tell her.

He tipped his chin in the direction of the ER beds. “It’s my father.”

Shock registered on her face. “Your father? But . . . isn’t he in—”

“He was released a week ago.” To her shocked expression, he explained, “I didn’t mention it because I didn’t want to stir up any trouble at the ranch or here in town. He did his time. That’s over now. But he’s sick. Very sick apparently.”

“Oh. Cooper. I . . . I’m really sorry.”

Cooper stared at his hands. “It’s cancer. But he doesn’t want to treat it. He refuses to see a doctor. Well—” He gestured around them. “He doesn’t have a choice now. But I think prison just . . . broke him.”

Shay reached for his hand and her fingers warmed his. “I-I’m so sorry. And you’ve been working so hard on the ranch. I can’t imagine that it’s been easy for you, taking care of him and trying to manage his care, too.”

When she released his hand, he tucked his arms against his chest. “Look, I know you and others around here have big feelings about my father, but I need the job, Shay.”

“I know. That’s not what I’m saying. Of course, you have the job. What are the doctors saying?”

“A day, maybe two here. Then, I’ll take him home. But he’s . . . he’s not taking care of himself. Not really eating well.”

“That’s bad. He shouldn’t be alone.”

“I know. But . . .”

She took a deep breath. “Then, bring him to the ranch. With us. You can use the apartment attached to the barn. Our old ranch manager, Holland Meeks, lived there forever. It’s not The Ritz, but it’s nice. There’s a kitchenette. A bedroom. He can be there where we can keep an eye on him during the day and you can stay there, too. For as long as you need. Make sure he eats and doesn’t fall.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You didn’t ask. I offered.”

Now he looked her in the eye. “But why? You didn’t even want me at the ranch, much less my father—”

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“I know. I admit I was a little nervous about it,” she said, blushing. “But I’ve watched you work hard with Liam. He thinks you’re great. And Ryan can’t stop talking about you. How you are with the horses. So . . . apparently . . . every now and then I’m”—she leaned forward and whispered the next word—“wrong.”

“That was hard, huh?”

“You have no idea.” Shay bit back her grin. “So, it’s settled then. In a couple of days, you’ll bring him out to stay at the ranch. And he’ll eat. I mean, have you seen our vegetable garden? There’s bound to be something he likes there. I’ll tell Liam you’ll be out for a couple of days until then.”

He blinked up at her. “I know you didn’t want me working on the Hard Eight, because of our history.”

“That has nothing to do with you. And a girl can change her mind, can’t she?”

His throat felt like it had closed up on him. “Your family. Will they be okay with this? Having my father at your place?”

“Look at me. Do you think they’ll argue with this face? Now, about tonight. I can stay here with you for a while, or—”

“No. I got this. You go.”

“Are you going to stay here awhile, or do you need a ride home? Can I give you a lift?”

“I’m gonna wait until he gets a room, but I’ve got my truck. Thanks, Shay.”

“Sure.”

“No, I mean thank you. Really.” The smile she sent him seemed to crack some icy, frozen thing inside him.

“Okay, then. See you in a couple of days.”

Cooper watched her stride out the ER doors and disappear into the night, but it felt more like a force of nature had just exited the building. She was something. But then, she always had been. He wasn’t sure how to react to kindness like that anymore. He simply had no choice but to accept it.

He was still trying to get over her touching him the way she had. Taking his hand. Just a kneejerk kindness, he guessed. But he wished that touch had lingered just another minute.

Hell. There were times when even a grown-ass man needed a touch. A hug. Anything to beat off the damned loneliness.

He was reminded of his conversation with Trey Reyes about his wife and how he’d somehow changed his mind about being alone. How and when had he decided that he deserved that in his life?

Standing beside her just now reminded Cooper of how many times, as a teenager, when everything still seemed possible, he’d dreamed about being with her. She’d been so out of his league then, popular and beautiful, and him being the resident scholastic nerd she’d never looked at twice. But that summer after he went away to college, he’d dared to imagine—just for a moment—that she might turn his way. He’d gotten into Harvard; he’d finally grown into his body, and he’d lost the baby fat

after spending a year building muscle in the gym.

But that summer, it wouldn't be him. Instead, it was some rich, summer tourist kid that she'd set her sights on. Cooper remembered hearing that her twin brother Will had been against her seeing that guy. But he'd had to leave early to go to college and maybe that was partly why she got a little wild. All the campfire parties down by the river and rubbing shoulders with that boy's wealthy family vacationing in town for the summer. And even from a mile away, Cooper could see that guy wasn't worthy of her.

And then she was pregnant, and that boy was long gone.

From what he could see, Shay had raised Ryan alone. The fact she'd never married made no sense to him. There must have been a dozen guys from their class alone who would have married her. But here she was, still single, living with her mother and her son, worrying about him, sitting alone in a hospital waiting room. Making him feel . . . hopeful.

*

"Cooper Lane's father? Staying here?" Sarah Hardesty paled and turned quickly away from Shay, staring out her living room window after Shay had explained what had happened the night before at the hospital.

Shay watched her, confused. Her mom was the most generous, inclusive person she knew, and it had been, after all, Sarah who had encouraged Shay to give Cooper Lane a chance in the first place. But this news hit her differently. A stranger—an ill, ex-con stranger at that—staying at your ranch, needing who knew what? Maybe she was thinking about Shay's father who died suddenly only three years ago in that very barn where they would be staying. Maybe it was all too much? Shay should have considered all that before she offered.

“It will probably only be for a little while, while he recovers. I just felt like Cooper needed a little help and this was the best option, if we want to keep Cooper working with Liam,” Shay said. “Was I . . . was I wrong to offer?”

When Sarah turned back to her, there were tears in her eyes. “No. You weren’t wrong. We’ll do our best to make him feel welcome.”

“Mom. What are you not telling me? Obviously, you have feelings about this.”

She swiped at her cheeks. “No. It’s nothing.”

“Seriously?”

Instead of answering, she reached for a hamper full of towels she had taken from the dryer and began to fold them.

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“If you want me to rescind the offer I—”

“No. No, I don’t. For heaven’s sake. You’re reading too much into this. I’m just a little emotional today. I’m just . . . thinking about—oh, I don’t really know what I’m thinking about, but it has nothing to do with Ray.”

Ray? Not Mr. Lane or Cooper’s ex-con father? Shay tried to remember if her mother had even known Cooper’s dad back before everything went wrong. She couldn’t recall a connection. Unless it had been through her brother, Will, and the many sports teams he’d been on. She recalled Ray Lane had coached some of the park football teams when Will was young. “I promise it won’t mean more work for you. I got us into this. I’ll help out if he needs anything.”

Sarah sighed and patted her hand. “They’ll be needing some fresh sheets and bedding out there. Some food in the fridge. I’ve been wanting to clean that place up a bit for a while now. Here’s a good excuse.”

“That’s the exact opposite to what I meant when I said—”

“I need a distraction today anyway. This is a good thing. When did you say he’s coming?”

“A day. Maybe two?”

“You did the right thing, darling. I can always count on you for that.”

Sarah picked up the armful of towels and left Shay standing alone with her thoughts.

Something was going on with her mom, but she couldn't quite put her finger on what.

There were a million things to worry about that didn't include Ray Lane or Cooper. But she couldn't stop thinking about him, sitting alone in the hospital waiting room. She should have guessed that it was his father who had brought Cooper back to Marietta. Why else would he have come? Certainly, he'd been unfairly targeted after his father's conviction and had no love loss for this place. And yet . . . here he was. He surely could have taken his father back to Texas with him if he'd wanted. Sold the ranch. Used the money to buy something for them elsewhere after his father's release. But he came here instead.

She had heard somewhere that Ray had never confessed to his crimes. Never, even to be eligible for parole. So, he'd served out his entire term claiming innocence. But now, he was apparently dying, and simply giving up? Accepting that fate without a fight? Why, after so many years of incarceration, fighting for the truth, would he simply give up now?

All those questions were none of her business. And she was determined not to pry. Her offer to help was a simple one and she had no intention of getting involved in their family issues beyond doing what she could to lessen Cooper's burden. In a strictly platonic way.

But the memory of taking his hand in hers in the waiting room wouldn't quit her. As inconvenient as it was disturbing, the memory niggled at her—as usual. God, why couldn't she let things go? There was no going back to change it. She'd done it. She just hoped he didn't read anything into that touch. That was the last thing she wanted. Right?

Definitely.

Absolutely.

Not really at all.

Cooper had settled his father—his recalcitrant father—into the cozy apartment attached to the small barn this morning. Shay had been there to greet them, as had Sarah and Liam. That the family was on board with Shay's plan for keeping Ray there as he healed was a comfort, not only to her, but apparently, to Cooper as well. Ray was the lone dissenter, clearly not wanting to be a burden to anyone. He'd fought hard against the idea, but in the end, surrendered to Cooper's decision.

Shay didn't miss the look on his father's face though when he'd first seen Sarah. The sight of her seemed to take years off his face in an instant.

"Mrs. Hardesty," he'd said, touching the brim of his ever-present hat.

Whatever her mother was thinking, she masked her feelings well. "Ray." It seemed almost intentional that she used his first name and not his last.

"It's been a while," he said.

"Yes," Sarah said. "Yes, it has. I hope you're feeling better. Cooper said you were in the hospital."

"I told him I'd be fine at home, but he strong-armed me over here. A man doesn't want to admit he needs help. But I—we—thank you for having us. We won't overstay our welcome."

"Nonsense. The apartment comes with the job. We offered it to Cooper already, so one more person there is no problem at all. And we're glad Cooper won't have to worry, you bein' so far away."

Ray looked simply embarrassed by the whole thing.

“It’ll save me the long drive back home at night,” Cooper said. “It’s a win-win for both of us.”

It was easy to see where Cooper had gotten his looks. Ray Lane was still a handsome man, and Shay guessed he was only in his late fifties, like her mom. The silver at his hairline edged his once dark hair, but his eyes reminded her of Cooper’s—a mossy green, limned with near black.

The last few years had taken their toll on him. The deep crevices in his cheeks which might have been dimples once had been deeply carved by the trouble the last decade had brought him. He looked tired more than anything. Except when his eyes met her mom’s.

“I hope you’ll be comfortable here,” Sarah told him. “I put fresh linens on the bed and there’s a fold-out sofa for you, Cooper, with extra linens. There’s some food in the fridge. If you need anything, I left my cell number on the counter. Just call up to the house.”

“Appreciate that,” Cooper said.

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“I won’t be making any more work for you,” Ray said. “Don’t trouble yourself.”

“It’s no trouble at all, Ray.” She looked flustered and flushed to Shay, but that seemed to have nothing to do with the early September heat. Sarah scrubbed her palms against her worn denims. “I’ll stop by later to make sure you’re all settled. If that’s all right.”

Ray nodded, finally meeting her eye after avoiding it for most of the conversation.

The two of them held each other’s gaze for a good ten seconds with some indefinable something going on before Sarah nodded and Ray and Cooper walked back to his new digs and closed the door. Shay definitely got the vibe that there was more going on between these two than met the eye. Literally.

“You didn’t mention that you knew Ray Lane,” Shay said after they’d gone back to the apartment.

“Didn’t I? We didn’t know each other well,” she said, still staring at the closed door. “Just acquaintances. But it was a long time ago.”

Sarah wandered back to the main house then, leaving Shay and Liam staring after her.

“What is up with that?” Liam asked.

“I was going to ask you the same question.”

“Huh. Probably just our imagination that they seemed—”

“Right. No question. Just Mom being . . . Mom.”

As Sarah walked into the house, Liam and Shay exchanged knowing looks.

“Riii-ght,” they both agreed and went their separate ways.

*

It was late afternoon when Sarah knocked on the door to the apartment where Ray and Cooper were staying. Cooper was off working with Liam and everyone else had gone to town. When Ray answered, and saw her standing there, his hard façade crumbled.

“Sarah.”

“Hello, Ray. May I come in?”

He opened the door wider and let her in. They stood in awkward silence for a long moment before Ray gestured for her to sit on the comfy sofa near the electric fireplace.

They both spoke at once.

“You look—”

“You’re—”

“Sarah, I—”

Finally, Sarah took the lead. “I wanted to just say thank you for not saying anything about—”

“Us?” he finished.

“Yes,” she said. “About us, before we had the chance to talk.”

Ray rubbed his forehead. “Nothing really to tell, is there?”

The look she gave him belied that. But no one knew that better than him. “We never got the chance to talk after you were . . . arrested.”

“It was better that way,” he said. He didn’t really want to dig all this up again. There was no call to bring Sarah into this.

“Better for who?” she said. “I tried to visit you up there. Several times. I lied to Tom about where I was going. But they said you wouldn’t see me.”

“It needed to be over. We needed to be over. You had your family to think of. Nothing ever really happened, did it? Between us, I mean.”

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Sarah stood and filled a teakettle with water and put it on to boil, her back turned to him so he wouldn't see the tears in her eyes. "Except it did in a way that changed everything. In my heart, that is. I . . . I loved you, Ray." He said nothing and she turned back to him. "Did you love me? Or did I just dream all that up? Because sometimes, I've convinced myself of that."

Once upon a time, was how it felt—what had happened between them. It had all begun innocently enough, as a friendship. They'd known each other, tangentially, for years, since before he'd lost his wife a decade before. For a while, they'd attended the same church, but Ray had stopped going altogether after he'd lost Cooper's mother. But one season of Will's football when Ray had assistant coached had caught Sarah at a time when her relationship with Tom was particularly bad, or more accurately nonexistent. Tom was distracted with the ranch business and, worse, angry all the time. About what, she didn't know.

But Ray was kind and funny and all the things she wished Tom could have been, but never would be. They'd run into each other in town, accidentally at first, then on purpose for coffee, or lunch, or sometimes for a long drive into the country where they'd talk about all the things she could never talk about with Tom. Her feelings. Her dreams. Her needs. And his, too.

And yes, they'd kissed. They'd nearly done more, but Sarah wouldn't until she'd ended things with Tom. She planned on leaving him because the kids were all grown, and it was finally her time. But then, suddenly, it was all over, with Ray being accused and convicted of a crime she knew he couldn't have—wouldn't have—committed. That was the end of her dream. Her hope. In the tumultuous and confusing time afterward, she hadn't the nerve to leave Tom, who, years afterward,

admitted he knew about them. She still wondered why she hadn't the courage to go.

"You know I did love you," Ray answered finally. "But it wasn't meant to be."

She turned to him. "Why didn't you fight the charges? Fight for us?"

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter—"

"To me it does. Can you explain it to me? Why would you just let them railroad you like that?"

"Evan," Ray corrected, staring at his hands. "Evan Clulagher set me up. Laid it out carefully to frame me. Laundered money through my accounts and then disappeared it. Then he disappeared. There was only me left to take the fall for his crimes. My only crime was not paying closer attention. Trusting him."

Sarah fisted her hands. "You'll never convince me he didn't stage his own death. You and I both know he's off somewhere, living high on all that money he stole."

"Or he's dead."

She rolled her eyes and took a deep breath. "If there is any justice in the world. Evan didn't do all that cattle rustling alone. He had partners who went to prison, too. They could have cleared you."

Ray shrugged and stood as the teakettle began to whistle. He took it off the burner and set it aside. "Let it go, Sarah. It's over."

It wasn't over and both of them knew it.

She exhaled sharply and poured hot water into two cups from the cupboard, trying to

make her hands stop shaking. “You still drink tea?”

“Not for a long time. Prison’s more a coffee kind of place.”

She made tea anyway and handed him a cup. “You aren’t well. And I hear you’re not getting treatment.”

His cheeks flushed with color. “That’s my decision.”

“To die? Without even giving us a chance?”

That brought his gaze up to hers. “That chance has passed.”

“Has it?”

“I’m an ex-con now, Sarah. A pariah. I’m not the man I used to be. Your children, kind as they are, don’t want me here. The town doesn’t want me.”

“Since when do you care what everyone thinks about—”

“Since my old life disappeared and I am unrecognizable. Even to myself.”

“I know you,” she said, taking his hand. “I know your heart. I know you were innocent of what they said you did. But you have a chance now to start again. And you can’t just give that up. I’m asking you not to give that up.”

He took his hand away. “Is that why you’re here? To talk me into treatment?”

“No. Yes. Partly,” she admitted. “But, Ray, you know why I’m here.”

“I appreciate you letting us stay here. But what’s past is past. Done is done. Some

things are meant to be, and some things aren't. You and me? No, Sarah. I'm not that man anymore."

She set her tea down carefully. "Ray, I don't claim to even know what you went through these last eight years. It must have been terrible. And it had to change you. I know that. And I also know it will be hard to risk coming back to your life. No one thinks it won't be. But if you won't do it for me, then do it for Cooper. He needs you."

"He's a grown man."

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“Who loves you and wants you to stay.”

Ray scowled down at his tea and refused to meet her eye.

She stood to go. “You may think you can just disappear, Ray. Fade away and no one will notice. But you’re wrong about that. So, don’t get too comfortable being a ghost on my ranch. Because I see you. We all see you. You’re still alive, and you’re finally free. That alone is something to fight for.”

That was when Cooper burst through the door and stopped dead at the sight of her and his father obviously having words.

“Uh,” he said, his gaze seesawing between them. “Oh. I-I forgot my, uh—Hi, Sarah.”

Tight lipped, his father looked away.

“Oh, hello, Cooper,” Sarah said.

“I’m sorry,” Cooper said. “I didn’t mean to interrupt—”

“No, I was just leaving,” she said with an even smile. “Bye, Cooper. Ray?” Then, she walked out and let the door snick quietly in its frame.

Cooper turned to his father. “Everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine.”

“Looked like you two were in the middle of something. You look . . . upset.”

“Nope. What’d you forget?”

He could deny it all he wanted, but Cooper sensed something had happened between them. “My digital protractor. I left it in my bag.” He glanced at the two cups of tea still steaming beside each other. “Why did Sarah stop by?”

“It’s her ranch. She can go wherever she wants.”

“Just that you look a little . . . flustered about it.”

“Flustered? I’m not flustered. And do I get any privacy around here without you asking a hundred questions?”

“Okay, McCrabby.” Cooper knew surrender was his only option. “Might as well drink that tea, since she went to all the trouble of makin’ it for you.”

Ray gave Coop the side-eye. “How do you know I didn’t make it for her?”

“Just a hunch. But next time, maybe you should.”

Ray took a sip of tea and winced at the heat. “Next time, maybe I will.”

*

Another busy week passed on the ranch with building projects, cattle moving, and finally, a quick trip to the Marietta rodeo for all of them. That was a time to connect with friends they hadn’t seen in a while and to just let loose for the finals night and watch the show. There were incredible bull rides, calf-roping, barrel racing, and more. The horses and bulls were every bit the extreme athletes the riders were and

fun to watch. Mostly, the animals kept the upper hand, which—when they weighed that much in pure muscle and strength—is as it should be.

Cooper noticed that Ryan seemed more interested in a pretty, dark-haired girl from his school than in the show. And Cooper didn't miss the looks she was giving Ryan either.

Somewhere around ten that night, he spotted them sharing cotton candy near the stables, deep in conversation about a particular horse. Cooper marveled at how fast a transition kids made from being just kids to being interested in each other. At fourteen, Ryan was already not a little kid anymore, but moving into that next stage. Precursor, he supposed, to the one where your heart either got broken or you found yourself at last.

Cooper wasn't quite sure where he himself landed on that spectrum. Perhaps he'd find his answer right here in Marietta. That, or he'd be done with this place for good.

Shay chose a seat next to him in the bleachers and seemed to enjoy herself, cheering the athletes on. Once or twice she even grabbed his arm in alarm when a bull pulled some dangerous stunt with a rider. He tried not to feel encouraged by her unsolicited squeezes that night, but he was happy to be her touchstone whenever she needed him.

Will and Izzy came to dinner a few nights later and, over dessert, the conversation turned to the wedding that everyone was expecting to happen sometime during the Christmas holidays. As the women discussed colors and catering, Will, Ryan, and Liam zoned out over fantasy football picks. Which was actually fine with Izzy.

She was the one pushing back on any formal ceremony, considering her sketchy history with weddings. Only last summer, she'd endured a humiliating wedding debacle, from which Will had rescued her, driving her in his limo from Texas to Seattle, with a rather life-changing pit stop at the Hard Eight. Turned out, they were

meant to be. Now, wild horses couldn't pull those two apart and Shay was happy for them. Izzy had become like a sister to them all and Shay already loved her like one.

With long blond hair and dark violet eyes, Izzy couldn't be more the antithesis of her moneyed background. She was down-to-earth, funny, and had a laugh that was contagious. She fit right in here, like now, jumping in to wash the dinner dishes and catching Shay up on their recent visit to Seattle.

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“Literally, this gigantic salmon missed my face by mere inches as these two fish mongers tossed it back and forth up at Pike Place Market,” she said, laughing, handing Shay a rinsed plate. “And while Will yanked me out of the way because I wasn’t paying any attention, I’m pretty sure those two would never have hit me. They’re like jugglers—only with slimy fish!”

Shay laughed. “And did you buy it? The fish?”

“Me? Cook on vacation? That would be sacrilege, really. No. But we did have fun talking to the juggler brothers after. One of them held a PhD in medieval history and used to teach at Oxford, and the other one was a former Special Forces Marine. But they were happy as clams with their work there. Just goes to show you. You can’t judge a book by its cover. And the market itself had all kinds of cute stuff and we found a few fun décor pieces for the glamping tents there.

“And later that day, we ate at a cute little place on Bell Harbor with fresh oysters and unbelievable seafood that melted us into little puddles of incandescent joy. And it made us want to live near the ocean.”

Shay looked up, stricken.

“But only for a minute,” Izzy quickly assured her. “And really just for the fresh oysters. We missed this place terribly, even with all the fabulous shopping there and seeing my friend, Carrie, and her three babies, who were adorable. The Pacific Northwest is gorgeous with all the trees and the water, but nothing really compares to Montana.”

“Even with the long winters?” Shay asked, knowing that winters here were especially hard on newbies.

“Even so. I mean, it’s just an excuse to cuddle in front of the fire, right?”

Shay sighed. “Sadly, Ryan is not into cuddling anymore. Fourteen, you know?”

“Welp. I guess that just means you’ll have to find another cuddling partner.” She glanced out the window at Cooper in the pens. “What about him?”

Shay found herself blushing, unable to stop it. “What about him?”

Izzy shrugged. “Liam says he’s a good guy. And you have to admit he’s hot.” At Shay’s sideways look, she added. “What? I’m taken, but I’m not dead. And you do realize that I have two almost sisters-in-law who are in dire need of cuddle partners.”

Izzy ducked, laughing as Shay splashed five fingers full of soapy water at her. “I’ve managed to make it this far on my own, and I’m certainly not in dire need of any man.” She slid a stack of dry plates into the cupboard.

“Okay. Maybe not dire need,” Izzy agreed. “Maybe I was overstating. What I meant was, it would be nice, and what’s wrong with him?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Do you two have history?”

“No,” she said quickly. “Not really. Though I’ve known him forever. It’s just not a good idea. He works for us now and besides, there’s his father . . .”

“I heard about that, too. So, you lump Cooper in with all that business with his dad?”

“No.” Maybe. “Of course not. It’s just that I’m not looking to get involved with anyone right now. Especially someone as complicated as Cooper.”

“I wasn’t looking last summer, either. Especially after what my ex, Theo, did. I was technically, and in every other way, finished with relationships. But then . . .” She sighed. “There was Will. I was lucky, I guess. But some part of luck is being present. In the moment. Not worrying about yesterday or tomorrow. At least, I think so.”

“I’m a single mom. I have to worry about those things.”

Izzy clucked her tongue. “Listen to me, giving you advice. You’re my role model for the best mom. Because, as you may have heard, my own mom wouldn’t win any awards in that department. And I’m just kind of figuring out how all the rest of this works. So, just ignore me.”

“Hey,” Shay said. “I’ll never ignore you. I may not take your advice, but I’ll never ignore you. Because I think you’re wise beyond your years, Izzy. And Will couldn’t have made a better choice in you. This whole thing with Cooper and his father . . . it’s tricky. But it’s mostly me being stuck worrying about other people’s opinions, trying to get this guest ranch going, and also me being totally out of practice with men. I thought I knew who he was, but every day, he strips away another piece I was wrong about, tosses it aside. Now I’m really not sure who he is.”

