



# Cowboy's Christmas Girlfriend

**Author:** *Leslie North*

**Category:** Romance, Western

**Description:** One lie leads to another... But will their hearts reveal the truth?

It was just a little white lie... To promote her new book, romance writer Suzanna Jacobs told her publisher that she lived on a cattle ranch. Problem is, now they want to send a publicity team for a visit, and Suzanna has never set foot on a ranch. For months she's been emailing single dad rancher Will Carson for information, insight—and friendship.

Luckily, Will has a plan. He'll "loan" her his ranch. But in return, he needs her to pretend to be his girlfriend for his best friend's wedding, and the family's annual Christmas Games. When Suzanna arrives, she's shocked to discover Will is tall, lean, and drop-dead gorgeous. Meanwhile, she's short, curvy, and suffers from low self-esteem. Who would believe they're a couple?

Will is determined to show her the ropes of ranching, but Suzanna is a fish out of water. An adorable fish—one he's wildly attracted to. And he's falling for her, hard. But the more successful their deception becomes, the more he begins to wonder...

If Suzanna is so good at faking it, is anything they're sharing real?

**Total Pages (Source):** 36

# Page 1

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Will snorted harshly, fighting a sneeze. It was hot in the barn despite the winter outside, the air moist and fragrant with the musk of nervous cows. Dust floated like pollen, stirred up by the herd. It'd been a long morning's slog, but the work was nearly done, just four cows in the crush waiting to be tagged. Will had waved off the ranch hands, sent them off for lunch. He and his best friend, Taison, could handle the stragglers.

"Okay, next up." Will waved the all-clear and Taison opened the head bail. A red cow flounced through, freshly tagged and indignant. She shot Will a reproachful look on her way out the gate.

"Sorry, Bessie," he said. Taison was already wheedling the next victim into position. The cow made a break for it, straight down the crush. Taison closed the bail on her, trapping her neatly. She bellowed, outraged, but then Will held her fast, stroking her muzzle as he slipped the halter over her ears.

"I gotcha," he said. "Relax, you're doing great." He bent to disinfect his tagger. Taison leaned on the bail, staring out at the snowfall.

"So, anyway, for the wedding party, Kat wants it all couples. She says it looks weird, boy-girl down the line, then just boy on the end."

Will blinked. "Sorry, what?"

Taison cleared his throat. "I gotta spell it out? Come on, man, you need a date for my

wedding.”

Will tsked. “I don’t see how it matters. Besides, who would I bring? I’m supposed to just meet someone and ask her to your wedding?”

“Why not? Here, let me get that.” Taison took the tagger and moved to soothe the cow. “You’ve got options,” he said. “Penny at the feed shop’s had her eye on you for years. Or, hell, just go dancing. You’ve got those sweet moves, bound to get you some.”

The cow kicked and bellowed as the tag went in. Taison stepped clear and Will opened the bail. She trotted out, chin high.

“Seriously,” said Taison, “you’d be doing me a favor. Kat’s so stressed with the planning. You scoring a date would be one thing off her list.”

Will stifled a sigh. Had Mom put Kat up to this? Or had it been Aunt Nancy? Why was everyone so gung-ho to see him paired off?

“How about, uh, Samantha? That girl off the computer?” Taison asked. “Aren’t you two sort of dating?”

Will’s shoulders went tight. “Suzanna,” he said. “You didn’t tell Kat about her, did you? ‘Cause you know she’ll tell Sarah, and Sarah’ll tell Mom...”

Taison dunked the tagger in the bucket and stirred it around. Disinfectant fumes rose, stinging Will’s nose.

“Taison? Tell me you didn’t—”

“How’d you two meet, anyway? You still never said.”

Will stared, narrow-eyed. Part of him wanted to tear Taison a new one, both for running his mouth and for getting it all wrong. He and Suzanna weren't dating. They got on, was all. She was easy to talk to, an ally. A friend.

"We're not dating," he said. "She was writing a book. She came on /r/ranching with all these rube questions, like what do cows eat? Are spurs still a thing? Everyone started teasing, feeding her BS answers to see if she'd bite. I didn't like it, so I stepped in." He chuckled at the memory. "Anyway, once we got past the basics, she's actually..."

"What?"

"Good to talk to." Will looked away, embarrassed. "I mean, when Apple got equine flu and I thought I might lose her, Suzanna was...there. Like, she switched off her research brain and just...just..."

"She cared?"

"Yeah. Yeah, she did." Will's face went hot. He didn't like the way that sounded, all maudlin and soft.

"So, you know what I'm going to ask." Taison's grin turned impish. "You guys swapped pics?"

"A few days ago, yeah."

"And?"

"And, I don't know. She's cute. What do you want me to say?" Was she pretty? Yeah. Did it matter? Hell, no. He wasn't looking for romance—not with Suzanna, not with Penny at the feed shop. Not with the women Mom kept throwing at him. In the

six years since Hannah's death, his heart had healed—but that didn't mean it was ready to get smashed again.

“Seriously, I'm jealous,” Taison teased.

“Jealous of what?”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 am*

“You know, early days, when it’s all new and fresh.” Taison tucked his thumbs in his belt loops. “I remember me and Kat when we were still new, how we’d sit out till late on the bridge by the pines. How we’d talk about nothing, but to us it was everything, all those little details that make you fall in love.” He shrugged. “I miss that sometimes. It’s been months since we’ve talked about anything real.”

Will frowned. “Are you two okay?”

“It’s the wedding,” said Taison. “It’s filled up her head, no room left for me. Everything’s gotta be perfect. You know how it is.”

“I guess so.” Will’s frown deepened. His wedding hadn’t been perfect, just fun, full of cheer—cider and line dancing, him and Hannah hustling the night away to the Boot Scootin’ Boogie. Mom and Dad flushed and tipsy, belting out Only You. A fierce pang gripped his heart, loss and nostalgia in one. Taison patted Will’s arm, perhaps guessing his thoughts.

“C’mon, grab that heifer. Let’s finish up here.”

Will nodded, happy to focus on work. Hannah was gone, and no amount of missing her would bring her back. As for Suzanna...she was a friend, and a distant one at that, twenty-five hundred miles away in the land of sun and surf. Anything more was a fantasy, and that suited Will fine.

Nobody’s heart ever broke in a dream.

\* \* \*

“Dad! Dad, look out!” voices yelled as Will opened the door to the house.

He snapped to attention, too late. Two hundred pounds of English mastiff came skidding down the hall, a great hairy rocket aimed square at his crotch.

“Lucky! Get back!” Will commanded in the nick of time.

Lucky ricocheted off the banister, tripped over the mat, and sailed splay-legged past Will, into the snow. The twins charged out after him, Ann in the lead, Beth hot on her heels. They plopped into a snowbank in a great cloud of powder, their Christmas-socked feet sticking up in the air.

“Beth, Ann, you get back here,” Will shouted. “You’ll catch your deaths.”

“Calm down. Grandma’s got ’em.” Mom bustled past him and grabbed a girl under each arm. Beth and Ann squealed as she swept them off their feet. “You too, Lucky, inside. And leave that stick where you found it.”

Lucky dropped his stick and hung his big head. A glittering tiara slid down his nose. Will bent down, groaning, to ruffle his fur.

“Those girls dress you up again? I told you, just say no.”

“We’re having a tea party,” said Mom. “Your place is all set.”

Will pressed his lips together. “Did the girls get their dinner? It’s nearly six o’clock.”

“I gave them those salmon cakes, just like you said. But they wouldn’t eat ’em, so I made my mac and cheese.”

“Mom—”

“It’s just as nutritious. It’s got all four food groups, and a dash of love too.” She bundled Will inside and brushed the snow off his shoulders. “Speaking of love, did Taison talk to you about the wedding?”

“You mean my date?” Will closed his eyes to keep from rolling them. He hadn’t even gotten his boots off yet and Mom was already starting. He needed to nip this in the bud. “Look, I get that Kat’s stressed and all, but I don’t see how—”

“I found you someone.” Mom’s smile was sweet, but Will wasn’t fooled. She’d been plotting again, her and Aunt Nancy. She had that glint in her eyes. Will braced himself as she whipped out her phone.

“God, Mom—is that Tinder?”

“No, silly. Instagram.” Mom held up a photo. “Look, Patty Michaels—didn’t she grow up pretty?”

“You fobbed her off on me last year.” Will leaned on the banister, suddenly tired. “Don’t you remember the ugly sweater debacle?”

“I remember a girl brim full of Christmas spirit. And she was cute in that sweater, with that big Rudolph nose. If you’d just worn your matching one...” Mom reached out and flicked Will’s nose. He spluttered. He’d told Patty a million times, he didn’t do ugly sweaters. She hadn’t listened, just like Mom didn’t listen. Just like nobody listened, not his aunts, not his cousins, not his sister, Sarah. Was there one woman in his life who did listen to him? Suzanna, maybe...but she doesn’t count.

“I don’t get ugly sweaters,” he grouched. “I mean, what’s the point? Those things cost a fortune, and you just wear them once. And they itch; they’re too hot, and they—”

“Well, hello Mr. Grinch.” Mom swatted him lightly and reached for her coat. “You



don't have to ask Patty, but you need to find someone. I want you to be happy, and Kat does too. It's time you had someone. If you're dead set against Patty, then we'll find someone else."

Will's life flashed before his eyes, showing him not his past, but his future: a sea of blind dates, arranged by Mommy dearest. Something snapped in his head, and he heard himself bark, "I have someone, okay? We've been talking a while now, and she's—we're a thing." The moment the words were out, he wished he could call them back. Mom's eyes went round, agleam with delight.

## Page 3

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“Why, Will Carson! You’ve been holding out on your mama?” She leaned in so close he smelled her mac and cheese. “Well, who’s the lucky girl?”

“You don’t know her.”

“But I’ll meet her soon, right? At the Christmas Games?”

The Christmas Games? Will flinched at the thought of subjecting Suzanna to the Games—his family’s annual orgy of holiday competition run wild. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. She’s in Florida. We’ve just talked online so far. She’s a writer, real smart, but she’s not—”

“You’ve invited her, right? Ooh, this is exciting...”

Will shook his head. “I can’t. It’s the holidays. She’ll have her own family, places to go.”

“Still, it can’t hurt to ask.” Mom leaned in and kissed him, smack on his cheek. “Oh, Will, I’m so happy. I was starting to think—”

“Mom—”

“Okay, I’m going. But this is just so...so great.” She dabbed her eyes with her sleeve. The sight of her tears brought a lump to Will’s throat, and when she hugged him goodbye, he hugged her back tight. Watching her go, he felt hollow inside. Sometimes, he forgot she’d lost Hannah too. She’d lost her daughter-in-law; the twins had lost their mom. And he’d lost the life that had once stretched before him, a long,

golden road lit with glittering milestones.

“Dad?”

Will looked down, misty-eyed. Beth was tugging his shirt sleeve, Ann bouncing in place.

“We’re having a tea party. We saved you a seat.”

Will dug down deep and conjured a grin. “Okay, lead the way.”

Two air-sipping hours later, he was tucking the girls into bed, a kiss on each of their foreheads, an extra blanket for Beth, whose feet were always cold. He left Lucky to guard their dreams and stumbled to the kitchen in need of a beer. Mom’s matchmaking frenzy had jumped to the girls, and they’d set him up with Astronaut Barbie as his date for the tea party.

Because you don’t have a girlfriend.

Because you need one. Ann’s tone had been scolding. She’d all but wagged her finger.

Will dragged his laptop toward him, across the kitchen table. He cracked his beer open and took a long swig, letting the bubbles loosen his stress as he checked his e-mail.

“Okay, Suzanna. What’s new with you?” He tapped on her message, chuckling at the subject line—What have I done!!!!!!?!?!?!!!!

So, you know how my book’s been going crazy with preorders? Well, my publisher’s thrilled. So thrilled, in fact, they’re doing this HUGE launch campaign...which, duh,

that's fantastic, except I kind of might've said—or, NO!!! I didn't say! But I didn't correct my editor when she thought I said...

## MY PUBLISHER THINKS I'M AN ACTUAL, REAL-LIFE COWGIRL!

They want to come interview me on my ranch! ON MY RANCH!!! Are there, like, AirB&B ranches? That I can rent at short notice? Without breaking the bank? At Christmas?

Are you laughing? You're laughing! What have I done?

Will was, indeed, laughing, eyes streaming with mirth. He tapped the reply button, then changed his mind and grabbed his phone instead. He pulled up their text thread and thought for a moment.

There's no such thing as an AirB&B ranch, he typed. Not a full, working ranch, anyway. That'd be like AirB&Bing a factory. Or an airport.

Suzanna's response was immediate and emphatic: nooooooooooooooooooooo! D-: Will stifled a snicker. He felt for her—he did—but she'd walked into this one. Not, he reflected, that he was one to talk.

If it makes you feel any better, I kind of made a mess too.

Oh yeah? What'd you do?

Will hesitated. He licked his lips, tasting beer. He didn't think Suzanna would take offense, but you never could tell.

I told Mom we were dating. You know, you and me. She was playing matchmaker again, and I just snapped.

Will held his breath. Suzanna was typing, then the dots went away. Then they came back again, and a text bubble popped up.

## Page 4

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Look on the bright side, said Suzanna. You can tell your mom we broke up, no harm, no foul. How am I going to explain my beach house to my publisher?

“Oh, you don’t know the half of it,” said Will. It’s not that simple, he sent. My best friend’s having this big Christmas wedding, and now my whole family’ll expect you on my arm. Mom’s even pushing for you to join the Christmas Games.

Suzanna typed a long time, so long Will’s beer turned sour on his tongue. Then a massive text filled his screen.

You mean your family’s whole over-the-top Christmas Olympics? With the epic snowball fight? And the ugly sweaters??? That actually sounds awesome. At least, when you compare it to sitting home alone. Or hiring myself out shoveling cow pats. Which, the way things are going, might be my best shot!

Will stared at his screen, a far-fetched idea taking shape in his head.

You know, I might have an idea that could save both our butts.

I’m listening.

Will gulped more beer. Either this was genius, or he’d lost his mind. Come for Christmas, he sent. I need a wedding date. You need a ranch. What do you say?

I say call me, said Suzanna. If we’re going to do this, I need to hear your voice.

Will swallowed hard. Was he really going to do this—this wild, reckless thing? Just

to save face? To get Mom off his back?

The phone rang on Suzanna's end. When had he dialed?

"Hello? Will?"

Will couldn't breathe. Her voice was warm, slightly nervous, sweet as maple syrup. She let out a giggle and his heart skipped a beat.

"It's me," he said, his voice thick and gruff. "Listen, if—"

"So I'd be like your date-date, or I'd be there as a friend? What did you tell your mom? How serious are we?"

"Not too serious," said Will. "But we'd be more than friends. Pretending to be." The blood rose to his head, a hot, prickling flush. "I'm sorry. It's just, my mom—"

"No. No, I get it." Suzanna chuckled again. Will detected a rueful note, something deep and wounded. "It's a full-time job, isn't it? Parents and their expectations?"

"Then you'll come to Montana?"

"I'm packing already."

Will leaned back, laughing. This might actually be fun—Suzanna on the ranch, getting her hands dirty for real. Suzanna on horseback, in Wranglers and—

"So, like, do I need spurs for this, or is that just in movies?"

Will choked on his beer. What had he done?

Suzanna fought her way through baggage claim, barely snagging her bag through a forest of elbows. She felt like a beach ball in a boisterous game of catch, batted this way and that as the crowd boiled around her.

“Hey, hey. Gangway!” A wheelie bag rolled over her foot. She jumped back with a yelp. Her phone buzzed in her pocket and she scrambled to get it out—a new voicemail from Marcy, her publisher’s assistant.

“We’re so glad you’re on board,” sang Marcy. “It’s going to be magical, showing your readers how you spend Christmas on the ranch. We thought for the interview, you could arrive in a horse-drawn carriage, or even a sleigh? Do you have those on your ranch, or is it more just, uh, cows? Anyway, call me. We’ll workshop ideas.”

Suzanna hung up and her phone buzzed again, a text from Will this time. He’d promised to meet her at baggage claim, and sure enough, he’d come through: I’m here. Can you see me? I’m in the brown Stetson.

She did a slow turn, craning to see. Plane rides usually made her grateful to be short—at five-two, she was travel-sized, able to fit neatly in the average plane seat—but when it came to spotting someone through a crowd, her height became highly inconvenient. A brown hat caught her eye, but the man underneath couldn’t be Will. He was prime-time soap hot, square-jawed and slate-eyed, with a dusting of stubble across his broad chin. And he was tall, towering over Suzanna at well over six feet.

Wave so I know it’s you.

Will raised his right hand, half-wave, half-salute. Suzanna’s knees turned to water. He’d tricked her, she thought—hidden all that hotness under a grainy snapshot.



## Page 5

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“Suzanna?” He doffed his hat at her approach, and reached for her bag. Her hand got caught in the grip and they struggled to free her, Will pulling one way, Suzanna the other. At last, she detached herself and stood breathing hard. Next to Will, she felt dumpy, a round little mushroom at the foot of an oak. She had to tilt her head to meet his eye.

“How tall are—”

“How was your—”

“Sorry. You first.” She laughed, too loud, and cringed as heads turned. Will smiled—perfect teeth—and set his hat back in place.

“Six-six bare-headed. Six-nine with the hat. And I was asking, how was your flight?”

“Tall. I mean, bumpy. I mean, nice to meet you.” She was making a mess of this. Breathe for goodness sakes. He’s just a tall, gorgeous cowboy. That’s all. She briefly imagined him on the cover of a sexy romance novel. He would do the book justice.

“Likewise,” said Will. “You got more bags, or is this all you brought?” He hefted her bulging suitcase like it was nothing. Suzanna resisted the impulse to reach up and squeeze his bicep. To give him a good pinch to make sure he was real. She tweaked her own arm instead, and Will cocked a brow.

“My truck’s parked out front,” he said. “Ready to go?”

“Ready when you are.” Suzanna trailed Will through the concourse, trotting to keep

up. When she lagged behind, he slowed to match her stride. He smiled down at her, bemused, and she realized she was babbling, filling the silence with a stream of nervous chatter.

“It smells different,” she was saying. “I noticed it the moment I stepped off the plane—sort of an icebox smell, like when you open the freezer. Can you smell that? Maybe it’s just an airport smell, but I—I—”

She broke off, stunned, as the sliding doors hissed open. Blue mountains rose in the distance, their crumbling peaks wreathed in scarves of cloud. Above them, the sky stretched wide, the color of ocean spray on a clear winter morning.

“You okay?”

“The mountains. They’re...” Suzanna gaped, slack-jawed. Majestic didn’t cover it. Breathtaking came closer, but—

“Oops, watch your step.”

“Huh?” Suzanna looked down, stumbled, and tripped over a low step. She cried out, dismayed, and then Will had her, strong arms encircling her, setting her upright. He held her close as she found her feet, only a moment, but enough for her to breathe in his warm outdoor scent. Enough that she felt his pulse, the slow tide of his breathing.

“You’re shivering,” he said.

“What?” She stepped back, face flushed with embarrassment. What was he talking about? She was heated, actually, though it had nothing to do with the weather. Then the sting of the cold reached her, making her actually shiver.

“You should put on your coat.”

She looked down at herself, at her new silver puffer jacket. “This is my coat.”

Will pressed his lips together, as though stifling a laugh. “In that case, you’d better get in the truck. I’ll blast the heat and you’ll thaw in no time.”

True to his word, Will got the heat blowing as they got underway. Suzanna leaned back and basked in it like a turtle on a rock.

“It gets pretty cold out here,” said Will. “Record low’s minus seventy, so you’ll want to bundle up—hat, scarf, gloves, long johns. If you need anything, just ask. My mom’s about your size.”

“Minus seventy?” Suzanna wasn’t sure she’d heard right. “Is that even possible?”

“Up in the mountains, yeah. Down here, minus forty’s about as low as it goes.”

