



Dependable Cowboy

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Category: Romance, Western

Description: Now that Joy is back in Rocky Ridge, she's hoping she's made the right decision. Though life with her husband in LA had been turbulent, she'd at least had a job and a steady income. Now she's got to rebuild from the ground up and jobs aren't as plentiful in the small mountain town as they were in the city. Her daughter is depending on her, so this move to her home town has to work.

Running into Joy was the last thing Aaron expected. She'd been his best friend and his biggest crush back in the day. They tried to date once. He'd been smitten and she'd decided that a guy with Hollywood stars in his eyes was better for her than a small town cowboy.

He'd heard a little about her since she left their home town, but he didn't pay attention to the town gossip. One thing was for sure, though... he'd never forgotten her or that one kiss.

Memories flood back as they chat. She'd loved him so much—as a friend. She'd wanted that one high school kiss to open the door to her future, but it hadn't.

Her sweet daughter makes it impossible to have regrets. But given the mess her life has turned into, she wonders what might have been if she'd never left Montana. For the first time since she drove out of LA, she's hopeful life will be better. Could Aaron be part of her future and not just her past?

Total Pages (Source): 47

CHAPTER ONE

Joy Randall's sleeveless shirt and shorts clung to her like a second skin despite their hundred percent cotton construction as she drove through her old familiar haunts. Rocky Ridge, Montana might not be a stranger to her, but it felt a bit like some distant relative she only saw during family reunions.

It was almost surreal being back here after a decade of being away. Since this was her hometown, she knew others would expect her to appreciate her return to the fresh air, sprawling green pastureland, and small-town country charm.

But those expectations better prepare to be subverted because coming back home had only happened as a last resort.

"Mommy, it's so hot," Kara, her eight-year-old daughter complained from the backseat, and though technically, she couldn't blame her, piling on any additional stress right now wasn't a good idea.

"I know," Joy snapped, then taking a deep breath, softened her tone. "I know, sweetie. Why don't you switch seats over to the middle."

Her ancient Toyota Corolla had long been a rattletrap of a car, but it was all she had. The fact that it had no working air conditioner or windows that rolled down in the back was something she and Kara just had to deal with. It didn't help that they were currently experiencing record-breaking highs for July as well as several rain showers in a row. It made the normally delightfully dry and comfortable summer atmosphere sticky and sweltering.

Especially when there was little to no air movement.

At least when her child sat in the middle of the back seat, Joy could aim the single working vent in Kara's direction.

The area was still undeniably beautiful. Mountainous terrain served as the background no matter what way she glanced. And even though Los Angeles was situated on a coastal plain made up of pavement, rocks, and grass so dry and crispy it resembled breakfast cereal more than plant life, she already missed it. She had built a life there or tried to.

But sometimes no matter what you did, life would go flying off the tracks.

She passed a bank with one of those digital signs that specified temperature. It was one hundred and nine degrees right now, so it was no wonder her normally placid daughter kept griping about it. Joy felt like she was melting, too, and if she'd had the time, she might've stopped and purchased them some drinks or something else cold. But she didn't have that time. She needed to make about a million pitstops today, and she was on the way to just one of them.

The sign flashed from the temp to the fact that it was eleven o'clock in the morning, later than Joy wanted it to be. Then, it switched to a message.

Congratulations to native son Jack Taylor on his latest first prize win!

Jack Taylor, famous on the rodeo circuit for his ability to stay on the backs of bucking broncos, had made a name for himself. She probably would've eventually heard about this win even if he hadn't been her second cousin. Taylor had, after all, been her maiden name. But then everyone seemed to be related by blood or marriage in tiny communities like this one.

She hadn't seen Jack or his sister Lilliana in ages, but she believed he might be engaged to some girl named Felicity. Or maybe he'd married her by now? Joy wasn't sure. She knew Lilliana had snagged a husband from one of the four Duncan brothers who ran the appropriately named Duncan Ranch outside of town and that she still taught at the high school. But only because of the family newsletter her mom always forwarded to her at Christmas.

She didn't want to think about her parents right now despite having just moved in with them. It'd been so embarrassing to have to call them up with her tail between her legs asking for refuge. Not only because they'd been mostly estranged for years, but also because Joy had felt like she had to eat crow. They'd been right about the man she'd married while she'd been wrong. So very wrong.

But Joy hadn't known that when she'd walked down the aisle to marry him.

The most notable thing about Wayne Randall was his charisma. The man could charm a rattlesnake right out of its skin. He'd won her over with his big personality, good looks, and leading man smile. It hadn't hurt that he'd been a man with big dreams to match that personality.

Wayne had wanted to be a star. He talked about his future in the movies all the time. Had told her his name would someday be on the Hollywood Walk of Fame next to so many other people everyone recognized. And his excitement about this had been contagious. More importantly, she'd witnessed his talent in acting and believed he could actually pull it off.

That's why she'd not only married him against her mom and dad's wishes, she'd moved with him to LA. California had been like this whole other world. At first, it'd been so exhilarating. She'd felt wild and free as well as rebellious for defying her folks. They'd had to live in a closet-sized apartment that cost an arm and a leg, but right off the bat, Wayne attended a bunch of auditions. Joy had been so sure his

moment was right around the corner.

It hadn't been.

Turned out that Wayne Randall was a small fish in an enormous pond of hopefuls exactly like him. And while he was out there giving his all and doing his best, so were so many others. Thousands of them. On the rare occasions when he'd receive a call back, either the gig wouldn't be above board—typically a total scam—or he never made the final cut.

After a year and a half of this, the light of hope she used to admire inside her husband faded.

But Joy kept supporting him, encouraging him. She invested in a short stint in beauty school so she could begin working in the hairstyling industry. Through one of the few contacts Wayne had, she even managed to secure a full-time job as a stylist on a soap opera. The steady work saved them even though the pay wasn't great. And that was when Wayne broke down and did what so many others before him did, he waited tables.

Joy passed a restaurant named Three Sisters Barbecue Excellence, somewhere she'd never heard of, and caught a strong whiff of something tangy and probably wonderful. But Wayne wouldn't have been remotely interested in working in a place like that. The only reason he got onboard with serving at all was due to the bistro being frequented by the Hollywood elite. He'd been certain that he'd be "discovered" by a casting agent, producer, or director.

So, for a while, everything seemed fine.

That's when she discovered she was pregnant.

Joy had known she wanted to be a mother someday, but having it happen right then was less than perfect timing. Her and Wayne's finances weren't where they needed to be for a child, and at first, she'd been terrified to tell him. When she did, though, he seemed happy. Nervous but happy. They prepared for Kara's arrival and right before she was born, he had another audition that boded well. He even got hired to do a pilot. They'd both been on cloud nine.

Then the network dropped the show prior to it even airing.

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Joy gripped her cracked steering wheel, her sweaty palm slipping as she did. But then a view of what her mom had told her to search for. A coffee house named Mountaintop Java. A jewelry store that went by Montana Jewels. And in the middle, her destination of Salon 406.

Tossing her troubles out of her mind, she did her best to straighten her hair and makeup. Her outfit was too informal for an interview, but she was just going to see if she could make an appointment anyway. She'd attempted to make it by phone, but the number kept going to the same message.

"Hi, there, you've reached Salon 406. This is Christine, and I'm probably knee-deep in hair dye or some other chemical concoction meant to make you gorgeous. My other stylists probably are, as well. So, leave us a message."

Since yesterday, Joy had left three without hearing anything back. It'd been a letdown. Maybe this was how Wayne had felt.

But she couldn't afford to take no as an answer. Hence her reason for just showing up in person. One thing hit her as a positive right off the bat.

There was a help-wanted sign posted in the window.

"Come on, sweetie," Joy told her daughter as she pushed herself out of the car and smoothed whatever clothing wrinkles she could with her palms. "We need to go in here for just a minute. And please try to just stand with me and don't fidget."

"Can't I just stay here?" Kara asked.

“No, it’s boiling hot out here. This should only take a minute.” Her daughter looking immensely unhappy had Joy squinting at the special highlighted at the coffee place. “This mountaintop place has smoothies. I’ll get you one when we come back out if you’ll just come in and wait for me to do this one little thing. Okay?”

Kara’s face brightened back up to its full wattage, so Joy waited for her to get out and they hurried over to the salon. Entering it felt both familiar and unfamiliar. Back in California, her job had been all about preparing actors to go on the set of *Futile Passions*, a soap opera for which her husband had once hoped to become a main character.

While Wayne hadn’t been able to get anything but a member of the assorted background cast or a walk-on, her position had kept them from starving. Especially since his job as a server paid much less than she’d heard some servers in LA made in tips.

Joy had been given a single initiative. Make everyone beautiful.

So this couldn’t be much different.

On the surface, it wasn’t. There were three salon chairs with their foot-activated pumps to adjust the height as well as lots of hair products like mousse, gels, shampoos, and conditioners on shelves nearby. Her last position didn’t have the sinks and blow drying machines she saw here, but her beauty school had.

She could work with this. If they’d let her.

“Be with you in a sec,” one of the women called out, a petite blonde with curly hair. The other woman, an older lady with an iron gray bob, continued trimming her client but did offer Joy a brief tight-lipped smile. “You the eleven-fifteen?”

Joy blinked at her before realizing she must mean an 11:15 appointment. “No, actually. I was just wondering if you had paper applications since there weren’t any online.”

“Ooh, you job hunting?” Blondie continued their conversation.

“I am.”

“Fabulous. I’m Christine Brickell, the owner. I’ll be right over.” Christine was as good as her word, finishing up and taking payment in an efficient manner, then hurrying to extend her hand. Shaking it, Joy introduced herself, even while she peered about for that elusive application.

Kara was doing as Joy had asked her to do, though she was looking at the books on the table in the corner. Joy reached over and smoothed her daughter’s back to mildly encourage her to keep up the good work.

“So, tell me about yourself.” Christine smiled as she bobbed her head.

Speedily, Joy rattled off the basics. “I have my license in cosmetology and ten years of experience. I’ll be happy to email you my resume. Oh, and I can start right away.”

“Oh, you don’t need to email your resume,” Christine waved off her concerns. “Let’s go have a seat together so I can find out more about you.”

It sounded like this salon owner wanted to interview her on the spot, which would be fantastic except... Joy glimpsed down at her high unprofessional outfit and how much of a hot mess she was. She couldn’t interview like this. Not to mention that Kara was probably just about ready to run out of patience.

“I’m sorry, but I really can’t right now,” Joy told her, then backpedaled. She didn’t

want to sound reluctant. “I mean, obviously, I’m not dressed for an interview.”

“That’s all right. We’re don’t stand on formality around here.”

“And well, this is my daughter... I wasn’t planning to interview right now or I’d have come in here without her.”

Christine glanced down at Kara and gave her a huge smile. “Well, she’s a little cutie. And what gorgeous hair! I always notice hair, I’m sure you understand that.”

“I do the same, so I get it.” Joy smiled and nodded as she tousled Kara’s hair gently.

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“As you see, we have a kid’s corner right over there.” Christine pointed to the aforementioned corner where a box of toys, children’s books, and even one of those colorful puzzle piece mats resided by some waiting room seating.

For a second, Joy felt compelled to pull out her phone. She only had until three in the afternoon to register Kara for the third grade, which started next month. She’d also planned to do some apartment or rental house hunting.

Last night had been spent with her and Kara in her childhood bed together, a trippy experience since her parents hadn’t changed her room at all since her high school days. They still had her school pennant and a glossy eight by ten of her senior picture up on the wall.

It’d felt like going back in time, only more bizarre than nostalgic.

Regardless, she needed this job, so she gave in. “Hey, sweetie, do you want to sit over there and read a book or play with the toys?”

Kara nodded eagerly. “Yep.”

Joy let out a breath of gratitude and planted her daughter in the children’s area. Since Kara seemed perfectly willing to go along with this plan, Joy did her best to come across as business-like as she could under the circumstances.

Christine outlined a few details of the position and Joy’s eyes brightened. The way Christine described her expectations, it seemed like a good place to work. The hum of a hair dryer provided a familiar backdrop to their conversation.

"So, you'll be working Tuesday through Saturday, with Sundays and Mondays off," Christine explained, her manicured nails tapping the schedule sheet. "We offer a base salary plus commission on any products you sell. How does that sound?"

Joy nodded enthusiastically. "That sounds great." She felt like she should say more than that, but she couldn't think of anything to add that wouldn't seem like she was a chatty Cathy. The thought did flash through her mind that this is a small town beauty shop and chatty Cathy's are not unusual, and that made her want to laugh. She really did need to keep her head in the game and focus on getting this job.

Joy could already picture herself at one of the styling stations, transforming clients and building relationships. Visualizing something actually happening was a positive thing, wasn't it?

I won't be making as much as I did in the city, Joy mused silently, but then again, I won't be paying city prices for rent and groceries either. She pushed the thought aside, paying attention to Christine as she shared more about the job. Just getting some money coming in would be big steps forward.

"Any questions so far?" Christine asked, pausing in her explanation.

Joy shook her head, feeling a surge of optimism. "No, it all sounds wonderful. This place seems like a great place to work."

As they continued chatting, Joy couldn't help but feel that somehow, one way or another, everything would work out just fine. She'd had too many things go wrong and some good luck had to be coming her way right about now.

Then, Christine leaned forward just as the other lady, who the owner referred to as Bonnie, meandered over to join them. Joy at first thought she was about to be formally introduced to a possible coworker, but that wasn't how it went.

“The best part of living and working in Rocky Ridge is all the cowboys,” Bonnie explained with a mischievous glint in her eye. “Montana is full of them, but here especially the men are a sight to behold.” She even made an audible smacking noise with her lips.

Joy nearly gaped at her. Such attitudes were very common in LA, but she’d never expect such talk in a small town like Rocky Ridge.

She, Christine, and Bonnie continued to have a discussion, but a little to Joy’s chagrin, it had devolved into mostly gossip. At least the salon was climate controlled and cool, and the other women kept their voices low enough Joy didn’t think Kara could overhear them. Finally, after almost a half-hour of her on the spot “interview,” she tried to wrap it up.

“I’m so delighted to interview with you. Salon 406 is lovely.”

“Oh, thank you, Joy. I think you’ll make an excellent addition to our team,” Christine said, Bonnie nodded in agreement. Had she just been hired? “How about we make your first day next Tuesday?”

“Really?” she asked, still in shock.

“Really.” Christine’s grin was contagious.

After effusive thanks, she collected her daughter and headed for the door. They were definitely getting a smoothie now. She might even splurge and get one for herself, too.

She and Kara had just turned left out the door when she bumped into someone on the sidewalk. The scent was what struck Joy first. Birchwood cologne of a very specific blend that only one person she’d ever known had worn. A person who’d once been

not only her best friend but her first ever boyfriend, Aaron Hunter. He paused, did a double take, then spoke in a stunned voice.

“Joy, is that you?”

CHAPTER TWO

Aaron blinked at the person in front of him as if she were a mirage. But he could swear Joy Taylor, the only woman he'd ever really loved, was the one standing right in front of him. He even almost reached out to touch her face to be sure but didn't. Sure was tempting, though.

“Um, Aaron... hello. Yeah, it's me. And this is my daughter, Kara.”

Daughter.

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The word punched him in the gut like the fist of a prize fighter. It was a reminder that ten years had passed, that she had a life that no longer included him in any way. Not that he hadn't already known that. But coming face to face with the evidence of her having moved on was hard. Even if it should've been nothing but ancient history at this point.

"Nice to meet you," he stated, fiddling with the slender box in his hand as he glanced at Kara then back to Joy. "So, you back for a visit?"

"More of a longer stay. We're moving here."

"How awesome."

He wanted to mean it, but he couldn't tell if he did or not. He felt too astounded to decide one way or the other. His system hadn't quite caught up to the fact that the girl he'd grown up with, his best friend since kindergarten, the one who'd up and abandoned him after tearing out his heart and stomping on it was here. Right here.

With her kid. The one she'd had with another man.

He kept messing with the box in his hand temporarily forgetting what it was or where it'd come from. Aaron forced a smile hoping it came across as genuine. Based on Joy's grimace, he doubted that it did.

"Well, we'd better get going. Lots to do and a short time to do it in."

Relief swept over him at her announcement. He'd rarely felt this uncomfortable.

“Sure, sure. And uh, welcome back.”

“Thanks.”

Then she was gone.

Aaron watched as she plunked herself in one of the ugliest and most rusted out little vehicles he'd ever seen, her daughter following suit in the back. He couldn't help but stare as the car burped out a cloud of sooty smoke and squealed as if a belt was loose as it ground its way down the street.

He wouldn't be surprised if the orangish thing, or maybe that was all the rust, simply broke down and breathed its last about a hundred feet from where he stood. Somehow, though, miraculously, it kept going until Joy was out of sight.

Unconsciously, he played with the box in his hands, nearly dropping it. Glancing down, he remembered what he was holding and why. His mother's fifty-fifth birthday would be in a month, and they were celebrating it with what should be a pretty sizable party.

The box contained her present from him, a bracelet specially made with the four birthstones from their family, a ruby, an emerald, an aquamarine, and a yellow citrine. It made for a lovely rainbow, a weather phenomenon Angie Hunter dearly loved if her tendency to take pictures of every single one she saw and post it to Facebook meant anything.

He thought his gift would be a hit. He hoped it would.

But before the pleasant concept of the look on his mother's face could bring him a sense of contentment and satisfaction, Joy's expression popped back into his mind. Her kid—daughter—resembled her so much she could be her mini-me. Same dark

hair and gray green eye color. Same nose. Same chin. He figured everyone probably told her that, though. Toldthemthat.

Why he couldn't quit thinking about it he had no idea.

Determined to get his feet back under him, he stowed his mom's bracelet in his breast pocket and hopped up into the cab of his raised Chevy Silverado. He hadn't had the truck altered for looks but for practicality. The road to his house was way out in the sticks and made of dirt that washed out with every single storm. Any vehicle with a more normal suspension often couldn't make it.

But his always could.

Once onboard, he dragged his hat off his head and wiped his forehead with a hand. It'd been hot as blazes this year, the summer heat downright unpleasant. He hoped it would break soon. Aaron couldn't even remember the last time the temperatures were this crazy. So crazy he bet he could fry an egg there on the sidewalk.

No traipsing barefoot for him.

Backing out of his parking spot, he motored out onto the lane, glancing over his shoulder for pedestrians. Rocky Ridge might be a small town with relatively minor traffic, but in a vehicle as tall as his, he couldn't afford to not be careful.

Pulling around the back of Mountaintop Java, he ordered a sandwich, chips, and iced coffee to go. This might be his lunchbreak, but he spent most of it with this errand for his mom. One that had been extended by running into Joy. Yet time and ranch work stopped for nothing and no one, so once out of the city limits, he accelerated, munching as he went.

Those at the Duncan Ranch would be expecting him.

As he pulled up by the barn, Sam Duncan, the brother who supervised half the ranch hands, approached. His wife Whitney normally supervised the other half, but due to being heavily pregnant with twins and prescribed by her doctor to be on light duty, she was staying mostly inside due to the heat.

“Still on lunch?” Sam asked him.

Aaron glanced at his watch. “Back as of now.”

He didn’t leave the property most of the time, but with the jewelry shop closing before he’d get off work, he’d wanted to get this taken care of sooner rather than later. Aaron half worried Sam would say something about him being away from the property, but he didn’t. Aaron knew his lunch was his time, but he preferred to be as dependable to these people as he could. The Duncans were the best employers he’d ever had.

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“Excellent. Bessie’s in need of her hot lime treatment.”

Ah, poor Bessie. The dairy heifer was getting up in years and had a reputation for falling victim to minor ailments off and on. Pete Duncan, the family veterinarian and youngest brother, had come up with a treatment plan for Bessie’s latest condition of mange, something Aaron and Sam had to deal with since Pete was away at a conference. They’d also provide the cow with an injectable drug known as ivermectin to make sure to restore her to health as soon as they could.

The Duncans weren’t the type to rid themselves of any animal they could help. It was yet another reason why Aaron respected and appreciated them. Bessie might serve a specific use, but she was also half pet. Especially when it came to Pete, his wife Lilliana, and Whitney. Sam’s wife might be tough as nails and work harder than half the men, but she was all soft and gooey on the inside.

Those kids—the twin’s genders were still a secret since they wanted it to be a surprise—would be lucky to have her as their mama. As well as having Sam as their daddy.

With Bessie’s treatment taken care of, Sam waited for any other of the ranch hands to take off to see to their duties then pulled Aaron aside. It was something Sam had done more than once. But what Sam told him today sent him for a loop.

“Newbie, I want you to become my managerial apprentice,” Sam said, referring to Aaron as “Newbie” even though he’d been with the ranch for three years now and there were other people there newer than him. “I need a right-hand man to pick up the slack for me, and you’re it.”

“I’m honored,” Aaron told him, and truer words had never been spoken.