Izzy winked and handed her another plate to dry. “Finding out can be half the fun.”

Chapter Six

The sun was setting over Copper Mountain a few days later, casting the prairie and everything between in a purple-pink wash of color. Skies like this one were often seen during a fire or a storm, but tonight was perfect, with no sign of rain. In the distance, the wild mustangs grazed in the dim light, huddled together in groups, a few

of this season's foals napping close by their mamas. The scene could have been ripped off a postcard advertising Montana with the mountains in the distance and the occasional glimmer of the snaking Yellowstone in between.

Shay wandered out from the house to the corrals where she saw Cooper giving the new horses evening treats—carrots and sugar lumps, which were Kholá's personal favorite.

Her annoyance with Cooper being such an eyeful had begun to wane, despite her best intentions to ignore him. Instead, she now and then allowed herself to sneak a look to appreciate his beauty. His ripped torso, muscular arms, the way his denim followed the curve of his butt.

To say nothing about his eyes—as green as the Montana prairie after a storm. And the way he looked at her sometimes as if there was something he wanted to say but couldn't bring himself to say it. Gone was that nerdy boy who'd once been, and in his place, this beautiful man, who sent unwanted prickles of heat to her core when she was close to him and made her forget that ogling his rear end was a very bad idea.

Shay straightened, embarrassed. That's so cringe, Mom, she could almost hear Ryan saying. Cringe. Yeah.

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What was wrong with her? And how long had it been since she'd even noticed a man's . . . nicely curved ass?

Too long was the answer. It had been too darned long. Wasn't thirty-one supposed to be the height of a woman's feminine power? Somewhere, she'd heard that. And where was she? Single, living with her mother, standing in the yard of her struggling ranch, imagining how Cooper Lane's lips would feel against hers.

Stop. That kind of dangerous thinking will get you exactly nowhere. And she didn't want to kiss him for heaven's sake. She didn't even really like him.

Much.

God, she was out of practice.

From a distance, she watched him distribute the treats to all the new horses who had already come to accept his offerings without complaint or fear. Likewise, Ryan had made great progress with his filly just watching Cooper work with the others. Already they were working with lunge lines and several looked like they'd already had histories of being ridden.

In the cool of yesterday evening, she'd seen Cooper working with the bay mare in the circle pen while her son watched. The mare was running in panicked circles on the lunge line and Cooper had stood casually in the center, seemingly unconcerned with whatever the horse was running from, but calmly shifting the lunge line from one hand to the other, speaking softly, not buying into the horse's fear. After a good little while, the mare slowed and walked directly up behind Cooper, stopping, covered

with sweat and confusion, but looking for relief from the only likely source. Cooper.

Slowly, he turned to the mare, stroked her nose, and fed her a treat for doing what he'd wanted all along. The mare licked and chewed, a sign Shay recognized from being around horses her whole life as some kind of release of tension. Baby horses clacked their lips together when they approached an older horse, as if to say, "I'm just a baby, don't hurt me." Older horses similarly did this as if relaxing of tension in their jaws once the threat of danger seemed past.

At any rate, Cooper had a Zen way of being with the animals. It was almost as if some magical thing was happening between them. These were damaged animals that had been universally abandoned, given up on, and rejected by whatever humans had had them before.

And as the dun mare finished up and joined the others, the gray mare with the silver mane actually nuzzled Cooper's chest, and he wrapped an arm around her head and patted her back. Shay thought, in that moment, that those horses might just follow him anywhere. And not just for the sugar.

Now, Cooper looked up to find her watching him again. He smiled. "Hey, there."

"Hey, yourself." She climbed on the rail of the paddock. "I see you're making new friends."

He patted the mare one last time and moved away from her. "You can't ever have too many," he said, smiling at her. "Especially on a night like this."

They both turned to look at the sunset. "I've lived here my whole life and I'll never get used to how beautiful it is here," she said. "Did you miss this sky when you lived in Texas?"

“Texas has its own supernatural beauty, but this place . . . it gets in your blood.” He moved beside her at the fence. “I can see why you never wanted to leave.”

“It’s not that I never wanted to,” she admitted. “I did once. I thought there might be bigger things out there for me somewhere.”

“Bigger than this ranch?”

“Silly, huh?”

“Not at all. There is something to the old the grass is always greener saying. I never expected to be where I am now either. I guess I imagined something else altogether.”

As she recalled, their high school class had dubbed him Most Likely to Succeed. Then again, the horses in his care might argue that he had achieved just that.

“I guess dreams don’t always take a linear path. And most get detoured by reality,” she said. A fact they both knew all too well. “I’m not saying I regret anything. I don’t. I’m right where I should be. I have Ryan, my family, everything I need, right here. All the rest is just geography.”

He smiled the smile that made her heart stutter. “And now look. You’re building something to bring the world to you. It’s a big dream turned real.”

“With your help,” Liam said to Cooper, walking up behind Shay. “Your ideas have been really innovative and helpful. If this place succeeds, it will be in no small part because you were here to help.”

Shay couldn’t decide if she was relieved or annoyed that Liam had interrupted their conversation.

“Don’t you agree, Shay?” Liam prompted, putting her on the spot.

“I—Yes.”

Cooper patted the mare who was nuzzling his shoulder. “I was just about to go get some dinner started for my dad.”

“Wait,” Liam said. “Since I’ve got the two of you together, I wondered if you’d mind, Shay, taking Cooper for a ride to scout out parts of the ranch that would make for good trail rides tomorrow. We’ve booked a wedding for a couple of friends of mine here as well as their honeymoon later this month in one of our glamping tents down by the river. They’re so excited and have never been on horseback, but it was their big request. I want to make sure we get those trails set and start clearing them in case they need some maintenance before our guests come. Shay knows the ranch pretty well, and she can show you around.”

The thought of spending hours alone with Cooper was . . . well, she wasn’t sure at all what it was. “But . . . really?” Shay knew her cheeks were flushed. “I thought that was something you’d want to do. Knowing the ranch backward and forward as you do.”

Cooper stared down at his boots and said nothing.

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“You’ve ridden this ranch every bit as much as I have,” Liam told her. “And you’ll come at it with a different perspective than me. I’ll make sure Lulu and She-Ra are pulled off pasture tonight so they’ll be ready to go in the morning.”

“Lulu and She-Ra?” Cooper asked.

“Two of our best ranch horses. Unless you want to take one of the new ones?”

“Not ready yet. No, Lulu and She-Ra will be fine.”

Flustered, Shay did her best to make light of the situation. Could she spend the morning riding with Cooper Lane? Of course, she could. “Shall we say eight o’clock then?”

“Sounds good,” Cooper replied. “I’ll have the horses saddled up and ready to go.”

“All right then. See you in the morning.”

As she walked away, she felt his eyes on her, simultaneously telling herself she was crazy and almost turning to confirm. But in the end, she kept walking. Because looking back would be admitting she was hoping he was watching her. And how idiotic would that be?

*

Morning broke over the ranch as Cooper finished eating breakfast with his father. Ray had been even quieter than usual the last couple of days, since Sarah’s visit, and

Cooper wondered about it. But, because his father had drawn a line in the sand, Cooper didn't broach the subject of Sarah with him. Instead, he talked about the ride he would take this morning with Shay.

"Maybe sometime, you'd like to take a ride with me," he suggested. "I can saddle up a horse for you and we can go down to the Yellowstone to fish." How many hours had they spent doing just that when Cooper was a boy? Tossing lines into the shallow river and catching dinner or just catching and releasing the fat rainbow trout that hid in the deeper shallows beneath stands of oaks and willows? He missed those easy days with his father, and he wondered if Ray missed them, too.

"Yeah," Ray said, his look suddenly far away. "I'd like that. You remember that time we caught the grandfather of all trout up by Twisted Root Cove?" He did. "You fought that fish for nearly a half hour before you got him up on shore. You were sure proud of that fish. And then you threw him back in before I could get a picture."

"I didn't need a picture. You and I were the only ones that mattered, and we knew. Besides, he was too old and still had too much fight left in him to let that be his ending," Cooper said.

Ray smiled. "I guess so. You always were a soft touch with animals."

"I like 'em better than people, for the most part."

"They're more trustworthy, that's for sure," Ray said, pushing his eggs around the plate with his fork. "I was wondering if later today, you could drive me into town?"

"Sure. What do you need?"

"I . . . made an appointment with a doctor at the hospital."

Cooper leaned forward. “Are you feeling worse? Do you need to go now?”

“No, no. I’m, uh, meeting with an oncologist at Marietta Hospital.”

“You are?” That admission couldn’t have surprised him more if he’d taken a two-by-four upside the head. “Wait, are you considering treatment then?”

“Don’t get all excited. I’m talking to him. That’s all. Maybe give it a shot. See if there’s other options.”

“What exactly did Sarah say to you anyway?” Cooper asked.

“What makes you think she had anything to do with—”

“Just tell me, Dad. What did she say to change your mind?”

Ray ran a hand through his graying hair, as a muscle in his jaw tensed. “She said I couldn’t be a ghost on her ranch, not until I am one, officially, and she wouldn’t have it. She said—” He hesitated for a long pause.

“What?”

“She said you needed me.” Ray looked up and met his gaze as Cooper’s eyes began to sting. It was the first hopeful thing he’d said since he’d brought him home.

“I do. Need you. You’re all I’ve got, Pops. I’m not ready to lose you.”

“Well, then.” Ray swiped at his nose. “My appointment is at eleven.”

Cooper nodded. He'd be back long before that.

*

Lulu and She-Ra were saddled and ready to go by the time Shay got to the barn at eight. Lulu was Shay's horse—a sweet, nineteen-year-old bay quarter horse with white stockings and a blaze down the center of her forehead. She had the temperament of a lamb but could still out quarter any quarter horse around. Years ago, before Ryan, she'd done some barrel racing with Lulu and still had the trophies and ribbons up in the attic somewhere to prove it.

She-Ra—named by Ryan after becoming enamored with the cartoon character on YouTube as a little boy—was a gentle, strawberry roan Appaloosa who had taught Ryan all about loving a horse, and to this day, was his favorite. At least, up there with Kholá.

Cooper led the horses out of the barn and handed her the reins to Lulu. With a smile he touched the brim of his Stetson, the same way he had that first day they'd met at the auction. “Ma'am?”

Shay blinked. “Cooper? Did you just call me ma'am?”

He swung up on She-Ra. “We're on official ranch business. What should I call you? Ms. Hardesty? Boss?”

“Let's get one thing straight. You can address my mother as ma'am all day long. And you can call Liam boss if you want. But don't ever call me ma'am again. It makes me

feel . . . old.”

“Okay,” he said. “But you should know, you lookin’ old was the furthest thing from my mind.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that you look real pretty at eight o’clock in the morning. Sunshine on your hair and all. That’s what I was thinkin’.” He nudged his horse into a lope and pulled off in front of her, leaving Shay to stare after him in shock. Pretty?

Her pulse scraped against the collar of her shirt as she mounted Lulu and nudged her after him. If she’d been trying to impress him by curling her hair or even putting on makeup in the two hours she’d, instead, spent futzing around the kitchen avoiding anything that smacked of trying, she’d be flattered. But she’d done none of those things, perhaps on purpose. She’d left her hair in a single loose braid, specifically to make sure he knew she hadn’t tried. The thought of spending the morning with him today—balancing on that precarious edge of her feelings about him—had cost her sleep last night, and now, with a few words, he’d justified every lost minute.

Just that you look pretty at eight o’clock in the morning. Sunshine on your hair and all.

She couldn’t remember the last time someone told her she looked pretty. Most of the time, she just felt invisible and frazzled.

His easy compliment set her teeth clenching. Gosh, she wasn’t that easy. Was she?

She inhaled deeply and gave Lulu another nudge to catch up with him. And wasn’t she supposed to be showing him the ranch, not the other way around?

It took them a while to work their way through the pastures and through the cattle gates that led to open grazing land. Copper Mountain rose in the distance, but here, the land rose into foothills, winding through scrub-covered washes and leading to the tree line. It was pretty country, and here, the pines scented the air as the horses crushed pine needles beneath their hooves.

Cooper glanced at his watch. “You got a destination in mind?”

“There’s an overlook that’s amazing and you can see the whole valley. There’s also a little surprise there.” She pointed to where the trail forked two ways. “Let’s head that way.”

There was a good deal of brush and low-hanging branches that would need to be cleared before bringing guests up this trail, but it looked doable to him with a hand-held mini-chainsaw.

He inhaled deeply, feeling the calm of nature soaking in. Even in North Texas, where there was nothing but prairie, he’d missed the forest and the singular fragrance of Montana. This was what the Hard Eight ranch could offer city folks who lived amidst concrete parking lots, skyscrapers, traffic, and honking horns. There was something centering about this breath of nature and beauty. Something that made one forget, for just a little while, that there were problems in their life, jobs to worry about, or things going wrong. Here was a little piece of heaven, and the only soundtrack that mattered was the sound of your horse’s hooves, the cry of eagles flying overhead, or the rush of your own heartbeat.

Shay held back until he caught up with her and the two of them took the wider trail together for a while. “It’s been a long time since I’ve done this,” he said as they rode. “There’s a terrible beauty up here.”

“That’s a funny way to put it.”

“But accurate. In this season, these mountains are a refuge. In others, they’re just a dangerous reminder of how insignificant we really are.”

She considered his words that were surprisingly deep for a man who moved cattle and trained horses for a living, proving, yet again, how little she really knew him. “And I agree. Winter’s unforgiving here and these mountain trails will be buried under snow and no good for riding. That’s when we put people on snow mobiles instead.

“To be honest, I haven’t done this in a long while either,” she said. “In fact, I can’t remember the last time. Life gets busy with Ryan and driving him five ways to Sunday. And ranch work is pretty focused on the cattle, so if there’s riding to do, it’s chasing after them or herding them into pens. This . . .” she said, staring out at the view ahead of them. “This is what it’s really about to live here. It’s, granted, a narrow window for this kind of weather, but even in the winter, these hills are beautiful. Good for snowmobiling at least. But summers . . . when I wasn’t practicing my barrel racing, we used to ride up here when I was young. Me and Lulu.” She patted her horse’s neck. “She’d been my one constant through it all.”

Cooper nodded. “I had a horse like that. Petra. She was a pretty Pinto and steady as they come. She was born on our ranch. But . . . we lost all of our horses, including her, when my dad went to prison. Lost pretty much everything but the ranch itself.”

She could hear the pain in that memory. “I’m sorry.”

He stared out over the valley as they passed through a stand of lodge pole pine. “I often wonder where she ended up. But that was a long time ago.”

“Maybe you could find her?”

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He shook his head. “Doubt it. Anyway, I always imagined—or hoped—she’d found some kid to love her and that she had a good life.”

“I’m sure she did.”

He smiled a little sadly. “Hope so.”

They broke through a stand of trees and found themselves in an open field covered with end-of-summer wildflowers that had turned to straw. The grass here was still a little green and they pulled up the horses and let them graze for a minute. “This still Hard Eight land up here?” he asked.

“It ends a little way up ahead. But yes. This is all ours down to the valley.” Shay dismounted. “Come on. I want to show you something.”

*

They took the horses with them as they walked a short distance to an outcrop of rock where a small creek ran down the mountain, following the jagged granite boulders in its path. Shay knelt beside the outcrop and pointed to the small gush of water spilling out from the mountain. “It’s a mountain spring. Freshest water you’ll ever taste. Luckily, it’s on our land, but I suppose if water companies found it here, they’d want to ruin everything and bottle it up.”

The horses dropped their heads to the small creek for a drink and Shay cupped her hands into the trickle of spring water and took a long drink. “Try some.”

He did. And she was right. It was the best-tasting water he'd ever had.

"This little spring feeds our ranch and has forever, I guess. A decade ago, or so, another rancher tried to divert the water to his land, but that was short-lived. Tom Hardesty would do anything to protect this land. Our legacy. He wasn't an easy man, but I guess we're lucky he was so hardheaded."

A distant rumble of thunder brought their gazes to the dark clouds that had begun to gather to the west with the suddenness of typical Montana weather. One minute the sky could be clear, the next, a downpour waiting to happen.

"We'd better get back before that storm that's coming hits. Looks like it'll be a good one."

She followed his gaze with a worried look. "The weather forecaster didn't say anything about rain today."

"Looks like he was wrong."

A movement to their right caught Cooper's eye. Some animal darting into the brush. She-Ra whinnied an uneasy high pitch squeal.

"What was that?" Shay asked, hopping to her feet.

"Not sure. Coyote?" He reached into his saddle bag and pulled out a pistol.

Her eyes widened. "You brought a gun with you?"

"Not gonna stop a bear, but it'll stop a coyote if need be. We're in prime wildlife territory with this fresh water source."

Something moved in the bushes, rustling the drying leaves of the scrub. Cooper aimed the pistol in that direction, then yelled, “Yahh!” to scare whatever was in there away. But instead of a coyote, a small brown and black pup flattened itself to the ground, poking its nose under the bushes.

“That’s no coyote. That’s a dog! Put the gun down.”

He leaned closer. “You sure?”

Shay approached the scrub and spoke softly. What appeared was a small puppy. “Oh, no! What in the world are you doing all by yourself, all the way up here, baby?”

Indeed, it was a puppy, clearly starving, skinny and covered in dirt and burrs. It looked like it had been out here for days or longer. The pup whined and thumped its tail on the ground, edging out from the brush with a hopeful wiggle. Still, the pup cried in fear as Shay approached it, but didn’t run. Desperate, the puppy seemed willing to overcome his fear to ask for help. Gently, she lifted the pup in her arms, cradling him there.

“Poor thing! Who could do this?” Shay said. “Just . . . why? He can’t be more than two months old.”

“Maybe we should look around, see if there are any others.”

As they spoke, another one crawled toward them out of the bush. That one was white and brown coated, equally as scruffy and skinny as the other one. They searched for more, but if there had been others, they were gone now. By the time they’d finished catching that one, lightning streaked behind the mountain and thunder cracked loudly close behind. The puppies were shaking uncontrollably with fear.

“What if we’d never come?” she said. “These two were just abandoned here. They

wouldn't have lasted much longer.”

“We'll get them back to the ranch, get them to a vet. But we're not safe out here,” he said. “We need to find some shelter 'til that storm blows over.”

“We're miles from any shelter I know,” she told him.

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“Maybe not. I think I saw an outcrop of rocks not too far down the mountain. Better than nothing.”

*

They mounted and rode with the two lost puppies in their arms down the same trail they’d taken up. All the while, they could smell and feel the rain coming. The lightning storm grew worse, exploding a pine tree less than two hundred feet from them. Then, a drenching rain poured down on them.

Soaked to the skin almost instantly, Shay shouted to Cooper over the sound of the rain. “That way!” She pointed to the fork in the trail that ran along a wall of stone, above a steep ravine. “We’d better walk the horses!”

They led the horses down the narrow trail that led to a thin stand of pine in front of a shallow cave-like rock shelf in the wall. Quickly, they led the horses underneath and took shelter from the rain there, too. Water soon gushed over the rocks like a waterfall from somewhere above them, but they were fairly protected from the storm here. At least from the lightning. Even the horses were able to squeeze under the narrow shelf of rock.

Shay squeezed the water from her braid, then tucked a small towel from her saddle bag around her small, shivering puppy. The grateful pup curled in her lap as did his brother against Cooper’s warmth. Breathless, she looked up at Cooper. The two of them could only laugh, drenched to the bone, clothes sticking to their skin. Cooper fingered a loose strand of her wet hair off her cheek with a smile.

“Well, that was exciting,” he said, staring out at the lightning still forking across the darkened sky. “Though, I don’t think it’s a good idea to advertise that kind of adventure to your guests.”

The fabric of her blouse made a sucking sound as she pulled it away from her chest. “Yeah, I think we could skip that part all together.”

They poured bottled water into their hands to allow the puppies to drink. They were hungry and needed food soon. Cooper broke up a couple of crackers he kept in his saddlebag for them to eat. It wasn’t what they needed but it was all they had. They gobbled the crackers up.

“They’re so thin,” she said, stroking the one in her arms. He was already falling asleep there. “At least they had the spring there for water.”

“Probably wouldn’t have lasted much longer if we hadn’t found them. Lucky dogs.” He gave his puppy a scratch behind the ears. “Looks like you’ve got yourself a couple of ranch dogs.”

“Ryan will be thrilled,” she said, stroking the little dog’s ears. “When our ranch manager retired a year ago, he took his dog with him. Ryan has been wanting another ever since. But these two are in terrible shape.”

“We’ll get them down as soon as the rain lets up. They’ll make it. No thanks to whoever did this to them.”

“It’s a regular thing, this dumping of dogs on the roadside—which is awful—but up here? In the middle of nowhere? With hungry predators? It’s a wonder they survived at all.”

She couldn’t help but shiver.

“You cold?”

She shook her head, but they were both soaked through. Chilled to the bone with the sudden drop in temperature.

“I’d give you my shirt but—” He pulled the soaked fabric away from his skin with a sucking sound.

His every muscle was defined by his soaked shirt. For a few moments, she was lost staring at him. But she was every bit as exposed. She pulled the puppy closer to her chest.

“This storm doesn’t look close to letting up,” he said, “looks like building a fire is out.” Holding out his arm to her, he urged, “C’mere. Get closer. Let me warm you up.”

Shay eyed his muscular, open arms. Find someone to cuddle with, Izzy said. What about him? she said. “Oh. I don’t think—”

“C’m on,” he encouraged. “It won’t last forever, and I don’t bite.”

Shivering, she scooted close to him, hesitantly eased her shoulder against his chest. He put his arm around her. Instantly, she felt his warmth seep into her. She tried not to sigh as he pulled her against his side, rubbing her arm to warm her. “Okay. That is better,” she admitted.

“Yeah, it is.”

She wrapped her arm around his back to warm him, too. They sat like that, listening to the storm. Slowly, she began to relax there against him, tucking her cheek against his shoulder. It felt good, so good, to be held again. It had been a long time since

she'd felt any man's arm around her. She drank in the feeling, knowing it could be a long, long time before she felt it again.

For a long time, they didn't talk. Instead, Shay listened to his heartbeat thud against her ear as the rain poured down in sheets, as the temperature continued to drop, as she chose and discarded a dozen things to say to him.

"I'm sorry you got dragged into coming up here today," she said at last.

"No one dragged me. Least of all you."

"Right, but just the same. I'm sorry. This is not the way I saw the morning going."

"I don't know," he said. "Didn't turn out too badly. Considering."

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She looked up to see if he was kidding. His smile said he was. Sort of. She shivered again. “I skipped breakfast,” she admitted. “I was too nervous about today to eat.”

He pulled out a roll of mints from his pocket, handed her one and popped one in his mouth, too. “Nervous? Why?”

“I knew you were doing this whole ride under duress.”

“Not at all. I was looking forward to it. This storm was just an unexpected bonus.”

That caught her by surprise. “Really? At least it was Liam’s idea. So, he can’t be mad at us getting back late.”

Cooper glanced at his watch again and sighed. “Except my father has an appointment later this morning with an oncologist. I thought we’d be back in plenty of time for me to get him there, but I’d better call him.”

“Cell signals up here are spotty at best.”

He checked his cell. No signal. A low curse escaped him.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “But that’s encouraging he made an appointment, though. I thought he was against getting treatment. That’s what I heard at least.”

“He was. But after a conversation with your mom, apparently, he changed his mind. At least he seems willing to try something.”

“With my mom? What could she have said to him?”

“But I happened to interrupt a conversation they were having in our apartment. That was your mom telling him to get his act together, I guess. That he couldn’t just give up. Not on her watch anyway. And...that I needed him. It was a surprise, really, because I thought that they hardly knew each other.”

As he talked, his thumb absently rubbed across her shoulder. His fingers warmed her arm.

She felt warm everywhere he touched her. “Maybe they did.”

“I feel like I would’ve known,” he said.