Suzanna shivered all over. She thought she’d packed warm—plenty of turtlenecks, thick socks, knitted hats—but she hadn’t reckoned with the reality of Montana. Cold in Miami was like fifty-five, still T-shirt weather, but with a jacket on top.

“We should talk about our relationship,” said Will. “What we’re going to say.”

Oh, right. Suzanna took a deep breath. Less than an hour from now, she’d be giving the performance of a lifetime—introducing herself to his family as Will’s girlfriend. This, too, felt more real in the cold light of day.

“We should stick to the truth,” she said. “At least, as far as we can. We met online. You helped with my book—a cowboy romance. One thing led to another, and here we are.”

“It’s still new,” Will continued, picking up where she left off. “We’re taking it slow,

so, uh..." His grip tightened on the wheel. "When it comes to my daughters, maybe you're just a friend. I don't want to confuse them, with us being just temporary."

"Understood." Suzanna flashed him a quick smile. "Speaking of Beth and Ann, how are they doing? They still in trouble for feeding Lucky spinach pie?"

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:47 am*

Will laughed out loud, finally seeming to relax. “He’s stopped throwing up, so they’re out of the doghouse. But I’m at the end of my rope, trying to get them to eat healthy instead of slipping their veggies under the table.”

“My mom used to make me—” Suzanna cut herself off, bile rising in her throat.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She’d been about to say weigh in before dinner so I wouldn’t pig out. The idea of Will doing the same, robbing sweet Beth and Ann of the joy of food, made her sick to her stomach. “Maybe try kid-friendly versions,” she said instead. “Like, take all that spinach and stuff it in ravioli.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” said Will. He reached over the gearshift and patted her arm. “Thanks for understanding. This is going to be great.”

During the rest of the drive, they managed a decent conversation without much awkwardness. Finally, they turned under an arched entrance into a driveway—a long one.

Holy heck! Was that his house? He parked the truck in front of a mansion with great sprawling wings and high, snowy gables. Suzanna stepped out of the truck and stood gawping.

“So, like, your house...is it behind Buckingham Palace?” she squeaked out.

Will blinked. “Excuse me?”

Suzanna gestured at the mansion. “This is enormous. Like a whole estate. I was expecting...I don’t know. A cute little shanty with a pigpen out back.”

“What, like Clint Eastwood had in Unforgiven?”

Suzanna flushed. “Maybe.”

“That wouldn’t work so good on a ranch this size.” Will gestured past the house, at the endless white plains rolling up to the mountains. “My ranch hands live here, and I need space for guests, and for seasonal help. You should see it in spring, when we’re—oh, look. There’s Mom now.” Will waved at a red-cheeked woman draped in Christmas lights. She waved back, and the big French doors flew open behind her, disgorging a flood of laughing, bickering guests.

“That’s my aunt Nancy,” said Will, “and that’s Dad and Uncle Albert, and Aunt Val and Uncle Vern. And Taison and Kat—they’re the ones getting hitched—and behind them, that’s Tabby and George. They’re my cousins.”

Suzanna stared wide-eyed as Will rattled off names, cousins and childhood friends, uncles and aunts. His family alone could’ve sold out a small restaurant, and then there were the assorted townsfolk and the girlfriends and boyfriends. That guy with the brown beard, was that Todd or Tim? And the kid in the red coat—

“Oh, and that there, that’s Sarah, but we call her Chickadee. And her best friend Cassie, and Cassie’s sister, Amy. They’re here all the time, so you’ll get to know them.”

“Sarah. Your sister, right?” Suzanna felt faint. Will had mentioned a sister, but not everyone else. Not this flood of humanity, all headed their way.

“So, you’re the famous Suzanna.” Taison stuck out his hand for a warm, hearty

shake. “Me and Kat had a bet, if you’d look like your picture.”

“You don’t,” said Kat. “You’re way cuter in person. But aren’t you freezing? Here, take my scarf.” She unwound her scarf and draped it over Suzanna’s shoulders, bundling it up to her ears to block—or at least blunt—the wind.

“You should have my hat too,” said someone—Will’s mom, maybe—and the next thing she knew, a fuzzy pink pompom was hanging in her face. She shook it aside, babbling her thanks, but her gratitude was drowned in an onslaught of chatter, questions and compliments and cheery Christmas wishes, all directed at her, from all sides at once. Her head spun and she swayed, blinking spots from her eyes.

“Aw, stand back. You’re scaring her.”

“Me? You’re the one cramming your hat on her head!”

“I had to. Her ears were red.”

“Well—”

“Daddy!” A high, piping voice rose up and the crowd parted a bit. Two tiny missiles came hurtling through, round as spring robins in their big winter coats. They flung themselves at Will and he caught them in his arms, hoisting them up as though they weighed nothing at all. He spun them around and Suzanna’s heart melted.

“You two been good?” Will set them down gently, with a kiss to their heads.

“I have,” said Ann. “Beth stole a marshmallow.”

“And now you’re telling tales,” said Will, “so that makes you even.” He turned the twins around to face Suzanna. “This is my friend I was telling you about, Suzanna

from Florida. Can you say hello?”

Ann mumbled a faint greeting. Beth stared at her feet. Suzanna smiled gently—she’d been a shy kid too.

“I brought presents,” she said, and reached into her pocket. Ann perked up immediately, eyes bright and curious. Beth hid behind her, peeking over her sister’s shoulder.



## Page 7

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“Are they snow globes?” Ann reached for hers, but didn’t quite take it. Suzanna set it in her hands.

“Surfing Santas,” she said. “Merry Christmas from Miami.”

“I wanna surf!” Ann held up her snow globe for Will to see. Beth took hers cautiously and peered into its depths.

“I love it,” she said. “There’s little shells on the beach. And Santa’s sack is full of fishies.”

“We should take those inside before you slip and drop them,” said Will’s mom—and what was her name again? Patty? Petunia? Suzanna cringed inwardly at the thought of guessing wrong.

“We should head in too,” said Will. “I can show you your room.”

Suzanna followed him, her head in a whirl. An enormous dog joined them at the front door, thrusting its massive nose into her hand. She scratched it behind its ears, taking comfort in its warmth.

“We’re just up these stairs here, and your room’s on the right. There’s a bathroom if you—hey. Are you okay?”

Suzanna leaned on the dog, sucking in a deep breath. “I’m good,” she said. “Just kinda freaking out.”

“Freaking out?” Will seemed baffled—and small wonder, the way he’d embraced the crowd in his front yard. He’d been expecting them, she realized. This was normal to him, five hundred of his nearest and dearest here to welcome him home.

“You did great,” he assured her. “Mom loves you already, and those snow globes were a hit.” Will took her by the arm and ushered her to her room. His grip was gentle but firm, and Suzanna leaned into it. She just needed a minute, some space to catch her breath. Once she’d done that, she’d be good to go.

“Oh, shoot,” said Will. “Two thirty already? That makes me late.”

Suzanna stopped in the doorway, anxiety spiking anew. “Late? Late for what? I made you late?”

“No, not your fault.” He squeezed her arm again. “I’ve got a meeting with my HVAC guy, looking into a new system. Will you be okay if I...?”

“Sure.” Suzanna straightened up, feeling steadier. It felt good to know she wasn’t the only one off her game. “Go on. I’ll get settled.”

“Are you sure? I can put him off. It’s just, this meeting’s kind of a big one. Putting in this new system, it’s a lot to take in. It’ll mean a whole grid update, and then there’s the risk—if it doesn’t meet our needs; if it goes down...”

Suzanna looked into Will’s eyes, all stormy with worry. She smiled bright as she could, and told him “Go. Meet your guy.”

Will flashed her a look that was pure gratitude, and then he was gone. Suzanna sank down on the bed and beckoned the dog to her. He came lolloping over and jumped up next to her. She buried her face in his big, hairy shoulder.

“Your name’s Lucky, right?”

Lucky whined.

“You think if we hug a while, I’ll catch some of your luck?”

Lucky made a grunting sound, which Suzanna took for a yes.

3

Will froze halfway into Suzanna’s room, one hand on the doorframe, the other flying up to cover his mouth.

“Oh, excuse me. I thought you said ‘come in.’”

“I did.” Suzanna did a wiggle, rooting under the bed. Her jeans-clad ass stuck up fetchingly, jiggling to and fro.

“Did you, uh, lose something?”

“One of my Uggs. I wanted to wear them for the big snowball fight. Sarah was just here explaining the rules.” She straightened up, smiling, pink-cheeked with exertion.

“I swear it was right here, but—how was your meeting?”

Will blinked, bemused at the sudden change of subject. “My meeting? Oh, with the HVAC guy? He didn’t wait around. I’m ten minutes late, and he’s off like a shot. You’d think he’d have stuck it out a little longer, or at least—” He broke off abruptly, choking back his frustration. “This isn’t your problem. Now, what did you lose?”

“My Ugg.” She bent down and retrieved a soft sheepskin boot, the kind Mom wore as slippers on cold winter nights. “I had ’em both right here, but the left one’s walked

off.”

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“Walked off? I don’t think so. Not by itself.” Will whistled loudly, a sharp, piercing blast. “Lucky, get in here!”

Suzanna broke out giggling as the big dog slunk in. He still had her Ugg, or at least what was left of it—but she couldn’t bring himself to be angry when he looked so woebegone. He dropped the soggy lump at her feet and hung his head low, so low his loose, sloppy jowls brushed the rug.

“Aw, he’s so sad.” Suzanna dropped down next to him and took his head in her hands, scratching behind his ears till his tail thumped the floor. Will cleared his throat.

“I’ll get you a new pair,” he said. “But those wouldn’t have worked for the snowball fight, anyway. And for that matter, is that really what you’re wearing?”

Suzanna glanced down at herself, her silver puffer jacket and her sparkly red knit gloves. “No good?”

Will cocked his head. She didn’t look bad—in fact, she looked damn cute. Like she’d just stepped off a Hallmark card, the kind with apple-cheeked carolers in snowy front yards.

“You look festive,” he said. “But, pardon my bluntness, you’re going to freeze your tush off.” He picked up her ruined Ugg and held it aloft. “See how that’s soaked through, just from Lucky’s spit? Imagine how much more damage a foot of snow could do. You’re going to need real boots, and thick socks, a down jacket.”

Suzanna's face fell. "I don't have any of that."

"Don't worry. We do. Let's hit up Mom's cabin, and we'll raid her closet. Or, come to think of it..." He glanced at the ruined Ugg. "For shoe size, I'd say you're closer to Chickadee. Her room's right down the hall, so you're in luck."

Suzanna blinked. "So, your sister lives with you? And your mom...where's her cabin?"

Will tried not to flinch. Suzanna's question was innocent, but she'd struck a nerve all the same. Still, he could think of no reason not to give her an honest answer. "My family moved out when I got married, to give us some space. But then after Hannah...after she passed, Sarah moved back in to help with the girls."

"Oh, I see..." Suzanna's eyes had gone wide, soft with compassion. She opened her mouth—no doubt to say something kind and sympathetic—but Will spoke up before she could, steering back for safer ground.

"So anyway, let's go raid my sister's closet. She'll have what you need—something tough to get you through the battle ahead."

To her credit, Suzanna followed his lead. "Battle? I thought it was just a friendly snowball fight. It doesn't even count toward the competition, right?"

Will smirked. "Yes, it's a snowball fight, and no, it doesn't count. But if you think it's low-key or friendly, you're in for a shock." He took her by the arm. "You don't understand yet, but trust me, you will. Snowball night's epic. It's like going to war. My family's...well, you'll see."

"Pretty competitive?"

Will barked laughter. “Competitive, cutthroat, you take your pick. You think you’ve seen snowball fights, but you haven’t, not like this. Think Full Metal Snowball. Snowpocalypse Now.” He whirled to fix her with a thousand-yard stare. “You’ll go into those snow forts a sweet little Bambi. You’ll come out the Deer Hunter: pew-pew-pew.”

“I don’t believe you. Your family’s so...the opposite of everything you just said.” Suzanna paused at the top of the stairs, listening to the laughter rising up from below. “I went down to say hi while you were gone. Everybody was—”

“Let me guess, nosy? Meddlesome?”

“Curious. And kind.” A cloud crossed her features. “They love you, you know? They want to make sure I’m right for you, that I won’t break your heart.”

Will frowned. He’d thought the inquisition would die down once he brought home a woman—his family would back off the matchmaking and just let him be. Instead, they’d just shifted from matchmaking to meddling—and even bumped it up a notch, turning their attention to Suzanna. What had she told them? Had she stuck to the plan?

“I was thinking,” she said. She was chewing her lip. “One of your aunts mentioned we looked nervous together. Like we were on a first date.”

Will made a choking sound. “I guess we kind of were.”

“So, maybe we should fix that.”

“Fix it how?”

Suzanna turned to face him, chin tilted up. She took a small step toward him, her eyes

resolute.

“I think we should kiss,” she said.

“What?”

“We should kiss.” She smiled, and it did something to Will’s insides: first his heart stopped, and then it was racing. His neck felt too hot, his collar too tight.

“Kiss,” he repeated, his voice scarcely sounding like his own. “And why would we do that?”



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“Because once you’ve kissed someone, your walls tumble down. You’re different together—your body language, your expressions. People can see it, the spark between you. There’s a certain something, a glow.”

“So you’re saying, if we kissed, it would make us more believable?” Will stepped closer himself, as though drawn on a string. Suzanna was tempting, no question about that—pretty and plump, with skin like peaches and cream. Soft, tender lips that would yield to his own; a ripe, perfect bosom that—

“Well?” She looked up at him, teasing, the light dancing in her eyes. They were pale green, he saw, not blue like he’d thought.

“Well, I...” She stepped closer, and Will took it as the invitation it was, reaching out to pull her to him. He closed the space between them, her hair tickling his wrist. Suzanna rose to meet him, up on her toes. Their lips met and she sighed, then she shuddered all over. Her kiss was as soft as Will had imagined, with a faint taste of pumpkin pie spiced with nutmeg. Her hands fluttered up to grasp his shoulders, then dropped to his hips as he deepened the kiss. A sharp thrill ran through him—the reckless excitement of a midnight ride—and he drew back gasping, pulse loud in his ears.

“Oh...my...” Suzanna reached up and touched her lips, and let out a breathless giggle. “I expected a peck,” she said.

“I don’t believe in half measures.” And there’d been nothing halfway about that kiss.

Suzanna looked up at him, all flushed and bright-eyed. “Then...I’m glad you’re on my

side in this snowball fight.”

\* \* \*

Will crouched in the deep snow behind the shielding pines. Cassie and Sarah had double-teamed him right off the bat, tripped him and tackled him so they could keep him down long enough to rub snow in his hair. It was time for revenge, but he’d need a distraction. A ripe, tempting target to draw them off his tail.

“You run out first,” he said, low-pitched to Suzanna. “Haul ass for the barn, and I’ll—Suzanna?”

“Look at your girls.” She pointed out past the firepit, where Beth and Ann were raiding the marshmallows. “Aren’t they the cutest?”

“They’re in trouble, is what they are.” Will stood up, scowling. “S’mores are for after the fight. They know the rules.”

“Aw, don’t be a Scrooge.”

“I’m not. I just don’t want them up all night, sick to their stomachs.” He ducked down and ran to grab them, arms over his head to ward off a hail of snowballs.

“It’s Dad,” yelped Ann.

“Get him,” squealed Beth, and then they were on him, pelting him with big, sloppy handfuls of snow. Mom popped up from her hiding place behind the woodpile, flinging tight-packed snowballs like grenades. Will took off like a jackrabbit, with a shout of dismay.

“Suzanna! Help! Ambush!”

“I think she switched sides,” said Aunt Nancy, and where had she sprung from? Will whirled and spotted Suzanna across the yard, taking a gossip break with Cassie and Sarah. His mouth turned down. He didn’t like that at all, Suzanna bonding with his family out of his earshot. She’d tell them one thing about their supposed relationship, then he’d say another, and before they knew it, they’d have their stories all tangled.

“Bombs away!” Ann charged him, snowpants whooshing, and caught him full in the face with a bucket of snow. Will went down laughing and Beth piled on, kicking up drifts of snow to cover his head.

“Bury Dad! Bury Dad!”

“Dad’s a snowman.”

Will struggled upright, packing snow as he went, forming it into a tight ball the size of his fist. “Better run,” he said, and the girls took off. Beth tripped and Ann righted her, and the two of them slid down the hill on their snowpants-clad rumps. Their laughter rose high and merry, and Will couldn’t help but join in. His heart always lightened when his girls were full of joy. It took a lot to make them laugh like that, more than it should have. He hated that that hint of sadness that lived in their eyes—that hollow look that came from growing up without their mother. Some days were hard, almost brutally so. But other days? Other days overflowed with happiness and made every sad thought melt away.

“You should check on your girlfriend,” called someone, across the yard. Will ducked down on instinct, not at the words themselves, but at the note of warning they carried. He stashed his snowball in his pocket and started on a new one. He’d build up an arsenal, and the next ambush he encountered—

“Will? Where’d you go?”

He went still at Mom's shout, braced himself for her assault.

"She's talking to you," said Aunt Nancy. "Get up and be a gentleman—go check on your girl." She swatted him across the shoulders and Will jumped up, surprised.

My girl? Finally, it hit him. "You mean Suzanna?"

"She took a pretty bad spill. She's got a nosebleed."

Oh. Will dropped his snowball. He felt dizzy, caught off guard. Hannah was his girl, always had been, all through high school, then college, then their life together. It hadn't occurred to him he had a new girl—at least for now. For the first time in nearly a decade, he had a girlfriend. A fake one, granted, but no one knew that.

"Well, kid? Get going." Mom gave him a push and Will set off stiff-legged. Cassie had sat Suzanna on Will's chopping stump, and was fussing over her while Sarah plied her with Kleenex from her stash. How had it not occurred to him she might get hurt too? Hannah, who had grown up on a ranch, who knew exactly what she was doing, had managed to get hurt—get killed. Suzanna was a city girl, and klutzy to boot. Had he screwed up, bringing her here? Today a bumped nose, tomorrow who knew?

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“Hey, Will.” She flashed him a sheepish grin. “Who knew ice was slippery? Not this girl, I guess.”

Will smiled back, speechless, torn between relief and a mounting sense of dread.

4

“Ready for inspection, Drill Sergeant.” Suzanna marched down the porch steps like a soldier on parade early the next morning, only to shriek as a shelf of snow slid off the eaves, plumping down on her head with an audible plop.

“Looking good, Private.” Will brushed snow from her shoulders. “Hat, check. Mitts, check. Long johns, I’ll take your word for it, but—”

“I didn’t have long johns, but I thought these might work.” Suzanna pulled up her jacket and pushed down her jeans, just far enough to reveal her rainbow leggings. “They’re thermal,” she said. “All fuzzy inside.”

“Cheerful and practical.” Was it her imagination, or had Will’s cheeks gone pink? He turned away quickly, before she could be sure. She liked thinking she had some impact on him, especially after their kiss. “Our first stop’s the stables. Sarah’ll meet us there, and we’re going to groom some horses.”

“Horses, I can’t wait.” Suzanna fished out her phone and swiped it to life. First, an overview of the ranch—that blazing mountain sunrise would play great on TikTok—then she’d get Will to shoot her with a horse.

“Who lives in those other houses?” She gestured down the hill, where a cluster of smaller houses stood overlooking a frozen pond.

“That’s Mom and Dad’s place, off on the left. The one by the oak trees is the original homestead, from before the big house was built. It used to be Uncle Herb’s, but he retired a few months ago and moved to Florida. For now, it’s a guest house, but someone in the family will probably move in eventually. You coming, or what?” Will had jumped in his truck, and was patting the seat next to him. Suzanna jammed her phone in her pocket.

“Sorry about that. It’s just so gorgeous out here.”

“Yeah, it is.” Will’s expression turned wistful. “You forget it sometimes, working the land every day. But then there’ll be a sunset or a perfect spring day, and you see it all fresh.”

Suzanna knew what he meant. She felt the same way about the ocean, the white stretch of beach outside her front door.