Sam patted him firmly on the back. “Comes with more than a decent raise, too. You’ve earned it by proving yourself reliable. I’m going to be tied up for the next little while if not for the next eighteen years straight. I need to know that my duties for this ranch are in good hands whenever I have to focus my attention on more important matters elsewhere.”

Aaron let his mouth slide into a conspiratorial smile. Sam would never say such a thing in front of either retired patriarch Jim or the eldest son and current general manager of the ranch, Bryce. They each liked to say and think that ranch business came before everything else, but their wives would be quick to tell a different story.

Also, Sam, in Aaron’s estimation, at least, had his priorities straight.

“From here on out,” Sam went on. “I’ll be doing some extra training on what to do when certain emergencies come up and how to handle some of the other basic business I hadn’t already shown you. You’ll be ready when I have to take a step back for a while.”

That was another thing Aaron liked about this job. They didn’t just throw their employees to the wolves. In the two positions he’d had previous to this one, it was sink or swim with next to no guidance or leadership. Yet that had never been the case here.

Not once.

“I’m your man,” Aaron felt something powerful burst in his chest. It gave him such a sense of pride to know Sam trusted him like this. Especially considering he was only twenty-eight. There were a lot of other ranch hands on the property who’d been there longer, though he could admit that they weren’t as dedicated as he was.

“Yes, you certainly are. Now, let’s get back to it.”

After returning down the bumpy driveway to his home, Aaron took a long shower to work out the kinks and aches then slid his dinner for one into the microwave. He’d been a bachelor ever since Joy had left him, and he didn’t regret it.

It was fun to play the field and meet new women all the time.

He kept things light with them, letting them know up front that he wasn’t in the market for anything remotely serious. The last time he’d been more serious minded about romance it’d bit him in the rearend.

No more of that. Thank you very much.

As he chomped on his single serving of lasagna, he kicked back in his recliner in front of his large television, a baseball game playing. But he couldn’t seem to hone in on it, despite it being his favorite team.

Today had been such a mixed bag. First, the blast from the past that was Joy Taylor, then a promotion out of the blue. Life could be so unpredictable sometimes.

Yet rather than focusing on his promotion and raise, all he could think about was his old flame and what her being around might mean for his future.

CHAPTER THREE

Enrolling Karaat Rocky Ridge Elementary had proven to be form-heavy enough that Joy had to concentrate on what she was doing, even if it was simple. But apartment and house hunting had been anything but. She’d had to wait on apartment managers to unlock doors or come out of their offices and for real estate agents to show up. It’d given her extra time to contemplate how she felt about seeing Aaron Hunter again.

In a word, she would probably have to say flabbergasted.

She didn't know why his sudden presence had struck her like a lightning bolt. It wasn't like she didn't know that he lived here. He, like many others born and raised in Rocky Ridge, had never left here. But being so near him after so long had almost overwhelmed her.

Registering all his similarities and differences. Like the fact that he seemed to be wearing his hair shorter now. Or that he had a round scar on his left cheek that hadn't been there before. Yet the eyes, heavy brows, and ready smile... Those had all been the same.

She couldn't stop thinking about him, about their interaction.

It downloaded a torrent of memories through her brain. How they'd napped next to each other in kindergarten and became fast friends. How they'd shared lunch in the fifth grade with her trading her dessert for his fries—French fries were always her favorite. How they did their homework together on the phone in middle school and went to all the dances together only dancing to the fast songs.

Those had been the days.

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Then had come high school and hormones. For so long, she'd been sure that had been the catalyst that had made him ask her out. That and proximity. They were friends which meant that she was conveniently right there for the picking. She hadn't thought about him that way, yet when he'd requested she go on a date with him, she'd said yes. She'd said yes again when he'd asked her to go steady. Mostly because it seemed like the logical next step.

But although she'd cared deeply for him, she hadn't felt that spark, that spur of adventure and excitement that Wayne had brought her.

Not that sparks were the end-all be-all either, obviously.

So why couldn't she end this fascination she seemed to have about Aaron's life now? She could find out all about him if she wanted to. It wasn't like her parents couldn't fill her in. Her mom had always known everybody else's business, and Joy was certain that hadn't changed.

Yet, she didn't ask. Didn't inquire. And that wasn't due to the strained relations between her and her folks, either. It was more because a part of Joy, a part not so insubstantial, didn't want to know.

Was afraid to know.

What if the sweet boy she'd once been so close to had become someone else? Someone she couldn't relate to or understand? Almost automatically, she'd zeroed in on the third finger of his left hand. No ring. Not that that meant anything for sure. But it didn't appear that he was married. He could be in a relationship, though. Could

even be engaged.

Not that it mattered to her.

Why should it?

Thoughts of Aaron inevitably brought up thoughts of a youthful Wayne. She'd been so caught up with him, so lost in the whirlwind of their love. When he'd proposed six months after they met, she'd immediately said yes. Hadn't hesitated for even a moment.

Yet it'd been her quick acceptance that had then placed a rift between her and her parents. They'd hated Wayne. Just straight up despised him. She never knew why. Other than being all up in arms about them not knowing one another long enough and being too young, that only made her more determined.

So what if Wayne hadn't wanted to embark on a more traditional career path? He had dreams, enormous ones, and that was so much more thrilling than anything that ever occurred in Montana. That's why she finished her beauty school certification and moved with him to California.

She and Wayne had incredible chemistry from the beginning, and she was certain he'd woo the Hollywood execs and have an acting job right off the bat. The glory, fame, and fortune never came.

When he became a server in the fine tradition of many famous people thinking that would be the answer, she'd encouraged him. Believed in him. She was thankful he was at least trying to bring in some money. He was working in an upscale place that catered to many VIPs and assumed he could charm or flirt his way into some great parts.

Then, Joy became pregnant. They were in no way prepared, but Wayne had been optimistic. His optimism had even rubbed off on her enough that she'd told her parents thinking that the news would end any animosity they might have toward her husband. She'd also thought they'd be happy to be grandparents, that they'd finally accept Wayne with open arms but that hadn't worked out like she'd hoped.

What they'd done was beg her to come home and have the baby in Montana with them.

Which she'd of course refused to do. In hindsight, maybe she should have. Maybe it would've saved her a whole heap of trouble and torment.

Once Kara had been born, their debts rose substantially. It was like living in a pressure cooker. Wayne's server pay wasn't enough, and Joy was so thankful to find work as a hair stylist on a soap opera set. She hoped it might allow her to make some connections for Wayne, but that didn't pan out.

They limped along financially, Wayne saying over and over that his big break had to be just around the corner. It had to be. Only it wasn't. It'd been five years later when Joy caught him with the drugs.

His behavior became erratic and unpredictable. He'd always been high strung, but this was different. He became angry to the point of being verbally abusive. He spent their money on what she suspected was his habit rather than necessary bills. And right before Kara's seventh birthday, he went missing.

Living with the mystery of her husband's disappearance hanging over her like a thundercloud left her not sure what to do.

It'd been over a year since she'd last heard from her husband. Her mind went wild with speculation about what had happened. It was hard to believe that he'd abandon

his daughter. So she really didn't know what to think.

His drug abuse had gotten worse and Joy wasn't even sure what his drug of choice had been. She didn't really care, since no matter what it was he was dependent on it.

She'd been just about to kick him out. She didn't want drugs or his abusive behavior around their daughter. Even now, Joy couldn't believe that he'd be willing to have it around their daughter. He'd been a doting father, once upon a time. When Kara was a baby and toddler, he'd nurtured her, loved her.

At first Kara asked questions about where her father was and Joy didn't have any answers. She couldn't tell her the truth—she'd never put that kind of adult issue on the shoulders of a child to handle. At first she'd say that daddy had work to do so he was away for a few days. Then finally Kara's questions just stopped. Joy was sad for her daughter, but thankful for a reprieve.

She had no clues about where he was or what had happened. No calls. No texts. No emails. No note of any kind. Nothing.

So, despite filing a missing person's report with the LAPD, despite posting his professional actor's headshot all over social media, on people searching sites, and even on old-fashioned paper posters she'd had printed up, no sign of Wayne Randall had been found.

It was as if he'd dropped off the face of the Earth.

It felt as baffling today as it had when it'd first happened. And she'd done everything she could think of to locate him. She went through all the emotions until one day she was just empty. Tired of searching, worrying, wondering. She felt oddly relieved when she decided to move back here. What other choice did she have?

When it was time to tell Kara about their move, Joy felt like she had to tell her daughter something about her father, so she was brief but honest.

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“Kara, there’s something we need to talk about.”

Kara had been watching TV when Joy came in and turned the show off.

“Awww, Mommy! I was watching that!”

“I know and we’ll turn it back on in a minute.” Joy took a long beat and then let out a breath. “We’re going to move to a new place. Montana.”

“Where?” Kara’s nose scrunched up as she clearly wasn’t sure about any place outside of the city she’d been raised in.

“Montana. It’s where your grandparents live.”

Kara looked at Joy and blinked. “Your mommy and daddy?”

“Yes. You’re going to love them and my goodness they’re going to be crazy about you!”

Kara broke into a big smile. “I think so, too!”

“So, sweetheart, about your daddy… um, he’s not going to go with us.”

Kara sat somberly with her hands in her lap. Finally she looked up at Joy and nodded.

“But why not?”

“Well, sweetie, he must have had some important things to do and I guess he’s been

doing those things.” Joy shrugged and smiled weakly. “I haven’t heard from him in a while. I wish it wasn’t like that, but it is.” She scooted over to Kara and put her arms around her. They sat together like that for a while until Kara asked if she could watch her show. And that was the end of their conversations about Kara’s father.

Joy took a deep breath and forced all this out of her mind. Her heart was racing and her breaths shallower than they should be. The last thing she needed to do was upset herself. Was she haunted by his husband’s unknown status? Yes. But could she do anything about it that hadn’t already been done? No.

All she could do was what she had done. Start over. It was just too bad she hadn’t considered how Aaron might fit into that scenario.

Randomly, she considered how it might’ve been if hadn’t been so rebellious. What if her feelings for her best friend had evolved into something more? If she’d never left her hometown? What if she’d been content and had settled down with him and had his child instead?

Would she be in a better place in her life right now? But there hadn’t been a magic looking glass back then to help her make better decisions. So she’d have to be more careful from here forward.

CHAPTER FOUR

Aaron was distracted all during the subsequent week thinking about Joy. Luckily, his increased duties on the ranch kept him so busy he couldn’t think about her much when he was at work. The ranch doubled in size a few years back due to a neighboring ranch owned by Levi Mason challenging them to a competition which Sam’s wife won.

Aaron still heard tales about that competition, about the uniqueness of the situation in

general. Especially from Sam who was clearly still proud of Whitney. Every time he talked about her, his features lit up as if he'd just won the lottery. In a way, maybe he had.

Whitney Duncan had become something of a legend on the ranch and within her husband's family.

Putting the backhoe into reverse, Aaron continued to widen out a spring-fed pond on what used to be the Mason Ranch. With this heat, it was grueling work, but he felt thankful for the machinery making the job so much easier. Wiping the sweat from his brow, he contemplated how it might be to climb into the pond to clear it out by hand. The getting wet part didn't honestly sound half bad, but the rest wouldn't be as fun.

The engine on this piece of equipment clanged noisily, so it took Aaron a couple of minutes to realize that his walkie-talkie was beeping at him. Sam came over the channel they used, his voice fuzzy and rushed. But the reason for that soon became apparent.

"It's Whitney," he said. "She's experiencing preterm labor, so I'm taking her to the hospital in Billings as we speak."

Aaron turned off the engine altogether. Would she be all right? Whitney was a strong woman, he'd seen the evidence of that himself. But going into labor early could be a real problem.

"We'll hold down the fort," he told Sam, hoping to bolster him.

"Well, I'm leaving that up to you. I know I just gave you the apprentice position, so this might be a trial by fire. But I trust you. You pretty much know what to do. If anything crazy comes up, just call Bryce."

“He’s staying?”

“He is. He insisted. Everyone else is going, though.”

Everyone else likely meant the retired Duncan grandparents, Josh and Maddie, Pete and Lilliana, and possibly Bryce’s wife. The Duncans took family seriously, and anytime something scary cropped up, they circled all the wagons. Aaron’s own family was the same way.

The hardest thing about being left in charge of the ranch hands was the reaction of some of them. When Aaron gathered them all together to make the announcement about Sam leaving him temporarily at the helm, a handful of the hands balked.

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Bobby Dean, the eldest of all of them thrust out his chin and bobbed his head as if acquiescing, but Kiefer and a couple of the others threw Aaron some bitter glances. One or two could even be called venomous. It didn't bode well.

Not that Aaron planned to show it.

It didn't help that he was so much younger than the majority of these employees. While there were a few other hands in their twenties, none of them had been offered such authority. Granted, Bryce, as the owner, would still be the lead on every final decision, but Aaron was going to do his best to not require Bryce's attention. The oldest of the Duncan brothers had enough to think about right now.

"So," Kiefer sauntered over inside the barn where Aaron had gathered everyone to give out assignments in person. Leaning against the wall with his boots crossed and his arms folded over his chest, he drawled, "You taking over, newbie?"

"Sam put me in the driver's seat, yes." Aaron kept his tone carefully neutral. He knew any arrogance would cause dissension in the ranks, but so would playing it with too much leniency. He might be younger than most, but despite the nickname, he was far from green. With five years here and four years at another ranch nearby, Aaron had all the experience necessary.

"It's not right," someone Aaron didn't immediately identify grumbled from the back.

"Just a wet-behind-the-ears kid," mouthed off another, and Aaron decided he'd had enough.

“Get to the list of tasks that have been assigned,” he raised his voice. “I will be checking if I feel the need to because the last thing Sam or Whitney needs is to worry about the ranch right now.”

His words had the desired effect. These men respected Sam and Whitney even if they didn't respect him. It might be a tad manipulative to bring the couple up in order to squash any open animosity, but Aaron didn't care. The ranch had to be taken care of, and he was going to do whatever he felt necessary to do it.

“Sam has you on backhoe duty, newbie. That tells me all I need to know about how much he really trusts and respects you.” And Aaron didn't have to survey the man to recognize his snide and condescending tone. He knew who it was. Brock Beatty, someone Aaron grew up with.

Unlike the others who referred to him by his nickname, Aaron had no illusions about any friendliness coming from Brock's direction. The man was a bully, always had been and probably always would be. He'd been a thorn in Aaron's side, in particular. Brock was a year older, a loudmouth, and barely did enough on the property to stay in the Duncans' good graces.

The only reason he had a position here at all was because his mother had asked Sam to give her son a chance. Since she was one of the kindest most loving people in town, Sam had agreed. She volunteered at the soup kitchen, visited shut-ins, and read to the blind and bedridden in hospitals and nursing homes. How such a saint bore Brock as her son, Aaron would never know.

“We've all been on every duty. It's part of ranch life,” Aaron told him.

“Just think it's funny that you're stepping up is all. I mean, it's not like Sam is here to confirm anything.”

“It’s a no-brainer that my brother made Aaron his apprentice, Brock. Who else would Sam have asked?” Josh, the second brother and unofficial horse whisperer, chimed in.

Aaron hadn’t seen him come in, but he felt glad the man made his presence known. And the amazing thing about Josh was that he said all this with this air of confusion that was completely believable. He didn’t sneer right back or snarl like Bryce would. He simply asked questions as if he was sincerely curious to know the answer.

Brock kicked the toe of his boot into a dirt clod at his feet and mumbled, “Never mind.”

Josh didn’t approach, didn’t say anything else, and Aaron realized that was for his benefit. He wanted to demonstrate to everyone that Aaron could stand on his own. Only after the group disassembled did Josh stroll by. “You got this, newbie.”

And Aaron offered him a grateful smile. Yes. Yes, he did.

The next week became a busy one as Aaron maintained his original duties along with his managerial ones. There was a general tension on the ranch due to Whitney’s situation. Although the doctors were able to stop her labor with medication, she had to stay because it took two days for them to halt the contractions altogether. Since it was far too early for her to deliver, this meant she had to be on mandatory bedrest.

According to Sam, she wasn’t happy about it, especially when he insisted on remaining home with her for a few extra days. Whitney was amazing, but she was also stubborn. Aaron suspected her husband was hanging out with her at home to help her with whatever she might need but also to make certain that she obeyed the doctor’s mandates.

Maggie Duncan was there at the main house overseeing the weekly Friday lunch when Aaron came in, so furious he could spit nails about something he’d found. The

second he saw the family matriarch standing there, though, he shoved as much of his anger aside as he could. Maggie wasn't the one who usually took over the lunches they provided to all their employees, so that must mean that assistance was thin on the ground.

He couldn't add to the family's burdens.

Not even if he yearned to rail at the entire world.

He plastered a benign look onto his features, but even though he hadn't been around Maggie that much, she somehow saw right through him. "What's wrong, honey?"

"What makes you think something's wrong?" he asked, not eager to lie to her. Better to sidestep the inquiry.

"I am the mother for four sons." The wisdom written across her expression reminded him of some sage all-knowing creature from a fantasy movie. "I can read that annoyance you're feeling like it's a book."

No sense holding it all back then.

"Someone left a gate open over on the eastern side that lets out onto the rural route. Apparently overnight."

"Ohh," she said with a long sighing noise. She would've known what that meant. Cattle not fenced in will inevitably wander all over the place, especially when the breach lasted for so long.

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It might not have been so unforgivable had that gate not led out into the road. It was a miracle that no one driving late at night had hit one of the cows and suffered a frightening accident.

And since they escaped from Aaron's assigned area, he felt almost sure it had to be Brock's doing. He hated to think that anyone could be so petty as to endanger the lives of other people just to satisfy some ridiculous grievance they might have, but he'd witnessed similar behavior and worse out of the man before.

"Yeah," Aaron answered by way of confirmation.

"No one hurt?"

"Not as far as I know."

"It'll be okay then."

Only then did he absorb that there was a hush over everyone as they stared at him and Maggie.

"Go on with your tale, Mom," Pete said, and Aaron cottoned on that he must've interrupted something.

"It's just that I know what Whitney's going through. Being ordered to lie still when everything inside you is screaming to prepare for that child—or in her case, children—and to get things ready. Josh was a preemie and had to spend time in the NICU, you know."

Aaron's head automatically angled toward the same man who'd spoken up for him on Monday. He'd never heard this story.

"Preemies can be so much smaller than their full-term counterparts. Bryce had been almost nine pounds, but Josh was only three pounds three ounces." Crinkles formed over her upper lip. "Everything about those babies seems so delicate, so breakable. They have to be monitored so carefully all the time. And then there's the chance that something will go wrong that they can't fix." She shakes her head.

"It's difficult. I pray that Whitney and Sam won't have to deal with anything more than what they've already had to."

Aaron felt this intense anxiety at the thought of history repeating itself in this family. Whitney had spoken to him about her unstable childhood in foster homes and how she'd never felt safe. She deserved to have her chance at motherhood be a smooth one.

Surreptitiously, he texted his folks under the table after inhaling his tuna on rye. Should've done it a few days ago since they live in Billings and could act as go-betweens.

Aaron: Did either of you peek in on Sam and Whitney Duncan while they were in the hospital there? Did anyone let you two know what was going on?

Dad: Of course, she did. You know your mother.

Mom: Took Whitney a lovely spray of irises, roses, and baby's breath. Wrote on there that it was from everyone in our family. She was very sweet and bursting with gratitude.

Aaron: I'll transfer some money to cover my share.

Mom: Not necessary. But thanks.

Leave it to his mother to have her finger on the pulse of whoever might need it. She probably had phone trees and other methods for people to reach out to her in such instances. It should've been him who'd told her but hadn't been.

Aaron: You're the best.

One right after the other, each of his parents sent their texts seconds apart.

Mom: I know.

Dad. We really are.

Aaron snorted at his parents' joke.

Yet in spite of all the rigamarole of the past few days, his mind returned to the image of a woman and a totally different child. Joy and her daughter. Rocky Ridge was a small town. It was only a matter of time before he'd come nose to nose with Joy again. He wanted to handle it better than he did that first time.

He just didn't know how.

CHAPTER FIVE

It felt oddlylike relief to have her fingers woven into other people's tresses again. Wash, rinse. Cut, color, style. Just a little off the top, please. Can you make me look like fill-in-the-blank celebrity? Over and over.

Something about the physical activity mixed with the repetition of it all came so naturally to her that her mind almost went into a meditative state. When the client

played on their phone or fell asleep, Joy herself felt at her most Zen.

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But that didn't ever have the chance to happen at Salon 406.

“Whitney Duncan is having twins. Have you heard?” Bonnie chattered to either Christine or Christine's customer, she wasn't sure which.

She knew her cousins had married into the Duncan family, but she couldn't remember who this Whitney was.

“Yes, and now she's on bedrest, poor thing. My little sister had to be on bedrest for all three of her pregnancies. It's horrible. She about went stir crazy laying there. There's only so much TV you can watch and sleeping you can do, you know? This was backbefore everyone had the internet at their fingertips, though. I can scroll on those reels sometimes and hours go by.”