“Really? I don’t think any of us really know our parents when we’re young. I mean, life is complicated.”

Cooper frowned. “Are you saying—”

“I’m saying that our parents are and will forever be a mystery. I guess that’s how it should be. I mean Ryan might not understand . . . this.”

“Me, holding you, you mean?”

His thumb moved against her arm, sending tingles down to her fingertips. There was something particularly intimate about that motion, but she didn’t want him to stop. “Yes.”

“Mind if I ask you a question?”

She gave a noncommittal shrug, afraid he’d just heard her thoughts.

“You never married Ryan’s father. Or anyone else for that matter.”

“Is there a question in there somewhere?”

“I just wondered why. Why a woman like you would stay single and not find some man to love you?”

“Huh. I could ask you the same thing.”

“I asked first,” he said.

After a long moment, she decided to answer him. “Ryan’s father, Ethan Bradley, was a summer boy. You know the kind. His very wealthy family had sent him here on summer break to experience the West. To work on a ranch wrangling his father’s friend’s cattle. To at least pretend he understood an honest day’s work. I was young, he was different, attractive. He was everything I thought I wanted. Someone urban. Someone who could expand my universe. We spent the entire summer together. I thought I loved him. But at the end of summer, he returned to school back East with hardly a goodbye. When I realized I was pregnant, I called him. He told me that it was my problem, not his. He practically denied it could be his. He wanted me to—” She couldn’t even say it.

“So, he basically ghosted you?”

“His parents sent me money. A check. To me, then—even now, to be honest—it was a lot of money, but I wouldn’t keep it. I sent it back. I didn’t want their money. Or anything to do with them. Instead, I had him sign away any parental rights to the baby, which he happily but foolishly did. Because Ryan is an incredible kid who he’ll never know. That was the last I heard from him.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah,” she agreed.

Lightning streaked across the sky in a dozen little forks over the valley and thunder cracked, spooking the horses, tugging the reins that Cooper held tight. The puppies burrowed against them as well, still shivering.

“I’m single by choice,” she went on, ignoring the drama in the sky. “I won’t put my son through another disappointment. I . . . don’t need anyone.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes. That’s right.”

“Or is that because Summer Boy stomped all over your heart?”

She exhaled a laugh and pushed away from him. “He did, but I got over it. You don’t know me, Cooper, or what I want.”

“Maybe. But I’d like to,” he said, his voice low, his gaze focused on her. “Know you.”

She hugged her arms across her chest. “We shouldn’t be talking about this.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. “You’re right. It’s a bad idea. We might actually find out we kinda like each other.”

She blinked up at him, indignant. “I don’t. Like you.”

His gaze was on her mouth. “Right. So . . . if I kissed you right now, you’d probably fire me.”

Shock rippled through her. But she imagined it. Suddenly and completely. She imagined his mouth on hers. The taste of him. “Definitely,” she lied.

He grinned. “I’d better not then.”

Disappointment, however idiotic, caught up with her bravado. “Why would you even say that? About kissing me?”

“Because,” he said, tilting his head back against the rock wall, “if I’m honest, I’ve been thinking about kissing you since that first day at the auction.”

“No, you have not.”

“Longer than that, actually. That summer? The one with Summer Boy? I came home from college intending to ask you out. I’d finally buffed up that year, grew a few more inches. I thought maybe you’d finally notice me. But turned out, I was too late. You never even saw me.”

“What?” Rain splashed down from the rocks above them. She shivered again.

“It’s true. You really didn’t know?”

“No. I didn’t.” She sat and shivered for a whole minute before going on. “But . . . as long as we’re being brutally honest here, you’re wrong. I did notice you that summer. Before that, even. But I had no idea that—”

“That I liked you? Why would you? I was painfully shy. I couldn’t risk it.”

“Risk what? Me turning you down?”

“Something like that.”

“Hah,” she breathed, but it wasn’t a laugh. More like regret. She exhaled deeply. “Irony. Sometimes, I wonder what I saw in him—Ethan. Why I was so foolish and determined to alter the direction of my life? It was all because of Ryan, I guess. He’s one thing I’d never change. But just so you know, in high school, I might have had a little crush on you, the smartest boy in the class. But I was sure I could never be interesting enough for you.”

“But you were a cheerleader,” he said, stating the obvious. “And . . . popular.”

“Well, I was a cheerleader.” Whatever everyone thought about her, however she’d managed to trick everyone into believing her I’ve-got-things-handled persona, there was a reason she’d allowed herself to fall in love with Ethan Bradley, a boy who never had any intention of loving or protecting her. A boy who got what he wanted from her and couldn’t be bothered with the consequences.

Now, Cooper pulled her against him again. She didn’t fight him. She felt chilled to the bone. It was only his warmth keeping her teeth from chattering. He pressed his face against her hair, and she felt his breath warm against her skull.

“Shay?”

“Mm-hm?”

“I bet . . . by now, Summer Boy has been married and divorced three times,” Cooper said against her hair. “And all of them have taken him for everything he has. The last one, well, I bet she smeared him on social media so bad he had to change his identity on his dating app.”

She snorted. “And he’s probably living in some lonely two-room apartment in Stamford, Connecticut, because his filthy rich father has finally cut him off for being an idiot.”

Cooper seemed to be enjoying this. “And when he’s not working his sorry butt off in his sad little white-collar job to pay his trio of alimonies, or scrambling to keep up with his golf membership at the club and the car payments on the Tesla he’s about to lose, he sits in front of the TV every night alone, watching Jeopardy! trying to outwit the much smarter players as he’s warming up his frozen dinners in the microwave.”

“Because he was a lawyer,” she went on, “until he got caught in bed with the senior partner’s wife and his firm had him disbarred and tossed him out on the street.”

“Boom!” Cooper laughed. “That’s what you’d call a karmic reimagining.”

“Ahhh,” she said, laughing now, too. “I feel so much better.” Throwing shade on Ethan in a purely karmic way felt good and weirdly empowering.”

“Oh, yeah.” That hand on her arm moved again, warming her. She made the mistake of looking directly at him and catching the twinkle of humor in his eyes. That, and

something much, much hotter as his gaze dropped to her mouth.

“Just look what he missed out on,” he murmured.

She wiped a drip of rain from her nose and tipped her face up to him. “Yeah. Just look.”

“I am,” he said, his look intense and focused on her mouth.

The way he was looking at her stirred a rush of emotions. But worse than that, stirred a flutter in her belly that wouldn’t quit until she gave in to what she’d wanted all along. “Okay, then,” she said abruptly. “Go ahead.”

He tilted a questioning look at her.

“Just—just get it over with, then we’ll both stop being curious.”

“Oh, you want me to kiss you now? Well, put it that way, it’s a . . . damned enticing offer, which I’d oblige, but, you know, I can’t really risk my job.”

“I won’t fire you,” she promised with a sigh. “It’s just this once, then we won’t ever talk about it again.”

“You sure? I mean,” he said, dropping his mouth close to hers. “I might want to talk about it again.” His lips brushed hers with the briefest of kisses, then hovered there, just out of reach as he moistened his lips with his tongue, taking in the taste of her. “Because you never know how these things g—”

She pulled him toward her. He covered his mouth with hers in a kiss that was hard and long. It breached any agreement they might have struck for that kiss to be forgettable. He tasted of rain and peppermints; he filled her senses with the flavor of

him. A delicious flavor that seemed to short-circuit her brain as it stirred a thousand butterflies in her belly.

He pulled her closer against his hard chest. Insensibly, she heard the small, needy sound that must have come from her. But she was helpless to stop him now. She didn't want to stop him. She clung to him when he deepened the kiss, shifting his mouth against hers, first one way and then the other, exploring hers with his tongue. She wanted this kiss to go on and on.

If the small puppy in her arms hadn't chosen that moment to climb up her chest and slather their faces with kisses of its own, Shay likely would have given in to that need.

But reclaiming her sanity with that small interruption, she broke away from Cooper, breathless, and laughing at the puppy staring up at her, wanting to join in on the fun.

"Apparently, our tiny chaperone is aghast at our lack of decorum," Shay murmured, petting the puppy in an effort to disentangle herself from Cooper. To stop the tremor that had quaked up from inside her. Hadn't she been cold only a moment ago?

On a shaky exhale, Cooper let her go, running a hand through his wet hair, sniffing at the rain still dripping down his face. It seemed to occur to them at the same time that the storm beyond the ledge had moved on. They turned to stare out past the horses who stood like quiet sentries to the drizzle that remained.

"Looks like it's clearing up. We should get these dogs back down soon."

"Yes," she agreed, avoiding looking at him.

Cooper considered her again. "I gotta say, Shay, that was—"

She pressed a finger to his lips. “No, no. We promised not to talk about it.”

He frowned. “I don’t think I ever promised that.”

“It was a good kiss, okay? A great kiss even. But it shouldn’t go any further.”

“Because . . . why?” he asked in all seriousness.

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She blinked and looked away. “Because . . . because it was just a kiss. A curiosity kiss.”

“Your words,” he reminded her. “Not mine.”

“And I do not need anyone in my life right now to—”

“Kinda felt for a minute like you needed that kiss.”

More like that kiss had shaken her body awake from some long, deep slumber. Even now, she could still feel the delicious tingle of it inside her. But she stumbled to her feet, cradling the puppy. “We should head back. Maybe there’s still time to get your father to his appointment.”

“That ship has sailed.” Cooper got to his feet, too, handing her Lulu’s reins. “But pretending that kiss meant nothing to you is a choice, Shay. So is not talking about it. But just so you know, before we close the subject for good, what just happened between us? A kiss like that? That isn’t something that happens often. Or ever before. For me anyway. Maybe that’s all there is to it. But I don’t think so.”

“Cooper, you have to promise me you won’t tell anyone about what happened here,” she begged. “I don’t want them to know.”

He shook his head, tossed the reins around She-Ra’s neck, and climbed into the soaked leather saddle. “Talkin’ about what happens between you and me is always gonna stay strictly between you and me. That clear?”

Great job hurting his feelings, Shay, when he only did as you asked. “Yes. Thank you.”

“Okay, then. Let’s head back.”

“Cooper—”

Pulling up the horse, he turned back to her.

“Just so you know, it’s not you. It’d be easier if it was you. But it’s not. It’s me.”

He nodded as if he didn’t believe her and nudged his mare into a trot. She cradled the puppy against her shoulder as she mounted Lulu. With a tender caress, she stroked the small puppy between the ears. “You believe me, don’t you?” The pup whined. “No? Yeah, I don’t think he does either.”

Chapter Seven

Sarah had caught Ray standing outside the barn waiting for Cooper to show. When he didn’t, Sarah took it upon herself to drive the pickup the short distance from the house in the rain and find out what he was waiting for.

“Cooper was supposed to be giving me a ride into town,” was all he told her.

“The storm must have delayed them. I can give you a ride. Where do you want to go?”

Ray demurred. “That’s unnecessary, Sarah.”

“Ray. I have to go into town anyway. Get in.”

He looked ready to balk, but she insisted, opening the door from the inside. “Get in.”

The trip into town was awkward and silent, but Sarah didn’t care. She was determined to break through this wall that Ray had erected between them. Sitting beside him in the car for the first time in more than eight years made her remember all those times they’d spent together back before everything had fallen apart.

She recalled the drive up to Flathead Lake they’d taken one Sunday when Tom was out of town on a cattle-buying trip, when they’d brought a picnic to sit beside the turquoise-blue lake for the afternoon. Ray had so much to say back then. They could talk for hours about a thousand things. She’d worried about how her older children would accept them together once she left Tom. What would happen if she walked away from the ranch? Her children’s legacy? Would Tom punish them for what she did? Did they still even want any part of the Hard Eight? Back then, Will, her oldest son had already left, rejecting ranch life entirely. Her girls were floundering. And Liam, the one who seemed tied to the land most, seemed angry or resentful most of the time after Will left.

All of these things they spoke about together. Unlike her husband, Ray had found ways to support her, calm her worries about her children. His own son, Cooper, had gone off to Harvard on a scholarship. He was clear that his future was not here in Marietta or in ranching.

Her children on the other hand, were torn between loyalty to the ranch, the family, and lives of their own choosing. She well knew that her husband had affairs during their marriage, though he never admitted to them, and she would never have confronted him about them. She was scared of Tom, though he’d never physically hurt her. It was his temper she feared. It was what had driven her firstborn, Will, away from the family for so many years. Tom had made her smaller over the years, until she nearly forgot who she was.

Until Ray.

What she and Ray once had was a close friendship, which was more than she'd had with Tom for many years. That was as far as they'd taken things. But many, many times in the years since, she'd wished she'd done things differently. Taken the leap. Followed her heart. Because in the end, it was clear that Tom knew about them anyway. Knew she'd left him emotionally already. After Ray went to prison, he worked hard to win her back, and she was too tired to fight. But underlying all of that, Sarah felt her husband hated her a little bit, too.

They pulled onto Main Street in Marietta. "You're going to have to tell me where to take you, Ray."

He exhaled the breath he seemed to have been holding. "I'm seeing an oncologist. At the hospital."

She did her best not to slam on the brakes in surprise. "You changed your mind? That's wonderful. I'll go with you."

“No, Sarah,” was his curt answer.

“But—”

“I’m fine on my own.”

She gripped the steering wheel tighter. “Do you remember that time when Liam was bull-riding and he got thrown so badly he broke two ribs and his clavicle? They told me he might have punctured a lung? Tom and the kids were driving cattle from the north pastures?”

Ray met her gaze. “Of course, I do.”

“You came and sat with me in that waiting room while they treated him? I was so scared,” she said, the recollection of that awful night seeping back to her. “I needed someone to tell me it would be all right. To hold my hand. Buy me some horrible hospital coffee from that vending machine. I needed not to be alone.”

“I remember,” he said, his voice soft at the memory.

“Well, it’s my turn to return the favor. I know you’re scared, Ray. You don’t have to do this alone. I am coming in with you. I’m going to listen what the doctor says in there, because it might be a lot and you won’t hear all of it. But I will. Besides, I owe you a horrible hospital coffee or three, and I always pay my debts.” She smiled at him, seeing that her words had broken through somehow.

“Still the same stubborn woman I knew,” he said softly.

“Oh, no. Much worse,” she admitted. “I’m incorrigibly hardheaded now. Or so my children claim. I generally get what I want.”

He sniffed and rubbed a hand down his handsome face as she pulled into the Marietta Hospital parking lot. “Well, then,” he said. “I hope you’ve got change for the vending machine. As I recall, it requires a good kick in the backside to cooperate.”

“I think we can dispense with violence,” she said, grinning. “Even vending machines don’t stay broken forever.”

*

By late afternoon, as Cooper and Ryan were taking turns working with their respective horses in the round pen, Cooper saw Sarah’s truck pulling down the long road to the Hard Eight. He was relieved to see his father sitting beside her in the passenger seat. Sarah had texted Shay, explaining that she’d taken Ray to the doctor in town and not to worry. That she’d bring him back as well.

Cooper couldn’t get past the feeling that there was more to this than simple courtesy. No one knew better than him that his father was in dire need of a reason to live. Maybe, just maybe Sarah could help in that department. It relieved him that despite his father’s history, no one on the ranch seemed to hold it against him. Not even Shay, at this point. Which was . . . confusing.

As confusing as what had happened between them in the mountains. That kiss had caught them both off guard, but the fact that she wanted to basically pretend it never happened had his mind spinning. He knew he shouldn’t have done it. But she’d participated fully. Maybe it was just curiosity on her part, as she said. But it sure didn’t feel that way.

Now, Cooper patted the neck of the bay gelding who had decided Cooper wasn’t the

enemy. He'd had moved in for a cuddle after a long run on the lunge line in the round pen.

"And here he comes," Cooper told Ryan as the bay settled his face against Cooper's arm. "Thatta boy. See? His choice, not mine. He runs and runs because he's not sure what else to do. He's not really sure what I want from him. Or if I mean him harm. But if I just keep showing him that his running doesn't concern me, that he can keep that up as long as he likes, then he starts to feel like maybe I'm not the threat he thought I was. Pretty soon, he decides that to join me is better than to run from me. Because apparently, I'm not going to fight him or hurt him in any way. Instead, I'm going to help him and calm him down. Give him some affection."

"Do they all do that?" Ryan asked. "What if they're really scared? Of everything?"

"Pretty much they will all eventually come around. Some take longer than others, but it depends on their level of trauma, I think. Or their personality. That's where you come in as his partner. You're there to keep him safe. Whatever they've been through before this, that's trauma that sits with them. They remember it. For a lot of these horses that end up in kill pens, or the auction houses, that trauma didn't happen just once or twice but after a lifetime of being misunderstood. Maybe they have medical issues. Hooves untended. Aches and pains that have been ignored. You're lucky if they don't.

"But all those things we'll attend to," he continued, "but first we need to earn their trust. The bond you'll share with Kholá is special and lasting, but it's up to you not to break it. Your horse will never break it. That's on you. Horses are herd animals. They prefer to be bonded-up with other horses. Lacking that, people. The people who take care of them, feed and love them. There's every bit as much love exchanged between a horse and its owner as there is with dogs or cats. They'll walk through fire for you if they love you."

“My friend at school doesn’t believe animals can feel emotions like that. He says animals go on instinct. Survival instinct.”

Cooper cupped the bay’s head with his arm and scratched the horse behind his ears. “You buy that?”

Ryan shook his head. “Anybody can see animals feel things. Like a mama cow who loses a calf. Or a mustang that’s separated from its herd. And anyone who thinks dogs don’t feel sadness when they’ve been dumped up in the mountains has never had one. That’s what I think.”

“Well, I’m with you on that. Hundred percent.”

“You think those puppies you and Mom found up on the mountain will make it?”

“They’ve got a shot now, at least. They were too young to be up there on their own. Lucky for them some predator up there didn’t eat them for lunch.”

Shay had taken them to the vet and had yet to return.

Ryan climbed up on the fence rail behind him and sat on the top one. “Hey, Coop?”

“Yeah?”

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“Do you think it was just a coincidence that you happened to find those puppies up there today? Or . . .” He left the question hanging.

“I don’t believe in coincidence, Ry. I think we were supposed to find them, same way you were meant to find Kholá at that auction. Same way me working here is where I’m supposed to be right now.” He walked the bay toward the gate leading to the next pen where a feeder full of alfalfa was waiting for him.

“Yeah,” Ryan said, “I think that, too. Which is why we should keep those dogs. Because they were meant to be ours. Our ranch dogs.”

“You have a good point, kid. You’d better take that up with your mom. But I don’t think it will take too much persuasion.”

Sarah’s truck pulled up in front of the house. She and Ray climbed out of the cab.

Cooper told Ryan, “Why don’t you work a little bit more with Kholá and see where it gets you? I’m going to go talk to my father. See what kind of bonding up is going on with him and your grandma.” He winked at the boy who grinned knowingly back.

Ray was slow-walking toward him with Sarah by his side. The two of them were talking softly. His father was smiling. Relief flooded Cooper at the sight of that smile, one of the few anyone had wrangled out of him since he’d gotten out of prison.

“I’m so sorry we couldn’t make it down the mountain in time to take you to your appointment, Dad. We got caught in that rainstorm and—”

Ray held up a hand. “That’s okay, son. We managed. Sarah, here, was kind enough to drive me. She came in with me to see the doctor.”

Cooper turned to Sarah. “She did?”

“I did,” she said. “You’ll be happy to hear that the oncologist at Marietta Hospital was hopeful about your dad.”

“They ran a bunch of tests and just from the early results,” Ray said, “they proposed some new-fangled chemotherapy that involves the immune system.”

“Not exactly chemotherapy,” Sarah clarified. “It’s immunotherapy. And infusions.”

“Right. I have to go back, talk to them in a few days when the results are all in.”

For the first time since he’d picked his father up that day at the prison gates, he looked hopeful, alive again. Ready to fight. Nor did Cooper miss the irony of how his father’s joining up with Sarah had changed his entire attitude.

Humans, in the end, were not so different from horses.

“That’s incredible, Dad. Thank God you went in. Sarah, thank you so much for going with him. For taking care of him there.”

She patted Ray on the arm. “It was one hundred percent my pleasure. He’s very capable of standing on his own. But a little moral support is always in order, don’t you think?”

Ray blushed at her words. “Thanks again, Sarah. I’m grateful.”

“Well, you can thank me by coming to dinner. Cooper, you’re both invited up to the

house tonight. I'm making a slow-cooker lasagna that will knock your socks off!"

He glanced at his father who didn't look like he was about to refuse the invite.

"Far be it from me to turn down home cooking," Cooper said, clapping his father on the shoulder. "We'll be there."

She leaned in toward Cooper. "And thank you for spending so much time working with Ryan and his filly. It means the world to him. To us as well. The clock is ticking on his Youth Encounter competition. He's been so nervous about even making it in time."

Behind them, Ryan was with Kholá, doing a good imitation of what Cooper had just managed to do with the bay. The filly was already standing still beside him. "He's doing great. That filly will be ready in time. You wait and see."

"I hope you're right. Shay called to say she'll be back from our veterinarian, Dr. Anders, by dinnertime. Apparently, we're now the proud owners of two little lost puppies."

"Ryan will be so happy to hear that," Cooper said, feeling relieved that those two little pups wouldn't be moving anywhere but here. Maybe he'd even put his dad in charge of them. Give him something to focus on besides his own troubles.

Sarah headed to the house and Cooper walked his dad back toward the apartment. On the way, Cami walked by with an armload of tangled string lights heading to the big barn that was being decorated for a wedding this upcoming weekend.

"You need a hand with that?" Cooper asked her.

"A hand? An arm? A leg?" she replied, laughing. "But no, seriously, you've got

enough on your plate already. I'm going to recruit Liam once he gets in from mending fences in the north pasture."

Ray shook his head. "You'll never get this mess untangled alone. Why don't you leave it to Cooper and me? You can work on the important stuff?"

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Cooper stared at his father in surprise. “You heard the man.”

“Really?” Reluctantly, she handed over the lights to Ray. “You sure you’re up for that?”

He took the lights out of her arms with a smile.

“That’s so sweet of you. We took these down in such a hurry during that last windstorm, I totally didn’t take the time to store them neatly. Now look. Note to self: Next time, remember how much you hate detangling lights.”

“We’ve got this,” Cooper said.

“I’m putting you both in for a raise!” Cami said, only then remembering she had no such power. “I mean, I’ll tell Liam what gems you both are.”

Cooper grinned at her. Cami was adorable in a kid sister kind of way. He wondered if she ever slowed down? Between teaching, the ranch stuff, and helping to gear up for silent auction at the upcoming autumn festival in Marietta, she had her hands more than full. But he rarely saw her without a smile on her face. She was no doubt every kid’s favorite teacher.

As he and his father untangled the long strands of outdoor lights, Ray began to hum. His whole demeanor had changed since Cooper had ridden up the mountain with Shay.

That thought, naturally led to the next. The memory of that kiss he and Shay had

shared. It ebbed through him again as if he'd waded through a warm current in a river.

"Penny for your thoughts, son," his father murmured.

Surprised, he straightened and tugged a light through a tangled knot. "Just feeling grateful, is all. Mostly that you've decided to fight this thing."

"Hmph. Could've sworn you were thinkin' about a woman, just then."

Cooper gave a nervous laugh. "Now who would I be thinkin' of?"

"Cami's pretty cute," Ray allowed. "But unless I'm way off base, it's not her. Shay?"

"Everybody knows how Shay feels about me workin' here. She'd probably rather get a root canal."

"Women are like Montana weather, Coop. You never know what to expect from them."

If this morning was any indication . . . For a moment, he was back under that rock ledge, soaking wet with his arm around her shoulders.

"So," he began, shaking off the memory. "You and Sarah . . . There's obviously more to that situation than what you've told me. I mean, look at you. What's happened between the two of you?"

He refused to look Cooper in the eye. "She drove me to my appointment."

"You're not fooling me, Dad. You know what I mean. What's going on between you two? That wasn't a simple ride into town. You two have some kind of history, don't

you?”

Ray took a deep breath. “That’s a long story.”

Cooper gestured at the monster tangle of lights which only seemed to grow worse as they worked. “We’ve got time.”