“Hey, Will, Suzanna.” Sarah jogged up to meet them as Will parked the truck. Will hopped down to greet her.

“Hey, Chickadee.”

Sarah’s expression tightened, just for an instant. Then she smiled at Suzanna and offered her a hand. “It’s icy out here, so watch your step.”

“Thanks for the heads-up,” she said, and scrambled down with all the grace she could muster. The world, she reflected, wasn’t built for short people. You were always jumping down, climbing up, standing on tiptoe to reach something.

“I thought we’d start with Jenny,” said Sarah. “She’s our calm girl, won’t flip out if you rub her wrong.”

“Not Apple?” Suzanna was disappointed. She’d been looking forward to meeting Apple, after commiserating with Will through her bout of equine flu.

“Apple’s a grumpy old lady,” said Will. “She knows what she likes, and she kicks off if she doesn’t get it. We’ll work our way round to her once you’ve learned the ropes.”

Suzanna had to admit that sounded fair. She dug in her pocket and pulled out her phone. “Could you film me while we’re working? Try to make me look good?”

“Uh...” Will took the phone with a frown. “I could try, I guess. But I’ll warn you in advance, I’m no Steven Spielberg.”

“He kept his old flip phone till it broke in half,” said Sarah. “Now, here, take the currycomb and go down Jenny’s sides. Start at her neck, and—nope, not like that.”

Jenny let out a disgruntled whicker. Suzanna jumped back as though she’d been stung. “Oh God, did I hurt her?”

Sarah shook her head. “She’s not made of glass. But you don’t need to dig in like that. Just do little circles, nice and easy.”

Suzanna rubbed gentle circles down the mare’s glossy shoulder. Jenny made a happy sound. Her tail quit its twitching, slowed to a lazy swing.

“Stay off her legs,” said Will. “She’s too tickly there. Same goes for her face, and along her spine.”

Suzanna nodded, absorbed in her task. It was sort of relaxing, the rise and fall of

Jenny's breathing, the sweet smell of hay. She worked her way past her belly, along her taut, rippling flank, and started behind her to get the other side.

“Whoa, where're you going?” Will caught Suzanna by the arm and pulled her back against him. She gasped, startled. “Horses don't see too well, in the rear view. Go walking behind her and she's apt to kick.”

“Oh.” She'd known that—of course she had. But Jenny had been so calm, and she'd just...she'd forgotten.



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“Why don’t we say hi to Apple?” Will let her go and stepped back. “Hey, don’t beat yourself up. It’s your first day, right? You didn’t grow up here like we did.”

Sarah slung her arm around Suzanna’s shoulders. “You can’t go wrong feeding Apple. You hold out the snack and she’ll snarf it right up.”

“And keep your fingers well clear, or she’ll snarf those up too.” Will thrust a carrot into her hand.

“Okay, here goes nothing.” Suzanna took her carrot and strode up to Apple’s stall. She knew the horse from her pictures, a rangy old mare with a rough, speckled coat. She pricked up her ears at Suzanna’s approach, and stretched out her neck to nuzzle her cheek.

“Oh—oh, that tickles.”

“She likes you,” said Sarah. “She’s giving you a kiss.”

“That’s a big deal,” said Will. “Apple’s real picky when it comes to her friends.”

“Friends?” Suzanna beamed, delighted. “I brought you a carrot. You hungry?”

Apple took her treat delicately, then came nudging Suzanna’s pockets in search of more.

“That’s incredible,” said Will. “She’s been off her feed for weeks, but you’ve perked her right up.”

“Really?” Suzanna glanced back at him and saw his face had lit up. Warmth rose inside her. She’d got off to a rough start, but this was progress.

She left the stables walking on air, and her horsey euphoria carried her through the morning, through a series of increasingly backbreaking chores—clearing snow off the footpaths, patching up fences the wind had brought down. Lunch was quick and crowded, mugs of stew from Will’s thermos in the cab of his truck, thick-padded elbows bumping as they ate.

“I look like a blimp,” said Suzanna, frowning at her reflection in Will’s sideview mirror. “All these layers, if I tripped, I’d roll halfway home.”

“Better than freezing,” said Will. “Besides, you look cute. Like a little hedgehog curled up in a ball.”

“Right.” She wasn’t so sure that was a compliment.

After lunch, it was time to roll out the hay bales for the cows’ evening meal. Suzanna threw herself into the task, but her pitchfork bounced off the icy bales without making a dent. She flung her whole weight into it, only to gasp in pain as her palms rose in blisters.

“Ow...” She leaned on her pitchfork to inspect her reddened skin.

“You’ve got to know your limits,” said Will. “No shame in that. Go on, take a break. Me and the boys’ll finish up.”

Suzanna thought about protesting, but her palms were on fire. She dug out her phone instead, and held it out to Will.

“Shoot me with the hay, at least?”

Will glanced at the horizon, at the declining sun. “Can’t right now,” he said. “We’re losing our light.”

Suzanna huffed, annoyed. All day, he’d been dodging her, one excuse after another to shirk camera duty. She snapped a shot of her own red face, her lips cracked with cold. She looked like what she was, a fish out of water, gasping for air. The cattle stood watching her, chewing impassively. One of them farted, a long, rattling pthbbbbbt.

“Yeah, love you too,” she muttered, and pointed her phone at it. The cow showed her its bony rump, its thin scrap of tail flicking side to side.

“Okay, the hills, then.” She climbed onto the hay truck for a better view. The mountains were rosy with early sunset, their snowcapped peaks gleaming with the last light of day. Suzanna leaned out to catch the whole scene, from the orange-streaked sky to the indifferent cows. She lined up her shot, held her breath, and—

“Suzanna!”

She dropped her phone in the snow at Will’s panicked shout. She staggered and tripped, and next thing she knew, she was spinning through the air, sailing off the flatbed clutched to Will’s chest. They landed hard on the ground, staring up at the sky.

“Will?” she whispered.

He drew a deep, hitching breath, and she realized he was shaking. His grip was tight on her arms, so fierce she’d have bruises right through her thick coat.

“Will? You’re scaring me. What happened?” Why did he seem so upset?

“I told you not to stand like that,” he growled. “Not to squeeze between the bales.”

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Suzanna stopped breathing as understanding set in. “You mean—”

“I mean those things weigh six hundred pounds. You were about to be crushed.”

Suzanna choked on a whimper. Had she just almost...died?

“You’re okay,” muttered Will. “You’re fine; it’s all fine.” He loosened his grip, cleared his throat, and for a while they just lay there, catching their breath. She didn’t want to picture what had almost just happened. What would be happening right now if Will hadn’t grabbed her. If he hadn’t moved fast enough; if the hay had trapped them both.

“You’re a menace with that camera.” He sat up at last, and helped her sit up too.

You could’ve helped, she thought, but she swallowed her retort, and her irritation along with it. He had saved her life. That left one thing to say, and she said it with feeling.

“Thanks, Will,” she told him. “I owe you my life.”

Her gratitude had soured some by the time dinner was done, the aches and pains of the day settling into her bones. She half-lay by the fire, stretched out on the couch, barely able to lift her head when Will sat down beside her.

“I brought you some cider,” he said.

Suzanna glanced at it longingly and let out a groan. “I can’t move my arms.”

“Not even for this?” He waved the steam in her face and Suzanna’s mouth watered.

“Okay, maybe for that.” She took the drink stiffly and tried a cautious sip. Her eyes fluttered shut at the sweet, fruity taste. “Mm. That’s amazing.”

“Amazing enough for you to tell me what’s wrong?” Will flashed her a crooked smile, and Suzanna looked up, guilty. She felt a little ungrateful—he’d saved her life, and here she was sulking. Even so...

“It’s just, I’ve held up my end,” she said. “Playing your girlfriend, even when no one’s watching. But you said you’d help me too. You said you’d shoot me working your ranch, but I hand you my phone and you look at me like I’m—”

“Let me stop you right there.” Will reached for her phone and tapped on her videos. “This is you feeding Apple,” he said, tilting the screen so she could see. Suzanna’s eyes went wide. She’d thought she’d done well, but in truth she looked lost, flinching instinctively when Apple nuzzled her palm; patting awkwardly at her muzzle, unsure where to stroke.

“This is you shoveling snow.” Will tapped on a clip of her straining at her task. “And here, digging postholes. Falling into a posthole—”

Suzanna pushed the phone away. “I get it. I’m hopeless.”

“You’re not,” said Will. “But this was your first day. You can’t expect to come in and just—”

“Dad? Can we make s’mores?” Ann had crept up behind them and was peering over the couch. Beth was hiding behind her, smiling hopefully.

“S’mores? I don’t know.” Will scratched his chin. “Did you finish your chores?”

“Yes,” said the twins, in perfect unison.

“Then they’ve earned their chocolate.” Suzanna winked at Beth, who was sheltering in Ann’s shadow. Beth looked startled, then smiled sweetly in return. Will’s own frown softened and he reached out to muss both girls’ hair.

“All right, then. S’mores it is.”

“I’ll show you my trick for roasting the perfect marshmallow,” said Suzanna, and Beth crept forth at last, and sat at her feet. Will went to the kitchen and came back with the goodies. It didn’t take long for Suzanna to get the girls roasting marshmallows, then Will was right there with the graham crackers and chocolate. Suzanna accepted the crackers but waved off the chocolate. “Not my thing,” she explained.

“You don’t like chocolate?” Ann’s eyes had gone round. “Who doesn’t like chocolate?”

Suzanna just shook her head, nausea rising in her throat. She’d never forget her tenth birthday, sneaking down after midnight for one last slice of cake. Cramming her mouth full of frosting to find it covered in pepper. For your own good, Mom had said, and she’d—

“I’ve got a trick of my own,” said Will, his voice gone gruff with some undefined emotion. “White chocolate peppermint bark instead of milk chocolate. It sounds weird, I know, but you wanna give it a try?” He squeezed Suzanna’s shoulder and she felt she was melting already, warmed by Beth’s shy smile, and by Will’s understanding.

“That actually sounds great,” she said. Milk or dark chocolate turned her stomach, but she’d always been fine with white. She lay back on the couch as Will went for the

bark and made more s'mores, listening to Ann rattle on about life on the ranch—her favorite cows, the piglets she'd helped birth. Beth threw in her own two cents every now and then, looking to Suzanna for her approval. Suzanna smiled every time, and every time Beth crept closer, till by the time all the s'mores were gone, she was in Suzanna's lap.

Life on the ranch could be sweet after all.

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“Your girl’s sure fitting in.” Taison nodded at Suzanna, who’d joined Mom and Aunt Jess at the bar, and was laughing fit to split at Aunt Jess’s Cher impression.

“She’s my secret weapon tonight,” said Will. “At least, I hope she is.” Suzanna had assured him karaoke was her jam. She’d dated a bouncer at a karaoke bar back home and had taken advantage of his staff discount for the length of their fling.

“Whoever wins karaoke night always wins the Games,” said Taison. “At least, best I remember.”

Will frowned. “Mom won karaoke two years ago, but Uncle Vince snatched the cup. You can’t get too cocky, just because—”

“Hold that thought,” said Taison. “Kat’s looking nervous. I better go buck her up.”

Will watched him go. Kat did look ill at ease, by herself at the back, nursing a margarita. Suzanna, by contrast, was positively glowing. She’d dressed up for the night, in tight blue Wranglers and a slinky silk shirt. Her hair hung loose, blonde ringlets bouncing as she shook with laughter. He watched her for a minute, torn between going to her and keeping his distance. Her mix of sexy and sweet drew him to her. That had been going on since she arrived. It helped their fake relationship look real, but he worried that it was starting to feel a little too real.

She laughed again, and Will was unable to stay away. He went to her, weaving through the crowd and squeezing in beside her with a nudge to Aunt Jess.

“Just what are you telling her, to get her giggling like that?”



“Only the truth,” said Jess. “How you get so competitive you make your mom look like a cream puff.”

“I do not.”

“Only contest he doesn’t dominate is ugly sweater night,” said Mom. “And that’s only because he refuses to join in.”

“Those sweaters are hideous,” said Will. “And itchy, to boot.”

“Oh, grinch.” Suzanna leaned closer, as though to say something else, but Uncle Vince chose that moment to tap on the mic.

“Ladies and gentlemen and assorted riffraff—” He stabbed a finger at Uncle Albert, who’d come in mud-streaked, straight from his ranch. That got a laugh, which Vince paused to enjoy, before waving his hands for quiet. “It’s my pleasure, my honor, to welcome all and sundry to Christmas karaoke. We have some new voices this year, but first let’s get the kids up before their bedtimes.”

A loud cheer went up, and the sound of boots stamping a drumroll on the floorboards. Ann grabbed Will by one hand, and Beth by the other.

“Dad?” Beth tugged on his arm. “Hey, Dad? Can Suzanna join in?”

Ann yanked his other arm. “Yeah, Dad. Suzanna.”

Will glanced at Suzanna. Her eyes had gone wide and panicked. “I don’t think so,” he said. “We’ve got our dance, and she doesn’t know the steps.”

“Sure, she does.” Beth started stageward, dragging Suzanna in her wake. “She watched us practice. She’ll be fine, right?”

Suzanna licked her lips. “I don’t know,” she said. “I guess I could—”

The speakers cut her off, blasting the opening chords of *You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch*. Beth and Ann fell in line, Beth leading Suzanna, Ann bringing up the rear. They marched onstage as they’d practiced, and spun to face the crowd. Suzanna spun the wrong way and stumbled, knocking the mic off its stand. Will caught it and launched in, half a beat late. The girls joined in, singing their hearts out, stockinged knees pumping as they pranced down the stage. Suzanna just stood there, barely swaying her hips.

“Hey, Suzanna, uh...” Will held out the mic to her, hoping she’d take the hint. She fluffed her line, giggled nervously, and did a clumsy half-spin. This was a disaster, a heartbreak in the making. Mr. Grinch was the kids’ thing, their time to shine. If they bombed, they’d be crestfallen, robbed of their triumph.

Beth and Ann skipped by, still smiling. The music marched on, and Will had no choice. He grabbed the mic stand and twirled it like a cane, following the choreography they’d rehearsed a million times. Ann launched into her verse like a tiny Broadway star, leaning over the railing to wag her finger at the crowd. Beth peeked from behind Will’s leg and trilled her part high and sweet. The contrast between her shy smile and the harshness of the words drew the same laughter it did every year—but Suzanna just stood there, frozen in the lights.

Will had to do something—had to get her offstage. He started toward her, but then her eyes lit up and she broke out into a grin, as though seized with inspiration. She dropped into a crouch and beckoned Beth to her side, took her by the hand and whispered something in her ear. Beth’s eyes went round and she covered a giggle, then she and Suzanna stuck out their butts and Grinch-walked up the stage. They pressed in on Ann, squeezing her from both sides, bumping her with their bottoms as the crowd went wild. Ann gasped, outraged, then she got in the spirit. She snatched a big, plastic candy cane off its perch by the mic, and chased the two Grinches in

waddling circles around the stage, smacking their wiggling hips as they scurried away. The whole room erupted in gales of delight—loud roars of laughter that shook the very rafters.

“That was, uh...” Will stood dazed at the end of it, applause like thunder still ringing in his ears.

“Sorry,” said Suzanna. “I sort of panicked. I couldn’t remember the steps, and I—”

“That was incredible!” Mom emerged from behind the bar with a tray of steaming mugs. “I got cocoa for the girls—and Suzanna, you too. This is Vince’s own recipe, makes your whole mouth think it died and went to heaven. I’ve been trying to guess the secret ingredient since Will was this high.” She held her hand about knee height. Suzanna took her cocoa and tried a tiny sip. Her throat worked a moment, and then she smiled wide.

“Delicious,” she said. “Maybe allspice? Or a hint of caraway?”

“You don’t have to drink that,” said Will, leaning in close so Mom wouldn’t hear. “No one’ll be put out if you say chocolate’s not your thing.”

Suzanna took another sip and licked her lips. “It’s not that bad.”

“You’re literally gagging.”

“Just let me...” Suzanna glanced around, nervous. “It’s just easier, okay? Easier to fit in if I—”

“Next up, Kat and Taison,” roared Uncle Vince. “I believe they’ll be singing, uh, Jingle Bell Rock?”

Kat nodded tightly, up on the stage. She looked like she’d swallowed a yardstick, the way she’d planted herself stiff-backed in front of the mic. She was usually so bubbly, happy to claim the limelight...but when it came to the stage, she always froze up. When Taison squeezed in beside her, she elbowed him away. Suzanna frowned up at her, still clutching her cocoa.

“What’s going on there?”

“She’s a nervous performer, always has been. So scared she’ll mess up, she can’t just have fun.” Like you with that cocoa, thought Will, but he pushed the thought aside. Why did she feel the need to pretend? What did she mean, it was easier that way? Easier to ignore her feelings, conform to expectations? How often did she do this? Did she do it with him—and would he even know?

“Oh, God, she’s bombing.” Suzanna was clutching her cocoa, stiff with dismay. “Can’t she see the screen?”

“Snowblowers...bushes...it’s all so much—” Kat clapped her hand to her mouth and spun on her heel. Taison caught her, held her, carrying the tune on his

own—seemingly without effort, his voice second to none. He twirled her and dipped her as though they'd planned the whole thing, drew her close to his chest and waltzed her upstage. Kat clung to his shoulders, exhaling shaky laughter.

"That's sweet how he's got her," said Suzanna. "I thought they were fighting, but look at that. Just nerves."

Will gave a tight nod, but he wasn't so sure. He'd been keeping an eye on the two of them since that day in the barn when Taison waxed nostalgic for times gone by. "I think it's the wedding," he said. "Kat's all stressed out, and Taison—well, Taison just wants to say 'I do.'" He grinned at Suzanna. "That's the great thing with faking it: all the fun of being a couple, none of the drama."

Suzanna's brows shot up—maybe with shock, maybe on the verge of laughter—then Mom squeezed between them, Beth under one arm, Ann under the other.

"The munchkins are getting sleepy. Kiss 'em goodnight and I'll run 'em home."

Will bent and kissed them, and hugged them tight for good measure. "You two did great," he said. "Best Mr. Grinch yet."

Ann shot him the thumbs-up. Beth yawned and giggled, half-dozing already. Will turned to Suzanna, his pulse picking up.

"I think our duet's next," he said. "Ready to bring the house down?"

"You'd better believe it." Suzanna drained her cocoa and set her mug on the bar. "Mr. Grinch caught me flatfooted, but Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus? I grew up with that one."

"Country girl at heart, huh?" Will took her hand and led her to the stage. Kat and Taison were just finishing, belting out the last chorus like it was going out of style.

Taison was smiling, holding Kat in his arms. Kat's gaze hung on his like he was the only person in the room, but Will couldn't help but notice her smile didn't reach her eyes.

"Next up, our newest double act." Uncle Vince leaned into the mic, bellowing over the applause. "Everyone give it up for...Will and Suzanna."

"Just like we practiced," said Will.

Suzanna beamed up at him, then the music kicked in, that bright, bouncy oompah wringing a cheer from the crowd. Suzanna was bouncing with it, moving closer—had they planned this? Will almost missed his cue, caught up in the play of the stagelights in her hair.

Focus, he told himself, and threw himself into the music, that sweet down-home tune. Suzanna did a shimmy as the chorus kicked in, took Will by the hands and leaned in like she had secrets to whisper in his ear. Her breast brushed against him, soft through her blouse. Her breath kissed his ear and something burst in his chest, a bright shower of sparks lighting him up from inside.

Suzanna retreated going into her verse, her eyes locked on his, sparkling with promise. Will followed her without thinking, spun her into his arms. He could feel her chest rising, the beat of her heart—the way her whole body thrummed as she sang her verse. Then the song was ending and they were somehow backstage, Suzanna up on tiptoe, back pressed to the wall. Her hand slid up his back, nails catching on his shirt. He leaned in and kissed her, then he kissed her again. She nipped his lip hard, drew a gasp from his throat. Will moaned, wanting all of her, the taste of her soft skin, the curve of her hips. His hands in her hair, her lips on his—

"Well, what have we here?"