Joy had seen it. Joy had done it. On those rare occasions when Kara would be at school while she'd been off from work, she'd scroll through social media site after social media site, but she'd been searching for her husband.

Maybe it wasn't quite the same.

For that first six months of Wayne's absence, she'd been religious about checking every place she could think of. She'd walk up and down any streets she knew he frequented, would people watch on the beach or in shopping centers, and would check in with the LAPD so often she grew to know several of them on a first-name basis.

Since then, however, much of that vigor had dissipated. As much as she craved the

knowledge of what had actually occurred, if he had passed away in some sort of violent manner or if he couldn't contact her for some reason, she didn't think she could cope. That had been one of the most painful parts of this, how her imagination had tossed her a bunch of worst-case scenarios.

Although in those cases, he might not be such a reprehensible husband or father.

Maybe.

"Girl, you are just whipping that hair into a frenzy," Christine remarked, and Joy blinked, realizing she'd been referring to her. She'd been teasing the ends of her customer's bob haircut and gotten absolutely carried away.

She incorporated a few more minor moves and called her done, letting the lady go.

"That was amazing," Bonnie agreed. "You make it look effortless."

"Just plenty of experience," Joy downplayed it. "I could probably curl, braid, and blow-dry people's hair in my sleep."

"You're awfully young to have 'plenty of experience.' Not to pry, but how long have you been doing this?" Bonnie asked.

"A while," she blew her off until Christine doubled down.

"You're so young. Where were you working where you got that much experience?"

She braced herself. People had different reactions when they found out who her last employer had been. "I had to prep a lot of people every day. I had to be both swift and meet everyone's exacting requirements."

“You still haven’t explained where you worked,” Bonnie pointed out. Figured she wouldn’t let that one fly under the radar.

“I worked with actors and actresses on a set.”

“You mean like for a play?” Bonnie asked.

“More like a daily show.”

“For streaming? Or YouTube?”

“For television, actually.”

For once the entirety of the salon fell silent. “You worked on a television show?” It was Christine asking this time.

Joy nods. “It was a soap opera. Ever heard of Futile Passions?”

“Heard of it? I grew up watching it,” Christine cried. “You did hair and make up for a real, live soap?”

“Just the hair. Unless there was some sort of emergency.”

“So who all did you work on?”

That next topic of conversation went on for the next hour. Joy had worked on the hair, weaves, or wigs of dozens of famous people, from the stars of the soap itself to the many guest stars and even sometimes the extras who filled up the background of a scene.

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“Having you here is the best thing ever,” Bonnie exclaimed, evidently one hundred percent won over by this latest nugget of intel.

“I have to agree,” Christine stated next, and it was times like this when Joy thought of herself as being a part of some entertainment news show.

They were enthralled, though. Her boss. Her coworker. Her customers and theirs. She’d feared that admitting the truth might limit the number of tips people would give her believing her to be well off. But that wasn’t what happened. If anything, the more celebrity names she dropped, the higher the amount of cash filling her jar.

That afternoon the salon received an influx of ladies all at once, and for several hours, the place was bustling with activity. Joy had long been accustomed to such spurts and could handle them without issue. She moved from one head to the next without stopping or slowing down.

Also, no one seemed to be exceptionally picky about what she was doing. Sure, many people came in with an idea in their brains, but none of them left unhappy when the reality didn’t quite line up either. At least no producer, showrunner, director, or actor breathed down her neck about whether to cut bangs or to not cut bangs.

As if such things really mattered.

But as interesting and fun as Salon 406 turned out to be, her house hunt wound up being the opposite. It was seemingly impossible to rent somewhere to live no matter what she tried. That was why Joy decided to tap into the hivemind with her quandary. Might as well use the grapevine for good as much as evil.

“Christine, you or Bonnie familiar with the housing market around here?”

“Call Raymond Piazza. He’s been a realtor here forever. If anyone has the insider knowledge you need, it’s him.”

She made a mental note to see if he might be able to help.

Every time an apartment or rent house had popped up so far, by the time she’d call, it would be gone. Since she didn’t have enough money for a down payment, that left her with rental options only. And since she hadn’t managed to secure anywhere else yet, that meant she and Kara had been forced to stay with her parents for the past handful of weeks.

It’d been far longer than she’d intended, and due to the strain, it’d been uncomfortable from the get-go.

Neither she nor her parents had brought up the massive elephant in the room, which meant every meal was filled with these awful and awkward silences.

At long last, a full month after her arrival, the Raymond Piazza guy located an apartment above a garage right across from the elementary school. Joy had been ecstatic. It wasn’t fancy, but it was more than suitable for her and Kara’s needs. She’d been overjoyed to move her and her daughter into a place that was their own.

The timing turned out to be perfect, too, because school started that next Monday. Joy’s days off were on Sundays—the salon was closed—and on Tuesdays, which gave her enough time to get their meager belongings at least partially situated.

On Wednesday as she finished up a customer’s cut and color, the three other women who worked there went quiet. Joy glanced over at them to see the last person she’d expect stepping through the door.

Aaron.

He literally had his hat in his hands, his face set in this sheepish expression. She couldn't say why for sure, but she suspected that this was due to the salon having no men clientele.

"How might we help you, sir?" Christine asked him.

"Uh..." He peered around as if waiting for some giant bouncer to toss him out on his ear. "My barber couldn't get me in, and I really need a trim," he admitted, blowing his bangs out of his eyes.

All the ladies tittered. Joy almost did, too. For a moment, her memory took her back in time to when she was twelve again. She remembered a similar movement of his from their childhoods.

"Joy..." The shock in his tone was obvious. "You work here?"

"I do." She felt surprised to see him in here at all considering how much shorter his hair was now. So much shorter than it had ever been then. "Are you looking for maintenance or something more special?"

"Maintenance," he laughed self-deprecatingly. "And please skip all the facials and hair masks or whatever."

"Facials and hair masks?" Christine ambled over, laying a hand on one of his broad shoulders. Had they been that broad prior to now? That wasn't something Joy remembered, him looking so...sturdy. "You, Aaron Hunter, have no clue what stylists actually do, do you?"

Joy's boss regaled him with the terminology of her career, and the glazed expression

that roved over his features was pretty hilarious. Yet Christine and every other employee would be tied up with clients. Every other employee but Joy.

She didn't have anyone else in her line. Nor did anyone have an appointment with her over the next hour. It would be plenty of time to trim a guy's hair. The problem was that it wasthisguy. Even so, Joy couldn't say no.

So, despite the inherent weirdness of the moment, she waved Aaron over. It wasn't like he was some mass murderer or something. Besides, if she couldn't rise above and take care of the man who used to be her best friend, what business did she have taking care of anyone?

"Planning to go platinum blond?" Christine teased him, and Bonnie jumped in on that, too.

"Or fuchsia? Such a bright pink would be gorgeous with your skin tone."

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A burst of laughter escaped him, revealing his straight white teeth, before settling into a smile. Joy knew that smile. It was the same always ready one he'd worn ever since she'd first met him, and it was so familiar that her heart ached. Still, to keep the mood light, she joined in with the rest of the ladies.

“Or if you want to stick with your original color, you could go with some golden highlights and tips. It'll bring out the color of those dark eyes of yours and be flattering with the unusual shape of your nose.”

When he actually reached up a hand to test the shape of that nose, Joy lost it.

“I have an unusual nose shape?”

All four of them exploded into cackling howls of laughter, and what Joy feared might be an awkward encounter became something that brightened her mood considerably. Once they calmed back down, she took out her scissors and eyeballed his reflection in the mirror.

“My guess is that you want a short half-inch trim with a little more off the top, am I right?”

“Bingo. It's my mom's birthday party this weekend, and I can't go in there looking like a shaggy dog.”

There was nothing whatsoever shaggy about him, nor anything that resembled any sort of canine. In fact, he smelled fresh and woodsy. But she played along.

“Then, let’s get you cleaned up, shall we?” And after that, the silver of her scissors flashed.

CHAPTER SIX

Aaron hadn’t honestly realized that Joy worked here, he only knew she’d been in the building that one time. And it was too late to back out of this now without coming off like a jerk. So, he dutifully crossed the room over to her salon chair. At least he could chuckle along as these ladies—Joy included—made fun of him.

He didn’t honestly mind since not one of them had shown any real malice. And the truth was the teasing reduced the stiffness between him and his childhood friend.

As her scissors went to work, which was impressive because he could already see his hair taking a new, updated shape, he gave into his temptation to ask about her.

“So, you adjusting to life back in Montana all right?” He figured he couldn’t get much more innocuous than that.

“We are. We just moved out of my parents’ place into our own apartment. Things have both changed and remained the same.”

“How different and the same?”

“Well, everything’s new and old at the same time. If that makes sense. It’s been so many years since I’ve been back here that it’s strange to see a restaurant or store where the Gulp and Fill used to be. But then, some stuff’s still in the same place. Like the square, of course. And the elementary school. Kara starts her first day there on Monday.”

“What grade?”

“Third. Remember when we were in Mrs. Allen’s third grade class throwing rocks at each other?”

But that wasn’t quite accurate.

“As I recall, it was actuallyyouthrowing them atme,” he corrected her, grinning. “Thought for sure we’d both get spankings.” Corporal punishment had still been a thing back then, with kids living in perpetual fear of the principal’s paddle. “Good thing you turned on the waterworks.”

“I didn’t want to get hit with that thing.”

“Me neither, especially since you were the one at fault,” Aaron said, and Joy’s scissors stopped.

“Hey, just because I was the one throwing them doesn’t mean...” She trailed off. “Okay, fine. I was the guilty one. It was all the more reason for me to throw a pity party and get us out of trouble.”

He snorted at her. “Then there was that time we got caught passing notes in seventh grade science class.”

The funny thing was that they’d just been making plans for after school, not passing anything incriminating. They hadn’t been cheating on tests or even saying anything sappy. And that was despite him being in love with her even back then.

“Discussing the proper flavor of ice cream to get is exceptionally important,” she remarked.

“Still into fudge ripple?”

“Fudge ripple is a good one. But have you tried some of the Ben and Jerry’s? Their strawberry cheesecake is to die for.”

Aaron peered up at the mirror he was facing, catching her gaze in the reflection. That last sentence she spoke was precisely the tone and inflection she’d used back then. Back in high school. Back when they’d been a couple.

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Back before she'd broken up with him, and his world had fallen apart.

But he needed to change that horse midstream. No use going there. It was all ancient history now.

His hair looked better than his barber had ever left it and in half the time. Aaron wondered how Joy had learned to do such a good job so quickly.

"You're really fantastic at that." He patted the sides of his scalp, fluffed his bangs, and even felt for the cowlick at the back of his head that his barber could never seem to tame. Yet Joy had done it, no problem. Wow. "Maybe I'll come see you from now on."

"It appears that I'll be here. Just let me know, and I'll pencil you in."

Her eyes sparkled when she said this, those green-gray orbs so unlike anyone else's he'd ever known. He swallowed.

"Or how about I take you to dinner?" He had to clear his throat once his question was out. "You know, to catch up more? You worked so fast I didn't get the chance to find out how things went for you back in California."

Joy froze in place like a statue, and for a minute, he figured he went too far. As much silliness and fun as they'd had in here today, maybe she thought more time with him would be too much. He kind of surprised himself by asking, to be honest. But being around her hadn't been near as painful as he'd expected. He wanted to find out who she was now.

He needed to know.

“How about lunch instead? I’ll have to be home to make Kara’s meal, get her set for school the next day, and so forth.”

He was swift to agree. Even though getting away from the ranch would be a challenge. He could figure it out, though. “Sure. Absolutely.”

Over the subsequent two weeks, he and Joy met for lunch at the Sip ‘n Shop at her suggestion. The Sip ‘n Shop was a small country diner with eighties décor and a gift shop that was as popular as their famous “broasted” chicken.

“Do you like it?” he asked her, indicating her meal with his fork. He’d ordered the same thing.

“So, does the broasted mean boiled then roasted or...”

“Just broiled in their special oven setup,” he explained. “Supposed to seal in the juices like baked chicken but with more of the flavor of fried. I think they get pretty close. No false advertising as far as I’m concerned.”

“It is tasty.” She took another bite. “But I think I’d remember if they had it back when I was here. When did they start doing it?”

The broasted chicken had come about roughly seven or eight years ago, he thought. He and Joy had gone on a date or two here, but it hadn’t been their regular haunt. That had been a place called Edie’s, an even tinier greasy spoon owned by an elderly lady who’d run it for as long as Aaron could remember. The year after Joy left, a kitchen fire happened, and it burnt all the way to the ground.

Edie hadn’t been hurt, but she’d been devastated by the event. Heartbroken. She

never reopened and instead chose to retire, dying within a couple of years of that.

Sometimes at his bleakest, Aaron had thought of how it'd symbolized his relationship with Joy. Nothing left but cinders.

Yet here she was. Here they were together. Even if it was nothing like it'd once been.

Internally, he shook his head. Didn't know why his mind had gone there. Especially not right now. Determined to focus on happier subjects, he pointed out a sled strapped to the wall.

"Looks like the one we used to use."

She glanced up. Grinned. "Sure does. Kids still climb that hill over on the north side of town and race down it to see who wins?"

Man, it had been forever since he'd done that. Even thought about doing it.

"Not sure. Probably. Can't beat that spot for anything." He allowed himself to think about it now. How the speed would often knock his hood down so often that his mom started planting a knit cap on his head as well. How he and Joy had played out there until their noses and cheeks were red was a mystery all these years later.

"Think they went and tracked the thing down to stick up there?" She referred to the sled again. "Maybe along with that big green toboggan?"

"Nah, I think my parents still have the sled in their garage somewhere. The toboggan they gave to some of my distant cousins. Maybe the folks should donate it to the Duncan's Ranch, though. Let the kids of that family play on it. The guy I work for over there is about to become a dad of twins."

“Twins? Wow.”

“Yeah.” Aaron told her all about how Sam had been his mentor, and that he’d been so honored to be promoted. He also explained Whitney’s bedrest situation. Even as he talked about the other people in his life, he couldn’t help committing Joy’s appearance to memory.

She was so much thinner than she had been when he’d known her. Almost gaunt. Still beautiful, but he lied and mentioned that he didn’t want the complimentary cinnamon rolls that came with the meal, hoping she’d eat them. She took the outsides off and ate the sticky and gooey sweet middle.

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He watched every move, chew, and swallow she made.

“I remember the Duncans,” Joy said, licking her fingertips in a manner that had Aaron’s full attention on her. Once upon a time, he would’ve plucked through that confection and fed it to her himself. “Well, I remember their prominence here in town and could probably pick them out of a lineup. But I never really knew any of them.”

“They’re good folks. The best. Especially Sam and Josh. And Whitney works circles around every other man in the field. I’ve seen her do it with my own eyes. Well, when she’s not huge pregnant, anyway.”

She folded her hands in front of herself, studying him. “You like working there, don’t you?”

“Love it,” he answered immediately. “Consider myself a lucky man career-wise.”

“I guess as far as careers, I’m a little lucky, too. Most of my luck otherwise comes from Kara, though. She’s my light.” Joy retrieved her phone and showed him a selfie she’d taken with her daughter. “She’s put up with all this upheaval like a champ even though I know it’s been hard on her. All this change all at once like this... I don’t think I would’ve handled it so well at her age.”

Aaron’s stomach sunk. He anticipated her next choice of topic would be her husband. The man who fathered her little girl. Or maybe why he wasn’t here with her in Rocky Ridge. Yet Joy never once brought him up, and Aaron felt glad.

He wasn’t about to ask about Wayne, the guy she not only dated after Aaron but

married. Then, Wayne took her away from Montana entirely. Aaron didn't consider himself an unforgiving person, but he'd have a hard time treating Wayne Randall politely.

Doing that wouldn't be right, Aaron knew that. But there would likely always be a part of him who blamed the guy for stealing Joy away, even if from everything he'd heard, she'd gone with him more than willingly.

Yet at least when she'd been here in town, he'd see her on occasion. He'd known she was all right, even if it hurt quite a bit to see how well she'd been doing without him. He'd expected Wayne to be some flash in the pan. A guy with lots of pizzazz but zero substance that Joy would see right through eventually and...

Shoot, he didn't know if she'd ever come back to him. But as long as she stayed nearby, there was always a chance.

A chance that had dried right up once she'd moved to California.

Now all these years had gone by, and each of their lives had traveled along different tracks. He didn't want to hear about Wayne. He just wanted to hear about Joy. Yes, he knew she could still be married, he was just hoping that she was at least in the process of a divorce since she was here with her daughter without him.

That's why he heaved such a sigh of relief when Joy didn't mention anything about Wayne. And Aaron wasn't about to, either.

Still, after all these days in a row of having to rush to get back to the ranch on time, he decided to try another approach with her.

"It can be a bit challenging getting here to town and back sometimes," he began.

A closed expression fell over her features. “Well, if you can’t meet up anymore, I’ll understand.”

“No...” He reached across the table to touch her hand, then thought better of it and pulled back. “No, that’s not what I mean. I don’t want to give up our time, I’m just wondering if I could change it. Would you go to dinner with me instead? We could go to The Steer House.”

“Oh, Aaron, I don’t know.”

He had to tread carefully here, he knew. “As friends, of course. And that way, we could have more time to sit back and relax. We wouldn’t have to hurry off. It’s just an idea.”

“How about I let you know?” she asked.

And what else could he say?

“Sure.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Aaron asked her out that Saturday for dinner, she almost gave him a flat no. Not only would it mean having to ask her folks to watch Kara, it could open up a can of worms between him and her. Still, when he added the caveat of “as friends,” it made things somewhat easier. She and Aaron had a memorable past, but so far, being around him hadn’t proven to be difficult.

If anything, she felt far more comfortable with him than she thought she would. It was almost as if they’d gone back in time to when they were young, innocent, and carefree.

Before providing him with her answer, she decided to go to her parents first. If this was going to be some enormous problem, she should find out now.

“Hey Mom and Dad,” she started, after her mother put her on speakerphone. On her side of the line, she closed her eyes, waiting for some major fallout. “I was curious if you might be okay with babysitting Kara for a few hours tomorrow evening. I mean, I know this is short notice, and it’s totally okay if?—”

“We’d love to,” her mother’s voice spoke over the end of her sentence, so Joy felt compelled to ask for clarification.

“I’m sorry?”

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“She said we’d love to,” her dad interjected. “And she’s right. Bring her over anytime, Joy.”

For a minute, Joy opened and closed her mouth like a fish, no words coming out. Had they seriously fulfilled her request with no issues? Maybe that was why she asked her next question.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, we’re sure,” her mom spoke up again. “We would delight in it.”

Joy contemplated this. While she and Kara had been staying at their house, she’d kept out of her parents’ way as much as possible. Conversations had been tense, and she didn’t want to be any more underfoot than necessary.

She and Kara had remained in her bedroom or gone out rather than loiter in the shared family spaces for the most part. And beyond those first couple of meals, they hadn’t eaten with her mom and dad, either. She’d tried to save them the trouble of additional awkwardness by eating in her old room with her daughter.

Had that been a mistake?

Or maybe the problem was Joy herself being there. After all, it was her they’d been so furious with all those years ago. Maybe her future interactions with them could be positive any time they centered around Kara as their granddaughter. It wasn’t quite an olive branch, but it was something she could work with.

So, she called Aaron back.

“What time would you want to go?”

“Eight, okay?”

“Eight should be fine. Meet you there?”

“I could come pick you up if you give me your address,” he suggested, but that felt too... like a date. And this wasn't a date. Not even close.

“No, I'll drive and meet you there. I remember where The Steer House is.”

Everything went okay. She was able to drop off Kara without any negativity with her parents. She'd worried that her daughter might not want to go back to her grandparents' place after having so recently moved away, but her dad waved a pair of coloring books at her.

“These are fantasy ones with unicorns and flying horses. Do you like that, Kara?”

She did, but Joy had no clue how he knew.

“I do, Grandpa.”

“Then, let's get busy coloring.”

Together they'd strung out a whole series of crayons, using the coffee table as a surface. Suddenly, Joy was taken back to her childhood when her dad had done the same with her. Her mom had worked puzzles with her in the same way.

How had she forgotten such things?

“Kara be good for your grandparents,” Joy admonished her, but Kara seemed unfazed.

“I will, Mom.”

“Have fun with Aaron,” her mom said, and she couldn’t help digging into that remark for evidence of condescension or animosity. Yet, she could detect none. Her mother seemed to mean it. Which maybe shouldn’t come as a shock. It’d been Wayne her parents had loathed, not Aaron.

Never Aaron. Never her best childhood friend and first boyfriend.

“Okay. Thanks for watching Kara.” Her dad already had half a page colored in as Kara created some sort of pattern on hers using a fingernail file underneath the paper. Joy didn’t even know where the file could’ve come from.

“It’s our pleasure.”

So that left Joy with nothing to do but leave. She finished putting her makeup on in the car, then drove—even if the engine sputtered once or twice—to the restaurant without incident.