He focused on the lights for a long minute before he spoke, apparently torn between telling him the truth and continuing to hide it from him. “I . . . never told you about her because what happened was nobody’s business but ours, and telling anyone would have jeopardized Sarah. Her family. You were off at school and on with your life. And everything was complicated.”

“Complicated by her being married?”

Ray angled a look at him. “It’s not what you think. Not exactly. We became friends. Friends first, but it never went much further than that, physically. We—she and I—found we had a lot in common and, when we ran into each other, it was . . . we both enjoyed seeing each other. It . . . escalated to planning to run into each other. Spending time together away from Marietta for a few hours, away from prying eyes. I wasn’t trying to cause trouble in her marriage, but her marriage to Tom was in deep trouble already. She was planning to leave him.”

Cooper was trying to follow. “If it was just friendship, why keep it a secret?”

“Because . . . Tom could be difficult. Unpredictable. And . . . I fell in love with her. It was the first time since your mother. There was nothing for it unless she left Tom, which she wanted to do. And it almost happened.”

Cooper stopped unwrapping the lights, staring at his father. “Why didn’t it happen?”

He lifted a shoulder as if he wanted to close the subject. “Soon after, my life fell apart, and you know the rest.” He pulled a long strand of lights free and held up the end with the plug. “Ah. There’s one.”

“Oh, no. No, Dad.” Cooper had waited a long, patient time to get to the bottom of this. “You’re not going to just leave this story at that. Are you telling me that Sarah believed what they were trying to sell about you committing cattle rustling? That she abandoned you? After falling in love with you? Nearly leaving her husband for you?”

“I never said she loved me.”

Now he was just pissing Cooper off. “Sarah Hardesty just now drove you to the hospital in town, sat with you the entire day, and held your hand while you got some of the hardest news anyone can hear. Damned if she wasn’t the one to inspire you to even try to save your own life after all my pleas fell on deaf ears. She literally gave you a reason to live, Dad. And you’re saying she never loved you?”

Ray sighed deeply. “It’s for her to say, not me.”

This was all head-turning information. “Well . . . what did she say about it once you were in prison?”

“I never saw her there.”

What? “She never came to see you?”

“She did. She came to see me in prison. I turned her away. What was the point? To ruin her life waiting for me?”

The same way he’d pushed Cooper away. “But apparently, she has waited for you.”

Ray set the lights down. “It all comes down to choices, son. What we can live with and what we can’t. But not everything is as simple as yes or no. Right or wrong. Not even love. She was kind to me, today. But maybe that’s all it was. So, like every day for the last eight years, all I can do is one day at a time. Anything more is just . . . hubris and wishful thinking.” He lifted the tangle of lights and tugged out a long

strand. “Now let’s get these lights untangled before we miss that home-cooked meal Sarah invited us to.”

Chapter Eight

The slow-cooker lasagna was every bit as good as promised. The evening passed with that sort of big-family dinner feeling Cooper had always imagined but had never personally had. The Hardesty siblings spent half the time teasing each other and the other half laughing, with Will and Izzy right in the mix.

Cooper kept his eye on Shay across the table, without being too obvious about it, thinking about today on the mountain. How it had ended and what exactly that meant.

He could still feel the softness of her lips on his and the curl in his gut when she’d wrapped her arms around him. All of that couldn’t have been simple curiosity. Because the heat in that kiss had knocked him sideways. He couldn’t seem to let it go. Once or twice, Shay’s gaze flicked in his direction and caught him looking.

So, she knew he wanted her. He wished he could get her alone again, to talk about what was happening between them. But Shay Hardesty had a wall around her built of brick and mortar. Maybe she’d never allow herself to love again after Summer Boy had done his best to break her heart. She’d either convinced herself that A—she didn’t deserve happiness or a relationship that might bring her that or B—happiness would have to wait until her only child was grown and gone.

There was a C option as well, and it had to do with him being an acceptable possibility.

Acceptable, in terms of his history, he supposed. That he’d just have to deal with. That, he wanted to deal with. Because whatever she thought, he had no intention of bringing any trouble to the Hard Eight or to her. He’d been half in love with Shay

Hardesty for most of his life. He had this one last chance with her.

As the group polished off the cherry dump cake Sarah had baked up for dessert, Cooper pondered exactly how he was going to break through that wall of Shay's. Which was when his cell phone buzzed in his pocket.

One look at the caller ID and he excused himself from the table and walked outside.

"It's good news," Trey Reyes said on the other end of the line. "Your father's partner, Evan Clulagher, it turns out, is a dead man walking."

"Meaning?"

"You called it. These past eight years, he's been living the high life in the Bahamas under an assumed identity. My hacker was able to track that money from your father's business account to a bank in the Caymans, which exited that account some two days later to another LLC account in the Bahamas."

Cooper's head started swimming. For a moment he was speechless. "Wait. You found him?"

"Sort of. Not exactly. He was there, moving around a bit over the years, but staying in the Caribbean. Once my guy learned his assumed name, thanks to a contact he has down there who was able to access that account, I flew down there to track the guy down. Seems like he really enjoyed all that money he stole. He wasn't very wise about spending it. Eight years later, he's gone through almost all of it. He's left behind a bunch of bad debts there. Two weeks ago, he flew back to the US under that assumed name. He landed in San Francisco, then promptly disappeared again."

"Under that assumed name..." Cooper paced under the big tree in front of the house. From somewhere above him, an owl hooted at him, and a chill ran under his skin.

“But why would he risk coming back to the US? He’s been declared dead here. Getting caught here alive would surely have consequences.”

“Consequences that could clear your father’s name,” Trey said.

The moment of buoyant hope quickly deflated. “If he was able to invent a new identity once, he’ll do it again. He could go anywhere. We’ll never find him.”

“Don’t lose hope. There’s one more thing.”

“What?”

“My friend uncovered some curious cash withdrawals from Clulagher’s account in the year before his disappearance. Those cash withdrawals interestingly did not correspond with deposits in the Caymans. In other words, that particular money came out but never went back in. It never flowed through any of your father’s accounts. It was separate.”

“I don’t follow.”

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“The withdrawals were significant amounts and fairly regular. Like payments. But nobody pays bills in cash. They could have been gambling money, but he apparently wasn’t that careless until he thought he’d gotten away with it. My theory? Someone was onto his rustling scheme and was blackmailing him.”

“Blackmailing? Who?”

“Don’t know yet. And it’s just a theory. But if the cops were suspicious of those withdrawals, the man known as Evan Clulagher died before they could either prove or disprove that they went directly to your father.”

“My father? It wasn’t him. He knew nothing about this scheme before he was arrested.”

A long silence stretched on the other end of the line.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” Cooper said.

“I do, actually,” Trey said. “But it doesn’t matter what I believe. It only matters what I can prove.”

Cooper switched his cell to his other ear. “Wait, but do we really need him to prove that my father wasn’t on those initial accounts? Won’t that clear him now that we’ve uncovered these records? Surely once we can prove that his partner is alive and operating under—”

“In a perfect world, that would be enough. Unfortunately, the evidence against your

dad was quite effective, and that money did pass through his business accounts. Unless we can prove that his partner framed him, made those deposits himself, Ray is still implicated. Whether they ultimately catch his partner or not. To the prosecutors, the fact that his partner scammed everyone is simply not enough to prove his innocence. We need the man himself.”

Cooper dropped down onto the stone retaining wall that surrounded the front garden. “Then we have to find him.”

“I am working on that, my friend,” Trey told him. “Don’t lose heart.”

*

His father’s reaction to the news, wasn’t what Cooper expected. Not anger, not even surprise. Instead, his father’s response was a long-distance stare out to the field of horses beyond their kitchen window.

“What am I missing?” Cooper asked him after a long moment. “This is good news, isn’t it? It means that maybe we can finally clear your name.”

“Not that simple. The good news,” his father replied, “has less to do with me and my case, and more that Evan blew the fortune he embezzled and is a hunted man again. Maybe this time, he’ll get caught before he can disappear again.”

“You always knew he was alive.” Cooper sat down at the table beside his dad.

“Not for sure. But I suspected it. Disappearing had to have been his plan from the start. But the sheriff was too invested in me to get sidetracked by it. Anyone who could pull off what he did with the rustling, the money laundering, and keeping his two partners in crime silent could make himself disappear without a trace.”

Indeed, the two men who had enabled Evan's operation had also implicated Ray instead of Evan in the investigation leading up to trial once they'd been found to have taken part in the cattle rustling operation. No doubt they'd been well paid for their silence. One man would skim the head count of cattle getting loaded onto the trucks, the other would do the same at the other end of the ride after off-loading a percentage of cattle before arrival onto a different truck. Often, before the GPS ear tagging came into full use, the ranchers, moving cattle from one range to another, were none the wiser until much later as their own head counts during the shipping process were more estimates than accurate counts. Each prime steer was worth thousands of dollars on the beef market. All of it made Evan Clulagher a very rich man.

"Oh, he left a trace. We found it. Took some digital digging, but he left a trail of bad dealings behind him. But if we can find him, we can bring him to justice. Trey thinks Evan was being blackmailed. If we can find out who was—"

"That's a dead end," Ray said firmly. "Leave it alone."

"Why? What makes you say that?"

Ray stood and walked to the sink where the window overlooked the Hardesty home and land. "Just let it go, Cooper. I have. You need to, as well."

"Just when we finally have a lead? If someone knew what he was doing, was blackmailing him, then maybe we can find them. Force them to talk. To clear your name. It couldn't have been Dumb and Dumber, the two who went to prison for him. They were in on it while those payments were being made. No doubt they had more waiting for them on their release."

Ray shook his head. "It wasn't them."

Cooper angled a look at him. "You know who it was?"

“No. How could I?” Ray’s hands were shaking as he reached for a glass of water and filled it at the tap. He took a long drink and turned back to Cooper. The fire in the electric fireplace flickered in the dim light of evening, drawing lines of stress across Ray’s face. “I’m thinking it’s time to go back home.”

“What? Don’t try to change the subject here.”

“I’ve burdened them enough. You can stay. I’ll be fine.”

“You—you don’t even have a car, Dad. And why are you pushing to let this whole thing go? Is it someone you’re . . . protecting?” Cooper himself was the only person Ray Lane had ever protected since his mother’s death. The only other person he could think of for Ray to feel protective of eight years ago was—

“Is it . . . Sarah Hardesty?”

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“Don’t be ridiculous,” Ray snapped. “Sarah had nothing to do with any of this. Or her children either.”

“Okay. Okay. Easy. I don’t want to fight.”

Ray reached out and touched Cooper’s shoulder. “Eight years ago, if I could have gotten my hands on Evan, I might have killed him for what he did to me. But all that’s behind me now. It’s done. What I learned inside, more than anything, is what anger can do to you, to your soul. Anger is a hunger that’s never satisfied. So, it eats you from the inside out. So, no, I’m not looking for revenge anymore. I’m looking for peace now. That’s all.”

Cooper didn’t understand his father. His refusal to tell him the whole truth about what he knew. But he said, “Okay. But you’re staying here. With me. Nobody’s a burden. You understand? So, no argument. Clear?”

Ray set his jaw. “We’ll see.”

*

Cooper spent most of the next day working with the new horses, then supervising Ryan as he introduced Kholá to a bit of his weight—on and off the saddle she was finally getting used to. Cooper was grateful that the horses they’d brought to the ranch weren’t too traumatized to learn quickly. They all seemed to accept human contact and were, for the most part, interested in what he had to teach them.

Kholá, in particular, was a quick study, and Cooper had to admire the bond she’d

formed with Ryan. Getting her to take a bit took a few tries, but Ryan instinctively laid off the reins while handling her in the ring. They were just there for her to get used to them, nothing more. Same with the feel of Ryan's weight on her back after showing her for days that she had nothing to fear of his touch by using a long-handled crop to stroke her back gently.

All in all, Shay's son had made amazing progress with his filly, and it wouldn't be long before she could be ridden.

Later that night, after eating the dinner his father had surprised him with, he'd stepped outside for some air. Late September in Montana always held the threat of early snow, but tonight was almost balmy, still holding onto the last breath of the summer. The moon was a mere sliver in the pitchy night sky, leaving a wash of stars scattered across the sky like pin pricks of light.

The air was crisp and sweet. It held the fragrance of horses, the mountains, and the long grasses that grew everywhere. He reached out to stroke Kholá's nose as she wandered over to the rail to visit him.

That kiss with Shay was still on his mind. They hadn't spoken about it yet. Maybe they never would. Maybe her curiosity was satisfied and that was the end of it. But his wasn't. His was only piqued. He wasn't mistaken that she'd kissed him back. That she'd responded in kind. What he couldn't decide was how to proceed with her. She was a puzzle he couldn't quite figure out. Maybe he never would. Maybe this whole idea of coming home to Marietta had been a mistake. Maybe Thomas Wolfe was right. Maybe you can never go home again.

"Deep thoughts?" came a voice from behind him, surprising him. He turned to find Shay walking toward the corral. She had a fleecy Pendleton throw wrapped around her shoulders.

His heartbeat picked up at the sight of her, with the starlight skimming over the curve of her cheek. “No. Probably pretty shallow, if I’m honest. What are you doing out here? It’s late.”

“I was just sitting over there, watching the stars. You didn’t see me.”

He looked up, scanning the night sky. “Pretty night.”

“Mmm.” She joined him at the fence. They didn’t talk for a long minute, both lost in their own thoughts. Then they both spoke at once.

“I was—”

“Did you—” he said, stumbling over how to begin. They both smiled.

“God, we’re awkward,” she told him.

“That’s . . . accurate.”

“It’s because of that kiss. Up on the mountain.”

He nodded. “Yeah. About that. I don’t want you to think—”

“I don’t,” she said. “Actually, I’m not sure what to think.” She reached for Kholá and scratched her under her chin. “I . . . liked it. I know I said it was just—”

“You don’t need to explain.”

“No, here’s the thing.” She turned to him then, her hand close to his on the rail. “I haven’t stopped thinking about it since then. I—”

He pulled her to him then, covered her mouth with his, putting an end to all of that. She melted into his kiss, wrapping her arms around his neck, letting the blanket puddle to the ground. He couldn't get close enough to her. Couldn't kiss her deep enough. She tasted sweet—of mint and the cool night air. With his fingers against her scalp, he pulled her closer still, the fragrance of soap and fresh peaches intoxicating him. As she shifted her mouth against his with a hungry sound, the space between them ignited like a lit match. With her soft breasts pressed against his chest, he imagined that she could feel every part of him, too. All the parts that wanted her, needed her, longed for her.

But he knew where this was headed as he lost himself in that kiss. He forced himself to cool it down by pulling back. Both of them, breathing hard, found it impossible to separate then and just stood for a long, long minute gathering themselves, foreheads touching.

Shay swallowed hard. “Wow,” she breathed finally. “That was—”

“Something.”

“Yeah.”

He brushed the hair from her eyes with one finger, then pressed his lips against her forehead.

Eyes closed, she exhaled. “I’m a little out of practice. With kissing and such.”

He brushed his thumb against the corner of her mouth, that place where her lips took a cute little natural turn upward. “I don’t want to push you.”

“I’m a big girl. Nobody pushes me into anything.”

His chest tightened. “I know.”

She laid her cheek on his chest again and let him hold her. Just hold her. It felt good standing under that sliver of a moon, just the two of them, alone in the dark.

“I’ve been alone a long time, Cooper.”

“I know. It’s okay. We can take things slow.”

She nodded against his chest. He felt her relax a little. “It’s complicated, is all . . .”

“By what? Me? My history?”

She shook her head. “Yes. And no. Mostly, it’s me and my history. I . . . don’t trust easily.”

“I know.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“What do I think?” he asked gently.

“That I never got over Ethan and what happened with Ryan. But it’s not that exactly. I really did let that go a long time ago. I can’t even blame my father anymore, now that he’s gone, though I did for years.”

“Blame him for what?”

“It’s not important anymore. He was who he was. And I am . . . trying to be more like Izzy. Open to possibility. Open to trusting someone.”

“Me?”

She nodded against his chest. “And my son . . . he likes you. See? Complicated.”

He knew what she was asking. “We keep this between us.” This . . . this new thing exploding inside him. “For now.”

“Right. Thank you,” she whispered, pulling away to stand beside him without touching him. She scratched Kholá again who was nosing between them with curiosity. Shay laughed. “Okay, you’re included in the secret circle, Kholá.”

The horse blew a breath out against her hand.

He wasn’t ready to let her go just yet, and she seemed reluctant to move, too, even though he half-expected her to bolt toward the house.

Instead, she stared up at the sky above them. “See that constellation up there? The one shaped like a house with a roof?”

“Where?” he asked.

She moved her face close to his and pointed. “There. That’s Cepheus. Right next to Cassiopeia. There.”

“Ah. Okay. I see it.” He inhaled the scent of her again as her cheek briefly brushed his as she pointed out the stars. “Cepheus?”

“Named by the Greeks. You know. They had stories for all the stars.”

“I’m not exactly up on my Greek mythology. What’s Cepheus’s story?”

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“Since you asked,” she said, grinning. “There is a myth about those two. The story goes that Cepheus and Cassiopeia were married—a king and queen. They had a daughter Andromeda.”

“I’m intrigued, and I’ve heard of that one,” he admitted. “Go on.”

“So apparently, Cassiopeia, the king’s wife, thought she was all that. Sort of inadvertently, insulted the sea god, Poseidon, by claiming she was more beautiful than all the sea nymphs, of which his wife happened to be one. Which got Cepheus in big trouble with Poseidon, who sent a giant sea monster to avenge his wife and destroy Cepheus’s kingdom. An oracle told Cepheus the only way to prevent complete disaster to his kingdom was to sacrifice his only child, Andromeda. Which they did. Horrible. They left her chained to some rock in the sea to await the tide. But before she could drown, she was saved by Perseus, who heroically rescued Andromeda. Then he defeated the big, bad sea monster and got to marry the princess.”

“The end?” He was really enjoying her story and didn’t want it to be over.

“Not quite. After the sea monster debacle, there was a big fight at the wedding over who got to keep Andromeda. See, her uncle claimed she should belong to him—all very incestuous with those gods—and after a brief tiff, Perseus, who was greatly outnumbered, managed to get everyone turned to stone with”—she cringed—“Medusa’s head, including Andromeda’s awful parents who forgot to look away and also turned to stone. The only survivors were the two of them. And off they went. The end.”

“And they lived happily ever after?”

She shrugged. “There they are. Still up in the night sky.”

“Hard to argue with that logic. But her parents . . . they deserved it, chaining her to that rock.”

“Sacrifice for the greater good, I guess they thought. Didn’t really work out for them.”

He gazed up at the cluster of stars, picking out the constellation. “Maybe that’s why the constellation’s shaped like a house. Maybe that was the payoff for surviving sacrifice. A home that would never disappear?”

She smiled slowly. “I like that. See? Deep thoughts.”

He grinned as she pushed away from the fence. The look she sent him held a thousand unspoken things. One word from her and this detente between them would end and he would have dragged her to the nearest hayloft. Made her his.

But she said, “Night, Cooper.”

He nodded to her. “Night, Shay.” He watched her walk away until she disappeared into the house. Then he turned to the sky again, only vaguely unsettled by the idea that love and sacrifice were so inextricably bound together.

Chapter Nine

The Creighton wedding happened that next weekend. There was a lot of frantic, last-minute setup that happened the morning of. But in the end, Shay surveyed the reception that was in full swing under the pretty lights Cooper and his father had

untangled and strung up and breathed a contented sigh of relief. The happy couple were dancing under the stars on the wooden dance floor, the weather was holding and still balmy enough in the evening to require only a few gas heaters dotted around. The barn—she had to admit—looked beautiful, the guests, delighted. Even the affable minister, Mr. Gleason, who'd driven down from Billings to perform the ceremony, had gushed about the locale and how lovely everything was.

The bride had cream-colored roses and lilies everywhere. The whole night seemed scented with them. The local four-piece band they'd hired to play during the reception had a bluesy-country sound with a slide guitar player who gave her chills. Shay made a note to recommend them again in the future.

Cami wove through the crowd, making sure everyone had everything they needed. Liam made sure the bartender, parked under the barn's eaves, had plenty of ice and alcohol. The bussers they'd hired were busy cleaning up after the meal. At this point, the hard work was done. All that was left was to watch the guests enjoy the night.

Sarah and Ryan had disappeared around nine along with Will and Izzy, who'd shown up for any last-minute glitches. Ray and Cooper made themselves scarce. She hadn't seen them all evening—which she'd expected. Weddings weren't part of Cooper's job description. In fact, Ray had taken charge of the puppies, who had come back from the vet with a clean bill of health.

"It will be good for Ray to have something to focus on besides his health," Sarah had said, when she'd turned the pups over to Cooper. For the past few days, that was exactly what happened. The pups were a handful, but despite his initial reluctance, Ray was smitten. He even named them Pippa and Poppy.

Shay smiled at the four-year-old flower girl and the ring bearer, dressed to the nines and dancing amidst the older couples. At nearly ten p.m., they were still going strong; the current subject of the wedding photographer who happened to be the groom's

sister. Shay was thinking how it seemed like yesterday that Ryan was that little when Cooper walked up behind her.

“Looks like you pulled this one off without a hitch,” he murmured out of the hearing of the guests. “If those two are any indication, looks like the wedding was a success.”

In response, she couldn’t help but laugh at the little ones. “Aren’t they adorable?”

He grinned. “Siblings?”

“I don’t think they knew each other before tonight.”

“Ah. That explains why he’s been putting his best moves on her for the last few minutes.”

The little blond boy, who’d been dancing up a storm, wrapped his arms around the flower girl right at that moment, as if to prove Cooper’s point.

Shay laughed. “I expect one or both of them to fall dead asleep any minute. At that age, they go until they drop.”

Cooper folded his arms across his chest, enjoying the music and the dancing. He wasn’t dressed up, but he’d definitely upscaled from his work clothes. His long legs were sheathed in dark blue denims—not the kind cowboys wore, but city denims, and a plain white shirt rolled up at the sleeves. She rarely saw him without his hat, but his dark hair was short, sexy, and edged with strands of gray that made her want to run her fingers through it.

She blinked back the impulse.

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“What are you doing out here?” she asked. “I thought you two would be settled in for the night by now.”

“I was checking on the horses and got waylaid by the music. And . . . frankly, that dress.” His appreciative gaze took in the blue, ruffly silk dress she’d worn tonight. It was one of her three go-to event dresses, which made her feel pretty, but no one had ever noticed before. She felt herself blush. Tucking her hair behind her ear, she focused on the kids.

He leaned closer. “Is it out of bounds for me to say you look pretty in that color?”

“Wildly out of bounds. But thank you.” She flicked a smile up at him. “You look nice, too.”

“Well, thanks. The horses mentioned it, too. Asked who I was dressing up for.”

“Must have been She-Ra. She’s a terrible flirt.”

“I noticed that about her,” he said, his playful gaze fixed on Shay’s mouth.

The band started playing an old-time Ry Cooder song called “Boomer’s Story,” that she remembered her mother playing on the CD player when they were young. A song about lost love.

“Wanna dance?” Cooper said.

Her eyes widened. “What? No, I . . . I can’t. Dancing is for guests and I’m—”

“All dressed up with nowhere to go,” he finished. “I meant right here, back behind the barn. Just you and me, a little dance. Nobody has to see us.”

Shay looked around. No one at all was paying attention to them. She swallowed hard. She hadn’t danced with anyone in years. But it would be a mistake. Definitely. There was no way she should say yes.

However. “Okay. Just a quick one?” was what came out of her mouth instead.

With a grin, he took her hand and pulled her behind the barn. “I prefer slow.” He tugged her closer, fitting his hand in hers, then wrapped his other arm around her waist.

Shay thought surely he could feel her heartbeat thudding against him as they started to move together. She couldn’t help but inhale the delicious scent of him—soap, fresh air, and some indefinable scent that belonged only to him. She tried not to focus on how his shoulder felt under her hand—so strong and muscular—or the way he held her just so, not too tight or too loose. Just right. She felt his hips sway against hers as she tipped her forehead against his shoulder feeling ridiculously happy. When her heels started sinking into the soft, grassy earth there, she kicked her shoes off and felt instantly more balanced. Or rather less off-balance.