Will jumped back, guilty. “Mistletoe,” he grunted. Tucked his shirt in his pants. “We, uh—we...Suzanna, this is my cousin George.”

“Pleased to meet you,” said Suzanna, deadpan. George smirked, sipped his eggnog.

“What would my mom say? Or, hell, your mom?”

Will rolled his eyes. “You’ll keep your mouth shut if you know what’s good for you. Don’t think you’re too big to toss in the compost.”

“Or you could just hire me till my classes start up again.” George’s smirk widened. “I hear you’re installing an HVAC system. I got some experience there.”

Will swatted at him, shaking his head. “I’ll hire you,” he said. “But not because of your ridiculous attempt at blackmail. Because you’re family and I could use the help.” He flapped his hand. “Now, shoo.”

George shooed, flush with triumph. Will turned to Suzanna to find her slumped against the wall, barely holding back giggles behind her cupped hand.

“Your family—”

“I know...”

“I think I love them,” she said, and burst out laughing in earnest. Will stared a moment, and then he joined in. He laughed till his sides hurt, till his vision swam with stars. He laughed till his knees went weak, then he clung to Suzanna and laughed some more.

6

“You really think I’m ready?” Suzanna had never felt smaller, trying to picture herself scrambling onto Jenny’s back. The big mare peered down at her, still and serene.

“The way you saddled her just now, I’d swear you’d been doing it all your life. Go on, get up there. You’ve earned your ride.” Will came up behind her and set his hands on her shoulders. “If you’re scared she’ll throw you—”

“It’s not that.” Suzanna’s eyes prickled. She brushed at them, surprised. Will’s praise had caught her flatfooted. But beyond that, there was Jenny, saddle perched on her back, four feet off the ground. Suzanna closed her eyes and saw herself lunge for it, leg flung out dog-on-hydrant style. She saw herself miss, sliding halfway off Jenny’s back, flailing till Jenny spooked and bucked and reared, while Suzanna hung from one stirrup, hair dragging in the straw.

“Suzanna?” His voice was soft, questioning.



She blinked hard and swallowed. “I’m just worried I won’t make it. Even with the mounting block, that’s still pretty high.”

“I’ll give you a boost,” said Will. “You jump on up, and I’ve got you from there.” Still, she hesitated, holding her breath until Will patted her arm. “You trust me, right?”

She did. She’d put her trust in him completely since coming to the ranch. “You, absolutely. But trusting my two left feet is another matter entirely.”

Will’s chuckle raised butterflies deep in her stomach. “I won’t let you fall,” he said. “Now, here goes, on three. One...two...”

Suzanna hoisted herself up. Will caught her by the hips and heaved her aloft. She swung her leg over the saddle, and just like that, she was on horseback. She threw her head back and laughed. Will smiled along with her, and patted her knee.

“How does that feel?”

“Like...like I belong up here. Like my whole life I’ve been—whoa!” She yelped and pitched forward as Jenny tossed her head.

“Easy. You’re okay.” Will took Jenny’s reins and held her steady. “Here, give me your phone. Let me catch your first ride.”

Suzanna straightened up, sheepish. “You sure? I’m pretty shaky. And I can’t send my publisher a video where I’m not even holding the reins. They’ll realize I don’t have a clue what I’m doing.”

“This one’s just for you, to show you how far you’ve come.” Will clucked his tongue and Jenny got moving, clopping out the gate at a sedate pace. Suzanna sat stiff at

first, knees clutched to Jenny's flanks. Then she was squinting into the sun—into a glorious, bright winter's day on the ranch—and her fear drained away. She leaned back in the saddle and her hips found their rhythm. Her racing heart slowed to match Jenny's hoofbeats, and she knew she was safe.

"You look great," said Will, bringing Jenny to a halt and handing the reins to Suzanna. They'd gone over this, and she knew how to hold them—but still, it felt scary to be in control. "Okay, signal with your heels like we talked about, and just gently—yeah, guide her round the yard. Yeah, just like that. What'd I tell you? You're a natural."

Suzanna's heart soared. She turned her face to the mountains, and it almost felt real, ranch girl Suzanna setting off about her day. Riding out past the pond, past the houses and trees, where the foothills were purple and the air was crisp and new.

"Get 'er up to a trot," said Will.

Suzanna dug her heels in, but Jenny only whickered. "Uh, she doesn't seem to—"

"You need to do one of these." Will clicked his tongue. "Push your hips down, relax, and give her a cluck."

Suzanna did as he said. Jenny picked up her pace, easing into a trot. Suzanna moved with her, fighting breathless laughter as she bounced in the saddle. So this was how it felt—and she loved every bit of it, Jenny's soft whuffing, the breeze in her face. The jounce of her bottom bumping down on the saddle. She tilted her head back and breathed deep of the stable yard, hay and horse sweat, the sharp tang of ice.

"This part, you can send," said Will. "Your editor's going to love it." Suzanna hardly heard him. She'd half-forgotten he was filming, forgotten he was there at all.

The sun was high in the sky by the time they were done, Jenny unsaddled and brushed, the horses all fed and groomed. Suzanna's thighs ached, but she felt light as air. She'd achieved something today—not just the ride, but she'd mucked out the stalls, tended to every horse. She'd fed Apple her medicine without incurring her ire. And she'd done it all without straying into the kick zone.

“Your phone's buzzing,” said Will.

Suzanna dug it out, frowning. “It's my editor. She's...” A slow smile lit up her face. She held up her phone so Will could see. “She's in love with the photos I've been sending. Especially that last one, where you can't see the fence. Where it's just me and the mountains, and...thank you so much.” She flung her arms around Will, pressed her cheek to his chest. “This is all you. You and Sarah, the twins, I couldn't have done it without you on my side.”

“Sure you could.” Will stooped to kiss the pompom on top of her hat. “You gotta give yourself more credit.” His own phone gave a chirp, and he thumbed it to silence. Suzanna glanced at it.

“What was that?”

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“Just the vendor again, for my new HVAC system. He wants a final decision.” He jammed his phone in his pocket and zipped it shut.

“Everything okay with that? You seem kind of stressed.”

Will let out a harsh breath. “It’s just a tough call,” he said. “On the one hand, it’d save me a whole lot of money. I’d cut my power bills almost in half. I could build some new barns, maybe even expand. I’d have money to invest in the horse program, which would make Sarah happy. On the surface, it’s perfect, but...”

“But?”

“But it would mean the whole system running completely on computers. What if the power went down? We’ve got backup generators, but that’s a lot to keep running. One burnt-out gennie, one circuit fried, that’s all my barns without heat in the winter. It’s a big risk to take. Is it worth the reward?”

“You’re asking me?” Suzanna chuckled. “I might’ve managed a ride, but you’ve got me stumped there.”

“Guess that makes two of us,” said Will.

“Oh, don’t say that.” Suzanna bumped up against him, a companionable nudge. “You should cut yourself some slack. You’ve got all that on your mind, all the management, admin—I’ve seen you up late, doing your books. You do all that by yourself and still get up every morning and pitch in with the chores. It’s a lot, you know?”

Will shook his head at that, but his frown had faded. “I’d feel wrong not doing it,” he said. “Gotta keep my hands dirty, stay in touch with my land.”

Suzanna looked out over the ranchland, soft, snowy hills, scraggly patches of forest. She could see the sense in that. The ranch had a pulse to it, a life of its own. She’d miss that heartbeat when it came time to go.

And Will...he was so connected to his land. She’d miss him when it was time for her to leave, too.

\* \* \*

The big house was bustling by late afternoon, the ranch hands’ dining hall swarming with family. They’d come for the next event—the gingerbread house competition. The long wooden tables had been pushed together, groaning with trays of gumdrops and fresh-baked gingerbread. Tubs of icing steamed warmly, white, red, and green. Suzanna waved, catching sight of Cassie and Sarah and Cassie’s sister, Amy, but when she looked for the twins, they were nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s Beth and Ann?” she asked.

“Upstairs with Lucky,” said Will. “Would you mind bringing them down? I’ve got to make a quick call.”

Suzanna hustled upstairs and found the twins in their bedroom, building a Lego bridge over a sleeping Lucky. The dog woke at the door’s creak and sprang to his feet, sending bricks flying in every direction.

“Lucky! You broke our bridge.”

“Bad Lucky. Bad.”

Lucky's ears drooped. Suzanna bent to pet him. "You can't blame him," she said. "You're the ones who built your bridge over his butt."

"You said 'butt,'" said Amy. Beth giggled into her hand.

"I did," said Suzanna— "and speaking of butts, why are yours still up here? The contest's all set up, about to get started."

Beth and Ann exchanged glances. "We're protesting," said Ann.

Suzanna cocked a brow. "Protesting what?"

"Protesting Dad." Beth stared down at her Christmas socks, red and green, sewn with bells. "He's been doing, uh..."

"Unfair labor practices," said Ann. "That's when your boss is a double-dip jerk."

"Your...what?" Suzanna bit her lip, choking back laughter. "So, what, you're on strike?"

"No. We're protesting." Ann drew herself up. "We're not playing gingerbread house till Dad meets our demands."

"And what would those be?"

Beth drew herself up. "He can't wipe off our frosting and redo it himself."

"He can't eat our gumdrops if they're not uniform." Ann spat out the last word in a tone so like Will's it was all Suzanna could do to keep from cracking up.

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“Is that all?” she said.

“No.” Beth crossed her arms, the picture of indignation. “We want to do a gingerbread barn, like we saw on TV. A barn, not a house, with horses and cows.”

“I think we can manage that,” said Suzanna. She knew her way around gingerbread—gingerbread men, at least, with sweet peppermint eyes. A gingerbread horse couldn’t be too different...could it? She took each twin by the hand and led them out the door.

“Just one thing,” she said, as they headed downstairs. “Unfair labor practices? Where’d you hear that?”

“On the news,” said Ann.

“Some people were protesting.” Beth glanced up, eyes wide. “But it didn’t work.”

“Yours will, I promise.” Suzanna squeezed her hand. “Now, are you ready to build your dream barn?”

“Yeah!” The twins raced ahead, their good spirits restored. Suzanna caught Will coming back from his study.

“You might want to go easy,” she said. “I might or might not have walked in on the twins forming a union.”

“A union?”

“A united front against you and your taskmaster ways.” She elbowed him in the side. “They just want to have fun, and build a gingerbread barn. And not have you scold them if their corners aren’t straight.”

“They said that?” Will slumped where he stood. “Well, if that’s what they want...okay. Let’s do this.” He strode forth, shoulders squared. Suzanna followed with some trepidation, but Will was as good as his word. He set the girls to work crafting gingerbread animals that were anything but uniform—three-legged horses and aardvark-nosed cows—while he built the barn, complete with spun sugar hay bales. He did it all without a word of protest, and Suzanna smiled as she worked the frosting funnel. The twins were having fun—the loud, giggly kind that shook the room to the rafters. It filled Suzanna with a warmth that only got richer every time Will’s low chuckle joined the chorus.

“That one’s upside-down,” said Will.

“What, the horseshoe?”

Beth and Ann groaned in unison. “Dad says if they point down all your luck will run out.”

“Oh—can’t have that, then.” Suzanna scraped off her horseshoe and painted it luck-side up, just in time for the gong to sound for judging to begin.

“Is that a horse or a cow?” Will peered at a fat little creature stretched out in the hay.

“That’s Lucky,” said Ann. “That’s his collar right there.”

Will pressed his lips together, but didn’t make a peep. The judges made their rounds slowly, examining every entry. They retired to the pantry to debate the results, but returned in record time, bubbling with excitement.



“The winner of this year’s gingerbread house bake-off...” Mom let the silence hang, tension taut in the air. “Well, they all look delicious, but one tasty entry takes the cake for creativity: Will Carson’s barn, and don’t those cows just look scrumptious?” She plucked a horse from the barnyard and bit off its head. The twins burst out laughing and Will gave a whoop. Applause filled the air, and a few groans from the losers, then Will had his phone out and was corralling the twins.

“Everyone in for a selfie—and one, two, three, cheese!”

Suzanna leaned in, beaming, and cheesed with the rest, and if this wasn’t perfection, she didn’t much care what was.

7

Will paused on the landing, bleary-eyed and confused. He’d got up, as always, before dawn’s first light, before the cook or the housekeeper or even the twins—yet a faint golden glow spilled out from the kitchen. He hitched up his pants and continued downstairs.

“Hello? Someone down here?”

“Huh? Oh, just me...”

“Suzanna?” Will couldn’t believe it. She’d adjusted to ranch life better than he’d expected, but he’d yet to see her up before six. And it wasn’t till seven she came fully online. That first hour pre-coffee, she was soft, fuzzy-edged. Easy to tease and flummox, always a good time. But this morning, she sat hunched in the glow of her laptop, breakfast forgotten, coffee cooling at her elbow. Will peered over her shoulder, perplexed.

“What are you doing? Have you been up all night?”

“Not all night, no. My phone woke me at threeish, and I couldn’t get back to sleep.” She turned her laptop his way, open to Facebook. “We’ve gone kind of viral,” she said. “My editor, my publisher, they’re over the moon. They want to send a TV crew to—”

“Whoa. Is that me?” Will scrolled down and yep, that was him, bending to boost Suzanna over a stile. She’d turned to look back at him, red-cheeked with cold. He was smiling up at her, apparently enthralled. “Love the ranch boyfriend,” he read, scrolling through the comments. “He’s even hotter than the guy in the book. The guy in the book?”

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“The hero,” said Suzanna. She’d buried her face in her hands.

“I do look pretty good,” he said, to hide his embarrassment. “You never mentioned I was going to be part of the campaign.”

“I didn’t know.” Suzanna bent down to rap her head on the table. “I forgot Sarah took that shot. I sent it in by mistake.” She looked up, guilty-eyed. “Are you mad?”

“No. I’m happy for you.” Will reached down, laughing, to muss up her hair. “But I gotta tell you, you look like Lucky right now.”

“Excuse me?”

“Those big, sad eyes; the way you’re hiding your face. That’s what he does when he’s peed on the rug.”

Suzanna slapped at him, dissolving in laughter.

“How about this TV crew? When’s that all happening?”

Suzanna’s laughter died as abruptly as it had begun. “That’s the other thing,” she said. “They want to come shoot me the day after tomorrow...and they want you too. I’m so sorry. You don’t have to.”

Will sat down next to her and set to rubbing her back. Touching her had become kind of a habit, even when there wasn’t an audience. He liked the feel of her curvy body under his hands. A lot. He found himself smiling. “It’s okay,” he said. “It’s just an

interview, right?”

Suzanna shook her head miserably. “They want to follow me round the ranch, a day in the life. They want to see me dig postholes, bale hay, shovel snow. All the stuff I can’t really do.”

“I’ll help you with that.” Will pulled her closer, leaned his head against hers. “It’ll be fine, you’ll see. We’ll split up the chores so I’ll do the hard parts—like, I’ll dig the posthole, you bang in the post. We’ll be this cute couple that does everything together. Efficient, too, and you know I love that.”

Suzanna was quiet, staring at her chipped nails.

“What is it? No good?”

She let out a long breath. “It’s perfect,” she said. “Everything I could ask for. Only...it’s more than you agreed to. This is a huge deal, and we never—”

“Shh—shh.” Will took her by the hands and turned her to face him. “I want to do it, I promise. I want to make you look good.”

Suzanna blinked, uncertain. “You do? Why?”

Will’s heart swelled, and for the first time in recent memory, he wasn’t sure what to say. He wanted to protect her—from embarrassment, from failure, from everything that could go wrong. He wanted her to succeed, for her face to light up. For her to clap and cheer like she did when life went well. He couldn’t say all that. They’d share a few kisses, passionate ones, and he was attracted to her. He couldn’t deny that, but they were...friends. So he deflected.

“You’ve been great with my girls,” he said at last. “They loved you at karaoke night,

and you saved the gingerbread competition from a workers' strike. It's my turn to come through."

"My hero." Suzanna squeezed his hands, tightly, with feeling. Will leaned down and kissed her on the tip of her nose, pleased that he'd made her happy.

"I'm supposed to take the girls Christmas shopping this morning," he said. "But Mom's behind on her shopping, and Sarah is too. They can make it a girls' trip, and we'll practice our chores."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." A faint twinge of daddy guilt pricked at his chest, but the girls would have him the rest of his life. Suzanna's crisis was imminent—Beth and Ann could spare him this once. He kissed Suzanna again and got to his feet. "Go on, get dressed. I'll just grab some breakfast, and then we'll be off."

\* \* \*

The morning's chores flew by nearly without incident. In the stables, Suzanna snagged her coat on a nail and stripped a bolt helping Will patch up his snowplow, but proved a valuable asset with a hurt, panicked calf caught in a fence.

"We just found your talent," said Will when the calf was free.

"My talent?" Suzanna frowned. "You worked the pliers, cut off all that barbed wire. I just stood here, just—"

"You kept her calm." Will pulled on his gloves and flexed his hands to get comfy. "You've got that magic—the sweet voice, the soft touch. Didn't you see her ears, the way they were twitching? She was listening to you, forgetting all about me. Not

everyone can do that.”

“Will it be enough, though?” She stepped out of the cowshed, into the crisp, snowswept morning. “They’ll want to see me do everything—and what if they ask questions I don’t know how to answer?”

“Then I’ll step in,” said Will. “But honestly, that’d surprise me. I’ve done interviews before, local news, magazines—even this Discovery show on modern ranching. They’ll just want an overview, some nice clips and soundbites. Mostly, they’ll let you talk, so stick to what you know.”

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“What I know.” Suzanna thought for a moment. “Okay, how’s this: you’ve always got to be out there keeping an eye on your herd. You can keep your land clean, but you never know what the wind might blow in: branches, barbed wire, all kinds of hazards from out of the blue.”

“That works,” said Will. “But say stock, not herd. A herd’s about thirty head. We’ve got more like twenty thousand.” He caught Suzanna by the arm as she headed for the truck. “Hold on a minute. I’ve got something to show you before we head back.”

He led Suzanna down the dirt track, past a stand of tall pines. An old barn stood sheltered in the shade of the trees, its walls, once bright red, stripped to a weathered gray. A horseshoe hung over the doors, holding in the luck.

“This is my great-granddad’s barn. The oldest building on the ranch.” Will unbarred the doors and let them swing open. A warm smell drifted out, hay and oats, summer clover. “It’s just used for storage now, but this is where the Carson ranch first came to be.”

Suzanna tilted her head back and caught her breath. “It’s like a barn from a fairy tale,” she said. “I bet you could come here on a hot summer day, watch the sun peek through the cracks in the roof.”

“Or on a full moon night,” said Will. He pulled the doors shut to hold in the warmth. “The dust in the moonbeams, it’s a magical sight.”

Suzanna let out a sigh, perhaps picturing that. Will came up behind her and slid his arms around her waist. He really couldn’t stop himself from touching her.

“You could start your tour here,” he said. “The cameras’ll love it.”

“I love it,” said Suzanna. She shifted against him, surveying the scene. “What’s going on over there? Failed attempt at a haystack?”

Will followed her gaze and let out a low chuckle. A spill of golden hay had taken over one corner. “Looks like a bale split. It happens sometimes.”

“It looks soft,” said Suzanna. “Would it be weird if I went and, like...rolled in it?”

Will burst out laughing. “You want to roll in the hay?”

“I mean, it’s so—Will!” Suzanna turned and slapped at him. Will caught her wrists, grinning, and wagged his brows.

“I wouldn’t say no,” he said. Suzanna gasped, feigning shock, but her cheeks were bright pink. Her eyes danced and sparkled as she shuffled back toward the hay. Will followed, eager, and leaned in for a kiss. Suzanna kissed back, and she nipped at his lip, a sharp little sting that went straight to Will’s cock. A moan caught in his throat and he swept her off her feet. Her shriek gave way to laughter as he tossed her in the hay, and she stretched out, inviting, a smile on her face.

“It really is soft,” she said. “Softer than it looks.”

Will knelt over her, loosened her collar, and her hood fell away. Her hair streamed, bright as sunlight, over the warm bed of hay.