The dinner itself proceeded fine, too, except for one little issue. He kept touching her. Nothing inappropriate or egregious. Just a casual touch here and there. A brush of their fingers when he handed her the pepper. How his body leaned against her chair when he went to pay the bill. Then, his palm at the small of her back as he guided her out of the restaurant, and a steadying hand when she stumbled on some loose gravel out in the parking lot.

But she noticed. And for some reason she couldn’t explain, she liked it. It had been forever since Wayne treated her this nicely, with all his concentration on her. It was

lovely.

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Maybe due to there being next to no lighting out in that lot, she was able to catch sight of a shooting star. She hadn't realized they'd taken so long to eat inside, but a peek at her phone told her they'd been chatting and eating in there for nearly two hours.

She could hear the sounds of the tributary from the river that became a nearby creek, as well as the distant sounds of coyotes and possibly a woodpecker in the small grove of trees off to the side. It'd been a long time, but the noises didn't alarm her. They were the sounds of her childhood. The sounds of home.

"Ooh, look..." She pointed straight up into the sky.

"Pretty, isn't it," he said. "There's a meteor shower happening tonight. Also, it helps that there's a new moon. Makes for better viewing."

They stood there together for several minutes, content to watch as one splash of pale light trailed against the velvet of the darkened atmosphere after another. There must've been dozens of them. Then, there were the constellations themselves. Everything was so crystal clear here that she could see all the various signs her dad had named for her as a kid.

Planets and distant stars like Venus and Sirius, but also constellations like the Big Dipper, the Pleiades, and Orion.

"Cassiopeia's about to set, looks like," Aaron observed, and following his eye line, she could see that he was right.

“Never thought I would miss things like the stars, but I have.”

“You couldn’t see them in California?”

She shook her head. “Way too much light pollution, or sometimes real pollution like smog down in LA. Between the two, seeing the sky this clearly just didn’t happen.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here to see it again.”

“Yeah.” She stared at him, even though the dimness didn’t allow for her to make out much of him, just his outline, really. Yet, she could feel him standing beside her. Sense him there as a solid and familiar presence. “Me, too.”

He paused for another few moments halfway through the rocky parking lot, then reaching for her hand, tucked it into his arm and guided her the rest of the way. Once at her car, he brought his face closer to hers. She could smell that birch essence of his, and something about how it teased her senses had her taking a deep breath as if to memorize it.

“Night, Joy-Joy.” And he kissed her.

It wasn’t a full-on lip lock or anything, merely a brief peck that was mostly her cheek and the corner of her mouth.

She didn’t know what compelled her to do it, but rather than stepping back or even pushing him away, Joy returned the kiss. Worse, she didn’t give him what he gave her, she lined them up properly so that her lips pressed against his. It was an action that not only refamiliarized her with the feel of his mouth to hers, it allowed her to feel the warmth of his surprised breath as he released a sharp exhale.

His eyes—one she knew to be amber brown with darker flecks—shined at her for

maybe a second before he let them fall shut and kissed her all over again, improving on the one she'd provided to him. The kiss continued on and on, far too long, really, but she didn't stop him. She couldn't stop him. Or maybe, she had zero inclination to end something so wonderful.

By the time they broke apart, her breathing had accelerated, and she'd become a bit dazed. lightheaded. Even woozy.

Words were spoken between the two of them, but she had no idea what they were. She was too overwhelmed by all the sensations coursing through her. Because she and Aaron had never kissed like that. Or more accurately, she'd never had such a response to a kiss from Aaron. They'd been dear friends, and she'd felt more comfortable with him than with anyone back then.

But chemistry?

No.

So, when had that changed? And why?

Somehow, she found herself on the trip back to her parents' house to pick up Kara even though she wasn't consciously aware of any choice to do so. Had she been on automatic pilot or something?

Maybe.

Joy also discovered herself caressing her lips with her own fingers, as if to make sure they were there. She didn't know what was going on. This wasn't exactly normal behavior for her.

Had that kiss really happened how she remembered it? And if so, why had it been so

much more powerful now than in their youth?

It was only as she pulled up in front of her mom and dad's house that it occurred to her that she'd been treading in some dangerously deep water. She needed to think about all this, to process it. Because no matter what she might or might not feel for Aaron, there was one complication that she couldn't get past even if it was a technicality.

Legally, she was still married to Wayne.

The truth was she couldn't even be certain that Wayne was alive. For all she knew she was a widow. It wasn't the best of signs when a man with a drug problem vanished without a trace. Or that he'd been gone for so long. A year and a half without a word. Not a single call, letter, or message. And not one of the leads she'd followed had led anywhere useful. She'd done everything she could to find him.

She wished she'd done more than try to find him. If she'd pursued having him declared dead or even a divorce she'd be free right now.

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Still, by the letter of the law at least, she remained another man's wife. So, she'd have to rethink how she spent time with Aaron.

Or even if she should spend time with him at all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Aaron sat in his truck for several long moments without so much as turning on the ignition. He'd only meant his kiss goodnight to be just that, an innocent parting gesture. Yet what it turned into...

Dragging the side of a finger callused by handling ropes and other heavy materials against his lips, it felt like the essence of Joy was still there. Still with him. In reality, maybe she always had been. He'd known he was in love with her back in the day. It hadn't been any huge mystery what his feelings were for her.

The conundrum had come when she made it clear that she didn't feel the same way.

Yet, tonight...

Tonight.

What had transpired between them tonight? Their friendship had naturally evolved for him in high school, going from a devoted relationship where each was always there for the other to something more heated, something more powerful. But only on his end. He hadn't realized that until too late.

So, if that was the case—an understanding that had been difficult to accept—why had Joy kissed him back? And why had it been so... passionate? So good? He had an excellent memory for such things, but even in his best recollections, no kiss with Joy had ever made him lose himself like that previously.

Not like that.

On his side, yes. He'd definitely felt the ardor necessary to make that platonic friendship into something more, but Joy had never allowed it to go that far. They'd kissed, but she'd seemed almost indifferent to it. He'd never received back what he'd given.

Not until now.

Only after Joy's ancient and probably next to breathing its last breath Corolla had lugged itself out onto the road did Aaron feel the presence of mind to put his own vehicle in gear. He motored out to his home, down that pitted dirt driveway that wound around like a coiled snake, and to his house. He felt something he hadn't for a long time.

Elated. Just... on cloud nine.

He never imagined the chance to get back with Joy as an adult, and the fact that it all went so well this evening had left him floating like a hot air balloon.

He'd almost felt afraid to jump to the conclusion that things might actually go well for him, but was it possible that while the first time didn't work out for him, this time could?

The next week as he tackled the replacement of some of the old fencing along what used to be Mason's property, he and Bobby Dean had been able to knock it out in

record time. He dug a new ditch in the same week and didn't even feel that tired once done. It was like he'd been rejuvenated from the inside out. When he provided instructions to the other ranch hands in Sam's stead, no one gave him any lip, though he did see Brock sneering.

But whatever.

Brock could just take a long walk off a short pier if he couldn't do the work assigned.

Even his nemesis couldn't get him down this week. He and Joy switched from lunch dates—which he did miss, to be fair—to texting back and forth. He made sure to schedule his breaktime at the same part of the afternoon as hers, and so far, it'd been going remarkably well.

Joy: Tell me more about your job. What does a supervisor do on a ranch?

Aaron: Mostly oversee the other ranch hands. Snap that whip, you know. Just kidding.

Joy: Yeah, I can't imagine you snapping whips at anybody. You don't have it in you.

Aaron: Not sure how to take that.

Joy: LOL. Take it like the compliment it is. You're a nice guy. One of the good ones. Always have been. Always will be.

His heart glowed inside his chest at that one. He was surprised it didn't light up enough to be seen through his ribcage.

Aaron: I still do what I've always done as a ranch hand, too. I like getting my hands dirty. Also, it helps to show the others that I'm not trying to act holier than thou or

like I'm above them.

Joy: But you are above them. That's what supervisor means.

He shrugged, even though she had no method of knowing this.

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Aaron: I'd rather lead from beside them than in front of them, that's all.

Joy: That's quite noble of you. How's your family?

Aaron: Mom and Dad are great. Still, growing those flowers, you know.

Vance and Angie Hunter were known nationwide for the excellence of their blooms on their lavender farm, even though that wasn't the only thing they cultivated. They'd sewn crops of sunflowers, herbs that grew well in high elevations, berries, and even grape vineyards. The vineyards had only been started when he was in high school, but that's how he knew Joy would remember them.

Joy: I still remember the smell of all that lavender. Strolling there with you. Playing there when we were little.

They had played, but they'd been warned within an inch of their lives not to damage any of the crops that enabled the Hunters to make their living. Aaron could still hear their constant refrain of, "Don't step on the flower beds," or "Don't step on the berry vines," in his sleep.

Aaron: Me, too.

Joy: Does it still smell the same?

Aaron: I'll take you if you want, so you can see.

Joy: That would be great.

He made a mental note to do that as soon as possible. The harvest season was upon them and would pass quickly. So, letting her see the flowers while in full bloom would need to happen within the next couple of weeks.

Aaron: We on for dinner again this week?

After sending that, he wanted to punch himself. Shouldn't that be the sort of thing he asked either on a call or in person? Wasn't texting a date request considered cowardly?

Joy: Same time, same place sounds good to me.

Well, Joy didn't think of it that way. Thank goodness.

His mind wandered to last Saturday and that whooper of a kiss. Would they do that again? Or was it a one-time only deal? Surely it wouldn't be a one and done. That kiss had taken up a significant portion of his brain power since he kept reliving it over and over.

So, for the remainder of the month of August, they kept having dinner at eight at The Steer House. And at the end of each date, they'd kiss in the parking lot before parting ways. Each time would be just as amazing if not better than the last, teaching him that it hadn't been a dream or fantasy. It hadn't been a fluke or figment of his imagination. They were connecting in a real way.

Yet the text he received prior to that next Saturday stunned him. Maybe it shouldn't, but it did.

Joy: Mind if I bring my daughter along?

He'd stared at his phone not answering, unsure of how to feel about such a

development. On the one hand, it meant that Joy trusted him to meet one of the most important people in her life. But on the other, it meant meeting the living embodiment of the choice Joy made that wasn't him. He did like kids, though. At least he liked Kenner, Josh and Maddie's four-year-old son.

He'd probably be fine with an eight-year-old girl. Right?

Joy: Wow. Five minutes with no response. I'm taking that as a no.

Aaron seized his phone so fast he accidentally threw it like a projectile to the other side of his truck cab. Cursing under his breath, he pried it from the opposite side of his passenger seat and sent her a text.

Aaron: Sorry, dropped my phone. Sure, bring your daughter. Sounds fun.

Hopefully, she bought that.

Aaron: Did you want to do the same thing or switch it up a bit?

What did girls that age like to do, anyway? And what was her name? Had Joy ever said? Probably. He scrolled through his past text messages trying to come up with the name and fortunately found it.

Kara. Got it.

Joy: You could come to our place, though don't expect anything fancy. It's a garage apartment.

Aaron: Joy, I've spent years of my life shoveling what comes out the backend of animals. You could live in a drainage ditch that reeked like a stale pond, and I'd think it was fabulous.

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Joy: Lol. What a flatterer you are!

Man, the nerves he felt on that first date were back. This time because of a little girl. He knew this would be like some crazy job interview, except instead of getting a position somewhere, he might be meeting someone who could become a member of his...

Well, maybe he was jumping the gun on that one.

He and Joy had been having a wonderful time together, but he had no idea what to call what they currently were. Ex-best friends who occasionally kissed? His old love that got away coming back? His second chance at a new life as long as he didn't do anything to mess it up?

No pressure.

Still, when he arrived at Joy's place, both she and her daughter were standing at the top of the stairwell beside the garage to welcome him up.

"Kara, that's Aaron," she introduced him loud enough he could hear it even as he tramped up those steps. "He's the friend I told you about."

Aaron would give a lot of his salary to know exactly what "friend I told you about" entailed. Did Kara know that they grew up together? That they dated? That she passed him over for the man who would become her dad?

"Pleasure to meet you, Kara," he greeted her once at the top, and she smiled at him

but blushed.

“Hello.”

That reminded him to bring his arms out from behind his back. “These are for you,” he offered the cute bouquet of three sunflowers to Kara. “And these,” he spoke to Joy. “Are for you.” Joy’s bouquet was made up of lavender blooms along with a lavender satchel and some homemade lavender soap. “Compliments of the Hunter Lavender Fields.”

Joy brought them to her dainty nose, took an audible whiff. “Ah, that scent. That takes me right back.” She hugged him, and he was pretty sure his smile became goofy. “Thank you so much.”

“Yes, thank you,” Kara added, when her mother nudged her shoulder.

“Why don’t you go put these bouquets in some water for us,” Joy suggested to her daughter, and Kara obediently trotted off to do what she’d been asked. Then, she settled in to play with a digital tablet on the couch.

“She’s super well-behaved, isn’t she?” Aaron observed, and the corner of Joy’s mouth lifted.

“I have to admit that I don’t often think about that, but you’re right. She is. She’s quiet, creative, and a little shy. Don’t know where she gets that shyness. Definitely not me or her father. Come on in and have a seat.”

Aaron did as he was bid, but he couldn’t help tripping a bit over the mention of Kara’s father. Joy hadn’t mentioned Wayne Randall to him so far. Hadn’t made even the briefest of allusions to him. He had to admit that his curiosity was piqued.

Over the course of their evening together, they ate spaghetti and meatballs, had some fruit punch, and then indulged in ice cream for dessert. And quietly, Kara worked on her coloring, but it wasn't always just coloring books. Sometimes, she drew something, then colored it in.

She was good, too.

Kara drew turtles and frogs. Horses and cattle. Then, pigs with little iridescent wings. Joy snorted at that one.

"I once said if pigs could fly as a figure of speech, and she took it literally enough to draw."

"Joy," Aaron murmured in her ear, sincerely impressed. "She has some real talent. Especially for a kid. I don't think I could draw those animals that well if I tried."

"She's always had an artistic bent." To her daughter, she said, "All right, Kara-bear, time for bed. Why don't you thank Aaron for coming over?"

Kara did, word for word. Then headed into their single bathroom. There was also only one bedroom. Aaron wondered if they shared that room or even a bed. The space was miniscule, but he knew what it was like to go out on your own without having much.

"She's amazing, Joy, really. Is she doing okay in school?"

"As and Bs. Well, her only B is math. But yeah. I think she's doing fine all things considered."

There it was. Another hint as to what brought Joy back here.

“How are Mr. and Mrs. Taylor doing?” he asked, and she tensed. That’s right. He’d heard something about Joy being on the outs with her parents, even though she hadn’t mentioned it herself. Was that still going on? Had they stayed with her parents when they first moved?

“Mr. and Mrs. Taylor. You still do that at twenty-eight?”

“Well, that’s what I always called them.” The Taylor’s had been somewhat formal with visitors that were kids. Even him, and he’d been there more than once. Still, she came to his family’s farm way more often than he came to her place. “When I see them in town to this day, I call them that.”

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“I’d love for you to call them HZ and Gennifer just to get a rise out of them.”

He blinked at her. “Something going on with you guys?”

She did this movement that was part shrug, part head tilt, and part frown. She’d done that as a girl, as well. Usually when unsure about something.

“They didn’t approve of my marrying Wayne. Not sure if you knew about all that. So, the combination of me going against their wishes and moving so far away caused this gap between us that never got bridged. Well, things are a little better now, I suppose. At least between them and Kara. But for them and me, it’s iffy.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Eh, what are you going to do? I was a rebellious kid, and they didn’t like that I rebelled.”

For the first time, Aaron felt like he could say the other man’s name. Mainly because she already had. “So, where is Wayne, anyway?”

But her answer astounded him.

“I wish I knew.”

CHAPTER NINE

She did wish she knew. So much. Yet, since she didn’t, the least she could do was

answer Aaron's questions. Her thoughts waded into the whole mess. The whirlwind first days of their marriage. The setbacks. His serving job and her becoming a stylist. All their combined hopes and when those hopes were dashed. Then, the nitty-gritty.

"But I can't talk about it. Not now." She glanced toward the bedroom where her daughter would be settling in. Probably not sleeping yet. Probably listening.

"I get it." He peered around, saw his plate at the table and started to wash it in the sink.

"You don't have to do that. You're a guest."

"I don't mind. Besides, I'm more family than guest, anyway, right?"

She nodded, even if she didn't know how to think of Aaron. Was he a guest? A friend? Family? A love interest?

But he couldn't be that. Not for her. Not even after all their kisses.

Kisses she both desired tremendously and knew she shouldn't let happen again. She wiped the table off as Aaron did the dishes. Even at his best, Wayne had never bothered with housework. He'd never done chores of any kind. Looking back, she wasn't sure why she'd been all right with him saddling her with all the work day in and day out.

Aaron wiped his hands dry with one of her best towels, one that even then was awfully ratty. Good thing he was unlikely to judge her for that.

"Well, I should be going."

Joy followed him to the door, stepped outside with him. "Thank you for coming

over.”

“Thank you for having me.” He leaned in, and it might’ve been for that sweet peck rather than another of those incredible seals of his lips over hers, but she pulled back, anyway.

Aaron didn’t seem upset by this, though. Instead, he opened his arms for a hug. She gave him one, keeping it short.

They continued to text during their lunches the following week, and when he asked her out again for the next Saturday, she agreed. She simply had to put a box around how they were together. As long as it never escalated beyond friendship, she could be with him.

Unlike the rather informal date they had during those first few Saturdays, Joy was shocked to discover that their date this week would be happening at the ritziest of all Rocky Ridge locales, The Aviary.

Once they arrived, she felt uncomfortable. Not due to being underdressed or due to the price of this place—okay, it was a little due to the price of this place—but because of his expectations. The Aviary wasn’t a place a man took a woman he just considered a friend.

It tended to be a restaurant people patronized for special occasions. The kind of eatery where birthdays and anniversaries were celebrated. Where you’d take someone who was graduating or to propose.

And she would never be celebrating any of those events with Aaron.

“Is something wrong?” he asked her once they were seated in such a plush booth it was probably cushier to sleep in than her own bed.

She shook her head no, even went so far as to mumble, “Nothing.”

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Yet she couldn't get rid of the feeling that what he wanted from her was more than she could give. They ordered—she purposely asked for the least expensive meal on the menu—and she tried to eat what was set before her but felt so guilty. To make matters worse, she realized that Aaron had been trying to carry the conversation all by himself.

“And then Bessie let out this crazy noisy moo, letting us know she'd be okay,” he finished up, but she hadn't been listening to a word he'd been saying. “Why do I feel like you're not enjoying tonight? Do you not like what you ordered? If so, we'll get you something else.”

She wasn't enjoying tonight. But not due to anything that was his fault. And ordering something else on top of what she already had would only compound the issue.

“Look, you've gotta give me a hint or something because I feel like I'm failing tonight, and I don't even know why,” he continued, and a sore spot the size of a grapefruit developed in her chest. Like someone had hauled off and slugged her there.

Maybe it was her conscience.

“You're not failing at anything,” she attempted to reassure him, gripping onto his arm. But as fast as she clasped at him, she let him go. Couldn't be sending the wrong signals. At least not more than she already was.

“Think I have the solution...” His face brightened as the server approached with what turned out to be dessert. “Strawberry cheesecake ice cream. It's your favorite, right?”

It was. It so was. Yet him stabbing her through the heart might've felt better. Still, she felt touched that he remembered and tried so hard to think of that and only that.

“Remember that pumpkin patch you guys tried to grow that time,” she said, relieved that she could come up with a topic of conversation for once tonight.

Aaron talked animatedly about the pumpkin patch, the corn maze, and his family's attempt at pumpkin juice, none of which worked. The pumpkins were too small and few of them reached the size of a softball when they should've been more like basketballs. The corn had been so patchy that people could see through the “walls.”

And the pumpkin juice tasted horrible. Like a mix between cough syrup and a spiced pumpkin latte that had soured.

For a moment, Joy felt more upbeat, especially when they left the restaurant without him making any sort of declaration or grand gesture. It made an argument that they were still just friends. That they would bestayingjust friends.

Until he escorted her to her door. Kara was at Joy's parents' house, so she couldn't use her daughter as an excuse to not welcome him in. And when he kissed her, she forgot to protest it.

At first, everything felt right. She became caught up in the feel and taste of Aaron. The one hundred percent of focus he gifted to her as he united their lips together. But in the next instant, guilt again landed on her like an anvil, making her yank herself away.

“Aaron, I'm sorry, but I can't,” she gasped. “I can't do this.”

“Can't do what?” He looked utterly baffled, and she couldn't even blame him.

“I can’t... I need to talk to you about Wayne.”

Aaron seemed perfectly receptive. Open, even. “Okay. Tell me whatever you need to tell me.”

So she launched into the briar patch that was her marriage and how it eventually fell to pieces. She discussed the series of disappointments they’d each suffered and the habits her husband had unfortunately developed.