At the chorus, he let loose of her and twirled her. Shay laughed at the unexpected move, but he pulled her back against him with a smile. She forgot to worry about the space between them and let him hold her. God, it felt good to be held. To dance. To just be.

“Anybody ever tell you you’re a good dancer?” he whispered against her hair. “Especially barefoot.”

“If they did,” she replied, “it was so long ago, I’ve forgotten it.”

“Now, that’s a shame. A woman like you should be danced with on the regular.”

“A woman like me,” she said, “is generally too busy for dancing.”

“Ah, but you should never be too busy to dance,” he claimed, rocking her to the music with a slow and steady skill that made her insides tumble.

“Funny, I would never guess that about you. A dancer.”

“Oh,” he said, “there’s probably a lot about me that would surprise you.” Spinning her around again, he dipped her low until she laughed out loud.

When he pulled her into his arms again, he stopped dancing, simply holding her close for what seemed like forever but was probably no more than a few seconds. The band wrapped up their song. She thought he meant to kiss her again. She held her breath, but when he began to pull away, she tightened her fingers around his and held him for a long moment.

She was about to possibly embarrass herself by kissing him. Instead, a ruckus behind them in the wedding reception caused her to freeze. The sound of dishes crashing to the ground and glass breaking and shrieks of laughter—

“What in the world?” She broke away from him and followed the sound of chaos breaking out as wedding guests tried to dodge little blurs of movement that wound through the crowd, heading straight for the flower girl and ring bearer, whose eyes were wide with what was quite possibly terror.

“Oh, no!” She gasped.

The puppies had somehow gotten loose from Cooper and Ray’s apartment and were making a beeline for the shortest, most lickable people on the floor. The flower girl

shrieked as Pippa jumped up to swath her face with her tongue, but knocked her over, exuberantly bathing her face in kisses. Poppy, the skinniest of the two, collided clumsily with the little boy, who let out a delighted shriek of laughter as he dropped to the ground to allow the dog to have his way. Adults were scrambling to catch the dogs who eluded capture while climbing over the little ones and doing what puppies do. Cami was chasing them with her arms spread wide but couldn't seem to contain them either. Cooper tried and failed as well.

As adults snatched the children up, the puppies turned their attention to licking bare ankles on the fly and generally stirring up chaos. Even the band had stopped playing to laugh and watch.

"I'm so sorry," Shay said as she chased the dogs in circles. "Really, I don't know how this happened!"

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But most of the guests were laughing at the puppies' cuteness, not upset at the disturbance and some were trying to help corner the pups. Then Ray—who had appeared in the middle of the madness—and Cooper managed to corral and catch them both. Panting with excitement, Poppy slobbered all over Ray's face as Cooper apologized for the disturbance. But the newly married Creightons had waved the photographer over to capture the moment and the bride couldn't stop petting Poppy once he was in Ray's arms. Even the flower girl had stopped crying and was laughing, teary-eyed, at the puppies now.

After checking that everyone was okay, Shay addressed the crowd. "I'm so very sorry. We just rescued these two little miscreants. Obviously, manners are not high on their priority list yet. Although, suddenly, they are on ours. But clearly, Elizabeth and Daniel," she added, addressing the bride and groom, "these two are ecstatic about your beautiful marriage and wanted only to give you a puppy blessing. With their wet little tongues. So, consider that accomplished. Now, the puppies bid you good night. Please, please get back to your celebration."

The crowd laughed appreciatively and broke into a round of applause as they carried the puppies back toward the apartment.

"Holy bail out, Batman." Cami swooned as the four of them left the circle of lights. "That was some smooth talking back there, Shay."

"It was either that or sob," she said, scratching Pippa behind the ears. "Good thing they're so dang cute."

"It was all my fault," Ray said. "I opened the door to take out some trash and they

just scooted out past me—”

“Slippery little devils,” Cooper said as Pippa licked his face. “Yeah, you’re cute all right.”

“Disaster averted,” Shay told Ray, then stopped dead at the sight of a shadowy shape moving away from the office in the small barn. Running, actually. “Did you see that?”

“What?” Cami asked, oblivious.

“That,” she said, pointing at the open stretch of field beyond the small barn. But whoever it was, was already swallowed by the darkness there. “There was someone in the barn.” Someone who didn’t belong there.

Shay started running toward the open barn doors, and Cooper handed the puppy off to Cami and ran after her. “Wait. Don’t,” he called after her. “Shay, stop!”

She ignored him.

*

“Hold up!” Cooper said, chasing her down as she hurried through the barn doors. The horses were stirred up in their stalls, restlessly moving and whinnying. Cooper grabbed her arm. Pulled her to a stop. “You don’t even know what you’re running into here.” He fumbled for the light switch and flooded the barn with light.

That’s when they saw the office door wide open. Papers were strewn everywhere, and stuff was pulled off the shelves, lying broken on the floor.

“What in the world—” Shay sucked in a breath. “I was worried about the horses,

but—”

Cooper held onto her, quickly assessing that they were alone in the barn. “Whoever it was, obviously they were looking for something.”

“For what?” she asked, staring at the mess. “And did they find it?”

“I don’t think we’ll know until this mess gets cleaned up. What do you keep out here? Anything valuable?”

“Just paperwork mostly, I think. Plans. This was my father’s office primarily until Liam took things over. There’s some personal stuff, too, like awards, certificates. Photos.” She bent down to pick up a broken picture frame with a photo of Tom Hardesty and Sarah standing in front of a penful of mustangs. Broken glass fell out of the frame. “Like this. And this.” She picked up a large fragment of what looked like old ivory. “Part of a woolly mammoth tusk. My father found it right here on the ranch. What could they have been after? More importantly, who was it? It couldn’t have been anyone from the wedding. Nobody would’ve—”

“More like they used the wedding as cover to break in, knowing no one would be back here,” Cooper suggested, still wary about the thief’s return. “Looks like they were looking for a safe.” The large painting of the nearby Absaroka mountains on the nearest wall was dangling by its wire, but there was nothing behind it. “We should call the police.”

“No,” she said. “Not with the wedding party going on. We’ll call in the morning. Let’s just leave it all as it is tonight.” She was shaking. Cooper put an arm around her, pulled her close. She didn’t resist. In fact, she leaned into him. Her skin felt cool to the touch and his only thought was to protect her.

“Call me crazy,” she said, “but even in the dark, I could’ve sworn it looked like a guy

I've seen twice now in the last week. A guy who doesn't belong here."

"Say what now?"

She shook her head. "Probably just my imagination. It can't be connected."

With a frown, Cooper wondered if it was.

Cami and Liam appeared at the barn doors. "Oh. My—What happened here?"

"You tell her," Cooper instructed Shay. "I'm going to camp out here for the night in case our unwelcome caller returns."

"There's a gun up at the house." Shay closed the door to the office.

"A gun?" Cami threw her hands up. "What's happening here?"

“I’ve got my own,” Cooper said.

“Cooper, I’ll stay out here tonight,” Liam said, “that’s not your job.”

Hesitating, Cooper frowned at the mess. “He’s still out there somewhere on foot in the dark. Stands to reason he’s got a vehicle parked somewhere down the road. Maybe I should—”

“No!” Shay pointed at Cooper. “Neither one of you is going to go chasing down whoever it is in the dark. You stay right here. Tomorrow, we’ll get the sheriff out here to figure things out. Meanwhile, just leave everything as it is. Maybe there will be a fingerprint or two left behind.”

Surely, there was no connection between what Trey had told him and this. Even if Evan Clulagher was foolish enough to return to Marietta, the Hard Eight could hardly be his destination. Could it?

*

If anything had been stolen last night in the break-in, the family couldn’t find it. Aside from the mess the intruder had made, there was seemingly nothing of value missing. Not even the computer was taken. While Deputy Dominic Braehill, a young, thirty-something new hire—had dusted for fingerprints the next morning, he wasn’t hopeful that he’d get much that was usable after eliminating all of theirs.

“I’ll admit, it’s odd that nothing obvious was taken, especially the electronics, but you said he was on foot and possibly just looking for something he could carry easily

in his pockets to sell for cash. Y' know how that goes. If he got spooked, it's possible he didn't have time to take what he wanted." The deputy closed up his kit and headed back to his car with Shay and Cooper following behind.

"As far as the stranger you've seen around Marietta, I wouldn't call that too unusual. It's nearing the end of tourist season. We've got the autumn festival coming up in two weeks. We get all kinds of folks in town as that gears up. Cowboys. Tourists."

Cooper exchanged a disconcerted look with her. "But you'll keep an eye out for this guy she described, right?"

"Well, sure. But that could describe a lotta men in these parts, frankly. If you see him again, try to get a plate number or something like that."

Shay refrained from rolling her eyes. It didn't surprise her that he didn't take her seriously. She was having a hard time with it herself. Maybe all of it was her imagination. Except for the break-in of course, which could be merely a coincidence.

They passed the newly acquired horses in the pen and he stopped to admire Kholá and her pretty Appaloosa coloring. "Hey, now, she's a looker."

"That's my son's horse." Shay patted Kholá on the neck across the fence. "He's entering her in the Youth Horse Encounter this year. She's coming along well."

Braehill stepped back admiring her with a whistle. "My boy's got an entry, too. Havin' the devil of a time with that crazy gelding he's training, though. Finally got a saddle on him and a minute later, Kevin was flat on his back on the ground. But he's got a never-give-up attitude. Gotta give him that."

Shay mused that perhaps the investigation into their break-in could use a little of that never-give-up attitude.

“Well, if we learn anything from these fingerprints, we’ll be in touch. Meanwhile, y’all stay safe.”

“Thanks, Dom. We sure will try,” Liam said, walking up behind Shay and Cooper. As they watched him drive down their long road, he put his arm around Shay’s shoulders. “That was a plain waste of time.”

“Maybe. Maybe it was just a random break-in, and we’ll have to install a better security system. Better locks. Maybe we should consider moving Dad’s office back up to the house.”

Liam nodded. “Good idea. Let’s do it. We can use Will’s old room as the new office. Getting the house security upgraded makes more sense.”

“I can help with the move.” Cooper scratched Kholá under her jaw. “Back up the pickup to the small barn and we can just load it up. Shouldn’t take more than half a day.”

“That’s a half day we can’t spare right now. It’ll have to wait until we can find a minute. Meanwhile, I’ve hired a couple of guys to start bush clearing that trail you and Cooper took up to the spring and that starts today. Cooper, you and I will be finishing setting up the meadow glamping tent site. Shay, install is tomorrow. Truck should be here by eight a.m. with the furniture. Carolyn and Jess Brody arrive next weekend from New England for their mini-honeymoon to try out our first glamping tent experience. Brody is an old friend of mine,” Liam explained to Cooper, “from Marietta. He moved away a few years ago, but he and his bride wanted to be our test couple, trying out our facility. For them, it’s a free weekend with all the fixin’s. My wedding gift to them.”

He went on, “I have another construction crew working on Nuthatch Cottage down the road, that’s getting sheet-rocked today. I need someone to check the fences up in

the north pasture, because our neighbor just called to say a few head of our cattle had found their way into his pasture. He rounded them up and drove them back home. But new fence needs to be strung. But after all that's done, by about two o'clock, my head is scheduled to explode." His graphic gesture of just such an event made them all laugh.

"Don't worry about the fence," Cooper said. "I got it."

"I'll go, too. Two of us should make quick work of it," Shay added. "We can take the Gator up and be done quicker."

Liam eyed the two of them with a knowing smile. "Yeah. Quicker's better. Sure."

Blushing, Shay silently dared him to say anything more. "See you later, little brother."

"Yup." He bid a knowing adieu to Cooper with a small finger salute. "Cooper?"

Cooper shook his head and followed Shay to get the supplies.

Chapter Ten

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:48 am

A downed tree limb had taken out a section of the barbed-wire fencing. They made quick work of fixing it, working as a team to pull the barbed wire tight around the new fencepost they installed. The curious cattle milled nearby watching them, listening to them talk about nothing. The weather. The fall color in the mountain larches. Anything but what was clearly happening between them.

As they were loading the wire bale back into the Gator, though, Shay's hand accidentally got caught by a barb that sliced her hand right through her glove.

"Gaaa!" she gasped, grabbing her hand which immediately started to bleed.

Shaking out her fist, she danced around the Gator in pain.

"Lemme see," he demanded, reaching for her hand. He opened up her fingers. Blood had already spread across her glove. "God. I'm sorry. Was that my fault?"

"No, it was mine. I was . . . my hand almost got trapped under the bale and I yanked it away. Almost made a clean getaway. Darn it!"

He slipped off her glove carefully and inspected the cut. "That's kinda deep. You had a tetanus shot lately?"

"Maybe. Probably." She shrugged, feeling a little light-headed looking at all the blood. "I can't remember for sure."

He pulled his clean bandana out of his pocket, wrapping it around her hand, tying it tight. "Keep some pressure on it to get the bleeding stopped."

“It’s not that bad. Is it? It just stings. Like crazy.”

“Well, aside from a tetanus shot, you might need a couple of stitches.”

“No. You think?” Dread filled her expression. She’d never had stitches. The thought of it made her feel dizzy. She felt silly, clumsy, ridiculous. “I-I don’t like needles. Seriously, I hate them. I avoid flu shots, for heaven’s sakes. Maybe they could use glue or foam or—”

Gently, he took her wrist in his hand and rubbed a thumb over her skin. “Hey. It’ll be okay, Shay. We’ll take care of it.”

We’ll take care of it. We will. It had been a long, long time since anyone said those words to her. With him holding her arm that way and touching her as if it was the most natural thing to do, she felt . . . irrationally, like maybe he was right. She’d be fine. Except for the needle part. Stupidly, her eyes filled with tears.

She lifted her watery gaze to his and returned his smile. “I’m just being a baby about it.”

“Nah. I get it,” he said, guiding her into the passenger seat of the Gator. “For me, it’s snakes. Which, for a guy who’s lived in both Texas and Montana—rattlesnake capitals of the world—that’s essentially a big problem.”

She laughed. “Have you even been bitten?”

“Kidding me? I’d like to see the snake who can get close enough to sink its fangs into me. No, that’s me running away like a little kid across the pasture.” They laughed together as he accelerated the four-wheeler, flying across the field. “Don’t tell your brothers.”

“You’re just trying to make me feel better.”

“Maybe a little. But the fear of snakes thing . . . yeah, that’s absolutely true.” He turned his headlight grin her way making her wary heart squeeze in her chest.

There were, indeed, stitches in her hand later at urgent care. Four, to be exact. And she did not die. Or even faint. It was okay, and Cooper stayed right beside her the whole time, telling jokes, laughing with the nurses and the doctor. Being charming. That was a skill he’d developed over the years. It wasn’t one she remembered from his boyhood in Marietta when he’d been simply shy and brilliant.

As he charmed the nurses and doctors and held her other hand as she got stitched up, Shay realized that sometime in the last few weeks, she’d stopped thinking of him as a cautionary tale—a danger to her family—and instead as someone she wanted in her life.

It was an earthquake of a thought. A terrifying thought. One that gave her a weird sense of peace. She’d spent most of her life fighting the idea of a man in her life. Any man. She’d convinced herself that it would be just her and Ryan until he was fully grown. There were a lot of reasons why that made sense. But sense seemed to have nothing to do with what she was feeling for Cooper.

Watching him advocate for her with her doctor, even when she could have done it herself, did not offend her. Instead, it made her realize how tired she was of doing everything alone. Without someone who cared about her. Her family and, more particularly, Ryan were crazy about him, and for her son, the feeling seemed mutual. Ryan had bloomed under Cooper’s attention and had made great strides with Kholá and other things. Like math. And smiling. And feeling happy.

Maybe it was all in her imagination that Cooper was feeling the same things she was. And that would be her bad. Talking about feelings with men was not a skill she’d

mastered. Not because she didn't have feelings. But risking sharing them with anyone felt . . . dangerous. The last time she'd told a man she cared about him, he'd left her alone and pregnant.

These days, she'd settled for the possibility that her best years were behind her. That had been fine for a long time. Believing in love and happily ever after had always been a stretch for her. First her parents, who had never been well-suited to a life together, then her twin, Will, whose own divorce had devastated him. But he'd taken a chance again on love, returning to the ranch with Izzy, and Shay had admitted to herself for the first time, that maybe what was standing in the way of her own real happiness wasn't the world, or summer boy, Ethan.

It was her.

On the way back to the ranch, Cooper asked if she minded if they stopped by his father's place to pick up a few things for him. Of course, she said yes. She was curious about the place they'd left so long ago and how it had fared.

While the outside needed some attention, the inside looked freshly updated with paint and new furniture. There were arched doorways and refinished wood doors, and big throw rugs that made the room feel cozy and still masculine. Even the kitchen had been updated and freshened up with copper pots hanging on the wall.

"Who did all this?" she asked, standing in the middle of the living room, with its raftered ceiling and river rock fireplace. "It's so cozy and beautiful."

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He seemed taken aback by her comment. “Thanks. I did most of it. It needed freshening up after all those years. The guy who was renting it wasn’t much in the way of housekeeping, but I enjoyed working on it before my father came home. Pulling it into the twenty-first century.”

“Who knew you had interior designer instincts lurking behind those green eyes of yours.”

He laughed, pulling a jacket from the front hall closet before ushering her into his father’s room. “I wouldn’t go that far and never let your brothers hear you say that. I’d get kicked out of the cowboy union.”

“Oh, I doubt that.” She scanned Ray’s bedroom with its big bed and cozy bedding. A wall of blue cupboards that looked newly built stretched across one wall with a wall-mounted TV in the center. “Where’d you learn to do all this anyway? Surely not on that ranch you worked at?”

He pulled a handful of shirts from his father’s closet. “Let’s just say I had a lot of spare time on my hands when I wasn’t working horses. During the pandemic, I got sucked in by a home repair website and had a lot of the renovations clear in my head before I even got here.” He shrugged. “Filled the hours.”

She tilted a look at him. “Lonely hours?” She almost bit her tongue for asking such a personal question. He met her gaze with brief uncertainty. “Sorry, none of my business.”

“Truth?” he answered, dumping the shirts onto the pile he’d laid on the bed. “Yeah.

There were lots of those. I wasn't in a place to date, really. So, I kept to myself. By choice. And besides, I had this secret crush that I, honestly, never intended to act on."

Shay felt her face get warm. "Oh?"

"Yeah. See, there was this girl, back here in Marietta . . . you wouldn't know her. I almost didn't recognize her."

Her heart fell. "Oh."

"She was kind of out of my league, and she didn't have any idea about this crush of mine. Mostly because I never told her. But once I came back here, she'd made it pretty clear she wanted nothing to do with me."

She grinned, realizing he was talking about her. She opened her mouth to disagree but he went on.

"Then, you know, things happened." He moved closer, sidling up to her until his hips were touching hers and his fingers slipped around either side of her jaw. "And she kissed me up in the mountains and I thought maybe there's hope after all."

His mouth hovered above hers for a moment before he kissed her, lightly. Just long enough to start heat curling in her belly. "I wish...I wish you'd said something. All those years ago."

His lips just brushed against hers again. So soft it was like a whisper that made her crave something . . . louder.

"Maybe," he said against her cheek, "it wasn't the right time for us, then. But now—" He kissed the side of her neck, instigating a flash of heat inside her that threatened to explode into a full-blown torch.

She tipped her head back, giving him better access. “Now?”

“Now, it’s up to you.” He ran his teeth along her neck, nibbling her there before turning his attention to her mouth. “You decide if you’re ready for this.”

This? As if she wasn’t sure exactly what he meant.

With her good hand, she dragged his hand down from her shoulder to her breast and lower, against her belly until it found its destination between her legs. “Ahh, yes,” she whispered.

A sound—a groan—escaped him as he cupped her there.

“Yes,” she breathed again against his ear.

A shiver ran through him that he couldn’t disguise. He claimed her mouth then, fully, without holding back, as if he could devour her and gladly allow her to do the same to him. Not the tender, curious kiss they’d shared before. No, this one was hungry and unapologetic.

Without lifting his mouth from hers, he walked her back until her knees collided with the bed, then fell with her against the soft mattress, catching his weight before he crushed her there.

She wasn’t even afraid of that. It felt divine, his weight against her. To be held so completely. She wrapped her legs around his hips and drew him closer as they plundered one another’s mouths, teeth scraping, tongues lashing in their almost frantic need to get closer still.

He tugged at the button on her jeans and undid the zipper and she fumbled one-handed with his as well. He tugged her jeans down over her hips, then dispensed with

her lacy panties as well. The buttons on her blouse were next and he slid the fabric aside to access her breasts.

For a moment, he simply stared down at her breasts with a shaky breath. “Beautiful.” His thumb teased her nipple through the fabric of her bra.

“Take off your shirt,” she told him. “I want to see you, too.”

He obliged, ripping off two of his buttons when they wouldn’t budge.

A nervous laugh escaped her. “Now you’ve done it.”

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“Sacrifice for the greater good,” he murmured with that famous grin of his.

She couldn’t believe she was here. Half-naked with Cooper Lane, atop a strange bed, staring up at his beautiful face while his gaze searched hers. She skimmed his warm chest with her hands and the sprinkling of dark hair there. His chest was solid as the rest of him, contoured and beautiful from all the hours working on the range. She reached up and pressed her lips against his shoulder making him smile.

As he watched her beneath him, his hand roamed over her flank, across her belly and farther south. His mouth followed. Her eyes slid shut.

How long since any man touched me? How long since I’ve felt wanted? Physically wanted. So long. What if nothing worked anymore? What if I can’t—

“Sshhh—” he whispered. “It’s all right.”

Had he read her mind? Could he feel her tense?

“I know. It’s . . . it’s just that it’s been a long time for me,” she admitted, her fingers against his scalp. Maybe we should talk this out. Maybe we should wait. Not jump into anything we can’t take back.

“If you’re worried, I have protection.” He reached for his wallet, discarded on the bed along with his jeans.

“Wait,” she breathed. “Wait.”

“No?” he asked, clearly ready to stop if she asked him to.

“No, I want to. I-I just need—”

“What? Tell me.”

“Control. I need more control.” Ugh. “That sounds awful.”

He smiled slowly, understanding what she meant. Perhaps even why she needed that.

“No. It doesn’t. Take it.”

And after a moment, she did.

All of that was old stuff, old fear and memories of a summer long ago. Not wanting to feel . . . powerless. It had nothing to do with Cooper except how he made her feel safe, right here and now.

Her hands were shaking as she rolled toward him, pushing him back against the duvet until she was on top of him. With his hands on her legs straddling him, he waited for her to make the next move. So, slowly, she stripped off her blouse and discarded her bra, then bent over him to do to him exactly what he’d done to her.

She kissed him everywhere, enjoying how he allowed her to control the pace and even refrained from touching her until she pulled his hands against her breasts. She nibbled on his neck and tugged on his earlobe, eliciting a groan from him. He was having a hard time staying still under her and finally didn’t try. He reached for his wallet and quickly dispensed with the protection as she tortured his neck with her teeth.

“Promise me that’s not ancient and broken,” she said.

He shook his head with a smile. “Promise. Brand new.”

“Good. But a little cocky.” She bent down and kissed him on the mouth until he rolled over with her arms around him. “Did you plan this?”

“No. But that’s me. Hopeful and practical.”

She laughed and so did he. He was hard with wanting and he flexed his hips against hers. She moved on top of him until, with his hands bracketing her hips, he guided himself inside her.

She smiled down at him, moving slowly at first, teasing him, watching the look on his face change from humor to need. She felt powerful yet vulnerable. And with each up and down, she controlled the pace, controlled her own body, her own choices. With the gentleness of his hands, he seduced her, telling her how he felt through his tender caresses. Until all she could do was to lean over him, kiss him with all the emotion she was feeling inside.

Slowly, he rolled her in his arms until she was under him, moving inside her slowly at first, giving her time to adjust to him. With every breathtaking thrust of his hips, she forgot to be afraid. Forgot the need to protect herself. Or even that they were two separate people—as if they’d been fused together by some magical force.