“Can I...?” Will toyed with her zipper. Suzanna nodded, breathing fast. He peeled off her coat and gloves, and she plucked off his hat. She unwound his scarf and tossed it aside. She kissed the skin underneath, and Will’s blood ran hot. He undid her pink sparkly cardigan, and she stripped off his coat.



“So many layers...”

“Like unwrapping a present.” He relieved Suzanna of her heavy knit top. She yanked off his sweater and undershirt both at once, and ran a bold finger down his bare chest. Will caught her hand, kissed it, and laid it at her side.

“Not fair,” he said. “You’ve still got your T-shirt, and...” He helped her wiggle out of it, and then she was down to her lacy black bra. Will bent and kissed her where her necklace brushed her breasts. She smelled of soap and clean sweat and warm maple syrup, and he breathed her in, moaning. He wanted her, needed her—he groped for her hand and twined his fingers with hers. Suzanna stopped breathing.

“Will? Is something wrong?” She drew back, just slightly, and covered her chest. Will blinked and came back to himself, shook his head side to side.

“Wrong? No, you’re perfect. I just...” He laughed, embarrassed. “It’s been a while, is all. I was savoring the moment.” He ran his hand down her side, over the soft bowl of her belly. “You’re stunning,” he said. He unbuttoned her jeans and she let him, sighing with pleasure as he slid a hand down her leggings.

“Suzanna...” Will stretched up to kiss her lips. The air was cool but not frigid, her mouth hot on his skin. Her hand on his cock made him arch and cry out, the hairs rising up on the back of his neck. She teased him and played with him till he thought he would melt, then she rose up and pushed him back into the hay.

“I don’t suppose you brought...” She cleared her throat softly, glanced at his coat.

“Would you think less of me if I had a condom in my wallet?”

Suzanna laughed. “That depends on how old it is.”

“Not that old,” he said. “Taison snuck it in there, uh...”

Suzanna reached for it, laughing. “I don’t need to know.” She fished out the condom and rolled it on him, then Will’s world went hazy, all heat and sensation. He reached for Suzanna and ran his hands up her back, into the feathery spill of her hair. The sounds of her pleasure woke a hunger in his chest, and his shouts mingled with hers as she drove him over the edge—into a dizzy fall, a long, weightless tumble—and then she was smiling, lips twitching against his neck.

“That was just...mmm.” She rolled off him, sighing, and lay catching her breath. Will squeezed her hand, too winded to speak. High above them was high noon and sunbeams filled the barn, the dust they’d stirred up hanging thick in the air.

Will closed his eyes and let the moment stretch out. He had nowhere to be, at least not right away—nowhere but here, in the arms of perfection.

Suzanna woke at first light on the day of the interview, full of nervous energy. She buried her face in the pillow, hoping sleep would come back for her, but her stomach was jumping with twitchy electricity.

In truth, it had been since leaving the old barn the afternoon before. She sure hadn't expected to make love with Will. That wasn't part of their arrangement. But, damn, it had been amazing. She closed her eyes, remembering how his hands felt on her, the expression on his face when he'd looked down at her. He'd made her feel beautiful.

She sighed, reminding herself not to read too much into it. They'd returned to the house afterwards and pretended like nothing had happened in front of his family. That's what she had to continue to do. She needed to focus on why she was here in Montana. Everything rode on today. It was her moment to shine. Or her moment to blow it all, bring her castle of lies crashing down about her ears.

"You can do this," she whispered, and gulped back sudden nausea. She stood and went to the mirror and looked herself up and down. "You can be whoever you want to be," she told her reflection. "You can—

—lose the weight—

She frowned as her mother's voice unexpectedly cut into her thoughts. She brushed it aside.

"You can be a rancher," she said, more firmly this time. "You just have to believe it."

She got dressed in the dim light and tiptoed downstairs, out the front door and into the day. She needed a walk, space to clear her head and focus on what she had to do.

“Headed to the stables?”

Suzanna jerked where she stood, then smiled at the sight of one of Will’s ranch hands—a grandfatherly man who’d been working on the ranch longer than Will had been alive. “Morning, Gus,” she said. “I thought I’d take a walk, get myself some fresh air.”

“None fresher than here.” Gus drew a deep breath and let it out, satisfied. “Will went out a while ago. You might catch him if you hurry.”

Suzanna nodded her thanks and started down the track. She passed Sarah digging her truck from a snowdrift and stopped for a chat, and to lend a hand. Will’s foreman, Kurt, was out hauling feed, and he gave her a friendly nod as he passed her by. Almost like home, she thought—only, who’d smile and wave to her back in Miami? She had friends, of course, but she’d struggle to put a name to even one of her neighbors. She could walk down the beach till she hit the lighthouse without clapping eyes on a familiar face.

She passed by the frozen pond and its clutch of snowy houses, and made her way down to the rows of cowsheds. Will’s truck was parked out front, the air shimmering over the engine as the heat dispersed. Here was her chance to grab a minute with him alone, maybe share a morning kiss.

“Will?” Suzanna called out a greeting, jogging across the yard. Nobody answered, but voices drifted from the shed, Will’s and one other, one she’d heard before.

“You need to make a decision,” said this second voice, and where had she heard it? Will mumbled something, too low to hear. Suzanna stepped forward, straining to

hear. She wasn't eavesdropping, exactly. She was just in the area. Not sneaking around, not trying to hide her presence. It wasn't her fault they were talking so loud.

"I'm not trying to pressure you." The voice was closer now, heading for the doors. "But if you want to jump on this, now is the time. Come spring, you'll have cows to tag, all the damage from the snowmelt. You'll have brush to clear, weeds to spray, all kinds of—"

"I know," said Will. "This is my ranch. I know how to run it. But this is a big change, a massive investment. I'd bring Dad in on it, but he's been retired a while now. By the time he got caught up..."

In the shed, plastic crackled, cutting Will off mid-thought. Suzanna eased closer, holding her breath.

"—which is why you're bringing me in to run point on this." The stranger's voice rose in triumph, and Suzanna remembered—the bar, karaoke night, her and Will caught backstage.

"You're George," she whispered. "That's your name, George."

"Look, I've got this," said George. "We did this in business school—pros and cons, risk assessment. I could round up a focus group, folks with HVAC systems. Folks who've taken the plunge, and we'll see what they think. How does that grab you?"

Will rustled more plastic, maybe thinking it over. "That sounds good," he said. "Listen, I've got to meet Suzanna for her interview. I'll get back to you later and we'll hash out the details."

Suzanna ducked down quickly, pretending to lace up her boot. Will emerged moments later and did a double take.

“Suzanna? What’re you doing here?”

“I was out for a walk and I spotted your truck.” She got to her feet. “To be honest, I was wondering, are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“What, with the interview?” Will bent to catch her eye, but Suzanna looked away.

“Is this too much to ask of you? It’s one thing for me to lie, to go on record with my pants on fire, but asking you to join in—”

“You didn’t ask. I offered.” Will took her hand, patted it through her glove. “This was my idea, remember? You lie for me, I lie for you, and we both go home happy.” He smiled, warm and confident, and Suzanna’s objections died away. If Will was truly okay with this...

“Soundbites, remember?” He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. “Funny stories are good, little bite-sized facts. Tell ’em what you’ve learned, why you love this place.”

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“So it’ll almost be like I’m not lying at all.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” said Will. He pointed up the drive. “Speak of the devil, looks like we got company.”

Suzanna shielded her eyes, squinting into the sun’s glare. Sure enough, they’d arrived, a convoy of vans beetling down the main drive.

“We’ve got this,” said Will, and Suzanna’s heart swelled with gratitude. He’d said we, not you. Whatever came next, she wouldn’t face it alone.

\* \* \*

“I told you it’d be easy,” said Will. “For you, anyway.” He scrubbed at his cheek, pulled his hand away pinkish. “I can’t show my face around the ranch like this. How do I get it off?”

Suzanna bit back laughter. Will in makeup—that, she hadn’t expected. “Soap and water,” she said. “You should do that at home, though. The soap you’ve got here is too harsh for your face.”

“I’m not going out there with my face full of crud.” Will leaned over the sink and turned the water on full blast. Suzanna winced as he reached for the soap, a hard, scratchy bar stamped ANTISEPTIC. Will had fared worse than she had through the whole ordeal: they’d spent the bulk of their time in hair and makeup, being primped and painted and wired for sound. Then they’d posed for a series of canned “action shots,” pretending the cameras had surprised them going about their chores. The

interview proper had flown by in a flash—questions from fans, mostly. How'd you learn to ride? Does Will bale hay shirtless? Suzanna had fielded them all with aplomb, the lies mingled with half-truths tripping off her tongue.

Will stood up stiffly, cheeks scrubbed bright red. "Did I get it all?"

Suzanna rose on tiptoe to thumb mascara off his cheek. "You're good," she said. "Sorry they made you do that."

"As long as you got what you needed." He sneezed, rubbed his face, and set his hat on his head. "I need to check on the girls. Let's swing by the house."

They tramped up the hill, Will in the lead. He'd gone quiet, brooding, perhaps stewing over the indignity he'd just endured. She was sorry for that and wished she could make it up to him.

"Dad!" Ann charged out to meet them, Beth close behind. Both twins were red-faced, on the verge of tears. Will knelt down to catch them and gathered them in his arms.

"What is it? What's happened?"

"Lucky!" Ann burst out wailing, burying her face in his chest. He held her and rocked her, bent his head to hers.

"Lucky? Our Lucky? What'd he do this time?"

"He ate our tap shoes," said Beth, and began to cry herself. "The closet was open, and he—he—"

"He ruined our talent," cried Ann. "We can't do our dance now, and talent night's tomorrow. We'll lose, and they'll laugh at us, and he ruined it. Stupid Lucky."



“You could still sing,” said Suzanna. “You’re both great at that.”

Ann fixed her with a look of pure six-year-old scorn. “There’s no singing on talent night. Singing’s for karaoke.”

“You can still do your dance, right?” Will lifted the twins up, one on each hip. “It’ll be a little less noisy, but you’ll still—”

“It’s a tap dance,” said Ann. She looked up at Will, her tearstained face tragic. “If we don’t have our tap shoes, it’s just...it’s just...”

“Us in our normal shoes, kicking the stage.” Beth wiped her nose. “Stupid Lucky.”

“I might have an idea,” said Suzanna. “Now, don’t laugh, but...” She smiled, self-conscious, and spun through an axel turn into a skidding fan kick. “The ice kind of ruined it, but—”

“What was that?” Ann squirmed in Will’s arms, wanting let down. Beth slid down as well and tried a spin of her own. She slipped on the ice and plopped down on her butt.

“It’s from my big jazz routine,” said Suzanna, avoiding Will’s eye. If he laughed right now, she’d dissolve where she stood. “Mom made me take lessons back in third grade. I never made dance squad, but Lord knows I tried. We had to learn this piece for the audition, and I must’ve run through the steps a million times. But, when the day came, I—well, never mind.”

“No, what? What happened?” Beth’s eyes had gone round.

“I got nervous, tripped, and fell flat on my face. Everyone laughed, and I ran out of there. But the good news is, after all that practice, I remember every step. If you want, I can teach you.”

Beth and Ann exchanged glances.

“I like it,” said Beth. “I liked the high kick.”

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“Me too,” said Ann. “You can really teach us?”

“I can,” said Suzanna, and dared a glance at Will. He wasn’t laughing—far from it. His smile was wide and grateful, and Suzanna stretched up to kiss him as the twins raced inside.

“I’ve got this handled, if you need to go,” she told him.

“I do have some chores waiting, a barn wall needing patching.” He bent and kissed her, and straightened her hat on her head. “I owe you one,” he said. “And if the twins take talent night, I’ll owe you double.”

“I’ll find a way to collect,” she said and gave him a flirtatious smile, making him grin back.

“Looking forward to it.”

Suzanna watched Will go, but only for a moment before Beth and Ann were back, dragging her inside. A wry grin tugged at her lips—who’d have thought that old jazz routine, once the bane of her existence, would wind up saving the day?

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“You’ve almost got it,” said Suzanna. She picked Beth up one more time and set her on her feet. “You’ve got to keep spinning when you land. That’s why you’re tripping—you’re stopping too soon.”

“Like this,” said Ann. She twirled across the room, spun in the air, and tripped over her own feet as her toe found the rug.

“And that’s what happens when you don’t look where you’re going.”

Both girls broke out giggling. Beth tried one more spin, and this time she nailed it, twirling effortlessly into the kick. Will let out a whoop, already applauding. Suzanna gasped at the sight of him and nearly tripped, herself.

“Will? Where’d you come from?”

“I thought you saw me,” he said. He crouched down to catch the girls as they leapt into his arms.

“We’re doing it, Dad.”

“We’re real ballerinas.”

“Aren’t we jazz-erinas, if this is jazz?”

“You’re stars, is what you are.” He kissed both of their heads, bursting with pride. Suzanna was smiling down at them, pink-cheeked from exertion. Will winked at her, making her heart leap. “The chores are all done, and George is in my office, working. I thought we’d head to Taison’s early, help him and Kat set up for talent night.”

“Sounds fun,” she said.

“Oh, yeah, it’s great. Taison builds this whole stage out in his barn. Kat makes her puppy chow, and Mom brings the cider.” He gave the twins a push. “Go on, find your grandma, help her finish your costumes.”

The twins ran off, shrieking. Suzanna raised a brow.

“Puppy chow? Are there dogs there?”

“Not that kind of puppy chow.” Will slung his arm over her shoulders. “It’s a snack, chocolate and peanut butter, looks kind of like dog food.”

“Too bad,” said Suzanna. “I was picturing, you know, dancing dog acts. Dog trapeze artists; dog opera...”

Will chuckled. It was good being with Suzanna—having someone to laugh with, to brighten his days. It was more than he expected, but like Taison said, a good friend’s just someone you’re always glad to see. Someone who perks you up, like Kat did for Taison. Though, rolling up to Taison’s barn a short while later, Will had to admit his friend didn’t look too perked.

“Hey, Taison.” He hopped out of his truck and peered into the barn. “How’s the stage coming? Looking good from out here.”

“Not bad,” said Taison. He tipped his hat to Suzanna. “Good to see you again. What’re you doing for your talent?”

“Oh, funny thing...” Suzanna glanced at Will. “I kind of gave mine to the twins. I guess they’ll be representing our team tonight. I’ll be their cheering section.”

“Hey, everyone needs a good cheerleader.” Taison cracked his knuckles, pop-pop-pop in the quiet. “Anyway, that stage isn’t going to build itself. I’d best get back to it.”

“I’ll help,” said Will. “Unless, Suzanna—?”

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“I’m good,” she said. “I’ll head up to the house, see if Kat needs a hand with that puppy chow.” She clasped Will’s hand for a moment, a quick, warm press. Then she was gone, and Will followed Taison into the barn. The two of them set to work building steps for the stage, stringing up lights and swooping red curtains. Taison hammered steadily, pounding in nails, but something was off with him. Will could see it in his tight lips, in the set of his shoulders.

“Hey, Taison?”

“Mm?” Taison looked up at him, a nail between his teeth.

“Everything okay?”

Taison spat out the nail and banged it into the stage. “Everything’s fine,” he said. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I don’t know,” said Will. “But I’ve known you all my life, and something’s not right. You’re all moody, tense, chewing those nails...”

Taison sat back, sighing. “You know me too well.”

“So, come on, what’s up?” Will sat down next to him, tucked his hammer into his belt. “Might as well tell me—better out than in.”

Taison made a hissing sound. “It’s the wedding,” he said. “Kat’s been...all the planning, the bridal stuff, I swear she’s obsessed. Addicted, even. She’s thrown herself into it like it’s her whole world. I woke up last night, and you’re not gonna

believe this, but she was doing seating plans in her sleep. Least, that's what I think she was doing, mumbling all those names." He let out a harsh laugh. "We don't talk any more, not like we used to. Whenever I try to get through to her, it's wedding this, wedding that, bridesmaids and smoke machines and flowers for the tables. I asked her this morning, what do you want for breakfast? And she said red velvet cake, like she thought I'd asked... It's hopeless."

"Maybe not quite," said Will. He took Taison's hammer and set it down on the planks. "Have you tried taking charge? Like, if she needs smoke machines, you could go pick some up. Or if it's flowers she wants, take her to the florist. It's like with Suzanna, with her interview. I taught her a few tricks, made her feel like she had it all under control, and she calmed down like that." He snapped his fingers. Taison gave a snort.

"A wedding's more complex than some interview."

"But the principle's the same," said Will. "Show her you see her, you get what she needs. Be there for her, yeah? Fight this battle together."

"This battle...our wedding?" Taison's face contorted, but then he was laughing. "Guess you might have a point," he said. "I have kind of been leaving all that stuff to her."

"See, there you go. Get in those trenches, and you'll win that war yet."

Taison reached for his hammer. He looked better already, confident, resolute. He and Kat would be fine, Will thought. Those two always were.

\* \* \*

Suzanna followed her nose to Kat's kitchen, the scent of fresh baking heavy in the

air. To her surprise, she found the place deserted, trays of cupcakes and brownies filling every counter, bowls of popcorn and...puppy chow?—crowding the table. A spatula perched on the edge of the sink, dripping melted chocolate onto the floor.

“Kat?”

No answer. Suzanna rescued the spatula and rinsed it clean, only to drop it at the ding of the oven timer.

“Kat? You’ve got, uh—your brownies?” She searched for oven mitts, found none, and grabbed a hand towel instead. “Kat?”

Behind her, someone sniffled. She turned and there was Kat, wiping her eyes.

“Here, let me get that.” Kat took the towel and rescued her brownies from the oven. She set them down with the others and stood blotting her face.

“Kat? You okay?”

“I didn’t know you were coming.” Kat plopped down at the table, grabbed a handful of puppy chow, and crammed it in her mouth. “Mmph-mm?”

“What was that?”

Kat chewed and swallowed, wiped her mouth on her sleeve. “You ever go to bed one night and wake up with the feeling nothing’s like it was? Like the whole world changed on you, and you’re stuck just faking it, trying to get along?”

Suzanna sat down next to her. “I think so, yeah.” She dug in her purse and found a pack of Kleenex. Kat took it gratefully. She extracted a tissue and dabbed at her eyes.



“It’s like the whole world’s watching me, expecting...I don’t know.”

“Perfection?” Suzanna got that. She got it all too well. A wedding, she guessed, had to make it worse—all that planning, the stress, and the pressure to be happy through the whole ordeal. Isn’t it wonderful? Aren’t you thrilled?

Kat looked up, hollow-eyed, a study in exhaustion. “I know you don’t know me, but what would you do?”

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Suzanna chewed her lip, thinking. She thought of Mom and Dad, their endless expectations—the “inspirational” fridge magnets, the handmade goals charts. The dance lessons, music lessons, soccer, golf, and karate. The makeovers, the runway coach, the Little Miss pageants. And then the disappointment, when she wasn’t enough—when she was never enough, despite her best efforts. She cleared her throat.

“You’ve got to do your own thing,” she said. “At least, that’s what’s worked for me. Or, I should say, what’s working, now I’m finally doing it.”

“Yeah?” Kat’s lips quirked up, almost a smile. “What’s that mean for you?”

Suzanna beamed. She couldn’t stop herself. “Would you believe, till this month, I’d never left Florida? I’d never done anything for myself, just ’cause I wanted to.” She leaned in, gaining steam. “I was living for everyone but myself, writing other folks’ memoirs, telling their stories. Ghostwriting, you know? And I felt like a ghost—like I was right here, but no one saw me. I was drifting along like that, then one day I’d just had it.”

“And what did you do?”

“I wrote Cowboy’s Awakening—a story I came up with, under my own name. You might’ve seen the Facebook ads, me and Will on the ranch?”

Kat nodded. “Taison showed me.” Her expression turned hopeful. “And that’s made you happy? Going after what you wanted? Putting yourself out there, and to hell with the risks?”