“I didn’t know about the drugs initially. I suspect now that he’d probably been doing them for a while when I discovered him with them. He was getting sloppy, started caring more about getting high than the subterfuge needed to hide them. There was the lost job he didn’t inform me about, and it all was spiraling. Then, he simply didn’t come home one day.”

Joy explained about all the avenues she took to try and locate him, and when she finally gave up. When she decided the best thing she could do was come home. Back to Rocky Ridge.

Aaron had been sitting on her couch, but now he pushed to his feet. “I’m sorry you went through all that, but you’ve listed him as missing, right?”

“Yes.”

“And he’s been missing for over a year.”

“Nineteen months at this point.”

“So, did you divorce him?”

Joy swallowed, and it hurt to do so. “No.”

“No?” Aaron sounded incredulous. His eyes went wide as he put out his hands as if to steady himself. “Wait, you’ve been dating me, kissing me, and you’re still married?”

“He’s gone, Aaron. Chances are that he’s dead.”

“But if he’s not dead, we’ve been...” He halted his words midsentence, dragging his hands through his hair. Hair she herself had been cutting for him.

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“You could consider us separated if nothing else,” she said, needing to alleviate the pain that had started in her chest and now radiated through her entire torso. Her stomach had become this icy pit. “And no matter what, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“No,” Aaron agreed. “But that doesn’t change the fact that I’ve been making out with another man’s wife.”

He covered his mouth with his hand as if to take back what they’d already done, his complexion pale. Backing out her door, he vanished, and she could hear him as he took missteps that almost led to a bad tumble down her stairs.

Hurrying outside, Joy saw him right himself in the nick of time before storming away from her staircase. She made to follow him, but when he peeked up and saw her, he waved her off, shaking his head.

Then, in a cloud of dust from the bare earth of her driveway, he disappeared.

Joy felt horrible about what happened with Aaron. They’d reestablished a friendship and maybe even more, and she blew it out of the water like a torpedo. She had to calm down before driving over to collect Kara. After taking an hour to pace and attempting to plaster on a calm expression, she arrived at her parents’ place.

“I don’t mean this to sound bad, Joy, but you’re looking a little peaked. Are you feeling under the weather? I’ve got chicken noodle soup, if you do. Ginger ale, too,” her mom offered.

The gentle way she stated this, the pure kindness with no rebuke of her words, made that pain inside of Joy lessen. She peered over into her mother's eyes and her father's face as he placed some of Kara's drawings on their fridge, and suddenly, the distance that had been between them for so long faded into nothing.

"I don't know where my husband is, or even if he's alive," she confessed while her daughter was playing a video game in the other room with her earbuds in, going into details about how he'd failed her and Kara. "And then when I told Aaron that I was still married, he freaked out."

She anticipated her parents railing on Wayne, but they didn't.

"Who else knows about Wayne?" her father asked.

"The LAPD, and I've listed him on missing persons sites. I even put up posters at one point, asked everyone at the restaurant where he worked. I've done everything I can think of."

"And did you leave your information with the police?" her mom inquired next.

"Yes. Also, with my friend Debbie. She was the production assistant on the soap Wayne auditioned for, and then I was able to interview with her. Thanks to her, I held gainful employment the whole time I was there. She knows I'm here with Kara and has my number."

"I think it's time to pursue a formal separation from your husband," her father said. Neither of her parents liked saying Wayne's name.

"Yes," her mom agreed. "Find out what you have to do to pursue divorce proceedings despite not knowing his whereabouts. Then, explain to Aaron what you're doing. I'm sure once he sees that you're making strides to change your marital status, he'll be

desperate to spend more time with you.”

“Desperate?” Joy scoffed. That sounded really extreme.

“He was always in love with you, you know,” her dad intoned quietly. “That’s likely why he was so taken aback. He thought he had another chance with you, but you’re still tied to this other man. The same man. Aaron wouldn’t feel like pursuing you would be the honorable or respectable thing until you do. He’s a very principled person.”

“I know.” Joy did know that. She’d always known that about him.

On her way home, with a sleeping Kara in tow, she noticed a billboard for the Stewart Family Law Practice. Pausing for long enough at a stop sign to type their number into her phone, she made a note to contact them.

Going to her appointment set up for the next Tuesday, she discussed the steps necessary to file for divorce in the state of California. There were plenty of official hurdles to jump to legally separate herself from a person of unknown location, but it felt good to gain some forward momentum where Wayne was involved. This had been coming for a long while, and it was past time she got the ball rolling.

With that out of the way, she contacted Aaron and left a voicemail. When he didn’t immediately answer, she sent a text, as well. She needed to apologize. She was certain that her parents were right, that Aaron had been blindsided by the thought of dating a married woman, no matter what the state of her marriage might be.

Her day at work passed without any messages from Aaron, and she couldn’t help but feel down about it. Still, if she’d permanently burned her bridges with him because of not coming clean up front, she’d just have to accept that outcome for what it was.

Yet when she arrived home, it was to find Aaron waiting for her in person. And the second she came up to him, he kissed her.

CHAPTER TEN

Once they broke their kiss—after Aaron thought he had sufficiently communicated the depth of his apology nonverbally—Joy had fallen all over herself to explain.

“It’s just that I don’t make a habit of talking about him. And if he’s still alive, clearly he’s no longer interested in me or Kara. And?—”

He cut her off with another kiss. It might not be as good a form of communication as he wished, but he liked it, anyway.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, filtering fleeting kisses to her lips, her nose, her lips, her cheeks, and her lips. As shocked as he was by Joy’s marriage revelation, the more he processed what she told him, the more it made sense that she’d put off a divorce. After that amount of time, what were the chances that he was coming back, no matter his status?

“I’ve started the process to file for divorce. I won’t stop until it’s done. I wouldn’t be with him now even if he appeared from out of nowhere and said he wanted me. That ship sailed a long time ago.”

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Aaron would feel better still if he could punch the guy, but he doubted he'd get the chance. He couldn't imagine a scenario where the guy would return. If he was even alive. Both Joy and her daughter deserved a man in their lives who would always be there when they needed him.

And obviously, Wayne Randall wasn't that guy.

Besides, Joy becoming open and honest was worth its weight in gold. As long as they talked they could make progress together. And progress with Joy was all he wanted to make.

After chatting for a couple of hours, he went home feeling like something fundamental in their relationship had shifted. He found it so comforting, so satisfying to know that all the secrets Joy had been keeping out of shame or fear were now revealed. They could be plain with one another now and going forward, and since she seemed to be feeling this time what she hadn't the last time, he had high hopes for a real future as a couple.

He was at work investigating a weird hole in some fencing along the barn when he received a text from Joy. Since it was two hours prior to his lunch, he took a minute to check what she'd sent.

Joy: Bad news. Kara was sent home early for some sort of teacher workday and when she got there, the floor was wet. I'm here now, and it looks like a plumbing leak. The landlord suggested we stay elsewhere until they've dealt with it.

Aaron: Anything I can do?

Joy: No. Unless you know a lot about plumbing.

He didn't. Not really. Aaron knew some basics but even that was fairly limited.

Aaron: I suggest letting the experts crawl under there and do their thing.

Joy: Lol. That's the plan. Looks like we'll be at my parents' place for a day or two.

Aaron: Want me to pick you up there tomorrow for our dinner date?

Joy: Do we have a dinner date tomorrow? *grin*

Aaron really did grin.

Aaron: Yeah, we do. Unless there's something you're not telling me.

Joy: We do. Same time?

Aaron: You bet. I'll be there.

Their Saturday date was memorable. One reason why was because he and Joy connected in a way they hadn't up until then. They went to a fall crafts festival the next town over, then ate at somewhere Joy hadn't yet tried, the Three Sisters Barbecue Excellence.

"I could eat my weight in this brisket," he swore to her.

She raised her eyebrows at him. "That's an awfully big brag. You really think it's that good."

"I do."

“Well, I’ll be the judge of that.”

She was, and based on the groan she released, she could eat her body weight in it, too.

Once back at the Taylor household, he stood with her out on the porch. He wasn’t in a hurry to go inside. Being out here brought back all sorts of memories from their high school days. Looping his arms around her he held her like he had then, as well, relishing his ability to be this close to her.

After they’d clung to each other for what felt like not long enough, he leaned away and looked at her with a smile. He nuzzled her nose with his, then ever so slowly, he went in for a kiss.

And that’s when the porch light abruptly came on. Even though he and Joy were grown people with lives and jobs, the teenager in him still jolted a bit from being put in a sudden spotlight.

“Geez. My mom. I can’t believe she did that. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. It’s kind of cute. And a little nostalgic.” He pulled her to him again and breathed in her scent.

Joy giggled, and he delighted in the sound. In the time since he’d started dating her again, Joy had begun to fill out. Her bare arms no longer seemed bony and her cheekbones, while still high and regal, were no longer gaunt. The woman in his arms right now felt healthy and perfect.

Too much worry and stress for far too long had taken a heavy toll on her body. He was glad have helped her come back to herself.

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He was completely lost. Lost in her kiss. Lost in her arms. Lost in her, period.

And as long as he could breathe in her scent—bubble gum, like when they were young—feel her warmth against him, he knew he could be content. It helped, too, that he knew what was going on with Joy. He was willing to go at whatever pace she'd like, even if in the back of his mind, he vividly remembered the direction their relationship had gone the last time.

Not that he wanted to think about that right now.

It wouldn't be like that this time around. Joy was divorcing the dirtbag she married, and once she was legally free, they could move forward together.

He felt optimistic about his chances with Joy, especially right now. He finally released her so she could go inside, though he did so reluctantly. He waved to her once back behind his steering wheel and pattered through town and onto his bumpy driveway. Only once he pulled up in front of his own house did this niggling concern pop back up for him.

It was like an itch he couldn't scratch or a burning along his scalp he couldn't seem to reach. He hated to think it was a warning going off or some sort of red flag blowing in the wind, but he couldn't seem to free himself of the feeling.

Heading inside, he busied himself with folding the laundry he'd been neglecting and getting ready for bed. But even while brushing his teeth and taking a shower, that annoying feeling wouldn't go away. He didn't know why. But ultimately, he decided to ignore the feeling.

This was Joy, the woman he'd always loved, and his dream come true. This time nothing would thwart them. Nothing would rear its ugly head.

They would work out how to become closer and closer. The seriousness he'd always avoided with every other woman he'd dated he actually welcomed when it came to Joy. His original feelings for her were still there—had been there all along—even though the dynamics of dating Joy would have to change to include Kara.

But she was a cool kid. He could imagine them combining into this single, happy family unit eventually, after all Joy's legal entanglements had gone through whatever rigmarole it would take to work themselves out.

It could happen this time. He could be with her now and five years from now. He could be with Joy for a lifetime.

And he would.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Now that Aaron and Joy had figured out their footing, she felt so content. For the first time in a long, long while, she had this sense of stability that had been missing from her day-to-day experience. She'd basically forgotten what it felt like to be supported. But with Aaron at her side and her parents now at her back, she felt like she had a whole new lease on life.

She felt thrilled to observe just how well Kara and Aaron had been getting along. Not only had he been highly complimentary to her level of skill in drawing, he'd actually sat down to color with her, a paragon of kindness and patience.

"You get to play with cows, right?" she asked him, and Joy hid her grin as he nodded. Kara probably imagined him playing with cows all day rather than working to keep

them safe and well fed.

“I do. Some horses, too. All out along this vast stretch of fields and pastureland.”

This had led her daughter to sketch out this detailed picture of both types of animals standing behind a fence. Each creature looked remarkably realistic considering how young Kara was. In the back was a swath of open country with a handful of trees here and there. There were even mountains along the horizon.

“I made that for you to color in,” Kara explained to Aaron, and pride burst inside of Joy at this inclusion. Particularly when the two of them spent the next half-hour coloring in mutually relaxed silence together.

She’d once hoped that Wayne would’ve shared such a relationship with his daughter, that he would’ve prioritized Kara over everything else, but those dreams had long since died. Seeing such a thing transpiring with Aaron instead gave Joy hope.

It looked like returning to Rocky Ridge, something she’d dreaded before she’d done it, would turn out to be the best decision, after all.

She felt overjoyed when Aaron volunteered to be there for her daughter’s Career Day at school, too. Kara had asked her himself, something that astounded Joy, but she was so glad that her daughter felt comfortable enough around the man she was dating to do so.

Joy took off from the salon to watch as her childhood best friend cheerfully discussed his life as a rancher. The whiteboard surrounding the room and the colorful posters provided a bright environment and interesting backdrop for him to present in.

“It’s a lot of responsibility,” he informed the kids, his cowboy hat in hand. Aaron seemed so sweet and bashful in front of that third-grade class that Joy was sorely

tempted to take a photo of him to save the moment for posterity. “The animals depend on us to take care of them, and if we don’t, they won’t be able to provide milk or baby calves for the next generations. We maintain fences to keep them safe, and in the barn, we have to be their own personal clean-up squad.”

“Why?” asked a boy in the front row, his pants busted out at each knee. A memory of Aaron at the same age swam back to her with his jeans in a similar predicament. She wondered how much a future son of his might resemble this tow-headed young boy.

Then, she shook her head. It was far too early to go there. At least with herself in the role of the mother.

“Well,” Aaron scratched at the back of his head. “Because their stall is also their bathroom.”

“Ewww,” several of the kids intoned, and Joy snorted, deciding to cover the accidental noise with a fake cough. Aaron didn’t miss this and caught her eye with that constant grin of his, this one edged with gleeful humor.

“But I don’t mind even that duty. I love taking care of animals and being out in the open air like that... It’s just the best feeling ever.”

Joy could see it in his face. He meant every word, and she felt so glad he gained so much satisfaction from his work. She did, too. Having a fulfilling career really did help to make life easier. It’d been the one part she’d been able to cling to while in California no matter what might be going on with her husband.

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After Aaron's turn was over, Kara proudly seized his hand as if claiming him, and Joy watched from the sidelines, elation filling her heart. He gave her daughter a fleeting embrace, told her to have a good day, and together, Joy and Aaron walked out.

"You did great up there, you know."

Replacing his hat on his head, he grinned at her. "I was so dang nervous. Who knew presenting in front of a bunch of children would be so nerve-wracking?"

"You might notice that I didn't present," she pointed out.

"What? You declined Kara's invitation?"

"No." Her daughter hadn't even asked her, not that Joy minded. "But I would've been a mess up there. I thought you did an excellent job."

He brushed his lips across her temple in thanks, and she felt so gratified that he did this so automatically. Where the connection between her and Wayne had been fire, her connection with Aaron was like water. Flowing endlessly and effortlessly. Easy. Gentle. Yet with powerful currents that could shift the earth itself.

She liked the concept of floating along with that water very much.

Even better, once back in her car, she received a call from her landlord.

"Leak is fixed. We replaced the linoleum. You should be good to go now."

Easing past her door, Joy's breath caught in her chest. She'd once gone into an office building with carpeting that had been flooding and the reek of mildew had been intense. Her place didn't have any carpeting, but still. She tried to prepare herself for the worst. Yet, as she strolled in, everything smelled normal. There was no horrible odor of any kind.

And the landlord hadn't fibbed about the linoleum. In fact, he'd replaced the old pea green pattern with a much more subtle hardwood look that classed the place up significantly. It was like an entirely new residence. She couldn't wait for Kara to get home just so she could show her.

Even better, the leak was fixed. If she hadn't known about it, she never would've guessed such an event had even happened. With a spring in her gait, Joy yanked out her phone. Aaron picked up on the first ring.

"Come over for dinner tonight. I'm making homemade enchiladas."

"You know how to make enchiladas?" He didn't say this with sarcasm, though she wouldn't blame him if he did. She didn't tend to cook anything fancy. But she had learned this from-scratch recipe and on occasion—like a celebration of good news, for instance—she trotted it out.

"Yes. I was taught by the best, a lady from Mexico City who lived next door to us. It was her abuela's—grandmother's—recipe. Best and most authentic I've ever tasted. Thought I might share it with you."

"I'll be there. And Joy?" his voice lowered as if about to divulge a secret to her.

"Yeah?"

"I can't wait."

The interesting thing about their dinner that night, other than that they all ate on her pan of enchiladas until it was totally gone, was how natural everything felt. Their conversation had been laid-back and casual. Incredibly relaxed. Kara spoke to him as if he had been in her life forever. If Joy hadn't known better, she would've believed that they'd held such a dinner a million times already. The overall dynamic felt as if Aaron had always been a part of their family.

Joy just hoped that same dynamic would continue. She loved the idea of all three of them coming together like this.

Despite this covertly held wish of hers, Joy did her best to keep the romance between them as low key as possible. She knew she'd made a mistake by letting things get a little too intense before, and she didn't want to go down that trail again.

Not this early, anyway.

Besides, Kara was still getting to know Aaron. She didn't want to rush such an important relationship, not the one between herself and Aaron or the one between Aaron and her daughter. If things were going to proceed forward, she needed for it to be in as healthy and as gradual a manner as possible.

This specifically meant not kissing him like there was no tomorrow, difficult as it was to resist the temptation. Every time she glanced in his direction, she remembered that first kiss, as well as all the delectable ones that came shortly thereafter. But she couldn't risk a repeat. She had no desire to have an ember burn hot just to fizzle into nothing.

She needed something long-lasting. Something permanent. Something that unlike her marriage to Wayne, would be forever. Both for herself and for Kara.

The chemistry remained, though. Just beneath the surface. Yet rather than focus on

how much she missed kissing him, Joy allowed the anticipation of that eventual moment to float in her consciousness like some nebulous cloud providing much-needed rain. In many ways, looking forward to pressing her lips to his again made that future all the more inviting.

But rather than just managing her behavior, she talked to Aaron about what was going on. The conversation was brief, but they were on the same page. She was thankful he understood and supported her wishes.

“You’re worth the wait,” he’d said. And she believed he really felt that way.

Two more weeks went by in this almost bliss-filled state. She asked Aaron over for dinner most nights with him happily obliging. A couple of times, he even brought groceries and cooked for them. Joy so appreciated his efforts on this. She loved that he was willing to be an equal partner in whatever they might be building.

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The next evolution of their dynamic happened almost by accident. He'd stayed later than usual while watching a movie with the two of them. Joy knew it was past time she let him go home when Kara specifically asked him to read her a bedtime story.

Stunned, Joy blinked at her daughter. Kara had never let anyone but her or Wayne read her a story, not that her MIA husband had done such a thing in years.

It was too bad, too, since he would act out all the scenes. But any chance of that was over now.

Maybe that was why Kara's next question to Aaron sprang out as an entreaty. "Will you do the voices?"

Joy herself did the voices but didn't go as far as acting the scenes out. She'd discovered long ago that pinging around the room during a time that was meant to calm her young daughter down was unhelpful. In fact, after Wayne left her room, she'd often had to rock her little girl to get her to settle back down. That's how long it'd been since Wayne had "read" her stories.

But remembering that was neither here nor there.

Aaron seemed to be game. "I'll try. No promises, though. And no making fun of me."

"Never," Kara told him solemnly, so after clearing his throat for longer than it should've taken him, he began.

"Once upon a time..." Aaron did a decent job of reading the narrative part, but when

the character's dialogue started, he made this massive effort. He made his register go all high-pitched for the girl character, and for the boy, all low and raspy.

It was hilarious, and to keep from laughing out loud, Joy had to conceal her mouth behind her palm. She didn't want to dissuade him, but his completely serious approach had her in stitches, especially as the expressions on his face remained strait-laced.

He was approaching telling the story as if about to perform some life-giving surgery.

It helped that during his first time changing his voice Kara clapped her hands in support, a giant smile on her little face as she begged for Aaron to continue. So, he did. This also helped Joy to get a hold of the wild explosion of humor that was trying so desperately to escape.

After a while, Joy's mirth dwindled as it hit her just how compatible this man was with her daughter. He was downright wonderful with her and already becoming her friend. Things were so good between them that it made Joy's chest ache with longing.

It meant so much to her. More than she could even express. Still, she had to tread carefully here. She didn't want Kara going through what she already had with her father. The repeated disappointments. And now the absence of him. The loss.

Even though Joy craved being a family so much. She could imagine that future time so easily. Too easily. Joy knew she was falling hard for this man. Had already fallen.

And based on those open smiles Aaron kept providing her, he was falling right back.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Aaron had traveled to the most remote corner of the ranch in search of a heavily

pregnant heifer. No one had seen her in a day or two, and he sincerely hoped she hadn't managed to get herself in dire straits somehow while out of earshot. Most of their gravid cattle delivered without issue, but there were times when one would end up in distress.

It'd been Brock's job to keep an eye on this section of pasture. What he should've done was bring the creature closer to the barn so Pete could easily see to her if necessary. Why Brock hadn't, Aaron had no idea, but it didn't exactly surprise him to have the weekend off only to discover that Brock had been the one to lose track of this female.

Brock was the one off today, so Aaron had taken it upon himself to see to it everything was as it should be. Which it wasn't.