He gathered her up to him with his arms around her. Soon the rhythm overtook them, and they forgot to think at all. And when they both—by some miracle—came nearly at the same time, Cooper cried out his release, burying his damp face against her shoulder. He held her until their hearts had stopped racing and their breathing returned to normal.

When he finally rolled off her, he lay there smiling up at the ceiling as she turned to him, throwing her arm across his chest and her bare knee over his. She let out a deep

sigh of satisfaction. “We just did that,” she murmured.

“We sure did.” His eyes were sparkling with happiness. He pushed a strand of hair off her cheek and tucked it behind her ear. “You don’t plan on firing me for that, do you?”

“Nuh-uh. Although I hear it’s never a good idea to mix business with pleasure. And that was . . . a lot of pleasure.”

“Yes, it was,” he agreed, kissing her again—just a brush of his lips with hers. “I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around how amazing that was.”

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“Same. But I guess we don’t have to. None of it makes sense anyway.”

“I think we make sense,” he said. “Total sense. It’s been a long time coming.”

She spread her fingers across his chest. “I like the way you say that.”

“I’ll keep saying it until you believe me. Because it’s true.”

She lay, with her head on his shoulder, listening to the birds outside the window.

“Maybe we should keep this between us for a while though. Until . . . I don’t know. I don’t want Ryan knowing what just happened.”

“Understood. But eventually—”

“Yes,” she finished. “Eventually they’ll all know. Just for now . . .”

He nodded. “I can keep a secret.”

“As long as it’s not between us.”

“No secrets,” he said, staring up at the ceiling.

She nodded, content. “Just a little more time.”

He rolled over her and kissed her again. It was a permanent sort of kiss, without the franticness of passion. But deep and kind. The sort of kiss she guessed lovers shared over a lifetime of kisses. And for the first time in forever, she began to imagine the

possibility of that for herself and for him.

*

The next week was filled with busyness on the ranch, with construction and Kholá's final training sessions with Ryan. Even though Kholá had started from square one with Ryan, the kid's bond with the horse was undeniable. He'd managed to do what Cooper had thought was impossible in the allotted time frame and had a good chance of winning in the upcoming competition in his opinion.

Of course, it remained to be seen what the other kids had managed with their own horses. But even more important, Cooper felt the bond between him and Ryan deepening as well. He wanted that. He needed Ryan to trust him, too. But even aside from his growing relationship with Shay, his friendship and mentorship with Ryan felt important. And as the days passed, he felt more hopeful than he had in a long time.

Liam's newlywed friends, Carolyn and Jess Brody, arrived and tested out the glamping tent for a long weekend honeymoon, complete with lazy afternoons spent fly-fishing in the Yellowstone or trail riding in the mountains. Evenings they all gathered around the campfire, eating Sarah's wonderful cooking, and watching the Milky Way spin across the night sky.

They raved about having a luxe four-poster bed and all the amenities in the tent, and how the sounds of the prairie had lulled them into the best sleep of their lives. Frankly, no one—particularly Shay and Cooper—believed that was the only reason they slept well, but that was another story.

All in all, their inaugural stay was a smashing success and the Brodys left after their weekend, happy with promises to return for a longer stay with their friends.

As for Shay and Cooper, through much of October, they kept their growing relationship under wraps around the others, particularly Ryan. They'd met secretly a few times since that first afternoon at Cooper's father's place and their encounters had not been any less hungry than that first time together. They both knew the consequences of what they were doing. Yet unspoken, was where this was all headed. Neither of them had used weighted words yet, like love or the future. He didn't want to risk spooking her when everything was going well. So, he held back. But to himself, there was no denying his feelings. This was a leap into the unknown for both of them, but one he was more than willing to take.

Apparently, he'd seriously underestimated the intuitive nature of teenage boys.

On the afternoon, two days before the big competition at the autumn festival, he was watching Ryan work with Kholá in the big ring. Today, he was working bareback, reinless, working on the trust that went both ways between them, using his legs to guide the filly in big figure eights around the ring. Kholá seemed happy to oblige him, ears perked forward, all the tentativeness gone from her stride. Even Cooper was impressed.

When Ryan stopped Kholá near the gate and swung his leg over her neck carefully to dismount, the horse nuzzled the boy.

Ryan grinned at Cooper. "What do you think?"

"I think you're a natural. I think what you've accomplished with her is amazing. Whether you win this competition or not, you've more than surpassed what you set out to do. She's all the better for it."

Ryan stroked Kholá's nose. "I knew she was the one, from the first time I saw her online. I've, um . . . decided not to enter the competition though."

“What?” Cooper couldn’t believe it. “Why not?”

The boy tucked the filly’s head against his chest. “Because I think she can win. I think she will win. The winner gets prize money and then the horse is auctioned off. That’s how they do it. It could be for a lot of money. Could even pay for my college. But I don’t even care. I’ve decided. I’m never selling her. Ever. I’ll earn money to pay Uncle Liam back for her next summer. I mean look at her. She did all this for me. This is the least I can do for her.”

Giving a rescue horse a forever home was no small thing. “Wow. That’s a big decision. A hard one. Kinda proud of you for making it, Ry. She’s maybe your first true love, this horse.”

Ryan blushed a little but nodded. He watched him out of the corner of his eye for a long beat before he spoke again. “So, is that how you feel about my mom?”

“What?” Caught off guard, Cooper took a step back from the fence. “What makes you say that?”

He shrugged. “I saw you making out with her behind the barn last week.”

“We weren’t—” Cooper slammed his eyes shut. They’d tried to be so careful. He swallowed hard, not wanting to mess this up. And opening up to Ryan might mess things up badly. “I—Uh . . .”

“I see the way you look at her. And she’s into you. And I don’t want to know any more about it. But you know, she doesn’t want me to know for other reasons. Because she thinks I’m still a kid and I can’t handle it. But I’m not a kid anymore. I know things.”

“I—” Cooper forced himself to meet Ryan’s eyes. “I care about your mom. You’re right about that.”

Ryan looked almost relieved at Cooper’s admission. He stroked his filly’s neck. “She thinks I’m always going to be here, but maybe I won’t, you know? Someday, I might go away to school or another town or something and then she’ll be alone. With just the family. I don’t want her to be alone. She always thinks it’s better if it’s just the two of us, but it’s not really. I mean, I used to think so, but now I’m so busy and I think she’s just been lonely. And she seems happier lately. I think that’s your fault. In a good way, I mean.”

He hadn’t given Ryan enough credit. Not by a long shot. “Your life, kid, is gonna be great. And your mom’s life, too. Whatever she decides about her own happiness, about her own path, is hers to choose. You can’t choose that for her. Neither can I. But I want her to be happy as well. We just always want that for the people we love. Like you with Kholá. But her protecting you is what moms do. And that’s because

she loves you first and more than anything.”

“But do you love her?” he pressed.

Cooper had almost forgotten how it felt to be fourteen and filled with wild optimism. With hope. To have everything show up in complete colors instead of shades of gray. But with a silent nod, he admitted it to Ryan. Because to say those words aloud before even saying them to her felt impossible.

So, he simply nodded. “But let’s keep this conversation between us, okay, Ry?”

At five nine, Ryan was already man-sized and still growing with that boyishness that reminded Cooper he had years to go before he fulfilled that potential. But Ry seemed to gather himself up with the responsibility of this private, very adult sharing with Cooper. And Cooper trusted him.

But even so, there was no keeping their secret forever. Or even much longer. If Ryan knew, maybe it was time to stop pretending.

*

The autumn festival in Marietta had gotten under way and the Hardesty clan was going en masse except for Liam, who had decided to stay behind to finish up the shelving in the new office upstairs. Even Ray, who had been undergoing a series of infusion treatments at the hospital for his cancer was feeling well enough to go.

“You sure you’re okay to walk around all night?” Cooper asked him. “We could rent you a wheelchair.”

“God, no,” Ray said proudly. “Anyway, I told Sarah I’d win her a prize tonight and I mean to do it. On my own two feet.”

“A prize, huh? What kind of a prize would that be?”

Ray laughed and blushed a little. “Don’t get smart. Anyway, Sarah’s got standards. It’s gotta be a substantial stuffed animal from a legitimate game and preferably a horse.”

“Oh, making demands, is she? That’s progress.”

“She’s a woman who knows her own mind.” A grin tipped his father’s mouth against his will. “Like her daughter. Progress on two fronts I’d venture to say.”

Cooper pulled on a down vest over his flannel shirt without comment.

Ray grinned and called Poppy over, and both puppies came wagging over to him. Ray bent to pick up the two of them who licked his face enthusiastically. The pups had been his saving grace the last few weeks, keeping him distracted from his treatments and cheering him up.

Ray put the dogs down as he gave Pippa a kiss on the top of her furry little head. “I’m gonna take these two out before we go. I’ll keep my ideas between me and the dogs. If that’s okay with you.”

“Yeah. That works.”

Cooper should have known he couldn’t hide what was happening between him and Shay from his dad. As he was gathering up his phone and wallet, the phone rang. Cooper answered it.

“This is Dominick Braehill over with the sheriff’s office.”

Surprised, Cooper shifted the phone to his other ear. “Yeah, Deputy. What can I do

for you?”

“Well, I called you instead of contacting the Hardestys first because I thought maybe this information might be more pertinent or . . . to be more specific, of interest to you and your father.”

“Information?”

“Seems we got a match on the fingerprints I took at the break-in at the Hard Eight a couple weeks back. It didn’t come through initially on IAFUS as matching any known criminals in the database. But on a hunch, I expanded the search to cold cases in the central Montana area, and you’re not gonna believe what I found.”

His pulse kicked up a notch. “Please. Don’t keep me in suspense.”

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“Those fingerprints in their barn, the fresh ones? Well, it’s impossible, you see, but they belong to a dead man.”

Chapter Eleven

The fairgrounds were crowded on a Friday night and there were midway rides, food tents and trucks, and a huge carnival of games set up. In the tented booths, dotted throughout the grounds, exhibits of artists and artisans were on display, including a craft section that was popular every year and the traditional 4-H exhibit that touted the Youth Encounter coming the next night. The school fundraiser-silent auction Cami had volunteered to help with was in full swing and had lines near all the sign-ups happening in the tent toward the front, where it would be noticed. The Hard Eight had donated several packages as well. There were pumpkins and baskets of apples and the smell of autumn everywhere. Even the trees cooperated by turning beautiful shades of orange and red and dropping a carpet of color on the way in.

Cooper’s brain was on overdrive, thinking about the deputy’s call and the implications behind it. If the intruder was, in fact, Evan Clulagher, right here in Marietta, what the hell was he doing out at the Hard Eight, breaking into their office? And what did all that mean? What connection could Evan have had with their ranch? Or was it Ray who had drawn him there? But he’d made no attempt to see Ray, which made sense since he could have no desire to be recognized.

On the lookout for Evan’s face as they moved through the crowd, he shoved these questions to the back of his mind to focus on Shay as they walked in behind the others. He said nothing about the deputy’s call to anyone. He needed time to sort out his thoughts, because he could sense an answer lying just below the surface. He just

couldn't grab it.

He felt her fingers brush up against his surreptitiously.

"I'm starving," she told him as they reached the food tents. "I think I need one of those." Pointing to a truck selling decadent-looking apple fritters, she grinned at him playfully. "Dessert first at the autumn festival, right?"

"Absolutely." They ordered two and strolled the grounds, enjoying the sweet treat.

"What do you usually order at these things?" she asked him, watching Ryan disappear with school friends toward the midway. They were meeting for a sleepover at one of the other boys' houses tonight. "I mean, what's your vice?"

"You," he murmured close to her ear. "You're my current vice."

She punched him playfully in the arm. "Shhh. I mean food."

"Oh. In that case, it would have to be the deep-fried pickles."

"Pickles?!"

"Or, okay, how about deep-fried Texas BBQ shotgun shells?"

"That requires an immediate explanation."

"Ahh, yeah. Gooey cheese and brisket and jalapeño, all wrapped up in pasta and deep fried. Guaranteed to clog your arteries with no help from the fried pickles." He shrugged. "Maybe Montana has yet to discover this delicacy."

She finished the last bite of her apple fritter and tossed the paper bowl in the trash.

“That does sound fascinating. And, honestly, it would have sounded yummier pre the deep-fried apple fritter. But you apparently, are a fair connoisseur.”

“Or, an unfair connoisseur, depending on your point of view.”

She snorted. “Then please, tell me which carnival game I can actually win and isn’t rigged against me three ways to Sunday?”

“Oh, no. Sorry. That’s part of the unfair fun. They’re all rigged, at least two ways to Sunday.”

She laughed and hurried him toward the games. They bought an arms’ length worth of tickets and spent them on all the games that were impossible to win. Ring toss, coin toss, squirt gun target games, and a fake shooting gallery. Just as he was about to lose hope, he managed to win a large pink bear for her by striking down three bowling pins with a baseball.

Bear in hand, they rode the Ferris wheel that pulled them high above the fairgrounds with a bird’s-eye view of Marietta, all lit up for the event. Alone up there, he wrapped his arm around her shoulder, and she leaned into him as the cool night breeze ruffled through their hair. Around and around they went, as Cooper scanned the fairgrounds for any sign of the man Shay had seen. If Evan was here, he clearly didn’t look like the Evan who’d lived and worked here eight years earlier.

He couldn’t stop thinking about the connection to the Hard Eight. If his father’s partner had returned to Marietta, there must be a good reason. Trey had said he’d gone through all of his stolen money in the Bahamas and was nearly broke. Which meant he needed—was desperate for—more. If he thought, somehow, that he could find it at the Hard Eight, that meant he had reason to believe there was money—blackmail money?—or the means to get it somewhere at the Hard Eight. Ergo, that also meant someone from that ranch had been the blackmailer.

He tightened his arm around Shay, a sick feeling crawling up his throat. Could it have been Sarah? He could not wrap his brain around that possibility. Besides, she seemed to be in love with Ray. Then and now. She would have had no motive to set his father up to take the fall for Evan. Unless—

No. It couldn't be her. If there was one thing he'd learned working both with horses and the cowboys on the Four Sixes, it was how to read people. Sarah was good people. All of them were. Including Liam, who—despite co-running the cattle operation with his father for several years—would have been too young to have done something so dangerous or foolhardy as to blackmail Evan. But could he have known about the blackmail? That didn't make sense either, because from everything Cooper had seen, the ranch was struggling hard before Shay's twin, Will, had returned to infuse it with cash. If there was some cash in some bank account that Liam knew about, surely he'd have used it. And he flatly dismissed the possibility of Cami or Shay.

That left only one person with the potential to blackmail his father's partner—Sarah's late husband, Tom Hardesty.

A cold chill raced through him as the Ferris wheel spun to a slow stop. Tom Hardesty. A dead man who could not defend himself. The patriarch of the Hardesty clan, who was both feared and respected by his family. Yet in all the time he'd been at the Hard Eight, Cooper had rarely heard his children or widow speak of him or even remember him fondly. That didn't make him a bad man, but it made Cooper wonder. It also made him wonder—if he had blackmailed Evan Clulagher, simultaneously setting up his father to take the fall for him, just . . . why? And had he been involved with Evan's rustling scheme itself, or did he simply discover it and take advantage?

"You're far away tonight," Shay said, dragging him out of his thoughts as they walked away from the ride. "Is everything okay?"

“Yeah. Of course,” he said, flustered that he’d allowed her to notice. “I’m just enjoying being out in the world tonight. Quite a crowd, huh?”

“Okay. You don’t have to tell me.” She bumped into his shoulder playfully. “You’re a deep river, Cooper Lane.”

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She threaded her hand through his arm as they walked toward the tented 4-H exhibits and the kids who'd entered the Youth Horse Encounter.

"I guess you know about Ry withdrawing from the competition."

Cooper nodded. "That was a big decision."

"He was scared you'd be upset with him."

"Me? Why would I be?"

"After all the time you two spent together. He thought you'd be disappointed with his decision."

"Actually, I'm proud of him." He tightened a hand around hers. "He chose the bond with the horse over a cash prize. In my experience, that's a choice well made."

"Says the cowboy in you," she teased. "But I agree."

"That wasn't how it was for you as a kid?" he asked, easing her into a topic close to her childhood.

She sighed. "Money was always a priority in our family. There never seemed to be enough of it. At least when we were kids."

"So . . . what? That changed at some point?" he asked carefully.

“Well,” she allowed after a moment, “there were some good years when the struggle wasn’t so great. Financially, at least. But after my father died, it seemed that we were back at square one. Which is why Will’s personal investment in the ranch and all our hard work toward making it a profitable guest ranch is so important.”

They wound through the 4-H caged rabbit exhibits in one of the tents, bumping into proud 4-H parents and fairgoers at every turn.

He tried again. “You don’t talk about him much. Your father.”

She swallowed thickly, studying the long-haired calico bunny sniffing her fingers. “He was . . . not an easy man. He was a good provider, not much of a dad, and a very complicated human being. I mean, we loved him in our own way. Most of us, at least. I think he loved us back? Or maybe it was just the ranch he really loved.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry. That’s way more than you need to hear.”

“Don’t apologize. He’s part of you. Your family is a big part of who you are.”

“And you, too,” she said. “The way you are with your dad, after all you’ve both been through, it says everything about who you are. What kind of man you are.”

He was apparently the kind of a man who would ask sketchy questions under the guise of simple curiosity. Guilt washed over him. But he had to know how these two disparate parts were connected. And as the pieces ticked together in his mind, there was only one piece that connected all three men—Tom, Ray, and Evan. And that part was walking toward them right now with her arms full of a stuffed toy horse.

“There you are!” Sarah exclaimed, dragging Ray in their direction. “We lost track of you on the midway!”

Shay pointed to the stuffed horse. “Look at that. Ray, you’ve made my mother’s

night.”

Sarah, with her arm wrapped around Ray’s, laughed at his blush. “Who knew he was a master of the ring toss? He won another toy, but he gave it away to a little girl who was having a meltdown in front of the cotton candy.”

“Nice,” Shay said. “I don’t know about you, but we spent more than I care to divulge winning this three-dollar stuffed pink bear.”

Cooper couldn’t help but enjoy watching his father with Sarah and how easy they seemed with each other. There was no hiding the fact that they were together. They were comfortable with it. “Have you tried the food yet?”

“Oh, we did.” Ray rubbed his belly. “There were fried sausages involved.”

“Yeah, apple fritters here. Protein’s overrated,” Shay quipped.

Only then did Cooper notice the infamous gossip, Carol Bingley chatting with a man and his wife and looking in their direction. He remembered seeing Carol in town outside the café when he and Shay were having lunch. Cooper rolled his eyes, wanting to steer everyone in a different direction, but it was already too late. The man was walking up to them a bit aggressively.

“Well, if it isn’t the local crime family. The ex-con, Ray Lane and his slippery son,” said the impressively large man in cowboy gear and a silver belt buckle.

Cooper realized then that he had forgotten to brace himself for this tonight. He’d almost forgotten that there were those in this town who still hated them for what had happened so long ago.

Ray immediately put Sarah behind him and held Cooper back with one hand. “No

call for name calling, Messer,” he told the stranger. “We’re just here like you. Enjoying the fair.”

“Oh, not like us,” Messer said, looking around at his clearly distressed wife and grown son. “No, you’re probably spending your rustling money right here in Marietta. You’ve got some balls coming back here.”

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“I did my time.” Ray’s jaw was clenched, and he didn’t take his eyes off either man.

“Not nearly enough for what was lost here. You nearly ruined me with your thievery.”

“Let’s go,” Ray told Cooper and Sarah. Shay was biting her lip, holding onto Cooper.

“He didn’t steal your money,” Cooper snapped. “He was set up. Not that you’d care even if the truth bit you.”

“Truth? Yeah, that’s what he said. But a court of law convicted him. That means something in America. You should get out of these parts, Ray Lane, if you know what’s good for you. Nobody wants you here. Either one of you.” The younger Messer’s fist clenched and unclenched with warning. “And it’s mighty surprising to see you with a man like him, Ms. Hardesty. Maybe you should rethink your priorities.”

“Shut up, Jim,” Sarah told him. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Messer’s wife was tugging on his sleeve, begging him to back off. “Let’s go, Jimmy. Just leave it.”

Jimmy Messer took in the half-dozen children nearby who were stopped watching them with wide-eyed looks. “Yeah,” he muttered. “Trash like you ain’t worth my time.”

They ambled away, leaving the four of them shaken and temporarily speechless. It

wasn't as if his father had expected a welcome here. But the hope that the past might be a dim memory was dashed in that moment.

"Let's go home," Sarah said, tugging Ray toward the exit. "I've had enough of the fair for one night."

Fury knotted in Cooper's throat as he watched his father walk with Sarah toward the exit. He didn't deserve this. He'd never deserved this.

In the next moment, he felt Shay thread her fingers defiantly through his and pull him toward the exit. Her deep blue eyes met his with some emotion he couldn't quite name. Compassion? Empathy? Pity? Maybe all of the above?

With one last look at the retreating Messers, he tightened his fingers around hers and stalked toward the exit.

*

Liam was at home, in the upstairs bedroom that was being converted to a home office, building shelves when he heard a noise downstairs. He stilled, listening, sure he imagined the sound of breaking glass.

But then, it came again with a couple of short punches coming from the back of the house. The puppies, who Ray had brought up to the house for the evening, roused from their sleep at the sound, too, looking quizzically at Liam.

His first thought was that his shotgun was far away in a downstairs room. His second was—he was alone here and foolishly vulnerable.

He picked up his hammer and moved quietly to the top of the stairs and shouted, "I've got a gun. Whoever's down there, get the hell out of here!"

Downstairs, a shadow passed across the front hallway.

Inside.

Whoever it was, was already inside.

The pups whined and tumbled against his legs. Liam lifted his cell phone and dialed 911. It rang and rang.

“The police are on their way!” he lied, scanning around for a sturdier weapon to confront the man with. Downstairs, he heard a drawer full of stuff hit the floor and the crash of something breakable.

Again, the shadow of someone passed between the kitchen light and the hallway. “Tell me where it is!” the intruder yelled, surprising Liam so he nearly fell backward. “Tell me!”

“Get out of here,” Liam shouted back. “We’ve got nothing you want.”

From outside, the flash of headlights illuminated the front windows followed by the sound of tires crunching against the gravel driveway.

“Nine-one-one,” said a faint voice on his cell. “What’s your emergency?”

“Hard Eight ranch. We have an intruder. He’s in the house.”

Liam heard the back door slam and the sound of more glass hitting the floor. He pushed aside the curtain in the window to see his family truck had pulled into the front yard. The crew from the fair had come home early.

He rushed down the stairs to head them off at the door, the 911 operator still

peppering him with questions. He held up his hand to stop them from entering. “We just had another break-in. I don’t know yet where he is exactly. I think he ran out the back door. But we wait outside until Cooper and I clear the house.”

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A stunned shock registered on all their faces as the pups tumbled down the stairs after Liam and spilled into the front yard in a black and white furry jumble. Ray and Cooper caught them and picked them up. Sarah touched Liam's arm. "Are you all right, darlin'?"

He shoved a hand through his dark hair. "Fine. Just shook up, is all. Back door's busted. Just wish I'd had my gun." He returned to the 911 operator and told her they had it handled.

"What is going on?" Sarah gave a shudder. "That's twice in one month. What in the world does that guy want with us, anyway?"

"This guy," Liam said. "He just yelled at me. Kept saying, 'Where is it?'"

"Where is what?" Sarah asked, confused.

"That's a damn good question." Liam had the look of a ruffled-up stock guardian dog.

Cooper scowled at the darkness beyond the yard. He should tell them about Clulagher. Tell them now. But that was bound to go badly for everyone. He was in no position to accuse anyone of anything. Least of all a dead husband and father. He needed to talk to Trey Reyes first, and he needed some kind of proof that Tom Hardesty was involved.

The flip side of that coin was implicating their father-husband in a crime. The deeper Cooper waded into all of this, and the more involved he got with Shay, the more

certain he was that, if he wasn't careful, all of it could go very wrong.

A sick feeling hit the back of his throat as Shay took his hand in front of the others.