“It’s been incredible,” said Suzanna. “Better than anything I could’ve imagined. The book’s selling great. I’ve just signed a contract to write two more, and that’s not even the best part. The best part is, I’m living. Following my dreams. If I were you, I’d ask myself, where’s the joy in my life? Focus on that, not the things that stress you out. Focus on saying ‘I do,’ not if the napkins are perfectly pressed.”

Kat drew a long breath and got to her feet. “You’re right,” she said. She dusted off her hands, as though ridding herself of something unpleasant. “I’ve been scared too long. Scared of choosing wrong. I’m going to take charge, do things my way for once.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Suzanna. She blinked at the bright bloom of headlights in the window. “Looks like the family’s here.”

“I guess so,” said Kat. “You start running that puppy chow out to the barn. I need to wash up, then I’ll be back to help.”

Suzanna did as Kat said, and soon the talent show was in full swing. Cousin George did a ventriloquism act that had the kids rolling in the aisles. Will’s mom and dad busted out a set of hula hoops, and made Suzanna’s head spin with their jaw-dropping tricks.

“They started doing that for exercise,” explained Will. “Then they got really into it, and, well...there they are.”

The twins were up next with their new jazz routine. They started off shaky, Beth zigging when she should’ve zagged and bumping into Ann. But then they found their rhythm, and they brought the house down, drawing a collective gasp from the audience with their big flying finish. They got a standing ovation, and then Will was up.

“Come with me,” he whispered. “I’ve got an idea.”

Suzanna glanced over her shoulder. “Who, me? Up there?”

“Do you trust me?”

She looked up at Will. The glint in his eye was perhaps a bit wicked, but his smile was warm. And she did trust him—so she took his hand and let him lead her to the stage.

“What are we doing?”

“Follow my lead.” Will spun her out, so suddenly she shrieked. She twirled, soaring, that moment of weightlessness before the big fall, and then Will caught her and cradled her to his chest. He bent to her ear and murmured relax, and Suzanna let herself melt against his chest.

He waltzed her upstage and Suzanna found her footing. It wasn’t so hard, now her panic had gone—just move when Will did, match her steps to his. Breathe with him, spin with him, float in his arms as he dipped her to the floor. Catch his eye as he lifted her, feel his exhilaration. Feel the music, feel him, feel the rushing in her ears as the barn erupted in applause.

“Is that...did we do it?” She hung in Will’s embrace, catching her breath. He beamed down at her, and he’d never looked so gorgeous—so strong, so powerful, flush with triumph.

“We didn’t just do it,” he said. “Suzanna, we killed it.”

“I still can’t believe the girls didn’t win.” Suzanna paused at Will’s bedroom door, hands on her hips. “They brought your mom to tears. Actual tears. And that standing ovation—”

“It’s okay,” said Will. He came up behind her and set his hands on her shoulders, kneading away the stress of the day and guiding her into the room. He closed the door so their conversation wouldn’t disturb the girls, who were already asleep. “They had a great time, and they did come in second. And Matt and Jen did make a horse disappear.”

Suzanna laughed. “I’ll admit that was something. Though, you could still hear it snorting backstage.”

“But you had fun, right?” Will turned her to face him. Suzanna smiled up at him, and Will’s heart felt light. How had he got so lucky? Inviting Suzanna had been a gamble, but right now, in this moment, he felt on top of the world. Like he could reach out and—

“I had the best time,” said Suzanna. “And not just tonight. Being here on the ranch, with your family, with you...” Her pink cheeks flamed red. “We might’ve started out fake, just a story to tell my publisher and your family, but this all feels so real, me and you, what we’ve got. I—I’ve had relationships before, but none that felt this...solid.” She looked away, frowning. “I’m sorry. I—”

“Don’t be sorry. I feel the same way.” Will hooked his thumb under her chin. “Look at me. I mean it. It’s been a long time since I’ve had anyone. So long I’d forgotten how much I missed it, having someone to share these things—nights like this, morning chores. The big things, the little ones, everything in between. I think I’d forgotten how to have fun.”

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“You seemed to remember well enough the other day in the barn.” Suzanna’s smile had turned mischievous. Will opened his mouth to chide her, only to gasp in mock-outrage as she pinched his ass.

“So that’s your game?” He spun her around and slapped her behind. Suzanna laughed, delighted, and caught him by his belt. She flopped back on his bed and pulled him down on top of her, giggles rising as they bounced on the mattress.

“Kiss me,” said Will. Suzanna kissed him hard, happy to comply. Her fingers slid through his hair, nails raking his scalp. Will shivered at the sensation, heat igniting in his belly. He wanted her, needed her, needed every part of her. Needed her sighs of pleasure, his name on her lips. He pushed up her skirt and bent to nip her thigh, high on the fleshy part where the skin was smooth and soft.

“Will...” Suzanna’s legs parted as he kissed his way higher, following that pale curve to her pink, lacy panties.

“You wear these for me?” He teased her through the fabric, leaning in close so his breath grazed her slit. He tongued her clit through the textured lace till she arched off the bed. “They look so damn pretty...should I leave ’em on?”

Suzanna batted at his head. She made a faint sound, half furious, half pleading. Will slid her panties aside and let himself taste her, savoring her soft moans, the way she shook and gasped. The way she clutched at his shoulders, her nails short but sharp.

“Will...”

He could feel she was close, the tension coiling inside her. He raced to drive her over the top. She'd stopped breathing now, her pulse fast and urgent. Her grip tightened on his shoulders and Will's cock throbbed—at the bright spark of pain, at the thought she'd marked him, little crescent bruises to prove he was hers.

“Will!” She flung her head back and her heels drummed on the bed. Will didn't stop, lashing her with his tongue till she'd ridden out the last aftershock, till she lay spent and helpless on the soft coverlet.

“I'll need a minute,” she murmured, as Will nuzzled up beside her. “Just a minute to catch my breath, and then it's your turn.”

“Then your turn again.” Will stroked her hair, twined it round his finger. “I could do this all night, every night. You're just that addictive.”

Suzanna laughed faintly and rose to steal a kiss. “I'll hold you to that,” she said, and Will knew their night was just beginning.

\* \* \*

Will woke to an unfamiliar sight: morning light streaming in the window, making a halo of Suzanna's bedhead. As beautiful as she looked, he couldn't ignore the thread of anxiety he felt at all that sunshine. He never set his alarm because he didn't need to—his body knew when to wake, in the gray before dawn. But today he'd slept away half the morning. He reached out and shook Suzanna by the shoulder.

“Hey. We overslept.”

Suzanna made a murr sound and buried her face in the pillow. Will sat up and stretched, and threw off the covers. Something was buzzing, his phone or Suzanna's, buried in the untidy tangle of their clothes.

“Suzanna?”

She groaned again, but Will could feel her stirring. He dug till he found his jeans, and pulled out his phone. It buzzed again as he grabbed it, an angry text bubble popping up on the screen.

Well, breakfast is over. I hope you're happy. The girls certainly weren't, Santa's breakfast without Dad! :-(

Will blinked. Santa's breakfast. That had been today, waffles and pancakes at Uncle Vince's, Santa's village out back, set up for the kids.

“We missed breakfast,” he said. Suzanna grunted. She sat up in bed, flipped her hair from her eyes.

“Santa's breakfast? The twins...” Her mouth dropped open, a mask of dismay.

Will fired off a response—why didn't you wake me?—but Mom didn't respond.

“I think she tried,” said Suzanna. “I dreamed someone was knocking, but I never woke up all the way. How much you wanna bet that was your mom?”

Will only humphed. His phone was buzzing again, more angry text bubbles, an incoming call. He went to dismiss it, then saw it was Taison.

“Taison, what's up?”

“What's up, man? What's up? Didn't you get my texts?”

Will glanced at Suzanna. She'd found her own phone and was tapping at the screen. Will's blood ran cold.



“Is it the twins? Did something happen? I can be there in—”

“The twins? Are you kidding me? I’m talking about Kat. About you and your meddling, your no-good advice. Take charge, you said. Get in those trenches. Well, I jumped right on in there, and you know what? She buried me alive. Next time you got an opinion, you know what you can do? You can roll it up real tight and cram it up your ass.”

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Will blinked, dumbfounded. “That was Taison,” he said. “He hung up on me.”

Suzanna made a strangled sound, still staring at her phone. Will leaned over her shoulder.

“What? He text you too?”

“Not him. Your sister.” She angled the screen so Will could see. “Kat’s got cold feet. She told Sarah that she and I had a ‘long talk,’ and now she’s thinking about calling off the wedding. Everyone’s curious what I might’ve said.”

Will frowned. “What did you say?”

Suzanna pulled up the sheets to cover herself. “I walked in on her crying,” she said. “About the wedding, I thought—all the stress, the expectations. I told her she should focus on what makes her happy. I meant Taison, of course, but I guess, uh...”

“What?”

“She said she’d been faking it. Trying to be someone she wasn’t.” Suzanna chewed her lip. “I figured she was overwhelmed, y’know, with the planning, the perfect-bride pressure. I never thought she meant she wanted out.”

“She doesn’t,” said Will. “She and Taison are the real deal. They’ve been together forever, friends since first grade, boyfriend-girlfriend since high school. If Kat’s got cold feet, it’s just that, cold feet.”

“And I just poured ice on them.” Suzanna reached for her phone. “I’ll text her right now. Walk back what I said.”

“Don’t.” Will heard himself snap at her and softened his tone. “I mean, you don’t know them like I do. It’s better if I talk to them, remind them what they’ve got.”

Suzanna dropped her phone on the pillow. Will bent over his, composing a text. He’d work on Kat first, he thought, play to her nostalgia. She’d shared so much with Taison, so many firsts—first date, first kiss, first Carson Christmas Games. First time at summer camp; first trip to the fair with the hog they’d raised together. They’d been six at that fair, same age as the twins, hands clasped in a nervous knot as the judges weighed their pig.

“Is there nothing I can do?” Suzanna was hovering, buttoning her blouse. Will paused in his texting, sensing her hurt.

“Not right now,” he said. “But I’ll let you know if that changes.”

“Okay, well...” She did up her last button and stood fidgeting with her cuffs. “I’ll go make some maple bars. To make it up to the girls for missing breakfast?” She phrased the statement like a question, as though asking permission. Will nodded absently, already back on his phone. By the time he’d sent his first text, Suzanna was gone.

11

Suzanna was rinsing the twins’ lunch plates when Will popped his head in. She smiled at the sight of him and waved him to the table.

“I made chili,” she said. “And fresh cornbread.”

Will shot a longing glance at the chili pot, but he shook his head. “I can’t stay,” he

said. “I’ve got George coming by with his HVAC report. I’m just dropping by to check on the twins.”

“They’re playing castle with Lucky. He’s the moat monster.”

“They got him in the tub again?” Will pulled a face. “This is why we forgive him when he snacks on our shoes.”

Suzanna chuckled. “How about Taison? He and Kat work things out?”

“Well, he’s speaking to me again, so that’s a start. As for him and Kat, he says they’re talking too.” He came up to Suzanna and slid his arms around her waist. “Don’t beat yourself up, okay? Whatever’s between them, it’s been building a while. We might’ve lit the match, but they brought the dynamite. Maybe down the road, they’ll realize this was good for them—that it forced them to sit down and work through all the stuff they’d been pushing aside.” He leaned down and kissed her, a quick, fond peck. “I’ll be back in an hour or two. I’ll try your chili then.”

Suzanna watched him go, admiring the view. Will just fit out here, like he’d sprung from the land. He knew every inch of fence, every mountain stream. The cold hardly seemed to touch him. He never slipped on the ice or came home with chilblains. Meanwhile, Suzanna was freezing in two cardigans, and wondering how goofy she’d look if she piled on a third. She closed her eyes and imagined the sun on her face—the warm breeze off the ocean, hot sand underfoot. Will’s ancestors couldn’t have staked their claim in California or Arizona? She tried to picture him in swim trunks, lounging on the beach. Or farther afield, in the wilds of Australia, the sun high and scorching, dry grass at his feet. Sheep grazing—no, emus. A flock of hungry emus closing in from all sides. Will’s hands in the air, like—

“What’s so funny?”

Suzanna snapped back to reality, covering a laugh. Beth and Ann were gazing up at her, their eyes wide and solemn.

“I was just, uh...never mind.” She crouched down, smiling. “What can I do for you two?”

“You left your phone in our room,” said Beth.

“It’s been ringing.” Ann held out the phone. As if on cue, it burred again.

“Thanks,” said Suzanna. The twins ran off giggling and she picked up the call. Her editor again. “Hey, Dina,” she said. “I’m still working on that book two pitch. I should have it to you by Monday.”

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Dina sighed down the line. “We were kind of hoping you’d have something today. Not the whole pitch, but a teaser, something buzzy. Something to share with sales and marketing, to get the word out. You need to ride that momentum, keep your readers engaged.”

“Australia,” said Suzanna, and bit her tongue hard. Why had she said that? She’d panicked was why, and she’d—

“Australia?” Dina’s chair creaked. Suzanna could almost hear her frown through the phone. “That’s a start,” she said. “But we’ll need more than that to get you trending again.”

Suzanna leaned on the counter, wheels spinning. A spark flared and she jumped on it, improvising as she went. “It’s the hero’s little brother from Cowboy’s Awakening,” she said. “He—he needs a fresh start, so he buys up this ranchland out in Australia. He’s this fish out of water, thinking that he’ll be fine because he knows ranching, that he can do everything the way he’s always done. But, of course, he can’t.”

“And he meets some cute local who shows him the ropes?”

“The rancher’s daughter,” she said. “The one who sold him the land. She grew up there. It’s her home. She can’t let him destroy it.”

“And they bond over...spider bites? Killer kangaroos?”

Suzanna chuckled, half amusement, half relief. The idea had legs. She felt it already, and she knew Dina did too. “I’ll need to do some research,” she said. “But I’ll get you

that pitch, and I promise you'll love it."

"I'll be waiting," said Dina, and she hung up. Suzanna scrambled for her laptop. She was hot, she could feel it, bubbling with inspiration. She'd have her young, troubled hero, fresh off a fall that'd killed his rodeo dreams. In search of a new life, a new world to explore. He'd leave Montana in winter and land in Australia in summer. You think this is hot? Wait'll you get to...

Suzanna paused mid-thought and switched to Google. She searched "hottest part of Australia," then "ranches in Australia."

...Wyndham, she finished. Wait'll you get to Wyndham.

She could picture it now, her hero shirtless and sweating, bursting into the barn. Hosing himself down with cold water from the spigot. Shaking out his dark hair, scattering droplets on the boards. Fending off dingoes—were those a real thing? Stealing a starlit kiss under the wide southern sky. But then the day would come when he stood to lose it all, besieged by land developers and an unforgiving bank. He'd storm into town, hell-bent on justice, on defending the new life he'd fought so hard to build. He'd burst into that bank (wild-eyed, hard-jawed), and he'd—

The kitchen door slammed open, so hard Suzanna yelped. Will barged in, fuming, looking for all the world like her fantasy come to life. Only, this was no fantasy. Will was beside himself, tossing his hat on the table so hard it slid off.

"Will? What's the matter?"

Will's head snapped up. He took a deep breath and let it out through his teeth. "George," he spat, snarling the name like a curse. "One responsibility I give him—one task, just one—and what does he do?"

Suzanna didn't dare guess.

"He ambushes me, that's what. He promised me a focus group, and what do I walk into? A five-man commercial for these damn HVAC systems."

Suzanna eased closer, trying a smile. "Maybe you got your wires crossed. Maybe he thought—"

"I'll tell you what he thought." Will slumped against the counter, massaging his brow. "He thought I needed persuading, and that's what he set out to do. He brought in four guys with spanking new systems and had them sing their praises, not a con list in sight. Barely a nod to risk management, to what could go wrong. I mean, look at this." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a sheaf of papers. "His product evaluation reads like a manufacturer's brochure."

Suzanna took the papers and leafed through them. She took her time, mostly to give Will a chance to catch his breath. He poured himself a glass of water and drained it off in a single gulp.

"You see the problem, don't you?"

"Maybe, uh..." Suzanna pressed her lips together.

"It's so one-sided. So reckless."

"He does have a risk table," said Suzanna, holding up the last page. "Clogged filters, blown fuses, thermostat malfunctions—it's fine print, I'll grant you, but it seems pretty thorough to me. And here, look at this." She tapped on a red box down at the bottom. "It says the chance of total system failure is under two percent. He doesn't ignore the possibility, but he does point out how unlikely it is. What are the odds your whole system goes down, then your backup dies too?"



“Not zero,” said Will. He brought his palm down on the counter. “I tell you, I’m sick of only and just. A risk is a risk, and you can’t pretend it’s not there. You can’t stake your future on it’ll probably be okay.”

Suzanna gaped at Will. He didn’t look like himself, pale and hunched over, hands bunched into fists. She came up beside him and set her hand on his arm.

“I’m not saying ignore it,” she said. “I doubt George is either. I’m saying, I’m asking, aren’t some risks worth it?”

“Worth it?” Will’s stare was flat, uncomprehending.

“I mean, I was a risk, right?” Suzanna’s voice shook. “Inviting me, sight unseen? That was a big risk, but I’d say we’re doing okay.”

“That’s different. That’s...” Will trailed off, frowning, at a sound from the hall. “Lucky? That you?”

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“It’s me, Dad.” Beth peered out, hangdog, from behind the doorframe. “Were you fighting? I heard yelling.”

“No,” said Suzanna. “Just an adult discussion.”

Beth eyed her doubtfully, lips pinched into a frown.

“We’ll talk about this later,” said Will, whether to her or to Beth, Suzanna couldn’t be sure. “I need to start my own research, no thanks to George.” He set his hat on his head and stalked out. Beth watched him go, her little chin trembling. Suzanna squatted down next to her, conjuring a smile.

“It’s okay,” she said. “Your dad’s having a bad day, is all.”

“He’s not mad at me?”

“He’s not mad at anyone. He’s just frustrated, blowing off steam.”

Beth thought that over, then she nodded gravely. “I do that too, sometimes. Like when I want a cookie and Ann eats the last one.”

Suzanna laughed and scooped Beth into her lap. “That’s exactly what happened,” she said. “Cousin George ate Dad’s cookie and he’s having a tantrum. Give him space to cool off, and you’ll see he’ll be fine. We’ll just have to think up ways to make him smile.”

Beth snuggled close, throwing her arms around Suzanna. “You’re good at that. I wish

you didn't have to go. I wish you could stay here and play every day."

"That would be fun, wouldn't it?" She tousled Beth's hair. "I'd love to see this place in spring. I bet it's just stunning."

"It's perfect," said Beth. "So many sunflowers the hills go all yellow."

"Yeah?" Suzanna's smile turned wistful. "When I was about your age, our neighbors had sunflowers in their backyard. They were so pretty...but it was such a small yard so they only had room for a few. I used to dream when I grew up, I'd live in a treehouse in a field full of sunflowers."

"You'd have lots of fields here," said Beth. "And millions of sunflowers."

Suzanna laughed. "And would I live in a treehouse? I think that might get drafty, especially in winter."

Beth sat up suddenly, her eyes going round. "You could live in the FOR RENT place above Aunt Jess's bookshop."

Suzanna caught her breath. "What?"

"There's a 'partment up there, with pretty lace curtains and a claw-footy bathtub. Me and Ann used to play up there till Lucky chewed up the rug. They got a new rug, though. You'd like it a lot. There's a bedroom, and another bedroom, and a room with a skylight that used to be a greenhouse. You can see the hills and the mountains, all the way to the sky. It's not 'xactly in a field, but there's a park real close by."

"Whoa...whoa..." Suzanna sat back, startled. She hadn't expected this rush of enthusiasm—or this burst of reality in their game of make-believe.

Beth's sweet face fell. "That's not enough for you to stay?"

The words not enough hit so hard she almost glanced down to see if she was bleeding. The question behind it pierced straight through her heart: Am I not enough? She'd grown up with that question, asked it every day—of herself, of her parents, of her pillow at night. The thought of Beth or Ann asking that awful question, and thinking of her... She blinked back tears with an effort, and hugged Beth close.