Fortunately, Aaron found her and her freshly delivered calf beneath a small grove of Englemann spruce trees. Immediately dismounting from his all-terrain vehicle, he scrambled over to check on her.

"Hey Mama, looks like you've got yourself a new baby."

He spoke in calming tones, edging closer and closer. Nothing appeared to be amiss, thankfully. But he still carefully herded the two all the way back to the barn. Pete liked to examine every freshly delivered mother and new calf.

It was when he was about halfway there when his walkie-talkie buzzed to life.

"We need all ranch personnel to the main house pronto. That's all ranch personnel to the main house, now." The voice had been Bryce's and while the overall head of the Duncan Ranch could be short with people at times, Aaron had rarely heard this level of sharpness from him.

Something was wrong.

“On my way,” Aaron reported in, then pushed the pair of animals along as fast as he could.

Once he’d settled the two in the barn he raced for the main house. The majority of the large staff and members of the Duncan family were already inside, and despite the expansive size of the downstairs living space, it was standing room only.

Aaron didn’t know if he was the last to arrive, but as soon as Bryce made eye contact with him, he began.

“Whitney went into labor a few hours ago again. Sam’s taken her to the hospital, and it seems she’s going to have to deliver this time. It’d put her and the babies in danger not to.”

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There was dead silence for a beat, then...

“Wasn’t she on bedrest?” Bobby Dean asked. Aaron knew Whitney and the most elder ranch hand had often worked directly together.

“She was,” Lindsey picked up the narrative. If she wasn’t out running Sensational Shindigs and Soirees, her party planning business, that probably meant that she was making this family emergency her priority right now.

That more than anything else had Aaron’s heart pumping overtime.

“Everyone else at the hospital with them?” he asked, meaning the rest of the Duncan clan.

“Yes,” Bryce spoke up again, closing the distance between himself and Lindsey until she gripped his forearm. It was a small gesture, but it told Aaron just how scared the family was. “Maddie and Lilliana have left their classes with subs so they can go, too.”

It was all hands on deck, then.

Bryce tended to be a serious—often read grumpy—guy on a good day, but the lines scrunched up between his eyebrows were positively grim.

The question Aaron didn’t ask was if Whitney was far enough along to successfully deliver the babies and have them be healthy. It’d been several weeks since she’d initially been put on bedrest, but it was still early. He counted up the weeks in his

head from where he knew she'd been the last time he'd heard Sam discuss her pregnancy.

She'd be thirty-six weeks now. Would that be long enough?

"We wanted to keep everyone updated, so you'd know what was going on," Bryce said. "Lindsey and I are heading up to Billings now, as well, so look to your direct supervisors like Aaron if you need anything."

As they left, Lindsey caught Aaron's eye almost apologetically, but he knew the drill. Stepping in during a crises was part of his job, and he would do whatever he could to help while the Duncans were otherwise occupied.

Taking it upon himself to personally speak to every remaining ranch hand, he made certain all vital duties had been seen to and taken care of. When he discovered a few of the hands struggling to finish up moving some equipment into the barn, he hopped on over to assist them.

It was after he'd sent the last of these hands off to go home that he heard two voices chatting in another section of the barn. From where he stood behind the backhoe, Aaron knew he couldn't be detected, even though he'd never set out to hide. In spite of this, however, based on what he heard, maybe it was a good thing that he remained concealed.

"He said the newbie's been shirking his duties and leaving early whenever he wants now," said one of them, someone who sounded an awful lot like Keifer.

"That's not true," said the other guy, someone who'd been working there for about a year named Tyler. "If anything, Aaron stays later to wrap things up from what I've seen."

Aaron stayed behind the backhoe but shifted in order to make out the two speakers. Keifer simply shrugged.

“Just what I heard.”

“From who?” Tyler asked. Aaron didn’t know Tyler very well, but he was a good man and hard worker from everything Aaron had ever witnessed.

“Brock.”

Yep. That tracked. Aaron’s blood boiled at what this meant. Brock had been spreading rumors and essentially talking smack about him to the other hands behind Aaron’s back.

“Well,” Tyler scuffed the bottom of his boot across a nearby board as if to knock something off the bottom. “Brock can say whatever he wants, but Aaron’s in charge now. And if I were you, I’d take everything out of Brock’s mouth with a grain of salt.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Keifer demanded. The guy had always been a lightweight in the brain department along with being a hothead. No wonder he’d gravitated to Brock of all people.

“It means that the only man I think Brock is in support of is Brock. He’s the type who likes to stir the pot just to create animosity and drama. I guess he believes trashing others makes him look good. It doesn’t. I’d watch my back around him, if I were you.”

With that, Tyler tromped out of the barn leaving Keifer in his wake. Keifer followed after him a few seconds later, his movements chaotic and fidgety as if aggravated. Likely because Tyler refused to be fooled by Brock’s nonsense. Or that of his

apparent crony.

Over the next few days, Aaron had a ton on his plate, but he made it a point to keep tabs on whatever part of the ranch Brock wound up on. Far too often, he saw him lollygagging where he wasn't supposed to be or taking far longer than he should've been to finish a simple task.

Because he had so much to do, he didn't take the time to confront Brock about any of this, instead, he maintained a running tally of infractions to be dealt with later.

Whitney gave birth on Tuesday to a tiny baby boy and a just as tiny baby girl. They each had to be kept within the confines of the NICU due to their lung capacity not quite being up to par. The newest Duncans weren't out of the woods—wouldn't be for weeks—so Aaron had his folks peek in on Whitney and Sam to provide support and give him updates.

He didn't want to bug any of the Duncan brothers at a time like this.

Besides, he had so much to keep him busy that he honestly didn't have the time to do anything but manage the ranch. With four main personnel missing—five, really, since Whitney was among them—it left a lot on Aaron's shoulders just to keep up with the regular order of things.

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But that didn't mean that he'd forgotten the conversation he'd overheard between Keifer and Tyler.

It was Friday and right outside the main house when he heard his name in Keifer's mouth again, only it wasn't his name. It was "the newbie" said in the nastiest of sneers.

Of course, it was.

"Think the newbie will be off this weekend like usual?"

"Sure, he will. He thinks he's above the rest of us, that's why he insists on getting that special schedule." This came from Brock.

It was also utterly untrue.

As Aaron had risen through the ranks, he'd worked weekends like everyone else. It had only been since his very recent promotion that he'd been given every weekend off. And most of that came due to him needing to be at the ranch for important deliveries and other duties that took place only Monday through Friday.

Aaron and the other members of the staff were well aware that technically, the Duncan brothers were off on the weekends yet often ended up working if something came up.

That was just ranch life.

“I figured,” answered Keifer.

“See, he’s got ‘em all fooled. He’s convinced the Duncans that he’s some dedicated golden boy who deserves to lord things over the rest of us, but really, I think something’s happening under the table. Bet Sam would’ve given the position to me instead, if I’d offered to pay him off like the newbie did.”

Pay him off?

What in the world did Brock think he was saying? For one, Aaron would have to have money to pay Sam off, which he didn’t. And two, and more significantly, Sam didn’t run the ranch that way. None of the Duncans did. They had above-board business practices and were respected by everyone in Rocky Ridge.

Well, everyone but Brock, it seemed.

What did Brock ultimately think he would accomplish by slandering not only Aaron’s good name but Sam Duncan’s?

Fury leaped into Aaron’s blood and seared through his veins. It took a lot to make him mad, but talking hogwash about Sam was enough to do it. He’d been aggravated by Brock’s behavior before, sure. But straight up lying about Sam and how he’d been supposedly manipulated by a payoff that Aaron couldn’t afford to offer in the first place?

And to do it while the Duncans were in such a state of worry and concern?

That crossed the line from dirty to reprehensible.

“Brock,” Aaron shouted. It was rare for him to raise his voice, but it was even more rare for him to feel quite this incensed. “Get over here.”

The instant Keifer caught a glimpse of Aaron, his eyes went wide and fearful. Then, he sprinted for the hills like the coward he was. That left Aaron alone with his former bully, the man who just didn't seem to know how to behave like a decent human being.

"What?" Brock said, all uncowed bravado. No wonder weaklings like Keifer followed him. He could be brazen, that much was for sure.

"I heard what you said to Keifer." Aaron waited, wanting to know what Brock's next move would be.

"I say plenty to Keifer."

So, that was how it was going to be.

"That's slander. Spreading falsified information about me and Sam is slander, and you know it."

Brock smirked at him, one hundred percent unrepentant arrogance. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

Aaron had been standing maybe ten feet away from the man, but now he took enough steps forward to have no more than a foot and a half between them. For the first time, Brock's stance became slightly less obnoxious as his complexion paled by a shade or two. Aaron lowered his voice to just above a murmur.

"Since you so clearly have a problem being here, I'm suggesting that you go find employment somewhere else. The Duncans have enough on their plates without you pulling stunts on their ranch. Especially when all you're trying to do is stroke your own ego."

Brock's expression went apoplectic, the perpetual look of scornful disdain he gave Aaron filling with rage. "How dare you? You're nothing, newbie. Nobody. And you certainly can't fire me."

"Actually, I can," Aaron kept his tone mild. Totally tranquil except for the beam of steel underneath it as he kept his eyes locked on Brock's. "I overheard you myself, and I have a witness willing to make a written statement about the specific brand of horse manure you've been spreading. Don't think I'll hesitate to use those means to get rid of you. And I don't just mean from the Duncan Ranch. I mean from the entire town. I'm sure the powers that be in Rocky Ridge would be fascinated to hear your word against someone like Sam Duncan's."

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Sam had a pristine reputation with the town, and if anything, Whitney had an even better one. Everyone in Rocky Ridge had looked up to the Duncan family name ever since Jim and Maggie had built something from nothing decades ago.

Aaron held Brock's gaze without so much as blinking. He'd already gone to Tyler a couple days back. If Brock pressed the issue, he'd find out extremely quickly that he had precisely zero legs to stand on. Someone like Keifer didn't make for a strong ally. He would no doubt fold like a bad hand of cards.

Brock maintained eye contact with Aaron for maybe three seconds longer before twisting on his booted heel and storming off. He gunned his engine in park for long enough to leave a nasty column of black smoke from his engine—talk about a toddler throwing a temper tantrum—then roared out of there so recklessly that he nearly hit a fence post.

Good riddance.

Buoyed by having this unfortunate duty over with, he called Joy.

“Hey, it's so good to hear your voice,” he said, the moment she answered.

“Awww, you're sweet. Long day?”

“The longest.” But just as he made his reply, he could hear her doorbell on the other end of the line.

“Hang on just a sec.” Aaron didn't think anything of Joy going to the door until he

heard her gasp. “Wayne...” Wait, Wayne? As in her former husband Wayne? “Y-you’re... Wh-what are you doing here?”

“Joy?” Aaron spoke her name. She’d told him about this guy and how he’d been a drug addict. The last person he wanted around Joy—and Kara—was someone like that. “Joy? Are you all right?”

And that was when the line went dead.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It was like seeing a ghost. An impossible apparition. As Joy stood there gaping at the man she hadn’t made visual contact with in literal years now, she wondered if she might be hallucinating. Because this man couldn’t be here. Not after all this time. Not after everything that had happened.

Joy hadn’t known how she would feel should this moment ever come, but now that it was here, what she experienced was pure horrified shock. Because somehow, this man who’d been absent for so long had shown up unannounced at her door.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes,” were the first words out of his mouth. Then, he offered her one of his slick smiles. “What? Aren’t you gonna give your man a hug?”

She didn’t, though. She merely stood there feeling numb. Paralyzed, almost. How could he be here? How? And...

“Where have you been?” she finally managed, her throat seeming to take forever to work correctly. “It’s been right at two years now, Wayne. Where have you been?”

But Wayne waved away her question as if it were nothing. Inconsequential.

“Oh, baby, don’t fret your pretty head about all that. You’ve gotta come back with me. Back to Hollywood. Exciting things are going on, and I want you to be a part of them. And Kara. Where’s my darling little angel girl?”

And as if staged, that’s when Kara appeared from the bedroom where she’d been drawing, her small face hopeful as she stared at the man in the doorway. Her biological father.

“Daddy? Is that you?”

“Of course, it’s me, silly. Come here.”

Kara did, almost as if in a trance. He gathered her into his arms and spun with her as if he’d only been gone for a week on some fun trip. Not like he’d basically vanished as if he’d never existed. She giggled like any other eight-year-old who was experiencing her father’s unexpected return and attention.

Joy couldn’t blame her. How often had she hoped for this? Prayed for it? Yet to have it transpire at this point...

“I’m all set up now,” he went on. “It’s all done. That soap opera job I kept trying for? I got it. I finally got it, Joy.”

But Joy’s thoughts were spinning out of control. Only as an afterthought did she remember the phone in her hand and that Aaron had been on the other side of that connection. She glanced at the screen to see that it was blank, the call ended. She must’ve bumped the disconnect button or something. Or maybe in her stunned state, she’d accidentally hung up on him.

She’d call him back.

“Futile Passions had to ultimately recognize my talent and sign me on. It was just a matter of time. And that time is now, baby. Woohoo!” Wayne whooped in delight to Joy even while still swinging their daughter around the limited confines of the above-a-garage apartment.

Joy merely stood there staring at the spectacle in disbelief. It took her a minute to even register that she was shaking her head at him.

“No.” The word left her at a whisper, and Wayne didn’t even seem to notice, so she increased her volume. “I said no.”

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He quit spinning with Kara, setting her down. She clung to him, dizzy.

“What do you mean, ‘no’?”

“No means what it’s always meant, Wayne. You pop up out of the blue without calling or attempting to contact me in any way after so ridiculously long...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he stated with a placating tone, his hands motioning as if fluffing a pillow. “I know. Things kind of went off the rails for a little while. You know how life can get a bit messy sometimes. But I’m back. So I came to tell you in person. I’m back.”

He smiled and opened his arms as if she should fall right into them. She didn’t.

“You haven’t answered my question yet. Where. Have. You. Been?”

His smile dropped off his face. “Come on. Don’t get all bent out of shape over it.”

Joy shoved her hands onto her hips and wordlessly gestured for Kara to step behind her. Her daughter glanced back and forth between Joy and her father and slowly obeyed.

Wayne didn’t even seem to notice.

“I’m beyond bent out of shape,” Joy informed him. “Bent out of shape doesn’t evenbegin to cover it?—”

“Hold up, it’s not that bad,” he interrupted her, so she cut him off right back.

“Hold up nothing. I didn’t know where you were or what might’ve happened to you. I searched for months and months and even went to the police to file a missing persons case. But there was no sign of you anywhere. I thought you might be dead. After so long, I had to assume that you were.”

“Aww, that’s sweet that you worried about me, baby. But I’m fine. Fantastic, even. That’s why you two have gotta come back home with me. Life will be just like I always promised it would.”

Still, he refused to mention anything about all the time that she and Kara suffered without him. No explanation. No apology. No apparent regrets. It was too much, and Joy was completely done with him. She couldn’t possibly continue in a marriage where her supposed partner couldn’t be bothered to not only show up for two years but to come clean about it after the fact, either.

Who did that? And how could he think it would be okay with her?

And that wasn’t even considering Aaron and how she felt about him.

“I wondered if you’d abandoned us, then I wondered if you had died or been killed,” she continued as if her former husband hadn’t spoken. “So, recently, I started the procedure necessary to separate myself from you. To legally divorce you.”

Wayne’s eyes widened as if his mind had never formulated any such possibility.

“Divorce me?”

“What else was I supposed to do with a husband who had been gone for so long? If I’d received a call, a message, an email, a letter, a carrier pigeon—anything at

all—then I would’ve kept looking. I wouldn’t have stopped at anything until I’d located you. Until I’d tracked you down.”

It was the truth. Despite all the turmoil with his addiction and him not being a good provider, she would’ve offered him a second chance. Maybe multiple second chances. But when she came to a certain crossroads, she at last understood that she had to cut her losses.

“But you gave me nothing, Wayne. No signs of life. Not even a cryptic lead that could’ve amounted to something. That’s why I moved back to Rocky Ridge. So I could continue to raise Kara and move on with my life. My attorneys sent the official papers by certified mail to California last week.”

“Official papers?” he repeated at a shout.

“Don’t fight,” Kara cried out, moving to the space between them, tears flying down her cheeks. “Please don’t fight.”

“Kara, come here,” Joy told her, but her daughter was too upset to listen.

It struck Joy all the sudden that Wayne had found her here. How had he done that?

But before she had the chance to ask, he strode up to her door and with a terrible roar, thrust his fist right through it. Joy stiffened in terror as Kara screamed.

Wayne ignored their daughter. Acted as if she weren’t even there.

“Divorce me? Divorceme? How could you?” He dragged his fist back through the splintered pine, knocking the entire thing halfway free of its hinges. Shards and slivers of wood rained across the linoleum, and Kara dropped to her knees and covered her head right there in the middle of the floor. But he just went on ranting as

if endangering his little girl was no big deal. “How could you, Joy? You’re my wife, and you swore that you always would be.”

Scared to death for her daughter, Joy seized her around the shoulders and tugged her away. Kara didn’t resist her, clinging to her mother as much as she had clung to her father minutes before. Placing herself between Wayne and her daughter, Joy did her best to figure out what to do.

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Ultimately, she didn't correct him or continue to raise her voice at him. She didn't reiterate that he'd been the one to ruin their marriage with his drug use, undependability, and endlessly long absence. It wouldn't do any good in this less than rational mindset. She knew there was no way he could be reasoned with right now. If anything, he was a menace to her and her daughter's safety.

So, she did what she could to deescalate the situation.

"I did love you once," Joy conceded to him, keeping her voice purposely calm and even. "And I did make a vow to stay with you forever. But after such a long time without you, I had to assume you were gone. Then, I chose what I thought would be best for Kara and me."

Wayne was standing there seething, and since she couldn't tell what he might do next, she knelt in front of her daughter while maintaining sight of her former husband. "Kara, why don't you go back to the bedroom, okay? This is a discussion meant for only Mommies and Daddies."

The little girl's eyes were noticeably red and swollen now and quiet sobs still rattled her petite form, but thankfully, she nodded and vanished into the bedroom.

The instant that Kara disappeared, Joy heard steps jogging up the stairwell. And the next thing she knew, Aaron had materialized there at her threshold, his features taking in the damage from the broken door and the unwelcome man who'd appeared. Then, her childhood friend's face became as hard and relentless as she'd ever seen it.

Unforgiving.

“I don’t know who you are,” Aaron said with a steadiness that belied that tautness of the muscles in his arms and how each of his hands had now clenched into fists. “But if you know what’s good for you, you’ll get yourself away from Joy.”

And in a nightmarish sequence that she wished she could halt, the man she married took a massive swing at the man she’d grown up with, and Joy couldn’t help but shriek in panic.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Aaron glared daggers at this other man inside Joy’s apartment. He didn’t care why the guy was there or whatever business he might think he had with Joy, Aaron hadn’t liked what he heard through the phone.

And when he’d caught sight of the hole in her door and how it’d literally been ripped from its hinges, his brain had lasered in on every detail. Yet he’d only had room for a one thought and one thought only.

Protect Joy and Kara.

That didn’t change one iota as the man took a swing at him. Aaron didn’t find it difficult to duck out of the way. Working with large herd animals meant he had to have swift reflexes.

The guy who’d thrown the punch didn’t fare so well, though. He lunged forward off-balance, then straightening himself, his complexion reddening—though how much of that was fury and how much embarrassment Aaron didn’t know—began to bellow at the top of his lungs.

“You’ve been cheating on me.”

The man aimed this accusation at Joy, which told Aaron this waste of skin must be Wayne Randall.

But what spurred Aaron into action was Wayne's next move, a move that entailed him snatching at Joy's arm and saying the following. "I'm taking her with me. Her and my girl both. They're mine, and they're going with me whether they like it or not."

Joy yanked free of his grasp, backing toward the bedroom where Kara stood in the doorway, openly weeping. All the color had drained from Joy's complexion, and she was trembling all over. Aaron didn't know if this was from anger or fear, but either way, he was finished with this yahoo and his threats.

Slowly, deliberately, Aaron paced forward until he stood in the center of the room. He glanced back at Joy and Kara, remaining as a barrier between the increasingly desperate looking woman and child Aaron felt responsible for. Keeping his motions purposeful, he retrieved his phone from his pocket and tapped the number nine and then the one on the keypad.

"I'm calling the police unless you get your tail end out of here right this second."

"But—" Wayne protested, yet as Aaron made of show of hitting that last numeral, he at last took off, barreling down the stairs and slamming the broken door in his wake, bouncing it off its broken hinges.

Aaron pulled the door to and rushed down to his truck, making certain to search for any vehicles that might've belonged to Joy's ex. He didn't see any, nor did he see Wayne.

He headed back inside to check on Joy and Kara as he dialed 911 on his phone. The cops would at least come by and take a report. This break in by Wayne Randall

needed to be on record. The damage would have to be repaired after the police were done with whatever investigation they could do.