"He's probably just some crazy looking for drugs," she said. "Or drug money. On the positive side, we outnumber him by a lot. And the alarm system we ordered goes in later this week. I say we stick close to home. Strength in numbers and all that."

Everyone was staring at her hand in his.

She blinked at them in confusion. "What?" Then she realized. "Oh." She flicked a wary look up at him and cleared her throat. "Yes. Yes, we are. Seeing each other."

It was a moment that should have made him very happy. He tightened his fingers around hers and met her family's stares. And his father's. "We are."

"Oh!" Sarah exclaimed. "Well, darling, that's . . ."

"Crazy timing." Liam looked befuddled. "But yeah. We already knew."

Ray patted him on the back as Cami's truck pulled into the driveway coming back from the fair. She hopped out with a curiously wary expression. "What are we all doing standing out here? What did I miss?" She immediately caught sight of the handholding. "Ohh-hhh!"

"Yeah, it's way more complicated than that," Shay told her. "I'll tell you inside." She kissed Cooper on the mouth, and he grinned back at her.

"Night, Cooper. 'Night, everyone." As she and Cami walked away, he made eye contact with the others without a word, then turned and headed back to the apartment, feeling like a Judas.

*

The next morning, Liam drove into town to buy glass to repair the door while Cooper helped Shay unpack the boxes from Tom's old office in the new one upstairs. The shelves Liam had built would hold most of it and after they got the desk cleared, it would look like a real office again.

The two of them had shaken off last night's troubles and after working for an hour, stopped to share some experimental cappuccinos Shay made in the new espresso machine they'd just unpacked for the main guest lobby. It was an extravagance, but necessary. The cappuccinos, on the other hand, would require some work.

She made a face. "Oooh. That's a leeeetle bit strong."

Cooper struggled to swallow his. "Nah. It's just . . . perfect."

She tilted an amused look at him. "I promise, it'll get better. Once I figure out that milk steaming thingy."

"It's the grind."

"The grind? Really? How would you know that?"

"Did I not mention I worked as a Starbucks barista in college?"

"No." She lifted a box onto the desktop. "But you were on full scholarship."

"With a work-study component." He shrugged. "Learned everything you never needed to know about making coffee."

"Then you are absolutely in charge of Kendall."

“Kendall?”

“The espresso machine. Unisex name for a beautiful workhorse.”

“Good call,” he said, glancing at his watch and setting down his drink. “Speaking of which, Liam wants me to start the round barn demo today, so I’d better go. Your mom was supposed to meet me out there at one to go over some design ideas.”

“Really?” She tugged him toward her by the front of his shirt. “You sure you have to go right now?”

“Well.” He kissed her briefly on the lips. “I do work for you. I am at your disposal.”

“Oh, in that case, you’d better go. Or Liam will never let me hear the end of it.”

He brushed a finger against her cheek. “See you later?”

“You’d better!”

After he’d left, she unpacked several boxes of books, including a raft of notebooks and old accounting folders. She sighed. All of those were mostly outdated taxes which would need a file cabinet to store until the IRS didn’t require them to save them anymore. Her father had diligently saved everything, which was good, but exhausting when doing this kind of a move.

She picked up a few books and put them onto the shelf. The number of books surprised her because he wasn’t a reader. But there were novels and nonfiction books

alike looking for space.

She heard the ding of a text and reached for her phone, only to realize the sound had not come from her phone. A few seconds later, it dinged again. This time, she searched underneath a pile of papers and found Cooper's phone! He must have put it down while they were working, and it had gotten buried there.

Trey Reyes was the name on the text message. Nothing more.

Trey Reyes?

She knew that name. Wasn't he the private investigator for the Canaday Law firm?

Why would a private investigator be calling Cooper? Confused, she stood there for a moment staring at his screen. Until a second text came in from Trey Reyes.

Whatever it was, it was no business of hers. She put his phone down and decided to run the cell out to him later when she finished up here.

She picked up several more books and slid them into place. But with the next book she selected—a small black, leatherbound family bible—a small, folded piece of paper fell out to the floor. Frowning, she reached for it and slowly unfolded it. The hand-written note appeared to be in her father's hand.

TO THE FOUR OF YOU,

THE PRICE OF YOUR MOTHER'S INFIDELITY IS WITHIN THE WALLS OF
THE PLACE WHERE I PROPOSED TO HER MANY YEARS AGO. I THOUGHT
IT WAS FITTING.

USE IT WELL. IT'S ALL I HAVE TO LEAVE YOU.

YOUR FATHER, TOM HARDESTY.

What in the world? Shay stared at the note and reread it four times. As if rereading it would make it make any more sense. The price of your mother's infidelity? What did that mean? Her mother had never been unfaithful to her father. Of that she felt certain. Oh, they'd had issues, but certainly not that. What did he mean by the price being within the walls of the place where he proposed to her? It sounded sinister. And terrifying. Where was that? He'd always said he asked her to marry him in the loft. It was a kind of family joke.

But not the barn here. The old round barn. A chill ran through her.

Cooper's phone dinged again. Twice. With two more texts. Then the phone rang. Trey again.

Oh, for heaven's sake. She reached for it and answered it.

"Hello? This is Shay Hardesty. Mr. Reyes?"

"Yes?" The deep voice on the other end hesitated. "This is Trey Reyes. Is . . . is Cooper there?"

"I'm sorry. I answered his phone. I thought it might be important since you'd left so many texts. He left his phone behind accidentally."

"It is very important that I speak with him. I'm returning his call. I was flying in from California this morning and unable to answer."

She'd only met Reyes once or twice with the Canaday sisters, so she didn't know him well. But there seemed to be an urgency in his voice.

“Well, he’s not here.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“He’s working out at the round barn. Is there anything I can help you with?” She was still holding the note from her father. Her hand was shaking.

“I-I think . . . listen, Ms. Hardesty. I have reason to believe that he and all of you out at the Hard Eight could be in imminent danger.”

Instantly, her thoughts turned to the man who’d broken into their home. “What kind of danger, exactly?”

“I really should talk to Cooper directly. It’s in regard to a case I’m working on for him.”

A case? The hair on the back of her neck went up. Cooper had hired Trey to investigate . . . what? Was it connected somehow to the break-ins at their ranch? Or the creep who’d passed her on the road? Why wouldn’t he tell her that though?

A drumming began behind her eyes. “Oh, the case. Yes,” she lied. “He told me about the case. You found something then?” She held her breath.

Trey hesitated again, but even as he did, she heard the sound of his car door shutting and his engine starting. “Okay, since he’s told you . . . It turns out Cooper was right all along about your mom being at the center of this. It was Sarah that Ray was trying to protect by going to prison without implicating your father—”

My father? What? No. Just no!

“And that might be the key to clearing Ray’s name. Cooper called me last night. The deputy had called him about the fingerprints out at your barn. Seems they belonged to none other than Clulagher. So we know now that the guy is not dead and has definitely been here in town.”

Her throat felt like it might close up. “Wait. You mean that’s who’s been stalking my family?”

“Apparently. Look, there’s no easy way to say this, but we also found that it was your late father who was blackmailing Clulagher. My guy retrieved some deleted emails that were . . .”

Her ears stopped working. Blackmail? Clulagher? Her father? Ray protecting her mom? What the hell was he talking about?

She stared down at her father’s note in her hand. . . . the price of your mother’s infidelity . . .

The words all collided as she tried to take them in. All she could really seem to grasp was that her mother was somehow at the center of all this. And Cooper had, for some reason, come here to investigate her parents’ involvement in some crime his own father had committed and that now, all of them were in danger.

Her heart sank. And all of the gut feelings, all of the intuition she’d had that very first day about Cooper ruining them had been right, and she’d ignored all of it and let him in. He’d lied to her. About everything. And had he known all along who this guy was who was stalking her? Stalking her family? But he did nothing? Told them nothing? Anger bubbled up inside her. All she could think about was making love to Cooper, him kissing her. Making her believe he wasn’t here for some ulterior motive. All so

he could ruin them by clearing his father's name.

"Shay? You still there?" Trey asked. "Listen to me. I can't predict what this guy will do. But a dead man can do pretty much anything he wants and get away with it."

A dead man? Not if she strangled Cooper first!

"Okay. Thank you," she said. "I'll tell him."

"No. Wait. Shay. Listen to me. Don't go by your—"

"Goodbye." She punched the end button on Cooper's cell phone. She let out a frustrated growl and tossed it roughly down on the desk. Then she picked it back up and angrily punched that end button over and over.

Then, she raced downstairs and out the front door. She jumped in her truck and spit gravel behind her as she headed out to find him.

*

Sarah and Cooper were up at the round barn, discussing design possibilities, even as Cooper was tearing out old sheetrock from the interior tack room.

"This right here isn't a supporting wall." Cooper banged his hammer along the wall, punching holes in it. "So, we can tear this down to make room for a kitchen, if that's what you have in mind."

"We'll definitely need kitchen facilities up here along with redoing all the electrical wiring and the box. I don't think a couple of string bulbs are going to cut it for wedding receptions." Sarah chuckled as she inspected the joists under the loft. Old bits of hay still drifted down from the spaces between. "They look pretty sturdy. They

must be a hundred years old though. Maybe there's something we can do with the loft. Build a staircase up to it. Use it as a changing room? Then the stairway could even be an entrance for the bride?"

"That's a lot of work, but it's a great idea."

He hammered again and pulled some drywall out with the claw part of the hammer. And with the drywall, unexpectedly came a fist full of currency.

Bills.

Money.

It fluttered to the floor like autumn leaves. Cooper just stared at it.

Sarah turned at his silence and gasped. “What . . . is that?”

He reached for the bills. Hundred-dollar bills. Lots of them. He turned to Sarah, wide-eyed.

“Oh, my God—” she breathed.

Cooper turned back to the wall. Pulled off more drywall. Then a whole section of drywall pulled away from the wall in one piece. A secret door. More bills tumbled out. Stacks of bills. Some wrapped in currency bands. Others, loose. There were thousands and thousands of dollars stuffed between the studs and spilling out onto the barn floor.

Speechless, the two of them just stared at the money.

Finally, Sarah said, “Wh-where did that come from? Who . . . who put it there?”

Cooper pulled more bills from the wall and looked back at her. The truth was inevitable now. There was no way he could keep it from her. “I haven’t been completely honest with you.”

*

“Honest?” Shay shouted, appearing at the barn doors. “Ha! Clearly you don’t even know the meaning of the word.”

Cooper and Sarah turned in shock at her sudden appearance.

“Shay—” Cooper began, getting to his feet.

Shay’s angry finger-pointing wavered at the sight of the money scattered all over the floor. She felt the color drain from her face. “What is that?”

“Money,” Sarah answered, stating the obvious. “Lots of money. Money that doesn’t belong to us.”

The price of your mother’s infidelity. Stunned into silence for a heartbeat or two, Shay turned fiercely to Cooper. “This is all your fault. You, Cooper Lane, are a liar. Is this what you’ve been looking for all along? This money? Payback maybe for your father’s suffering?”

“What?” Cooper stared at her in shock. “No.”

“Shay—” Sarah warned.

“Forget about the money, Mom. Did he tell you that he’s known all along who our stalker was? Did he tell you it was Evan Clulagher? The man who supposedly died eight years ago?”

Sarah looked at Cooper in confusion.

“And did he mention that he hired a private investigator to investigate us?”

“No, it wasn’t like that,” he denied. “I had no idea that—”

“Just stop. Trey Reyes told me everything. How you believed Mom was at the center of it all and—”

“What?” Sarah gasped.

“How our family was about to be implicated in this mess about Ray? All the while, he tried to . . . to insinuate himself into our ranch. Tried to make me think”—she teared up, her voice going up an octave as her throat closed up—“that he cared about me. That he . . . was falling in love with me.”

“I am. I am in love with you, Shay.”

Now actual tears squirted out of her eyes, tears as angry as she was. “Don’t! Don’t make it worse by lying again.”

He blinked at her anger. “Is that what you really think? That I would try to trick you? Pretend about my feelings for you?”

“Well . . .” she choked out. “I was the one holdout to your being here. The one you had to convince.” She shook her head. “Go on. Deny it. You can’t. You used me to get to . . . to all this.” Tears leaked out of her eyes against her will.

The wounded look on Cooper’s face nearly broke through her anger, nearly broke what remained of her heart, but she wouldn’t allow him to fool her again. “Oh, and here. You forgot this.” She pulled his phone from her pocket and threw it at him, hitting his shoulder before he could duck. The phone clattered to the ground. “Now look.” She pointed to the money. “How . . . how are we going to explain this?”

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He reached down to pick up his phone. From somewhere behind them came the sound of a gun cocking. “That is the question, isn’t it?” The three of them jumped as a disheveled-looking man appeared from the shadows under the loft. Had he been lurking there all along, watching this crazy scene unfold?

He stood at the loft ladder, holding a pistol aimed at them. His hair was overlong, his jaw was covered by an unkempt beard and his clothes looked like they could use a wash. It was the same man from the road that night. He tossed a small duffel bag in their direction. “I’ll take that money now and I thank you all for saving me the trouble of tearing all these walls out in the last place I had to look. You—Sarah—you fill up that bag.”

Cooper shoved Shay behind him. “There’s no need for guns,” he told Evan. “Take the money. We don’t want it.”

“We?” Shay hissed in a strangled whisper. “No. We don’t want it,” she corrected over Cooper’s shoulder. “Whatever it is. We, as in us. The Hardestys.”

“That’s amusing,” Evan said. “You think you’re all above this money? This Hardesty clan that thinks it’s so upright? This? This right here is the money your father stole from me. Blackmail money. Oh, yeah, he wasn’t above breaking the law, your old man, if it meant his family would profit and Sarah’s lover would go to prison.”

Shay gaped at him in shock.

She gripped the back of Cooper’s shirt as she watched her mother’s reaction to Evan’s words. At how some dawning realization replaced the shock in her

expression.

Impossible. All of this was impossible. Crazy.

Evan gestured at Sarah to hurry up. “Gotta say I’m relieved to find he didn’t spend it all.” He fidgeted, pacing along the wall, unable to stand still as she tossed the money in the bag. “But I knew he’d stashed it somewhere here on the ranch. Frugal man your husband.” He wiped his nose and sniffed.

“You’re lookin’ pretty rough there, Clulagher,” Cooper said. “Things a little shaky in your world? Once you betray everyone you know?”

Clulagher winced at the dig. “You seem to know something about that, according to the little lady here.”

Shay curled her fingers warningly into Cooper’s shirt. “Don’t—” she whispered.

“Maybe you’ll get away with it again this time. Maybe you won’t. Maybe you’re not in complete control of it anymore,” Cooper said.

“You let me worry about that. You worry about your old man who looks like maybe he doesn’t have long for this world.”

“You stole eight years of his life!”

The man shrugged. “I didn’t steal it exactly. More like he gave it away. All for love.”

“Liar,” Cooper barked.

“Yeah? Ask him.” Clulahgher hauled Sarah up by the elbow once she’d finished putting the last of the money in the bag. He pulled her close against him with the gun

to her head.

“No! Mom!” Shay breathed. “Cooper do something!”

“No!” Sarah snapped. “Leave it. You protect her.”

And he did. He was. He was blocking her with his body.

“That’s right,” Evan said. “You stay right where you are. Throw me the keys to that truck of yours.”

Cooper nodded at her and, angrily, she fished the keys out of her pocket.

“Toss them over here.”

She did and he made Sarah pick them up, then sidled out toward the barn doors with her back against his chest.

“Now, I’m not a killer,” he told them. “But you never know. Things are a little . . . desperate right now and you never know what might—”

But before he could clear the barn doors, someone reached out from behind the wall and knocked the gun out of his hand.

Chapter Twelve

Evan grunted as the pistol clattered to the ground and went off in the dirt. Trey Reyes jumped Clulagher and wrestled him to the ground. Sarah fell as well, then crabbed out of the way. Instantly, Cooper was there, dragging her up, away from the struggle. Evan and Trey fought briefly before Cooper joined in, gaining advantage. Fury overtook him as he punched Evan hard in the face, over and over until Trey stopped

him, rolling the man over and locking Evan's hands behind his back.

“Yeah, you bastard,” Cooper spat. “That was for my father. For the eight years he spent behind bars because of you.”

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Muttering curses, Evan lay defeated, face down, bleeding on the dirt barn floor.

With his knee on Evan's back, Trey met Cooper's look and grinned. "We got 'im." He pulled a pair of zip ties from his back pocket and locked Evan's hands behind him.

Cooper nodded, breathing hard, his heart still racing. "Where'd you come from?"

"I just had a feeling. Pulled up down the road. Looks like I was right." Trey's dark hair fell in his eyes. "You call the sheriff," he told Cooper quietly. "I was never here."

Cooper nodded and pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed the sheriff.

Brushing the dirt off himself, Trey dragged Clulagher over to the wall and shoved him against it.

Cooper hung up the phone, looking over at Shay and Sarah embracing. "Sarah. Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"No. I'm okay."

Shay refused to look at him, but he could see she was crying. She swiped at her cheeks angrily with her palms.

"Shay—listen to me," he began, but she put her hand up to stop him from saying anything more.

Frustrated, he turned to Trey. “The sheriff’s on his way.”

“Great!” Shay said. “That’s just great. Perfect! The sheriff! Now we’re ruined. Everything we’ve worked so hard for. He’ll see the money, linking us to whatever our father was up to. That we had no part of. It’s just perfect!”

The four of them stood in silence for a long moment before Trey reached for the duffel. “What if he doesn’t?”

Shay shot him a questioning look.

“What if there is no money to find?”

Evan Clulagher groaned miserably.

“What if,” Trey proposed, lifting the duffel over his shoulder, “all this disappears? What if I take it out of here right now and they never see it?”

Shay shot a look at Cooper. “And do what with it?”

Trey shrugged. “TBD. But this fool will never see a dime of it again.”

The accusing look on Shay’s face put a dark look on Cooper’s own. “I’ll tell them all about it!” Clulagher snarled from his corner. “I’ll tell them all how you made off with my money.”

“What money?” Trey snorted. “Nothing here but a sad, old, desperate man trying to pin the blame for what he did on everyone else.” He pointed at the hole in the wall. “Oh, and that? That’s just demolition. Just like everywhere else on this property. And FYI, you weren’t as clever as you thought you were fixing Ray’s books. If they’d looked a little bit closer, they would have found what we found. Your digital

fingerprints all over those transactions that framed Ray. So, not so smart after all, are you, Evan?"

Evan slunk down against the wall, silent again.

"I'd better get out of here before the sheriff comes." Trey looked at Sarah. "Cooper, you stay here and wait for him. Sarah and Shay, you should get out of here, too. No use complicating matters any more than they are."

Shay nodded, tugging her mother by the arm. She stopped to pick up the keys that had fallen out of Evan's hands, then turned back to Cooper.

He blinked at her, unsure what to say. Knowing anything he said now would only make things worse.

Anger was still burning in her eyes. "You know, I've been disappointed by people before, Cooper. But you? You've just managed to set a whole new bar. I actually let myself care about you! So, thank you. Thank you for reminding me that trust is just another word for gullible. And that I'm the fool. Again."

*

"This isn't Cooper's fault," Sarah told her riding back to the ranch in her truck. "None of this is Cooper's fault."

Shay stared straight ahead, her fingers tight on the wheel.

"This all started a long time ago, before you were even out of school."

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“Your affair with Ray, you mean?”

Sarah blinked. “It wasn’t an affair.”

“Not what Dad thought.” She pulled the note she’d found in the bible from her pocket and handed it to Sarah. “Care to explain?”

Sarah rolled her eyes shut and her face contorted with pain. “You’re upset. I can see that. But this was between me and your father and—”

“You forgot Ray. He was somewhere in the middle of all this, too.”

“Everything—life—is more complicated than you’re expecting, Shay. I get that. But it’s not because you’re naive or because Cooper came here hoping to help his father. It’s because we are all just trying to get things right. And your father and I, we never really could.”

“So, you cheated on him? Why didn’t you just divorce him? That would have been more honest.”

Sarah bent her head. “It would have. And I intended to do just that. But then . . . complications. I lost my nerve after Ray went to prison.”

Shay wanted to plug her ears, sing la, la, la! at the thought of her parents blatantly lying to one another for so long. But avoiding the truth was how she’d gotten here in the first place. “He knew, apparently?”

Her mother nodded. “He guessed, though he never confronted me. We just pretended for a very long time. Until he died. I’m sorry you had to find out this way. But I would have told you eventually. And trust that you could forgive me.”

“Forgive you for cheating on my father?”

“No. For wanting to live my life fully. For wanting love in my life.”

Shay felt tears leak out of her eyes.

Sarah crumpled Tom’s note in her hand. “Drop me off at Ray’s apartment. We need to get a few things straightened out.”

“Fine.”

Sarah braced her hand on the dashboard and turned to Shay. “I don’t know why you’re so willing to believe the worst about Cooper but—”

She steered the truck over a rough patch of dirt road, scowling. “Did you hear him defend himself? No. Because it was all true.”

“Did you give him a chance to defend himself? You did not. You just accused him of the most awful things.”

“True things.”

“I think you’re wrong.” Sarah folded her arms angrily against her chest. “Do you know what I think? I think you’re mad because you finally allowed yourself to be open enough to fall in love with someone. And he happens to have a past, too. Which is not a crime. Why is that so impossible to understand?”

“It’s not his past I’m upset about. He was here under false pretenses. And I am not in love with him. Yeah, I’m mad. I’m mad-hurt. Why can’t you understand that? He was just . . . using me to get to all this. How can I trust a man who lies to my face?”

“Did he though? Did it ever occur to you that he might have been trying to protect us from what your father did until he figured out what really happened? That he didn’t want you to know that your dad had done something so despicable as blackmail? Or that I was . . .” She stopped, swallowing back her own tears. “That my life might have been more complicated than you could imagine? Or that the last decade—before he died—had been one big lie for your father and was how our ranch survived on money that didn’t belong to us—without us even knowing?”

No. That hadn’t occurred to her. Was he? Trying to protect her? That sounded convenient. Possible. Heartbreaking. But she felt raw and punched, like someone had hit her in the heart.

Someone. Cooper.

Now what? What was she going to do with him now? Now that they’d made love and said words to each other? How could she even face him again?

She dropped Sarah off at Ray’s apartment and tried not to think of Cooper and what was going on up at the round barn. She didn’t want to think of him at all. Which proved impossible as she pulled into the yard to find Ryan waving to her from the paddock with Kholá. He was riding her bareback, without so much as a set of reins. The horse took note of her, ears pricked forward as she walked toward the pen.

Ryan, always the observer, instantly saw something was wrong. “Are you crying?”

She thought about telling him the truth but pasted a bright smile on her face. “Oh, it’s all the autumn pollen. I’m fine. What are you doing home so early? Did Cami bring

you?”

“No. Keegan’s mom gave me a ride. Remember? It was an early day for teacher stuff.”

“Oh, right.” Could the timing be any worse? She petted Kholá over the fence as she walked up to greet her, trying to figure how to keep him away from all of this. “Um. I’m going to go inside and um . . . have some tea. Are you hungry?”

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“No, we stopped for lunch on the way. Hey, have you seen Cooper? I wanted to show him what Kholá is doing. Look.” Using only his legs, he backed the horse up around in a circle. “Isn’t she amazing? Cooper said it would take a while for her to do that, but she got it right away.”

Shay sniffed and chucked a knuckle beneath her nose. “That’s awesome, Ry. But listen, about Cooper . . .”

“Ray promised we’d go fishing this afternoon, too. Maybe you and Cooper can come.”

She couldn’t look him in the eye. Thinking back to her son’s demeanor only a few months ago, before Cooper and Ray, before Kholá and everything that had happened in-between, the difference in this boy was like the shift that Dorothy took in the Wizard of Oz as she moved from her black and white world into a world of color. Ryan’s world had brightened and opened to all the colors because of Cooper, and she had just taken that away from him.

No, not her. Cooper had done that.

“I think they might be tied up with something else this afternoon. Hey, why don’t we go into town and find you some new football cleats. You’re outgrowing yours.”

“Not today. He promised. I was just going to go over and—”

“Grandma’s over there now,” she said, cutting him off. “They’re talking. This isn’t a good time.”