"Beth—oh, sweetheart. I fell in love with this place my first day here. I don't need anything more than I've got right here—not sunflowers, not skylights, not anything at all. I love everything about this place, and you and your sister are at the top of that list."

Beth wiped her face, smiled a watery smile. "If you stayed till spring, you'd have us and sunflowers." She brightened and jumped up. "I'll draw you a picture—you wait right there! You, us and sunflowers, so you can see how it'll be." Beth was off like a shot, her good spirits restored.

Suzanna got to her feet, her heart uneasy. She went to the window and looked out over the hills and tried to imagine them carpeted in wildflowers. She and Will could have picnics with the girls, or go riding together, or just wander off to some secret spot, stretch out in the heather and watch the clouds go by.

A soft sound escaped her, low and full of longing. It wouldn't take much to make Beth's dream come true. A writer could live anywhere. She'd just need a place to rent, and Beth had seen to that. She could write in that skylight room, looking out at the hills. That just left Will. Would he be on board?

A tingling sensation ran through her, nerves and excitement and hope all in one.

What if this could work? What if she stayed?

Will closed his eyes and counted to five. Maybe when he opened them, the hot mess in front of him wouldn't look so bad.

He opened his eyes.

He let out a groan.

Aunt Val's yard sparkled with ice sculptures from porch to gate—Kat and Taison's reindeer, Mom and Dad's gleaming sleigh. Sarah's big Christmas tree, blinking with lights. Cassie's grinning garden gnome, with its pointy hat. Then came his own lump, squatting toadlike in the midst of it all.

"I told you it was too complicated," he said. Suzanna ducked her head.

"I don't get it," she said. "I've built a million sandcastles down on the beach."

"Yeah, out of sand. Beth, no, don't—" Will buried his face in his hands as Beth raised her chisel. She tapped on a glassy tower, the one tower still standing. It cracked down the middle and fell in two lumps.

"Now it's a cube," Will said.

"We could slap some paint on it and call it a Rubik's cube," Suzanna suggested.

"Oh? You bring some paint?" He passed Suzanna a power drill. "Look, let's do something simple. A candy cane archway. We might just pull that off in the time we've got left."

Suzanna nodded, crestfallen. Will grabbed his own drill and set to work. This was his fault, when you got right down to it. He hadn't intended to bring the twins here at all. But Suzanna had got to them, got them all fired up to help sculpt Santa's castle. And Will—well, Will had disappointed them enough for one Christmas season. Bad

enough he'd skipped their shopping trip and slept through Santa's breakfast—yesterday's "tantrum" had frightened poor Beth. Suzanna had soothed her, according to Ann—when he'd come home, the girls had been coloring, not a tear in sight—but that was his job. Suzanna taking over, even in small ways...what kind of hole would that leave when she went home?

"Can I try the drill?" Beth reached for it, eager. Will raised it higher, out of her reach.

"Too dangerous," he said. "Why don't you grab a hairdryer, start melting the middle?" He drew an X on the ice, where the arch would open up. "Right here, okay?"

Beth pulled a sour face, but she went to find a dryer. Will watched till she'd found one, in case she got a notion to grab a drill instead. Bringing the girls had been a mistake. The place was bristling with drill bits and sharp chunks of ice. It was a disaster waiting to happen, and why, why, why had he listened to Suzanna? Suzanna, who'd just drilled through the hook of their left candy cane?

"Uh, Suzanna? You might want to leave some there, or we'll end up with—"

Suzanna looked up. Her drill skidded hard left. She screamed and dropped it, and clutched her hand to her chest. Blood spattered at her feet, bright Christmas red.

"Ow—ow—"

"You're bleeding." The twins crowded in on her, grabbing for her hand. Suzanna hid it from their sight, under her coat.

"I'm fine," she gasped. "Just a...just a scratch. If someone has a Kleenex—"

"You need to sit down." Sarah caught her arm and guided her to a chair. Suzanna

popped down on it, so hard it nearly toppled.

“Let me look at it,” said Mom. Suzanna just stared at her, eyes wide and shellshocked. Aunt Val bustled over, first aid kit in hand.

“I don’t see any fingers lying around the yard,” she said. “That means it’s not that bad. Now, come on, let’s—”

“Fingers?” Ann dropped to her knees, scrabbling in the snow. “Dad! Beth! Get over here. Help me find her fingers!”

“There’s no fingers...oh, for Pete’s sake.” Will threw up his hands. “Okay, girls, in the house. Ice sculpting is over. Get yourselves some cocoa.”

Beth and Ann exchanged glances. They stood silent a moment, tiny fists clenched. Then Beth let out a whimper, and they both began to wail.

“You said we could play,” howled Ann.

“You promised.” Beth’s scream rose higher, fit to shatter glass. Mom swept them both into her arms and hustled them away.

“Come on, you two—no tears, okay? I’ve got an idea for you, a special project. Sound fun?”

“Suzanna? You okay?” Sarah was leaning over her, reaching for her wounded hand. Suzanna had gone pale, and was trembling all over. Will could hear her teeth chattering from six feet away. He closed the distance between them and knelt in the snow.

“Hey...can I see it?”



Suzanna shot him a glazed look. “It’s all right,” she managed. “I’m keeping pressure on it, so...”

“That’s a good start,” said Aunt Val. “But you might need a bandage, or a stitch or two. You’re going to need to show us, so we can see if you’ll need a trip to the clinic.”

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Will slid his hand under her coat and found her hand. Her glove squidged as he squeezed it, soaked through with blood.

“Look over there,” he said. “At that horse-shaped cloud.”

Suzanna followed his gaze. “Which one? The fat one? Or the one with the beard?”

Will drew her hand out and pulled off her glove. The cut was long but not deep, from the joint of her thumb to the base of her palm. She hadn’t stopped bleeding, but the flow seemed to have eased off.

“That’s gonna need stitches,” said Taison, peering over Will’s shoulder.

“No, it won’t,” said Kat. “See, it’s clotting already. A bandage should do it, and some Polysporin.”

Will turned away, scowling, as the two continued to bicker. Suzanna was smiling now, sitting up straighter.

“It is fine,” she said. “A little accident, is all. It’s fine, I’m fine. No need for all the fuss.” Her smile was bright and too wide, the same smile she’d flashed at her TV interview. The smile from karaoke night, when she’d choked down that cocoa. Will couldn’t stand that smile, how fake it was, how plastic. He grabbed an extra-large Band-Aid and ripped off the wrapper.

“Stop it,” he said. Suzanna jerked where she sat.

“Stop what? What’d I do?”

“Stop trying to fake it. Trying to be someone you’re not. You’re not some great ice sculptor, and you’re not okay. You’re bleeding and shivering, and your lips are turning blue. And the girls shouldn’t be here. They’re too little for ice sculpting, and didn’t I tell you this would just end in tears?”

“The girls are fine.” Suzanna pulled her hand away, her voice thick with hurt. She pointed across the yard, and Will turned to look. Sure enough, Beth and Ann had recovered from their upset, and were building a snowman from ice shavings. Mom was handing them a carrot to use for the nose.

“You thought this was all a lie? Today, my coming here? My idea for the sculpture? You thought I, what...you thought I did all this just to fit in?” Suzanna’s voice was trembling. “I thought we were having fun, even though it wasn’t perfect. I thought—”

“—this is over!” Kat stormed past them, nearly bumping Suzanna. She slipped, caught herself, and turned to shout back at Taison. “And I can’t believe you’d say I didn’t try. I tried every day. I tried to like what you like, to be who you want. To live up to the idea of me you’ve got in your head. But I’m not that girl. Can’t you see I’ve changed? Can’t you see I want things, different things from you?”

Taison stood slack-jawed, red in the face. He closed his mouth with a snap, let his hands drop to his sides. “You could’ve said something,” he said. “I’d have made your dreams come true. Or at least, I’d have tried.”

Suzanna glanced at Will—is this really happening? He shrugged in response, as baffled as she was.

“I’m sorry,” Kat said. She blinked hard, wiped her eyes. “This wasn’t how I... I was going to do this later, when I—”

“You don’t have to,” said Taison. “It’s not too late to fix this, to sit down and talk.” He stumbled toward her, but Kat backed away.

“No, it is. It’s too late for us. We’ve been broken a long time. It’s too late to fix us.” She stepped back and raised her voice, addressing the whole crowd. “The wedding’s off,” she said. A muted gasp went up, and scattered murmurs. Kat ignored them, crossing her arms over her chest. “Taison and I, we’re just two different people. We’ve been trying to deny it, but we’ve grown apart. So I’m the one calling it—for both our sakes.”

Kat stood there a moment, as though awaiting a response. Then she turned and trudged off, the crunch of her footsteps loud in the silence. Will watched, disbelieving. With all the tragic endings he’d pictured for this day—broken sculptures, sobbing kids, a rogue drill bit taking out someone’s eye—he hadn’t foreseen this. Kat and Taison were...Kat and Taison. Inseparable since childhood, meant to be without question. But they’d been faking it too? Pretending, for how long?

Will swallowed hard. He felt dizzy, unbalanced, like the moment before an earthquake. If Kat and Taison weren’t the real deal, what was? Who was?

13

Suzanna closed her eyes and inhaled the steam from her mug, soothing notes of green tea and ginger and lemon. Today had been a day, full of blood and tears and soapworthy drama. She couldn’t wait to scrub it all off and crawl into bed next to Will. He’d be pleased to see she was healing, her palm scabbing over without needing stitches. A week, maybe two, and she’d be good as—

“Did you tell my daughter you’re moving to town?”

Suzanna jumped, sloshing tea down her arm. “What?”

Will loomed in the doorway, jaw set, shoulders squared. “It’s not a hard question,” he said. “Did you or did you not tell Beth you’d move here?”

“Of course not. I just said...” Suzanna faltered—what had she said? “We...we were talking about sunflowers. How the fields are all full of them here in the springtime. I think I said something about how I’d like to see that, but Will, I never—”

“So you didn’t say you’d move into the apartment above the bookshop?”

Suzanna felt hot all over, like she was ten again, caught raiding the fridge. The old feelings washed over her, shame and embarrassment, that awful, trapped guilt. She turned her head away to hide her blush.

“Well?”

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“No. I didn’t.” A new emotion burst through her, frustration this time. She hadn’t done anything wrong as a hungry kid, and she wasn’t wrong now. “Beth mentioned the place was free,” she said. “I never said anything to imply I’d take it.”

Will’s shoulders went lax, and he slumped in the doorframe. “I didn’t mean to go off on you,” he said. “She just seemed so sure, I thought you must’ve said something.”

“I wouldn’t do that, set her up for disappointment.” Suzanna rushed to Will, choking back her frustration. This wasn’t what she wanted, raised voices, accusations. She wanted the hope she’d felt, looking out over the ranch. She took Will’s hand, nervous, and made herself meet his eye. “I was thinking, though, I could take that apartment. I could make my home here, make all this real. Make us real, if you wanted.”

“Make us real?”

“Don’t we feel real already?” She clasped Will’s hands tight. “I’ve fallen in love with this place, with the land and the life. And you and your family, the girls, I...what do you think? Am I dreaming, or...?”

Will opened his mouth and closed it again. Suzanna’s smile faded. She’d been so sure, so sure he felt the same. But that surety was fading, and she didn’t like what was rising in its place.

“You, uh...” He cleared his throat. “You’ve really thought this through.”

Suzanna’s eyes prickled. She drew a deep, calming breath. Whatever came next,

she'd hold it together.

"This wasn't the plan." Will dropped her hands and ran his fingers through his hair. "Our deal, this arrangement, it was just for Christmas, right? You've done great, I'll say that, and the girls love you, but who do you know here besides my family and friends? What'll you have if we need to break up?"

"If we need..." Suzanna's voice cracked. She swallowed hard. "You see us breaking up, then?"

"No, but I thought Hannah and I would grow old together, so what the hell do I know?" He turned his back on her, tense as a whip. "Don't you get it? There's always a risk, whether you see it or not. How can I take that chance?" Will began to pace. "How well do I know you? How well do you know me? How real is this—can you tell me? Can you say for sure?"

Suzanna reeled back, stunned. "I thought—weren't we—" She dashed a tear off her cheek, turned and leaned on the counter. Outside was pitch-dark, that deep country dark city dwellers never knew. Suzanna stared into it, willing herself not to cry. "Maybe it's too soon," she said. "But isn't it worth a try?"

Will exhaled and said nothing. Suzanna felt weak.

"We don't have to rush into anything," she said. "I've just started my next book. It's set in Australia. I could take a research trip, give us some space. We could figure things out without—"

"Australia? What? For how long?" Will's tone had gone sharp. Suzanna closed her eyes, gripped the countertop hard.

"Three months, maybe six. And then we'd go back to how things were before

our—our deal. Figure out if we're something or if we're—"

"And what would I tell the girls?"

"I don't know, the truth? That I had to take a trip, but I'll come back with presents?"

Will made a snorting sound. "Is that the truth?" He closed in behind her, bootheels clicking on the floor. "Could you not write your book without flying across the world? Couldn't you use Google, or read a book?"

"Well, I could, but I thought—"

"So, more lies." Will turned away. Suzanna bit her lip hard, fighting fresh anger.

"We've both told a few," she said, bitterness in her tone. "What are a few more? You didn't seem to mind so much when you came up with this charade."

Behind her, Will took a deep, shuddering breath. He grabbed a chair and sat down and buried his face in his hands. Suzanna watched his hunched reflection in the window. He looked like she felt, blindsided, beaten. She turned and laid a cautious hand on his shoulder.

"We don't have to decide anything tonight," she said.

"You came here on a work trip," said Will, without raising his head. "You came here and you—you jumped in headfirst. You threw yourself into my world like you'd been waiting all your life for this chance. But was it this you were waiting for, or was it adventure?"

"What are you saying?"



“What if you go to Australia and you meet some sheep farmer, and he takes you to some...some billabong? And then he jumps in bare-chested and you fall for him? What happens if you fall for the outback as fast as you did for the mountains, and your dreams of big sky country all turn to dust?”

“If my...” Suzanna laughed, not sure whether she was amused or outraged. “You think that’s all I see in you? All I see in this place? Some exotic vacation, some fantasy? And what the hell is a billabong? I don’t even—I can’t.”

“It could happen,” said Will. “Maybe not quite like that, but you could love it there and decide not to come back, and where would that leave the girls? It’d leave ’em hurt, that’s where, and I can’t take that chance.”

“And what about you? Would you be hurt if I left here and never came back?”

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“Course I would,” said Will. “But I’m the adult—I understand you might not come back. That even after you plan all you like, things can still change. Beth and Ann, though? They don’t get that yet—and I’m not ready for them to learn it. We can make the break now, and that’s gonna hurt, but for the girls, it’s safest. You’ve been here two weeks and they love you already. How much will they love you in three months or six? How much more will it kill them if you don’t come back? The risk’s off the charts—it’s like I told George. You can’t look at the good side and forget the—”

“George?” Suzanna’s vision went red, then bright, rage-fueled white. “Tell me you’re not comparing our relationship to some HVAC system.”

“I’m just—”

“The risk? Are you kidding me? You can’t live your life by some list of pros and cons. Life comes with risks, but there’s rewards as well. You have to face the risks to get the rewards. You have to jump in and try, or...or, what’s it all for?” She grabbed his arms and shook him. “Don’t you want to try? To give us a chance?”

Will took her hand and ran his thumb over her knuckles. He closed his eyes, bowed his head, and when he spoke, his voice was hoarse.

“Part of me really wants to,” he said. “But you don’t understand. I’ve lost so much already.” He took a deep breath and let it out in a rush. “Do you remember how I lost my wife?”

Suzanna sat down beside him. “A riding accident, right?”

“I was out mending fences when the cowshed blew open,” said Will. He’d turned to gaze out the window, at something far beyond. “I had half the ranch hands with me. Gus was off for Thanksgiving. That just left Hannah and two men at the house, and that’s when the wind changed and the storm blew in—one of those sudden squalls, almost no warning. The cows were out and we knew they’d freeze and we’d lose them all. So when Hannah said she’d ride out to help us round them up...” Will paused, cleared his throat. “I could’ve told her not to go, and she’d probably have listened. The twins were still little. They needed her too. But I weighed up the risk, and I thought, okay. Hannah had ranching in her blood. She grew up on horseback, so what were the odds anything would go wrong? What were the odds she’d let her horse slip? The odds she’d land badly and pitch down the scarp? The odds she’d break her neck and stop breathing right there? She was conscious, you know. She felt herself die.”

“Oh, Will...” Suzanna wanted to comfort him, but he shook her off. He surged to his feet, spun to face the wall.

“I’d do anything to take it all back. To go back to that moment and tell her ‘stay home.’ But I can’t change the past. What I can do is make sure it never happens again. Make sure I never feel that loss and emptiness again.” He exhaled sharply, almost a laugh. “Look at Kat and Taison. They had it all, and where are they now? All I wanted—all I wanted—”

Suzanna couldn’t breathe. “What?”

“I wanted to be left alone.” His hands twitched at his sides. “That’s why I did this, why I asked you to come. So I could be left alone, and no one would bug me about finding love.”

Suzanna wiped her eyes dry. She felt flat, deflated, all her dreams of this morning ground into dust. “And that’s what you still want?”

Will stood breathing hard, and the seconds ticked by. He didn't turn to look at her, and she guessed that was her answer. She stood up as well, and pushed her chair in.

"Okay then," she said, gathering herself. She'd known disappointment all her life. She'd disappointed her parents and herself too many times. She'd never been enough, and she wasn't enough for Will now. That was fine. She'd manage. She always had. "I'll pack up and go, and you can be alone and miserable, just like you want. Should I head out tomorrow and ruin Christmas Eve for everyone? Or should I keep on lying till our story's all done?"

Someone behind her let out a soft gasp. "Your story?"

Suzanna whirled to find Sarah open-mouthed in the doorway.

"I brought you some Band-Aids," she said. "But what...what's your story? What were you lying about?"

Suzanna made a guttural sound, throat too tight to speak. She'd never meant for anyone but Will to hear those words.

Sarah rounded on Will. "Will? What's she talking about? What did you do?"

Will turned to face his sister, his mouth a tight line. He stood regarding her a moment, then cocked his head as one of the twins began to wail.

"I need to check on the kids," he said. He stalked out of the room without a backward glance, leaving Suzanna and Sarah to lock gazes in silence.

This, this exactly, was what Will had set out to avoid: his girls in tears, their hearts

broken anew. They were both crying, he realized, Beth wailing loudly, Ann sniffing and sobbing. Both of them miserable, and what were the odds it wasn't thanks to all that shouting? The acoustics in the kitchen were good—too good. Just how much of that had made it upstairs?

Damn it, Suzanna. He shouldn't have brought her here, shouldn't have let her get so close. It'd been a bad plan from the start, and here was the proof.

He let himself into the twins' room and found a pitiful scene, Ann curled up weeping into her pillow, Beth on the floor clinging to Lucky. Lucky caught sight of Will and loosed a howl of his own.

“Hey! Hey, it's okay...” Will hovered over them, unsure which twin to comfort first. “I'm sorry about the shouting, but it's all over now.”

Ann raised her tousled head, her eyes red and accusing. “We're mad at you,” she said.

“We—we hate you,” added Beth.

Lucky tossed in a bark, a short, angry yoop. Will stared at the three of them, all out to sea.

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“You hate me? Really?” He bent to rub Beth’s back, but she jerked away.

“We know you’re kicking Suzanna out. You’re the real-life Grinch.”

“You’re even meaner.” Ann kicked at him, missed, and curled up in a ball. Will lowered himself down and laid his hand on her back.

“I’m not kicking her out,” he said. “It’s just time she went home. She has her own house, remember? She can’t stay forever.”

“She could, though,” said Ann. She wiped her nose on her sleeve. “If you asked her, she’d stay, and we don’t get why you haven’t.”

“We don’t get it at all. You’re more fun when she’s here.” Beth turned her back on him. “You never let us do ice sculpting. But then Suzanna came, and she made you bring us.”