“You two all right?” he asked, but even as the question left his mouth, he already knew the answer. Joy confirmed this.

“No. I don’t think so.”

Kara was no longer sobbing, but her poor little face was a wreck. Aaron grabbed at a nearby box of tissues and cleaned her up as Joy watched him, looking like she was about half a minute from tumbling over into a heap herself.

“Hey, that was a lot of excitement, but he’s gone now,” Aaron soothed them. “And I’m going to make sure he doesn’t come back.”

“But that was my daddy.”

Kara’s words tore into Aaron. Not because of the truth of them. There was no getting away from that. But because of the sorrow and devastation behind them. Wayne Randall might not have realized it, but he’d just broken his daughter’s heart into thousands of pieces.

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He deserved serious consequences for that sin alone.

“People get confused sometimes, Kara,” he spoke gently to her. “Sometimes they forget what the most important thing to them should be and get a little lost. And sometimes, they hurt those they love in the process. It’s sad, but it’s human. So, for now, I want you to try to put what happened tonight out of your mind and lay down.”

Kara nodded, obeying him, and just for good measure, he read her not just one story, but two. He made certain these were cheerful stories with happy endings—ones he for sure performed the voices on—and that by the time she’d shut her eyes no more remnants of that evening’s trauma marred her features.

At least not in an obvious way.

Her eyes and nose remained somewhat red and swollen, and her expression wasn’t entirely peaceful. But it was the best he could do under the circumstances.

“Thank you for calming her down,” Joy gave him her appreciation, and looking in her eyes he could tell she was just as freaked out as her daughter. Joy might still be on her feet, and she might’ve stood up to the man who’d seemingly come back from the dead. But she looked like a stiff breeze could blow her over as easily as a bowling ball knocked over pins.

“Least I can do,” he comforted her, leading her over to her couch.

“You didn’t have to do anything. You didn’t even have to come over here. But I’m glad you did. He...” She trailed off. “He was so... scary.”

Aaron couldn't help but agree.

"Showed up with no warning, I take it."

Her only reply was to nod. She reminded him of someone who had been through a terrible car accident and was physically uninjured but had no clue where they were. Then, almost as an afterthought, she spoke up.

"None at all." She looked down at her hands, where she'd been rubbing her thumb into the opposite palm. It was a habit she'd had since elementary school but only when upset. "After all my worry, wondering what was going on when we were in Hollywood, seeing him today was just..."

Taking her nerve-ridden hands in his, he held them until she gazed into his eyes. Bringing them up to his lips, he pressed kisses to each palm, as well as the back of each hand. Then, he tucked them together against his chest, bringing her head so that it nuzzled against his collarbone. Looping his arms around Joy, he simply held her.

He did it for her, sure. But he also did it for himself. To remind himself that she was in fact okay.

"I was going to call you back. I'm not even certain how we got disconnected."

He wasn't, either. But that wasn't the aspect of what had occurred that was currently bugging him. "How did he find you and Kara, Joy? If you hadn't had any contact with him for so long, couldn't even reach the man to serve him with divorce papers, how did he just appear like he did?"

"Good question," she answered, which didn't satisfy Aaron in the least. But then, she went still and sat up, goggling at him. "Debbie..."

“Huh?” he raised his brows, puzzled.

“My friend back in Hollywood. Debbie Malone. She worked on *Futile Passions* as a production assistant and was friendly with Wayne. That’s how I became a stylist on the soap. If I hadn’t, we wouldn’t have had two pennies to rub together.”

“All right.”

“No, you don’t understand.” Joy pressed her open palm to his collarbone. “She’s the only person back there I told my plans to. She knew I was taking Kara and moving back here. That I was coming home.”

To Rocky Ridge.

“And she told Wayne,” Aaron concluded.

“She must have. I doubt that he maintained ties with anyone he knew from so long ago here. He knew I’d been on the outs with my mom and dad forever, so he wouldn’t have gone to them anyway. If he had, they wouldn’t have told him. Not in a hundred years. So, it must have been Debbie. It couldn’t have been anyone else.”

Before he could ask her what she was doing next, she was up and plucking her own phone from the cord where she had it plugged in on the kitchen counter.

“It’s earlier out there. Not too late to find out for sure,” she mumbled, and that was when he understood that Joy was calling this woman. Aaron listened, and Joy didn’t beat around the bush. “Have you seen Wayne?”

There was some chatter he couldn’t quite make out.

“Uh-huh. I suppose it’s a miracle. Did you let him know where I was?”

More incoherent chatter, the tone this time sounding more like regret.

“Well, in the future, please don’t let anyone else know our location. Especially anyone affiliated with him. He’s unstable, Debbie. And when he just showed up... well, it wasn’t good.”

More chatter.

“Don’t apologize. Just... You didn’t know what he would do. I didn’t, either, when it comes down to it. I had no idea he was even alive.”

“Me, neither,” Debbie must’ve hollered it because Aaron was able to understand that loud and clear.

After some more back and forth, Joy hung up with Debbie.

“She apologized all over herself. Said she was so surprised and delighted to see him that she didn’t think anything of giving him our address. I get it. I mean, she knew us as husband and wife. And back then, he’d been a more normal guy. Even if he did have all these huge aspirations. But in Hollywood, that’s not unusual. Lots of dreamers.”

“Nothing wrong with dreamers,” Aaron put in. “As long as their dreams don’t make them lose touch with the important parts of their reality.”

Like Kara.

Not that he said that part out loud.

Although he didn’t say anything further, a bunch of different possibilities occurred to him then. With Wayne alive and aware of where Joy and Kara were, he could come after them again. She may need to file a restraining order against him.

Or, on the other side of the coin, he could be paying child support. Especially if he was making money off a soap opera. He owed it to his wife and daughter after treating them so poorly for so long.

But it was Joy who came up with a concept that he never would've thought up.

"He could fight the divorce and make things difficult."

"That's true." Aaron grimaced at the idea.

"Or even try to take custody."

"He could, but no court or judge would give Kara to a former—or maybe current—drug addict. No way."

"But what if he makes more than I do? Couldn't that go against me as staying her guardian?" He could hear the worry in her voice.

"You have proof of his drug use?"

"Yes."

"And that you've been the sole parent to your daughter for all this time?"

"Sure. I also have copies of all those missing persons reports I filed. I might even still have a poster somewhere."

"Then, you should be more than covered," Aaron hugged her. "So, if he tries to fight you for her, he'll lose."

"Do you think he will? Try to fight for her?"

“I don’t know. Maybe,” he admitted. “But I’ll back you up, if need be.”

“He’ll probably just reassert that you’re the man I’ve been ‘cheating with,’” she said, using finger quotes, her expression downcast and glum.

“We know better.”

Then, her features brightened. “The next step in divorcing him was having him officially declared dead. That’ll be on record, so maybe that’ll help my case, too.”

“I’m sure it couldn’t hurt.” He played with the ends of her hair. “I don’t feel right about you being here alone. Do you want me to stay here on the couch?”

“I could just go to my parent’s house.”

But she glanced at the bedroom where Kara had so recently gotten to sleep.

“You could. But why disturb her?” He didn’t mind. Even if it would make it necessary for him to leave before dawn to get ready for his time at the ranch. Aaron was more than willing to make that sacrifice, though. He didn’t think he’d receive one minute of undisturbed sleep if he went home knowing they were alone, anyway.

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Aaron remaining here provided Joy with the solution she was looking for. The one she needed. And the one he needed.

So, with her giving him a blanket, he sacked out on the living room couch, facing that door. Luckily, unless Wayne turned into a spider or a bird, there was no other way in. He didn't sleep much since he stayed on the lookout, but as Joy and Kara stirred to ready themselves for school and work, at least he had peace of mind.

"I'm likely going to have to stay late at the ranch." He thought of the extra work he'd have to cover because of firing Brock. He'd also have to explain himself to Bryce. But the rest of the Duncans other than Sam and Whitney should be back on duty today. "So why don't you head on over to your folks' house tonight?" He could see the objection forming on her lips. "Or at least until your landlord has the time to replace your door?"

Reluctantly, she nodded. "All right."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The whole nextday Joy felt like she was in a fog. Her coworkers noticed, asking her repeatedly if she was okay, but she just nodded, not feeling like going into it. It was still so hard to believe that Wayne had shown up like he had. Maybe she'd been naïve to think that he'd been deceased after all.

But then, if he hadn't been dead or incapacitated in some way, where had he been? What had he been doing? Those questions still plagued her.

It occurred to Joy that part of coming here to Montana hadn't only been due to having her immediate family here—tense as it had initially been between them—but because she'd always felt safe here. So many of her most innocent childhood memories happened in Rocky Ridge and being with Aaron again had reminded her vividly of that.

Until now.

Now, because of Wayne's appearance, she felt scared here. For her daughter and for herself.

And that made her furious.

She now knew a few things about his abrupt appearance. Like that the soap opera had indeed agreed to hire him for a part. Debbie had confirmed that much, as well as the role she'd played in informing him of Joy and Kara's location. Wayne would have to return to Hollywood soon or lose the one thing he'd been drooling after for so long.

Joy seriously doubted that he'd risk that.

As much as she wanted to be irate at Debbie, she really couldn't be. How could her old friend have known that Wayne would show up without letting his wife know first? How could she have known that Wayne would come over to see her and Kara without having good intentions?

Maybe in his own eyes, those were good intentions. To him, maybe he thought he could just go and collect his wife and daughter as if all the insanity of these past months and years had never taken place. If that was the case, though, Joy certainly wasn't the only one who could claim the title as naïve.

Yet somehow the naïve angle where Wayne was concerned didn't ring true to her.

What motive could he have to darken her doorstep without feeding her even the most minimum of answers? Where had he been and why had he maintained his radio silence for so long?

It just didn't add up.

She didn't know if he was still involved with drugs or those who would've provided them to him or not. If he'd been in rehab somewhere, wouldn't that have been the first thing he'd confessed? And if he hadn't gotten clean, how did he succeed in securing such a crucial job offer?

What could his motives be? Why would he want them back after all this time when he'd clearly had no inclination to be with them prior to now? Was he trying to prove something to himself or others? Or was he so delusional that he believed she'd go back to him despite all that had transpired?

And why show up just to act so erratically? Didn't he realize that his behavior would convince her that Kara couldn't ever be around him again?

None of this made sense.

Maybe due to her distractedness or due to the lack of business, Christine sent her home early.

"Go on now. Go get some rest. I've never seen you look so tired."

It wasn't a compliment, but she couldn't be upset with her boss for saying it. Joy had hardly managed more than a few winks last night. Not when her memory kept serving her heaping helpings of Wayne throwing his fist through her door over and over. She'd basically done nothing but toss and turn.

Even with Aaron there to keep an eye on things.

Her old childhood friend had been a lifesaver to her, though. And to her daughter. He was the one behaving as a man should, not the man she'd married. How had Joy made such a huge mistake in judgment only to realize it far too late?

Not that ripping herself to shreds would help. She just couldn't seem to help it.

She'd contacted her landlord, who hadn't been pleased to hear that her apartment needed yet another repair, then went to sit down with her lawyers for a follow-up appointment. She updated them with the new information she had to share, anticipating them having some solutions for her.

But they hadn't.

"Your husband came to your place unexpectedly?" Phil asked her. He was one of the partners.

“Yes.”

“And this despite the fact that you didn’t think him amongst the living?” Craig, his partner and brother picked up the questioning.

“Yes,” she emphasized the word. Did they think she’d joke about something like this?

“The problem, Ms. Randall, is that you came to us seeking a way to divorce someone you strongly suspected—or told us you strongly suspected—to be deceased. Now that you know for certain that he’s not, this alters things significantly,” Phil said.

“Alters it how?”

“Your divorce will not automatically go through uncontested channels, for one thing,” Craig said, and the way they were volleying the conversation back and forth was making her feel like she was in the middle of some sort of intense tennis match.

In combination with her lack of sleep, it was also giving her a headache.

Phil spoke up next. “For a divorce to be uncontested, both parties have to mutually agree to part ways. They have to decide who gets any property or belongings. They have to decide on the custody of any children, as well.”

“But wouldn’t I get custody since Kara’s been with me all along?”

“Most likely,” Craig tilted his head toward her. “But without him agreeing to that, it

could prove a point of contention. If he fights you on this divorce, it could become much more costly than you were anticipating. And if you have to go to court to fight for the custody of your daughter, we'll need to have proof ready that you're the superior parent. Especially if you plan to keep her away from him entirely."

Did she want to keep Kara away from him entirely? Before last night, she wouldn't have thought so. But then again, before last night, she'd been ninety percent sure that she would never lay eyes on Wayne again.

"We're not saying it's impossible," Phil leaned in closer, softening his voice.

"Definitely not," Craig added.

"We're merely letting you know that the game has changed. With your husband indisputably alive and residing in another state, it complicates our ability to sever ties with him in a manner that would be cut and dried. This will likely take more time and financial resources now," Phil informed her. Not unkindly.

And all she had were her few meager belongings and a stylist from a small town's salary. Which, frankly, wasn't that much. Fine to live on as long as no real monetary setbacks came up, but nothing like what she used to make. The cost of living in Montana might be cheaper than in California, but that advantage could rapidly disappear in the face of high legal costs.

This wasn't good news.

"Based on his actions, the first thing we suggest you do is file a restraining order against him," Craig told her. "Not only for your safety and that of your daughter, but to create a longer papertrail. If he violates it in any way—and that means visiting you at work or even sending you a call or text—then that would be grounds for the court to find in your favor."

This was frightening, and not only in the way that Wayne acting so erratic was frightening. So much was at stake.

“Good thing Aaron didn’t plant his fist in his gut, then. That probably would’ve made everything worse.”

“Say again, please?” Craig focused on her with narrowed-gaze scrutiny.

“Aaron. Aaron Hunter. He’s my...” What was Aaron to her? What had he become to her? “I suppose you could say we’re dating.”

“That’s something you’ll need to cease and desist this instant,” Phil sounded stern. “If you’re already being accused of cheating, the last thing you need is to have a man in the offing that your ex can point a finger at.”

She shook her head. “But it’s not like that at all.” Even as she said this, though, her traitorous memory brought to her images of their fervent kissing. Kissing that had taken place on more than one occasion.

“We’re not stating that you have to end the relationship on a permanent basis,” Craig picked up an ink pen and clicked it a few times. “But until this case is wrapped up, for the good of yourself and your daughter, it’ll look better on your end to not have any other... entanglements.”

Joy felt heat come into her face, even though she wasn’t technically guilty of any wrongdoing. Still, they were making her feel that way. As if carrying on with Aaron somehow meant that she was the one who was guilty.

Even though she knew she wasn’t.

“It’s about appearances,” Phil explained, standing. He retrieved some paperwork

which she glanced through. “This will enable us to continue the divorce proceedings with the new information that has come to light. There’s still a possibility that your former husband could let this go through uncontested...”

“But from everything you’ve just told us,” Craig took over. “We doubt it. So, you should prepare yourself for a fight. And it might become a difficult one.

Phil indicated where she should sign, and once she had her copy, she held the papers in her lap, staring at them without really seeing anything.

“We’ll send a copy to your email. Once Mr. Randall receives the updated paperwork, we’ll let you know his response. And we understand that this is a lot. Just know that we’re on your side, Ms. Randall.”

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“Thanks,” she muttered. But she left feeling far more concerned about her life—and her ability to retain custody of Kara—than she had upon entering. This was so overwhelming. Having to explain to Aaron that they could no longer be in contact, especially.

How was she going to do it?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Aaron drove to work with the biggest transportable mug of coffee he owned. Despite this, he remained a bleary mess. Still, once there at the ranch, having something physical to focus on helped.

It was while working on some machinery inside the barn that he caught sight of Brock approaching Bryce on the front porch. From where they were, he couldn’t hear what was being said, but based on the eldest Duncan brother’s stiff posture and the abrupt moroseness of Brock, the latter didn’t like what he was told.

Good.

Aaron had gone to Bryce in person himself to explain the verbal altercation they’d had. What had stunned Aaron was the ranch owner’s response.

“Doesn’t surprise me,” Bryce had muttered. Aaron had peered at him, his eyes raised. Bryce only shook his head. “That one’s been on his way out for a while. He doesn’t keep up with his responsibilities as it is, and now this? I’m glad you got rid of him.”

“So, he’s still fired?” Aaron hated to ask, but he had to know.

“Oh, yeah. And he won’t be hired back. Not here and not likely anywhere around here. There are plenty of other ranch hands that don’t cause such trouble.”

At least that much had been a relief. Not that Aaron had doubted that he would be backed up—Sam would do it in a heartbeat—but he hadn’t been as certain about Bryce. It was good to know that all the Duncans would stand with his decisions once he made them.

Regardless, as the afternoon progressed toward the evening, he found himself yawning uncontrollably. He hadn’t slept enough last night to get him easily through today, and even doubling his caffeine intake only perked him up by the tiniest degree. It’d been as he’d been wrapping up his duties when he’d received a text from Joy.

He’d felt a swirl of emotions upon seeing it. Gladness to hear from her. Worry about if Wayne had shown back up. Appreciation that she’d been thinking of him like he’d been thinking about her. Then, he’d read the message.

Joy: We need to talk.

Aaron’s only serious relationship had been with Joy herself, yet he’d been around the block enough to know that those words didn’t usually end in the best of results. He’d used them himself anytime any of the ladies he’d spent casual time with had attempted to turn their no-strings-attached dating into something more. They’d known the deal the second he’d agreed to go out with them.

He didn’t do serious. Not at all.

Except with Joy.

Yet here she was using that ominous phrase. He tried not to jump to any conclusions. Nothing good could come of that.

Aaron: Sure. What about?

Joy: I'd rather tell you in person if that's all right.

To quote Lewis Carroll, this was only getting curiouiser and curiouiser.

Aaron: Anytime and anyplace.

Joy: How about the Sip 'n Shop at six? My parents picked Kara up from school today.

At least that was one thing off his mind. Kara would be safe with her grandparents.

Aaron: I'll be there.

Somehow, despite Joy working a mere block away from the diner, Aaron still managed to beat her there after his drive in from the ranch. He ordered a soda to keep him going, but his exhaustion was currently taking a backseat to his nervousness. What did Joy wish to talk about? And why wasn't she there yet?

When she bustled in, he heaved a massive sigh of relief. At least until he detected the graveness of her features. She looked as if she'd just attended a funeral, and his stomach flipped upside down at the sight.

"What is it?" he asked her straight away. No use beating about the bush.

"I..." she faltered, which put him right on edge. "I have to break up with you."

For a split-second, he was eighteen and heartbroken all over again. But then, he pushed his reaction to the side.

“Why?”

“Because of the divorce.” She proceeded to explain all the ins and outs of her rationale and specifically what the lawyers had told her.

Aaron could see that she had her reasons, the best of reasons, yet that didn’t make it hurt any less.

“It probably won’t be forever,” she interjected encouragingly, reaching out for his hand only to draw that hand back without making any sort of physical contact. That hurt, too. Way more than he felt up to admitting. “And I hope you know I wouldn’t be doing this if it weren’t necessary. I care about you. And the last thing I want to do is tear us apart, but...”

She trailed off, but he knew what she would say. What she’d already said. Yet understanding her motivations did nothing to quell the sensation of his heart being sliced in two. Worse, this was all too reminiscent of his past with her. A past when he’d loved her, and she hadn’t loved him back. Not the way he’d needed her to.

And even though that might not be the case this time, this all just... reeked of a repeat.

“Yeah, well,” he spoke up for the first time in what felt like an hour. His throat felt as if he’d coiled up some sandpaper rough side out and swallowed it. “You’ve got to do what you’ve got to do.”

“I don’t want to, though,” she whispered, and it nearly broke him. His eyes burned

and a fist-sized ache of physical pain blocked his breathing passages.

So, he jerked to his feet. A server was heading in their direction, making him grab his wallet. He left behind some bills to cover his soda and whatever Joy might order, then eyed the exit. He couldn't bear to glance at the woman seated across from him right now.

"You and Kara take care," he barely managed before hightailing it for the door.

He had entered his truck and hit the road using sheer muscle memory and had driven for fifteen minutes before realizing where he was even going. Only at that point did it click that he'd been on his way to Billings this whole time.

Suppose it made sense. He needed to hash out his gnarled thoughts with someone he trusted, and that's where his parents were. It was also where Sam was, even if he was indisposed at the moment. He had far greater worries than Aaron dared lay at his feet.

So, it was to his folks' house that he traveled. Which made it twice as ironic when he caught sight of Sam's new SUV in the parking lot on the way, the man himself glancing up with a big bag of food in his hands and spotting him.

After that, Aaron had no choice but to pull in.

"Newbie," Sam greeted him warmly, his tone the polar opposite of Brock's. "What are you doing here?"

"I was going to ask the same of you."

This barbecue joint wasn't all that close to the hospital, even if it did give off an aroma that had Aaron been in the right state of mind would've called to him like a siren. But Sam gestured between the restaurant and vaguely east, where the hospital

lay.