Ryan narrowed a look at her. “What’s going on, Mom? What aren’t you telling me?”

*

“Were you ever going to tell me, Ray?” Sarah asked, her hand still on the doorknob behind her.

Ray’s hand froze on the teakettle he’d just put on the stove. “Tell you? Tell you what?”

“The truth. About why you wouldn’t see me in prison? About Tom blackmailing Evan Clulagher and you both.”

“What?” He turned to stare at her. “Tom wasn’t—”

“No more lies, Ray. It’s time for the truth. I know now that Tom knew about us. I suspected that for a long time. But Evan’s alive. I just met him, in fact, up at the round barn.”

“You what? Sarah—!” He moved toward her with real concern.

“I’m fine. But as you might imagine, it was not a pleasant meeting at all.”

“What the—He’s here? In Marietta? Is that who has been breaking into—”

“Yes. It’s all right. He’s in custody now. Trey Reyes and Cooper saw to that.”

“Trey . . . who?”

She blinked at him. “You didn’t know about him?”

“Who is he?”

“A private investigator that Cooper hired.”

Ray shook his head. “Ahhh. I told him. I didn’t want him to hire any—”

“Well, he did. And now, it’s done, Ray. He found evidence that proves your innocence. And Evan is finally going to pay for the lies he told about you.”

For a long, lifetime of a moment Ray stared at her, hardly believing what she was saying. “No.”

“Yes. It’s true.” She reached out a hand to him and he took it, pulling her close. She felt his shoulders shake as emotion passed through him. It had been a long road. Much too long a road for Ray. After a moment, she rubbed a hand against his back and pulled back to look at him.

“You knew that Tom knew about us. Didn’t you? Did he come to you? Tell you that he knew?”

Ray lowered his head. “It was before the trial, but after Evan vanished. I’d heard a jailhouse rumor from one of Evan’s lackeys that there had been someone out there blackmailing Evan over the rustling. Someone named Tom, but they didn’t know a last name. And somehow, I just knew it was your Tom. I called him and he came to see me. I knew he could clear my name. He knew I wasn’t part of it. But he basically came to gloat and to tell me that he knew I was innocent. But he wanted me to know that he would never, ever help me to clear my name. Because of you. Because I’d stolen you from him. He didn’t actually admit to the blackmail, but he did say that if I ever tried to implicate him it would ruin you and the kids and the whole Hard Eight ranch would go down. Was that what I wanted? he asked. To ruin you? To have you arrested?”

“Oh, Ray . . .”

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“No, I would never have—it was my choice. That was how it had to be. I couldn’t tell you.”

“If I had known—”

“What? What could you have done?”

“I never would have let you sit in prison all those years. I would have told the truth about what Tom had done. About what Evan was paying him for. We would have walked away from all of this. Away from Tom and his lies. I should have. But I lost courage when you went away. Our marriage was over long before you and I fell in love.” She cupped her hand against his cheek. “I know you did that for me. For us. I’ll never be able to repay you for your sacrifice.”

He pulled her closer and threaded his fingers through her hair. “There is nothing to make up. I would do it all over again today.”

“It’s over now,” she said. “Done. Thank God it’s over now. Except for . . .”

“What?”

“Your son. My daughter. She’s furious with him for not telling her about Trey. For—in her mind—connecting us to the scandal. And she said things I think she doesn’t mean. At least, I hope she didn’t mean them. He was devastated.”

“Oh, no.” He pressed his forehead against hers. “This is all because of me. What’ll it take to fix this?”

She sighed. “She’s my stubborn one. I really don’t know. A miracle?”

Chapter Thirteen

Almost four days had passed since Cooper had packed his things and left. Ray went with him, and they moved out back to their own place. Shay had watched him go from her room upstairs and said nothing to stop him. Even though a thousand times, she’d wanted to. He’d looked angry. Hurt. His jaw set. He’d quit that night, despite Liam begging him to stay.

Now all of them blamed her for his leaving, even though they all could see how it must have looked. At first.

But there were things they didn’t know about her and Cooper. How far they’d taken things. How she’d let herself imagine a life with him. How heartbroken she felt. How foolish. And not just because she’d jumped all over him that day at the round barn without giving him a chance to defend himself. Or even because this mess had hurt all of them—Liam, Ryan . . . all of them. But mostly because she couldn’t seem to make herself take it back. Because her stubborn pride wouldn’t allow it. And now it was too late.

Her own kneejerk reaction to what had happened was what bothered her most. Had she learned nothing in all these years since Ethan’s denial? Her own father’s? Had she not moved past all that or was that always going to be a reflex that belied reason? A button that once pushed, she just . . . reacted.

She’d spent hours—usually during a sleepless night—revising her words to him in a useless rewritten version of that day. One that made her seem logical. Reasonable, even. But that old scar, the one he’d inadvertently nicked, had grown thicker with age, and it somehow still bled. It was there to protect her. But scars never fully heal the wound that caused them. They only cover up the damage like a warning for the

next potential injury.

But was it all her fault? He lied to her. And what about that money? Had he known about it? Was that what he'd been looking for himself? Was he keeping it? And what about what her father had done? Trey promised to keep them out of it, but would he? And Cooper had quit all on his own. She hadn't even fired him. Which all just proved to her that it was for the best.

Ahhhhh! Her brain felt on tilt.

She couldn't sort it out. She needed to clear her mind.

For the past four days, she'd thrown herself into keeping busy—cleaning, going through closets and tossing things they didn't want or need anymore, mucking stalls in the barn. Riding alone up the newly cleared trails on Lulu or She-Ra.

Remembering that first kiss.

But mostly she'd baked. It was a mindless task, like now, as she peeled a bowlful of green apples for a pie. She bent to her work over the kitchen sink, alone, slicing them before dousing them with lemon juice. Then a dusting of cinnamon/sugar and a pinch of cloves along with a handful of flour. Reaching into the bowl, she massaged the apples with her hands before spilling them into the pie crust she'd made. Dotting the filling with chunks of butter, she covered it all with a second crust and pinched the edges. It smelled divine already and she sliced a few vents in the top before sliding it into the oven.

She stared at it through the oven window, willing it to bake faster. There was something about the finished product that made her feel okay, if only for a few minutes.

As mad as everyone was with her about Ray and Cooper leaving, no one complained about the cookies, brownies, or the freshly baked bread she had churned out this week. Or the chicken potpie she'd made for dinner last night as they sat around the dinner table.

Listening to them all talk about their days and the ranch, she couldn't help but imagine Cooper's eyes lighting up if he were here, tasting this food, enjoying it—because he'd invaded her thoughts throughout the making of it. With each ingredient, each addition, it was his smile she remembered. Or some little joke he'd made her laugh about. Or a touch that had calmed her or made her tremble. He'd be grateful for the food, maybe even pull her up against him after the meal and kiss her.

Then she'd remember the look in his eyes when she'd ended things. And she'd regret everything.

Opinionated to a fault, her father used to say, your greatest strength and weakness at once.

Now she stared at the oven door, trying to picture her life going forward. Alone. Without him. Without his touch or smile or the way he looked at her.

“Well, that smells heavenly.” Cami breezed into the kitchen after getting home from school and inhaled deeply. “Like autumn should smell. Is that apple crisp?”

“Pie,” Shay corrected quietly.

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“Mmmm.” She pulled a finger along the cinnamon-y apple bowl and licked it. “You know, there is a solution to your obsessive dessert baking that would save us all a lot of unnecessary calories.”

“Don’t eat them?” she suggested.

Cami snorted. “As if. No. Go and talk to him.”

Rinsing the dishes, she avoided looking at Cami. “And say what? What’s the point? He probably hates me now. Like all of you do.”

“Nobody hates you. Least of all us. It was a moment, all right? Ry will get over it, and so will Liam. And Mom and Ray will do what they want. It’s you I’m worried about.”

“I’m . . . fine.”

“Uh-huh. Which is why you haven’t left the ranch in days and days. Compulsively cleaning and baking all the things.”

“I’m staying busy, is all . . .”

“Then I guess you haven’t heard that he and Ray have put their ranch on the market and Cooper is planning on going back to Texas.”

Against her will, she gasped. “What? When?”

“Soon, I think. As soon as they can sell it at least.”

She steeled herself against the ragged pain that knifed through her chest. Illogically, she’d somehow hoped that given time, they’d fix this. And maybe he’d even forgive her. But why would he? Why should he?

Because you love him. You’re a mess, but you love him. He must know that.

No, he doesn’t.

“Evan Clulagher admitted to everything. And they’ve finally cleared Ray. Now that his record is going to be expunged,” Cami went on, “he has a brand-new lease on life. And Mom is going to will his cancer into submission if it’s the last thing she does.”

“You know then? About her and Ray? About the past?”

Cami nodded. “Tell me you don’t remember the dozens of times you and I would hear her and Dad fighting, and between us, wished they’d just get a divorce already and be done with it? She deserves happiness. I really hope she gets it with Ray.”

Shay nodded. So did she.

“Also, the wildest thing.” Cami pulled a towel from the drawer and began wiping the clean, damp apple bowl. “The elementary school received an enormous, anonymous donation of almost three-hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars! All, oddly, in cash. And I heard Marietta Hospital’s pediatric wing got one even bigger than that.” She eyed Shay sideways. “No one will ever connect that money to our family. Ever. Y’know—just in case you were wondering if Cooper and Trey Reyes were planning on making off with all of our father’s ill-gotten gains for themselves.”

Speechless, Shay could only stare at the dishes in her hands. She was ashamed to

admit that it had, in fact, crossed her mind. Tangled up in her complicated justifications for how she'd accused him of being here to search for it.

"At least it all went somewhere to do some good," Cami said. "In spite of our father."

"At least that," Shay agreed, turning away from Cami so she didn't see the tears welling in her eyes.

It was too late to fix things with Cooper. She'd lost him. He was leaving for Texas and that would be that.

"What is wrong with you?" Cami asked rather accusingly. "Why can't you just see how crazy he was for you?"

Surprised by the confronting tone in Cami's voice, Shay said, "Was being the operative word. And I don't know what's wrong with me. I . . . I love him. And I messed it all up."

"So, tell him." Cami took her by the arm and forced her to face her. "I'm sorry to be so . . . real with you here, but let's face it, we only get so many chances in this life. Look at Mom and Ray. Eight years . . . more . . . wasted for him and for them. Who knows what would have happened with just a conversation? Are you really going to stand on principle, out of what? Fear? And you're going to let him walk out of your life? For God's sake! What, sweet Shay, are you waiting for?"

Shay was fully blubbing now. "I don't know! I'm an idiot, okay?"

"You are." Cami laughed through her own tears and handed Shay her phone. "Do it. And if I'm wrong, you can . . . all eat this delicious smelling apple pie without me while I look on. Tortured and pathetic."

Shay laughed and took the phone. “You’re crazy. And I love you.”

“Love you, too. If you’ll excuse me now . . .” She got up and left the room.

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Shay looked down at the phone, then dialed his cell. Her heart was pounding. Thudding against her temples.

Pick up. Pick up. Pick up.

But the phone just kept ringing until she heard his voicemail.

Hearing his voice on the message, she almost hung up, but instead, she took a deep breath. “Cooper. It’s me. You probably don’t want to talk to me. But I wish you would. There are things I need to say that I can’t say on a voicemail. So, please. Call me back. I—Please call me.”

She hung up and exhaled sharply and turned to look at the pie again. She could just sit here. Wait for the pie to cook. Wait to gather her nerve. Wait for Cooper to ride off into the sunset.

But—no.

That wouldn’t do. Not this time. “Be brave, Shay.”

She reached for her car keys. Across the room, Ryan’s bobblehead Yoda grinned at her from the kitchen shelf. “There is no try,” Yoda famously said. “Only do.” She pulled her coat from the coat-tree and shrugged it on.

But before she could go, Liam appeared at the door to the kitchen. “Hey, did Ry take Kholá out? She’s not in the pen.”

Shay looked out the window, confirming that she was nowhere in sight. “He wouldn’t. She’s not ready.”

Cami returned and said, “I brought him home. He did say something about fixing things. I thought he meant with his horse.”

Liam called upstairs for her son. “Ryan? You up there?”

Nothing.

Alarm pricked at Shay. “Where would he go?”

“He’s been missing Cooper,” Liam mused aloud.

Cami, Liam, and Shay’s gazes collided. “No,” Shay breathed. “Their place is three miles away across a dozen pastures. Or worse, roads.”

Without another word, she headed out the door.

“I’ll stay here in case we’re wrong and he’s just out for a ride,” Liam called after her.

Cami followed Shay. “I’m going with you. Watch the pie, Liam!”

Liam watched them from the door. “Priorities.”

“He’s not out for a ride,” Shay muttered as she and Cami hopped in the truck. “He’s going to fix things with Cooper.”

*

Cooper was on his knees, weeding out the front garden bed to get it ready for

showing. It had been a hard decision to sell, but his dad just wasn't up for the work this place would require of him. And as Cooper himself had decided to leave, there was no point in keeping it anymore. The ranch had served its purpose and now that was over.

All of it was over.

He yanked at the long grass and wispy dandelions taking their last gasp of good weather before the ground froze. Already, a chill had moved across Montana and most houses had fires going in their fireplaces, scenting the air with fragrant wood smoke. He'd built a fire for his father, too, because it warmed him after his last infusion of immunotherapy when all he wanted to do was curl up and listen to a book—because sometimes reading was even too much. But that phase only lasted a day or two and then he'd feel better.

The doctors were optimistic about his recovery, and he was responding well to the new drugs. It didn't hurt that Sarah was watching over him, too, or that the possibility of their future was giving him hope.

Cooper yanked on a stubborn weed and when it finally gave up the ground, he fell over on his ass. For a long time, he didn't move. He just sat there, wrists on his knees, staring at the beautiful Absarokas, awash with yellows and oranges from the aspens and larches, alongside the golden meadows contrasting with the evergreen pines higher up. He would miss this when he left. He'd miss his father, too, but now they were certain Ray's name would be cleared at last. Cooper felt like he could start his own life again in earnest. Maybe he'd go back to school. Maybe he'd just train horses. All he knew was he couldn't stay here.

He felt at loose ends after what had happened with Shay. She'd had every right to be upset with him for not telling her the truth about everything, but somewhere in his fantasy about the whole thing, he thought he'd have a chance to make it right. To

prove his intentions were good. But the whole twist with Tom Hardesty's blackmail had sabotaged that and now his chance was gone. As the days passed, without a word from her, he'd given up on the idea that she'd see him for who he really was and not as the enemy.

Liam's begging him to return to the Hard Eight, though, wasn't going to change his mind. Being there, around her—without her—was impossible. So, he had to go. But he would miss them. Ryan, Liam, Sarah, and Cami, too. He understood now why Shay had been cautious about telling anyone about them. Because Ryan's pain was on Cooper now, too.

But he felt like his heart had been ripped out. And somehow, he'd have to live with that.

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Ray was staying. Sarah had seen to that. Cooper was leaving his dad in good hands. And for the first time in a very long time, Ray seemed happy even as he'd tried to talk Cooper out of going. Cooper promised him he'd visit or send a plane ticket for Ray to visit him. He vowed not to let more than a few months pass without getting together. Eight years apart was long enough.

And the Four Sixes said they'd take him back, even on a temporary basis until he worked out his next plan. That was good. He had friends there. He would be all right.

Eventually.

In the distance, he caught sight of someone riding in his direction on horseback, which was unusual, to say the least. It took him a minute to recognize Ryan and Kholá trotting toward him up the long drive.

Cooper got to his feet. What in the world was that kid doing out here with such a green horse, crossing roads and pastures full of cattle? Not only that, but he was also riding bareback.

The potential disastrous scenarios arising from a stunt like that sent a chill through him.

Ryan trotted up into the yard and stopped in front of him. Kholá snorted and pranced to a stop. Ry was looking very proud of himself.

Cooper caught the reins and frowned. "Do you have any idea how lucky you are that you've gotten here in one piece? That this horse has arrived here unharmed?"

Ry slid off the horse and scratched Kholá on the neck. “You say luck, I say skill.”

This cocky kid . . . “What the hell, Ryan?”

“What? We’re fine. I told her we had to come see you and she agreed. And since I don’t have a car or a driver’s license, and I know you were just going to leave without saying goodbye to me—”

Cooper’s face heated. “I didn’t mean for it to go down that way. I meant to come over before I left.”

“Yeah? Well, that’s just lame.” As Kholá dipped her head and yanked mouthfuls of grass from his overgrown yard, Ryan took in the FOR SALE sign posted in the yard. “So, what? You’re just gonna ditch all of us? Just because of a little fight with my mom? Sorry, but that’s just BS. She’s basically been a train wreck in the kitchen since you left. Like, baking crazy amounts of desserts and stuff. And cleaning random corners and under beds like she thinks nobody notices what she’s trying to do.”

“Which is what, exactly?”

Ryan shoved a hand through his wind-blown forelock haircut. “Feel better about what happened with you, I guess. I don’t know. We’re not really talking much.”

Cooper rolled his eyes shut. Great. Add that to the list of damage he’d left behind him. “What happened was my fault,” he told Ryan. “Your mom had every right to be angry with me.”

“For what? Just because you found out the truth about my grandpa? Besides, you said you loved her. You told me so yourself.”

“I-I did. I still do. But that’s not always enough.”

“Well.” Ryan threw his arms wide. “I am disillusioned then.”

Cooper bit back a smile at this boy-man in front of him. God, he was going to miss him. “No, you’re not. You know what love is. She loves you more than anything. So, don’t hold this against her. She protects you and everyone she loves fiercely. And that’s always going to be her first priority. You gotta be the bigger man, here. Be there for her. Because maybe she’s hurting, too.”

He looked about to argue his point further, when they both heard the sound of a truck barreling down their road. Cooper’s stomach twisted. It was Shay. And beside her, riding shotgun-wingman-soldier-in-arms, was Cami.

Shay was out of the truck, running in their direction before Cami could open her door.

*

“Ryan August Hardesty!” Shay reached for Ryan pulling him up hard against her in a hug. “What were you thinking taking Kholá out this far? You two could have been hit by a car, you could’ve been thrown, or killed.”

“We’re fine. Anyway, how else was I going to get you out here to talk to him?” he muttered in her ear.

She pushed back from him to stare in surprise. “You—” He was doing that little thing with his mouth that he did when he was up to no good. “So help me . . .” Her eyes teared up. “Okay, you. Go sit in the car with Aunt Cami. We’ll talk later.”

“But—”

She held her palm up. “And we’re going to bring the trailer back for Kholá. You will

not be riding her home.”

“Fine.”

“Fine!”

“I won’t.”

“Good!”

He leaned into her as he brushed past her and whispered, “Just don’t mess this up, Mom.”

She watched him walk back toward the truck, her nearly grown boy who sauntered like a man, who was trying to fix her messed-up life. Who would’ve guessed that at fourteen he would be the adult in the room, not her?

Maybe Cooper. Turning back to him, she moved closer. “Hi.”

“Shay?” He nodded, watching Kholá yanking up grass in his yard.

“I’m sorry about this. Ry was just trying to . . .” She threw her hands up, unable to say it out loud.

“Yeah.” He hooked his thumbs into the front pockets of his jeans. “And you’ve gotta give the kid credit. He did make it all the way here on that horse without dying.”

She snorted. “Thanks to you. He learned a lot from you.”

“He made a good choice with that horse. She’s a keeper.”

She nodded, watching him covertly as he petted the filly. She glanced at the For Sale sign. “So . . . You’re leaving?”

He nodded. “Texas, probably.”

“Oh.” Her heartbeat drummed in her ears.

“For the best.” Cooper shrugged. “Yeah, so, if you want to send the trailer over, I’ll load her up—”

“No. I . . . I think . . . that might be a mistake.”

He snapped a look up at her. “You don’t trust me to load her up?”

“No. Texas. I think going to Texas would be a mistake. For you.”

Now he was staring right at her. Almost looking through her. “Why’s that?”

Shay took a step closer to him. “Because two wrongs . . . you know the old saying . . . don’t make a right. Because it would be wrong to just up and leave for Texas because I lost my temper . . . said things I shouldn’t have. Things I . . . really wish I could take back.”

“You . . . do?”

“I called you. Did you get my message?”

He looked surprised. “No. You did? When?”

“Not as soon as I should have. But when I finally realized that I’d foolishly pushed away one of the best things that’s happened in my life, and I knew I had to make it right somehow. And I couldn’t say it in a voicemail.”

He dropped his hands to his sides. She could see the pulse in his neck pumping

against his throat. “What exactly are you sayin’, Shay?”

She swallowed hard. “I’m saying I was wrong. About you. About my father. About the things I accused you of. I was shocked about what happened, mad that it was out of my control, and hurt that you hadn’t told me everything. That’s no excuse. I know you didn’t just walk into my life without a past. Without your own stuff to deal with, like your father. But it was a button for me, you keeping it from me. Partly because of my past. But really because I was scared. Scared of trusting what I was feeling for you—what I still feel for you. These last four days have been awful and—”

He straightened. “Wait. You still have feelings for me?”

She glanced back at Cami and Ryan standing outside the truck, watching. Now she met Cooper’s piercing look. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you. I do. I love you, Cooper. And I’m so sorry for not listening to you and trusting you. I wish you could . . . find it in your heart to forgive me . . .”

Those eyes of his, those mossy-green eyes that seemed to look right though her assessed her anew and she couldn’t tell at all what he was thinking. How he was taking this. He tilted an almost curious look at her, a small lift at the corner of his mouth. But still, he remained silent.

She shifted her feet. “You’re not going to make this easy for me, are you? Please say something.”

He pulled her toward him and kissed her then. Kissed her fully and deeply until she felt her knees buckle a little as he held her up. Thank God was her only thought. At the sound of Ryan cheering near the truck, he finished kissing her, holding her close.

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“So . . .” she murmured hopefully, “is that a maybe?”

He grinned down at her, his hands splaying across her back. “Ah, Shay, I’ve always loved you. And that didn’t change because of what you said. I should have told you about Trey. I should have done a lot of things differently. I was leaving because I couldn’t be here, near you and not with you. I couldn’t. I’ve wanted you, loved you most of my life and losing you that way, I-I couldn’t stay. I’m sorry, too, for how it all went down. I never meant to hurt you. Maybe we could just . . . give each other a little grace and start over?”

She blinked back tears, her mouth still feeling his kiss. “Yes. Please.” She hugged him hard, her breasts pressing against his hard chest. “Can we? Oh, I want that, too.”

Ray came out of the house wrapped in a quilt with a smile on his face. “It’s about time,” he called from the front porch.

“That’s what I said,” Cami shouted from beside the truck as she high-fived Ryan.

“I think they’re ganging up on us,” Cooper whispered.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

He grinned and dropped his mouth on hers again, and she kissed him back with all the love she had in her. No amount of cleaning or baking or pretending she was okay without this man in her life would ever be enough. She’d been alone for so long she’d forgotten what it was like to feel wanted. To want someone else the same way. With all their humanness, foibles, and flaws.

Oh, there would be mistakes. There would always be mistakes. But loving Cooper Lane? No, that would never be one of them.

They left Ryan and Ray in charge of Kholá with a stern warning about his lifetime of grounding if he ever did something foolish like that again. Ryan, looking very pleased with himself as only a teenager who'd won could, took the filly in hand and bending close to Shay's ear, whispered, "That was OG, Mom."

She gave him an affectionate shove, then pulled him in for a kiss on the cheek. He cringed with a smile. And maybe it was her imagination, but Kholá looked rather pleased with herself as well.

"You any good at hitching up horse trailers?" she asked Cooper, hiding a smile as they watched Ryan walk toward the paddock.

"I'm the best."

"Then, you're hired."

"I don't think it's a good idea for me to work for you."

She froze. "No?"

"No. But with you. That sounds doable."

She smiled. "That sounds very doable to me. Also"—they started walking again—"I made a pie."

"A pie!?" His eyes lit up. "Is that what I get for hitching up the trailer?"

"Oh, no, my love," she said taking his hand, her eyes stinging with emotion and, for the first time in a very long time, hope. "That's just the beginning."

The End