“And we got to go shopping with Gramma and Aunt Sarah, and pick out your Christmas presents without you watching.”

“And Suzanna’s nice, and she’s funny, and she makes you laugh.” Beth hung her head. “You never laugh.”

Will frowned. He never laughed? Of course he did. He’d had great times with the twins—last year’s Christmas Games, the one before that. There’d been their sixth birthday, when he’d hired that magician. Everyone had been laughing when his rabbits got loose. Everyone, except...had Will found it funny? In retrospect, sure, but

at the time he'd been livid. What if those rabbits never got found? Would he have to pay for them? What if they hurt themselves, and some poor kid found them all bloodied and dying?

"He's making his sad face," said Ann. "He's kicking Suzanna out and he's sad again."

"We don't want sad Dad." Beth picked herself up and climbed up beside him. She threw her arms around him and buried her face in his chest. "We liked new Dad better. We liked how you played with us, and we all had fun. You were like Felix from Encanto, always in a good mood."

"Even Gramma likes new Dad better," said Ann. "I heard her telling Aunt Sarah she's happy for us. That we get to be kids again, not little adults."

"You worry too much," said Beth. "You make us worry too."

Will's mouth had gone dry. Was this how everyone saw him? Some humorless ogre keeping his kids from being kids? He knew they hadn't been happy, that they'd cried in the night, but he'd put all that down to them missing Hannah. It hadn't occurred to him they were missing something from him. Sad Dad? When had that started? He stared at his reflection in the window, the shaggy fall of his hair, in need of a trim. The deep line between his brows, which had been a faint crease when Hannah was alive.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You know I love you, right?"

"We know," said Beth, muffled into his shirt. "And we don't really hate you. I'm sorry I said that, and we love you too. But we want you to be happy."

"We don't want you to ruin it. Not when everything's great."

Will held Beth closer, his chest gone tight. He gathered Ann to him too and rocked them both in his arms. How had he missed it? This was what made them happy, seeing him move on. And he had been happy, not fake-happy, not playing a role. Suzanna had brought back his spark and he'd pushed her away. He'd been a coward, so afraid of future heartbreak he hadn't let himself be happy. He'd practically demanded she leave him alone. Hot shame rose like acid in his throat.

I've had it backward the whole time, he thought. I might've lied to my family, but I've only fooled myself.

\* \* \*

Suzanna turned the volume up on her iPod. As long as she couldn't hear the silence in the hall, she could pretend Will was coming to take back what he'd said. She told herself that he was on the stairs now, rehearsing what he'd say—heading for her room, repeating it in his head, some magic speech that would make everything okay. Any minute he'd knock, and she'd let him in. He'd take her in his arms, and—

Will knocked.

Suzanna jumped. She dropped the jeans she'd been about to toss in her suitcase and lunged for the door. She'd forgive him, of course she would. As long as he...

"Sarah?" Suzanna's heart sank. Had she really expected some grand gesture from Will? Like in a romance novel? She almost laughed.

"You're packing?" Sarah peered past her, taking in her suitcase, her laptop open to AirB&B. "I was hoping we'd talk first. See, I brought wine." She held up a bottle and a pair of glasses.

"I'm not sure I should be drinking. I'm pretty overwrought already. And I lost a lot of



blood earlier, so it'll go straight to my head."

"One drink won't hurt you." Sarah uncorked the bottle and poured her a glass. "Besides, I'm not letting you go before I get the truth. In vino veritas, you know?"

Suzanna laughed and took the drink. She tried a sip, found it good, and took a long swallow. The wine warmed her belly and she sank down on the bed, letting her head loll back on the pillows.

"It's a long story," she said. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"I'm here, right?" Sarah sipped her own wine. "Mm...best batch yet. Uncle Vern's own vintage."

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“Really? I’m impressed.” Suzanna took another sip. Uncle Vern’s wine was strong, but it went down smooth. She’d have to be careful, or she’d wind up saying too much. “No one was supposed to get hurt,” she said. “What happened was...Jesus. Where do I start?”

“Maybe the beginning?” Sarah tipped her a wink.

“The beginning. Don’t you know chapter one’s always the hardest?” Suzanna closed her eyes. “Well it started with two big lies, one mine, one Will’s. I let my publisher think I’m a rancher—that I’d based my book on my own life. Will told your mom I was his girlfriend. Truth was, I’d never laid eyes on a ranch in my life, and as for me and Will, we were just friends. But we could keep both lies going if only I...”

“If you came to the Christmas Games, and Will let you use the ranch for your PR.”

Suzanna hung her head, embarrassed. Her glass had gone dry and Sarah filled it up.

“Didn’t we say one glass?” She drank some more anyway. It made her head swim. “It was so good at first. So fun, me and Will. I was a wannabe horse girl all through high school—Black Beauty, National Velvet, I read ’em all. I begged Mom for a horse, but she said I was...she said I’d squash it. She said if I lost weight, she’d consider it.” Suzanna’s laugh came out bitter. “Can’t believe I bought that. Horses cost a fortune, and we had nowhere to keep one. But I wanted it so bad I let myself believe. Let myself picture the day I weighed in at one-twenty. She’d get me my horse, and come see me ride, and we’d be like your family, like...” She looked down, embarrassed. “I guess she knew what she was doing, making that promise. I was never going to be skinny. I’m not built that way. So I told myself I was fine, never getting to ride. But

Will showed me how, and he made me feel... He said I was a natural. I think that might've been the happiest moment of my life. Will never saw some fat girl, some hopeless klutz. He saw me, and that was the best feeling on earth. I thought he felt it too, but..."

"But?" Sarah was leaning forward, her own wine forgotten.

"Kat and Taison were faking it too," she said. "At least, Kat was. I told her to be honest, to go for her dreams, and when she did, that was that. All they had down the drain."

"You can't compare you and Will to Kat and Taison." Sarah set down her glass and got to her feet. "Honestly, I'd say you gave Kat the right advice. Those two made sense in high school, but they've grown apart. Taison's this homebody, a farm boy to his core. Kat's more the social type, and she can't share that with him."

"But you can't build a relationship on a pack of lies." Suzanna blinked back tears. "That's what they tried to do, and Will and I did the same."

"I don't see it that way," said Sarah. "Kat and Taison's big lie was that they still felt the same. Their feelings were gone, but yours aren't. Will's aren't. You care, I can see it, and I know he does too. I know he loves you. That's worth fighting for, right?"

Suzanna tried to swallow past the lump in her throat. She gulped more wine, found her voice. "I want to," she said. "But Will...I think he's done. I can't stay and fight if he wants me gone."

"So you'll just go back home? Back to how things were?"

"No—I don't know." Suzanna glanced at her laptop. "I thought I'd go to Australia, research my next book. After that, I thought maybe I'd find some small town.

Somewhere like this, where I could find my place.”

Sarah frowned at that. “Why find a new place when you have one right here? We all think you’re great, me and Mom, Ann and Beth, all the ranch hands—not to mention the rest of our clan. Uncle Vince hasn’t stopped talking about what you did at karaoke.”

Suzanna made a sound, half-laugh, half-sob. “You still love me, really? After all the lies?”

“You never lied about how you feel about my brother. As far as I’m concerned, that’s all that matters.” Sarah sat down beside her and slung an arm over her shoulders. “And I’ll tell you one more thing: you can’t leave before Christmas. I’m putting my foot down. What kind of grinch walks out on Christmas Eve?”

“The mean kind, I guess.” Suzanna managed a smile. “Okay, I’ll stay. I’d hate to miss the chance to wow everyone with this.” She dug in her suitcase and whipped out her ugly sweater. She flapped it at Sarah, who shielded her eyes in mock horror.

“You really are one of us,” she said.

Suzanna grinned broadly, but inside, she felt hollow. Will hadn’t come, hadn’t knocked on her door. The big Christmas party would be her final farewell, not just to Will but to Beth and Ann, to the ranch and the family and the home she’d found here.

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Everyone was staring at her.

Suzanna had never felt so exposed in her life, never so naked, despite her ugly sweater. If anything, the garish knit only made it worse. She couldn’t be sure if they

were staring at her sweater...or because they knew she'd come here under the falsest of pretenses. Double-false, even, with a lie on each side. The covert glances, the laughter, were they for her sweater, or were they for her?

"Here. Have some joy juice. You need to relax." Sarah handed her a glass brimming with punch. Suzanna took a sip and nearly choked.

"You spiked this!"

"Damn straight." Sarah gave her a shake. "Go on, drink up. It's a party, not a funeral."

Suzanna drank up, but she didn't feel festive. She surveyed the scene bleakly, a lump in her throat. "I thought Will would come," she said. He'd managed to avoid her since their fight by staying out of the house as much as possible. "Did I chase him away from his own family's Christmas?"

"No, you didn't," said Sarah. "He chose to stay home and sulk, and that's on him. The rest of us want you here—see? Here comes Aunt Jess."

Suzanna looked up. Aunt Jess was waving, weaving her way through the crowd. Her sweater was the ugliest Suzanna had seen all night, red and green checkered with MERRY CHRISTMAS emblazoned in puffy paint across the front.

"Suzanna!" She jogged up to her, breathless, and hugged her one-armed, her other hand occupied with a tumbler of punch. "I heard you might be looking for a place in town. If you haven't already heard, I have something available, a nice big two-bedroom above my bookshop. And it comes with a cat, sort of, so that's a bonus if you like 'em."

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“A cat?”

“He’s really the store’s cat, but he sleeps upstairs. You’re not allergic, are you?”

“No, not allergic.” Suzanna remembered her manners. “You’re really too kind.”

“Too kind, what’s that? I don’t believe in too kind. There’s kind and there’s unkind, simple as that.” She hugged Suzanna again, a tight, boozy hug that smelled faintly of shortbread. “Think about it, okay? You’d be our real, live writer-in-residence. How many bookshops can claim one of those?”

She’d heard that Shakespeare and Company in Paris did something like that...but aside from that, Suzanna guessed not many. She opened her mouth to thank Aunt Jess again, but Uncle Vince had her arm and was tugging her in the direction of the dance floor. Suzanna watched the pair spin away through a veil of tears. Her body still remembered how it’d felt to dance with Will at the talent show. How he’d made her fly. She’d hoped they’d dance again tonight. Finish up on a good note, say goodbye with a smile. If she’d lost even his friendship—

“Suzanna?” A small hand slid into hers. She looked down and saw Beth, and dredged up a smile.

“Hey, Beth,” she said. “Having a good time?”

Beth bobbed her head. “I had chocolate cake.”

“Yeah, so I see.” Suzanna crouched down beside her and brushed crumbs off her

face. “Where’d your sister get to?”

“We split up,” said Beth. “She’s playing with Taison. See? Over there.”

Suzanna looked where she was pointing. Ann was dancing on Taison’s feet, giggling up a storm. Taison was holding her steady, his expression caught somewhere between amusement and heartbreak. Suzanna guessed her own face looked much the same. The girls had split up to comfort them—the two jilted singletons, all on their own.

“Do you want to dance too?” She nodded at Ann and Taison, and Beth’s face lit up.

“Can I go on your feet?”

“I don’t see why not.” She started toward the dance floor, only to stumble as Beth stopped in her tracks. “Beth? What’s the matter?”

“Dad.” Beth’s jaw hung open. “Over there, it’s Dad. And he’s...”

A chorus of hoots went up, drowning Beth’s voice. The walls rang with laughter and the roar of applause. Then the crowd parted and Suzanna let out a gasp. She couldn’t believe what she was seeing—had to blink and pinch herself to be sure it was real.

Will stood in the doorway, under the mistletoe, red-faced and wild-haired and decked out in the ugliest sweater Suzanna had ever seen, a Christmas trainwreck to end all trainwrecks. Blinking lights danced at his collar and cuffs, red, green, and white and blindingly garish. Santa’s sleigh careened across his chest, trailing clouds of glitter. And the reindeer, the reindeer—actual stuffed reindeer pranced around his whole torso, wrapping around his back for a full loop-de-loop. Rudolph sat on his hip, his big red nose flashing like a broken stoplight. Suzanna’s mouth worked, but no words came out. There were no words, she thought. No words to describe this...this glorious Christmas atrocity.

“What do you think?” He did a slow spin, shedding glitter all the way. Suzanna pinched herself again. Was this...could this be—

“Where did you even get that?” Aunt Jess asked.

“Same place I got these.” He pulled out two pairs of plastic antlers and set one on his head. “I went to every Walmart and Target between here and Bozeman, but I couldn’t find anything hideous enough. Nothing that said, ‘check it out. I’m all in. I’m embracing the horror and loving it.’”

Taison let out a groan. “Can you embrace it with your coat on? I’m getting a headache.”

Will flipped him the bird, drawing fresh laughter. “Anyway, I finally chanced on this tiny shop in Belgrade, a weird little party shop with a reindeer out front. And there, in the window, was this little number. The guy didn’t want to sell it to me—it was his last one, his big display. But I begged and I pleaded, and I paid double his asking price. And I got us these too, if you...” He held out his spare antlers. “Suzanna Jacobs. Would you do me the honor of wearing my antlers?”

Suzanna drifted forward in a Christmas-colored daze. Was this the grand gesture she’d dreamed of? Had her cowboy awakened, just like in her book?

“Will?”

He set the antlers on her head. Pushed back her hair and tucked it behind her ear.

“I am all in,” he said. “For everything. For the good, for the bad, and, well...” He gestured at himself, at his dazzling sweater. “I’d lost the joy in my life. Forgotten how to have fun. But having you here, it’s like I’ve come back to life. I wake up in the morning excited about my day. The girls are happier than I’ve ever seen, laughing



all day, and I want to laugh with them. I want to take risks and reap the rewards.” He paused, caught his breath. “What I’m trying to say is, you’re incredible, talented, funny and kind—you’re everything I’ve been missing, and I want you to stay. I want you here with me, if you want that too.”

Suzanna felt faint. She had to be dreaming. This was too perfect, too good to be true. Any moment, she’d wake up, and—

“Well? Don’t keep him waiting!” Sarah called.

“You’re under the mistletoe. Give him a kiss!” his mom added.

Suzanna laughed, giddy. She rose on her tiptoes and kissed Will long and deep. She kissed him till her antlers fell off and hit the ground, and even then she kept hold of him. She didn’t want to let go, not for a moment.

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“I need to hear you say it,” Will said. “That this is what you want. That you’re all in with me.”

Suzanna nodded. “I am. I love you.” She leaned into him, sighing, as the twins crowded in. She thought she’d made peace with herself, writing her book. Accepted herself for who she really was. But all along, she’d been wearing her mask, shaping herself to fit in, just like she always had. But now she knew, now she got it: she didn’t need to change. She could be loved for herself. She could fit in right here, in this town, in this family. In Will’s arms. She leaned back against him to take in the scene—his family all smiles, all ugly sweaters and hearty good cheer. “I’m happy. Really happy. I feel like I belong.”

“To us,” said Ann. “You belong to us.”

“And we’re not letting you go.” Beth held her tighter, fists bunched in her sweater.

“Come on, let’s dance.” Will took Suzanna by one hand and Ann by the other. Suzanna grabbed Beth’s hand and they swarmed the dance floor, skipping in graceless circles, laughing fit to burst. Will’s mom clapped her hands and the crowd circled up, and soon the dance floor was hopping, packed from end to end. Uncle Vince and Aunt Jess led the kids in a conga line. Sarah and Cassie did a clumsy two-step. Even Taison joined in, swinging his hips with the rest.

“Merry Christmas,” said Will, and bent to kiss Suzanna.

“The merriest,” she agreed, and that was the truth.

## EPILOGUE

“You’re going to freeze your butt off, going out like that!” Beth tugged at Suzanna’s jacket. “It gets cold at night. You need a whole coat.”

“And mitts, not gloves.” Ann held out a pink pair, fat as boxing gloves.

“Those? Really? How cold can it be?”

“Ten below,” said Will. He came up behind her and slid his arms around her waist. “My girls know what they’re talking about.”

“They get that from you, always prepared.” Suzanna leaned up and kissed him, tasting nutmeg on his lips. He’d made cocoa for the girls, hot apple cider for the adults. “These mitts, though, they’re huge! They look like fat turtles, like...” She held one up like a sock puppet and made it talk. “I tried out for Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, but they said ‘no girls allowed.’” The puppet hung its head. Beth burst out laughing. Ann held up her own mitt.

“That’s okay, pink turtle,” she said. “We can start our own club, all girls, no boys.”

“What about Dad?” Beth’s pooched out her lip.

“Dad can be our butler, like Batman has.”

“Yeah—Dad’s our butler. He can clean our room.” The girls dissolved in laughter, holding each other to keep from falling down.

“I feel like I’m getting the raw end of this deal,” said Will. Suzanna reached around him and made her puppet pinch his ass. That made the girls laugh harder, gasping for air. Will watched them, smile fading, as the girls collapsed in a mad tickle fight. With the girls distracted, she drew Will aside.

“Hey, you okay?”

He nodded, cleared his throat. “I’m perfect, just... It’s so good, hearing them laugh like that. They get that from their mother. She used to get the same way—she’d hear something funny and she just couldn’t stop. Her face would go red and she’d struggle to breathe, and still she’d keep going because when you’re happy, you laugh.” Will brushed at his eyes. “She used to say that: when you’re happy, you laugh.”

Suzanna leaned into him, laid her head on his chest. “You’ve been laughing a lot lately. Does that mean you’re happy?”

Will kissed her gently on the top of her head. “Happy seems such a toothless word to describe how I feel. Ecstatic, maybe. Over the moon.” He chuckled, then laughed, and spun Suzanna around. “You’ve brought this place back to life, and me along with it.”

Suzanna barely heard him through her own startled yelp, and the giggles that followed as he whirled her around. When he set her down, she staggered, nearly bumping into Sarah.

“Oh, Sarah! We were...”

“Acting like giddy teenagers, as you should be.” Sarah winked at her. “Does that mean the call with your publisher went well?”

“It went, uh...” Suzanna chewed her lip, searching for the right words. “It was uncomfortable at first. I mean, they were all on the call, not just my editor, but marketing, legal. The Zoom call was so full it took up two screens.”

“But what did they say?” Sarah was bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Do you still have a book contract, or—?”

“Well, first they made me talk. They had a million questions—why did I lie? What did I lie about? Did I lie about anything that could be seen as defamation or false advertising? The legal terms were flying, and I nearly peed my pants. But then their head lawyer made this sound like ha, and he tore off the top page of his legal pad. He tossed it in the trash, and he said something like so you weren’t a rancher, but now you sort of are? And the Carsons are fine with it, and no one got hurt? And then everyone started saying how the truth is even better. How I’ll have to come clean publicly—you know, for legal reasons—but they’ll spin it so it’s cute, not some mean exposé. And they want me to write a book based on my story and Will’s.”

Sarah burst out laughing. “And Will’s okay with that?”

“As long as he doesn’t have to be on the cover.”

“I’m so relieved for you. Come here.” Sarah flung her arms around her, pulled her into a hug. Suzanna hugged back, heart full. She’d found a sister in Sarah, a partner in Will. A place to call home, and a family who, even now, was headed up the drive, truck horns honking as they descended on the ranch.

Will held up his songbook. “Everyone ready to go caroling?”

Sarah whooped. The twins cheered. Suzanna joined in, her joy bubbling over.

Outside, the night was cold, but Suzanna felt warm as she and the Carson clan made their tuneful way up Main Street. They sang Silent Night outside the feed shop, and the old couple upstairs came to their window to listen. For the kids at the next house, they did Jingle Bell Rock. The two elder sisters came out and joined their group, then Mr. Bennett from the pet shop followed their lead. By the time they’d made their way down the street, half the town had come out to join them—the young and the old, friends and neighbors, all lending their voices to I’ll Be Home For Christmas.

Suzanna looked up at Will as the last strains died away. A light snow was falling, big

fluffy flakes, alighting on Will's shoulders and in Suzanna's hair. Will brushed one off her nose, then kissed the cold spot, and Suzanna knew she was home.