“Oh, this place has Whitney’s favorite barbecue sauce and fried pickles. And thanks to your folks bringing her meals from here, she’s now begun to crave it like she’s still pregnant.” Sam chuckled.

“So, the babies...”

“They’re holding their own. Better than that, actually. They came off oxygen today.”

Aaron gripped his arm, feeling the first honest to goodness smile come to his face since... everything.

“Oh, man, that’s wonderful.”

“It is. Colby James and Faith Margaret are strong little tikes, after all. As Duncans, they’d pretty much have to be.”

Aaron stared at Sam in surprise. He and Whitney hadn’t disclosed the babies’ names to the ranch employees yet.

“You named them after your mom and dad?” He bet Jim and Maggie were bursting at the seams with pride.

“Seemed fitting. Just keep those monikers to yourself. Only the family knows them so far, and we want to make a more formal announcement once the babies are home.”

“You know I will.”

“I know.” It was then that Sam glanced down the road, apparently taking note of the fact that Aaron hadn’t been driving to the hospital. Or to that specific eatery.

“Visiting the folks?”

Aaron dropped his gaze. As much as he'd love to confide in his boss and friend, he knew Sam didn't have the bandwidth for his complex love life—or lack thereof—not even with the good news.

“Sure am. Need to do it more often. Or that's what they're constantly telling me.”

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“A good idea,” Sam’s gaze was knowing, however, as if he sensed that something more was going on with Aaron. “We’ll catch up later?”

“Absolutely.”

They parted after that, Sam eyeing him a bit pointedly.

Yet despite how much Aaron needed to discuss the jumble he was facing, once arriving at his parents’ residence, he shot the breeze with empty small talk for a solid twenty minutes. Even then he wouldn’t have gotten down to brass tacks had it not been for his mom. She rooted around for the real cause of him darkening their doorstep as effectively as a gofer.

“Aaron, what a welcome surprise.”

And...

“Haven’t had you just appear like this in a long, long while.”

And...

“Your color is off. Are you feeling all right?”

All her prodding was like a dam springing a leak in a vulnerable spot. Eventually and inevitably, the structure had to give way.

“No,” his voice left him at a rasp. “I’m really not all right.”

He proceeded to explain everything that had been happening between him and Joy. Not that they didn't already know she was back in town and that they'd rekindled their friendship.

Or at least, that's what he assumed they thought. Turned out he was wrong about that.

"Figured it'd be something like that," his dad said on a sigh. "Something about you and Joy."

"What do you mean?" Aaron croaked out.

"Well, things were bound to ultimately come to a head, weren't they?" His mom moved to stand behind his dad's chair, her hand on his shoulder. "Once you became close to her again, we knew you'd offer her your heart, even if she didn't offer you hers."

How had they known that when he hadn't?

"You've been attached to her since you were a boy, son," his dad grimaced at him. "For better or worse."

How interesting that his father would choose to use a phrase most often referenced when two people pledged their lives to one another. Something Joy had done with Wayne rather than him.

"Am I being stupid?" Aaron asked abruptly. "Spending time with her after all these years? Devoting myself to her?"

"Oh, honey..." This time his mom's hand went to his own shoulder. "You can't help it. Sometimes love is complicated. Sometimes it's simple. For you, it's just always been Joy Taylor. And it looks like it will continue to be."

“Even though it’s apparently never going to actually happen between us,” he added, his sore throat making his tone a little bitter.

“You don’t know that,” his dad countered. “She didn’t say she didn’t love you this time. She just said she needed to cool it until the legal proceedings were done, right?”

“What she said was that she had to break up with me.”

“Hadto,” his mom echoed. “Not wanted to. Right?” Joy had specifically said she hadn’t wanted to. But Aaron only nodded. “I would say that’s a sign to not throw in the towel, then. Not yet, anyway. And you sound like you and her little girl were getting along well, too.”

“We are... were.”

“I say hang in there, then,” Mom reiterated.

His dad was the one to nod now. Only his could be considered one of encouragement.

“But divorces can go on for years,” Aaron told them as if they didn’t already know. They had a lot more life experience than he did and had known plenty of couples whose marriages hadn’t lasted the test of time. “Particularly when they’re messy.”

Besides, it seemed that Wayne would be doing his dead level best to make this one as lengthy and as messy as humanly possible.

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“Then you’ll have to decide whether waiting for her and her daughter is worth it or not,” His mom wrapped up everything as if in a neat little bow. As if there was anything about this situation that was neat or wrapped up.

“Should I?” he asked her, despite her just having declared that the decision was up to him. “Should I risk it?”

“We can’t answer that,” his dad said. “But you’re not a kid like you were originally with Joy. You have more wisdom, more understanding. What I suggest is that you measure all the pros and all the cons. Then, after sitting with that for a good long while, go with your gut.”

“But my gut has done nothing but churn ever since she told me we had to part ways.”

His dad stood and patted his back. “Just give time, Aaron. Sometimes, the only thing you can do in circumstances like these, is give it time.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Watching the light die in Aaron’s amber eyes had nearly killed Joy, and she kept reliving the sight of it over and over throughout the remainder of that evening. As she went through the motions of helping her mom make dinner. As she assisted in the cleanup and made sure Kara quit drawing in time to go to bed at a decent hour.

Up until the instant Wayne Randall had appeared at her door, she had felt a lot of mixed-up feelings toward her husband. Everything from confusion and worry about him going missing to frustration and annoyance with how he’d chosen to live his life.

The excitement of being with him in those early days had long since devolved into trying to get through the day-to-day drama of living with a drug addict.

But his reappearance and especially his reaction to her divorcing him had topped all of that. Now Joy had to work to not actively hate the man for how he'd ruined things for her and Kara. She'd just started to get her life back on an even keel whenbam, Wayne had to detonate it like some hidden bit of explosive.

The last thing she ever could've anticipated that night had been for a Wayne-shaped grenade to blow up her entire existence.

Why now of all times had he chosen to show up? Why when she was just beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel?

Why now when she'd only just figured out that she was in love with Aaron Hunter?

In spite of staying with her parents and feeling safer for the decision, she couldn't rest. All she could do was picture Aaron's agonized expression. It was like a movie clip playing over and over without relief. How she'd disappointed and maybe even devastated him.

The man who least deserved it.

The day after it had happened she'd followed her attorney office's advice and gone to the police and filed an incident report so she would have a paper trail. This also enabled her to file a restraining order against Wayne. It might not do much good since he would likely go back to California, but again, this was about creating a paper trail. Now she'd have proof that she didn't want anything to do with him in person.

Not after what he'd done.

What was strange was how differently she perceived him now. Before his fit throwing, she'd never felt afraid of him. Not even during his drug addict days. She'd thought of him as tortured, as struggling, as battling his inner demons. But she'd never once thought that he'd extend that battle to include her or Kara. Especially not Kara. He'd loved their daughter too much to do that.

Or that was what she'd believed. Now, she knew better.

Now, she was unwilling to take any chances.

Things felt totally different between her and her parents at this point, and she'd never felt so glad that they'd managed to patch up their relationship when they had. Being able to depend on them during such a trying time helped ease at least a tiny amount of her concerns.

After filing the police report and updating her lawyers, she'd thought about returning to the apartment, but facing that hole in the door—even with Aaron having patched it—felt too daunting. That was why a week after that horrible night and six days after she'd ended things with Aaron, she and Kara remained at her childhood home. Joy just couldn't cope with staying in that place alone with her daughter anymore.

She did feel forever grateful that Kara had school. Had this occurred over the summer break, her daughter wouldn't have had anything to distract her from this terrible and disruptive event. Joy was also thankful for Christine and the ladies down at her salon. They'd been so understanding through all this and lenient when it came to Joy missing some of her shifts.

And that was despite how vague Joy had been in describing everything.

Then, there was how nice it was to concentrate on her customers and her work when she could be at work. If Joy hadn't had that to preoccupy her, she was pretty certain

she would've spent way too many of her minutes pondering her new less than stellar situation.

"Joy..." Someone touched her elbow, and Joy glanced up, absorbing only then that it was her mother. "You were a million miles away, I think."

"Sorry. Did you ask me something?"

Her mom pursed her lips as if hesitant to mention anything, but then went ahead. "Your father and I were wondering when you were going to talk about all this?"

She hadn't. Not once. Not fully.

Her parents knew generally what had transpired but not any of the details. Joy hadn't had it in her to discuss all those terrifying events when they first happened, but she hadn't since then, either. So, with Kara in bed, she did. Every nasty word spoken by Wayne. Everything that had made Kara cry. Every piece of advice her lawyers had given her. And even how Aaron had looked so miserable as he'd strode away.

By the end of it, Joy had started to weep. "And you sh-should've seen him, th-those eyes of his were so s-sad." Her dad hugged her as her mom took her hand. She'd never felt so glad to have their support. "G-guess you can say I t-told you so now."

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They'd been right about Wayne. Maybe not at the very start. But there was no arguing with the way things had turned out. Not anymore.

"We shouldn't have taken sides so fiercely," her mom admitted, sounding awfully sad herself. "It caused a rift we never wanted. It's true that we both had a feeling about Wayne. But we're so sorry that it came to fruition."

"We'd do anything to fix things for you," her dad added. "To make it to where you and Kara never had to suffer any of that."

And Joy believed them. She truly did.

"Aaron will come back to you," her mom whispered, but Joy wasn't so sure.

"I don't know, Mom. Not this time. I think I've wounded him too deeply."

"Love forgives, Joy."

She stared at her mom. "You think Aaron loves me?"

"I know he does. He did when you were kids, and I have no doubt that he does now."

This was news to her.

"But..." They'd never said the words this time around. Never outwardly expressed any feelings other than through those kisses they'd shared. For her, because she'd been cautious. And for him, maybe it'd been because the last time he'd said the L-

word to her, she'd dumped him to go right off mere weeks later and fall for Wayne.

"Am I a terrible judge of character?" she asked her parents, looking at first her mother, then her father.

"I wouldn't put it that way," her dad hedged.

"More that you were young and inexperienced," her mom took over. "And a teeny bit rebellious."

Joy snorted and brushed the tears from her face. That was one way of putting it. Rebellious and hard-headed. And seeking excitement over dependability. Now, dependability didn't seem so bad.

In fact, it seemed anythingbutbad.

Because Aaron Hunter was the most dependable person she knew, and she craved to be with him. Especially now that she couldn't be.

The next day during her lunchbreak, she stopped off at her apartment to retrieve some of her and Kara's belongings. Staying at her parents for so long meant they were each running out of clothing and a few other necessities. Kara's favorite coloring books and story books were there, as well.

Joy had collected everything she planned to bring back in one of her mother's laundry baskets when she pushed her door open and right into someone standing there on the landing.

"Ow. Watch it, baby. I might need that arm later."

Wayne. It was Wayne.

She peered at him for only long enough to notice that he seemed bedraggled and twitchy. High, then. He had to be high or strung out on whatever he was on.

Perfect.

“You need to leave,” she ordered him in a firm voice. He wasn’t manipulating her again. Not anymore. “I filed a restraining order against you, so you have to go. If you don’t...” She yanked her phone out of her purse. “I’m calling the cops.”

Wayne simply regarded his feet, his hands fidgeting at his sides. “Call then if you have to. I deserve it. I deserve to be punished for so many things...” And that was when he burst into tears. “I’m sorry, Joy. I’m so, so sorry. I’m sorry for leaving you for so long, for leaving Kara. And Kara, she must hate me, despise me...”

Then, whatever he might have wanted to say became lost in a fit of what could only be regret. It took several minutes of outright shuddering sobs before he became coherent enough to speak again.

“Please forgive me, Joy. Please. I’ll do anything. Anything at all. And Kara. I need her to forgive me, too. I don’t deserve it, I know. But I need it. I need for you both to come home. To come back with me. I can fix everything if you do. I promise I can.”

Joy seriously considered going ahead with her call, but internally, she couldn’t help but give him one last chance. Not for a relationship—that ship had definitely sailed—but to listen to his side of things. To hear him out.

“Tell me where you’ve been all this time.”

“I... I was involved with some bad people. Far away. Far away from here. Far away from Hollywood. I can’t say more than that. But I managed to get away. I paid off my debt to them.”

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“Why are you high right now?” she asked him pointblank, fully expecting him to deny it. But he didn’t.

“I just needed a pick-me-up. That’s all. It’s... hard to get through the day sometimes. You know, to get through the day without it.”

“You’re going to have to, Wayne, or I won’t be helping you. I won’t interact with you in any way unless you quit. You understand me? I can’t afford to assist you unless you promise me you’ll go into rehab. That you’ll stop this permanently. And even then, our marriage is over. I might be able to be your friend, but us—you and me—we’re done romantically.” She gestured back and forth between them.

That made him double over and sob all over again, but he didn’t become violent. He didn’t even get loud when he spoke up again.

“I... I’ll do it. You’re right. I’ll do it. Just don’t chuck me out.”

“And I’m not returning with you to California. Kara isn’t, either. She doesn’t need to go through another upheaval, and she deserves a father who can be healthy and clean for her. We have a life here. We’ve built a life here, and I’m not letting you destroy it.” He shook his head no. “Do you hear me, Wayne? We’re not leaving. But if you’ll do what you promised, I’ll help you find a rehab program.”

He nodded vigorously. “Okay. I will. I’m sorry. So, so sorry.”

So, Joy used the time difference in her own favor and contacted his current employers at the soap opera’s main business office. After explaining the situation, leaving out

certain details like her restraining order or his behavior at her place the week prior, she waited to hear their verdict. Honestly, she didn't have that much hope for his new role. Not after he'd come over to meet with her as high as a kite again.

Amazingly, one of the producers agreed to work with him if he completed the program with flying colors. A producer who proved to be her friend Debbie's direct supervisor. She even knew of a facility to place him.

"My older brother went through rehab. It saved his life. Maybe it'll save Wayne's," she said.

From there it took six weeks for Wayne to complete the program. In the meantime, Joy continued to stay in Montana and work at Salon 406. Kara continued to go to school. And everything became steady again. Normal. Or as normal as people in such weird and upended scenarios could be.

Except for how much she missed Aaron. That wasn't normal at all.

If she'd thought missing her husband had been terrible—and it had, to be fair—doing without Aaron was a whole new sort of awful. Because Joy had had to learn to be self-sufficient without Wayne, she'd learned to go through things the hard way. And every time he was there he'd tended to mess up situations rather than make them better.

Aaron had been the exact opposite. He had improved her life in countless ways, and his absence felt more like the phantom pains from a missing limb. The kind that twinged incessantly. The kind that she was pretty sure would always twinge. And the kind that might prove to stay just as gone.

She wasn't sure after all these weeks that Aaron wanted to come back. That he wanted anything to do with her anymore. Not after she'd had to reject him this

second, so much more important, time.

Joy sometimes wondered if realizing her feelings for him late might not have been a blessing in disguise. Because if she'd had to break things off with him after declaring what she felt? That would've been far more excruciating. Probably for them both.

Still, she received a present in the mail three days after Wayne was released from rehab. A large manila-type envelope arrived, and upon opening it, her heart bounced in her chest. This was better than anything she could've hoped for. Better than anything she could've predicted might come out of all these wild events.

In a state of glee, she hopped in her remarkably old Toyota. Kara was staying over at a friend's house that night—she'd finally made a close friend—and the two of them had been moved back into their garage apartment for over a month now. This would be the most ideal time to go.

All hyped up, Joy twisted her key in the ignition only to have nothing happen. There was no cranking or grinding noise, no lights coming on her dash, nothing.

“Oh, no. Not now. Please, not now...”

But trying to turn the engine over three more times resulted in the same outcome each time. Joy sat there behind her steering wheel with her head in her hands. She'd just started to contemplate other alternatives when someone else pulled in right beside her. Someone with a recognizable Chevy Silverado. Someone who'd already exited to pause right beside her door.

Except it wasn't just any someone, it was the man she'd been yearning to see. The man she'd been attempting to go visit. She hand cranked her window down. At least that part still worked.

“Aaron...”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Hearing Joy’s voice after doing without it for all these weeks made him think of angel choirs and fictional goddesses from ancient stories. It’d been harder than he could’ve imagined to do without her for so long, and maybe he shouldn’t be here now. But he was.

He needed to be.

Or at least, that was what he kept telling himself.

He handed over his reason—excuse—to be here. “These are for Kara,” he told Joy as she stood there looking more beautiful than any woman had the right to be with her green-gray eyes sparkling at him as though misty. That must be his imagination, though. It would be impossible for her to feel his absence as keenly as he’d felt hers.

He’d always felt more strongly than she did. Always.

Joy glanced down, taking in what he’d handed her. “Coloring books?”

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“Yeah...” He suddenly felt sheepish. She could likely see right through him. “I ordered these online a while back and...” And he’d had them for a month now. He could’ve brought them over and left them at her door, but he didn’t want to. He wanted to see Joy. To see the look on her face as she saw what he’d done, selfish as that was.

“Aquatic animals, desert animals, and forest animals.” She flipped through all three. “She’ll love these. Thank you.”

He’d really like to catch a glimpse of Kara, too, if he could. Since he never had the chance to.

“She around?”

“At a friend’s house, actually. I’m so proud of her, making friends in a new place. She’s so introverted that it isn’t easy for her. But she did it.”

“I’m proud of her, too,” he blurted, as if he had any right to have an opinion on the matter. Feeling awkward, he took his hat off, playing with the brim. Mostly to have something to do with his hands now that they were empty. “So, how you been?”

“Good. Good. The landlord stopped throwing me the stink-eye once Wayne reimbursed him for the door.”

So, despite everything, Wayne remained in her life. Did that mean they were getting back together, that the divorce had been cancelled? Aaron swallowed, wanting to ask her, but not wanting to at the same time. If Wayne were here, what would that mean

for his freshly acquired acting job and everything?

“He staying here with you now?” Aaron finally managed, staring at his hat’s interior so he couldn’t catch sight of her face. He didn’t think he could take it if she seemed happy with her husband after all that had gone on.

“Wayne?” she sounded incredulous, so he peeked up at her. “No. He’s been in rehab for the past several weeks. He is out now, though. Based on what Debbie’s been telling me, he’s doing well so far.”

“He went back to Hollywood?”

“Oh, yeah. They love a good underdog story, you know. Gives writers ideas and people in general hope so see someone who was flailing pull themselves out of a tailspin.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

“It’s funny that you’re here,” she said, an odd little smile on her face. “Because I was just coming to see you, but my car won’t start.”

He glanced at the rusted hood of her antiquated car. To be honest, he’d been surprised that the car had been running in the first place. The thing was older than they were. Also, that explained why she kept holding onto the coloring books rather than setting them down in her passenger seat.

Then, the most pertinent part of what she’d said hit him over the head. “Wait... You were coming to see me?”

“Yes.” Her smile became a grin as she set the coloring books down to pick up a large envelope. “Can you guess what this is?”

He couldn't.

"I haven't a single clue."

"These just happen to be my divorce papers," she said, and his pulse rate doubled.

"Divorce papers?" His voice came out entirely too squeaky, but he didn't care if he sounded like a prepubescent twelve-year-old or not. "Does that mean what I think... Can you tell me what that means?"

"It means that Wayne Randall, as of today, is officially no longer my lawfully wedded husband. It also means that he's behaving himself and is willing to work with me on co-parenting Kara. That part might be a little tricky considering such a long distance is involved, but as long as he stays clean, we'll figure something out."

Thoughts pinged through Aaron's head like that silver ball through a pinball console.

"So he went through rehab and agreed to give you a divorce, no problem?"

"Well, we had plenty of problems leading up to this, but yes. He's finished his rehab and we're one hundred percent divorced."

"You're free to date me?" He knew he must sound like a broken record, but he had to be clear on all this.

"I am. If you want to date me." For the first time, she lowered her gaze. That was when he opened her door—the thing creaked like the Tin Man after a long rain—and reached for her. She allowed him to tug her to her feet, her eyes wide.

"I do. I really, really do."

Her features brightened. It was as if the sun had just risen right in front of her. “Then, you should know that I’m available this weekend.”

He smiled back. “Are you now?”

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“I am.” He loved her teasing tone. Besides, the forecasters were calling for the first snowfall of the season this weekend. Maybe he’d take her snowmobiling or skiing. Kara had never been out to his place in the woods. He bet she’d like it.

“How long has it been since you’ve seen snow?”

“Years. Since I left for California.”

“How about Kara?”

“She’s never seen it. Not in person.”

“Well,” he nuzzled her nose with his as he spoke. He could already picture it. Making snow ice cream. Having snowball fights. Building her first ever snowman. And he’d be there for it, helping her. Making memories. “Then, I think it’s high time we remedy that oversight, and it just so happens that I have some time open on my schedule then, too.”

“We could get together,” she offered. “The three of us. If you’d like.”

“Oh, I’d like.” He was already shrinking the distance between her face and his. But then, he sobered somewhat. “If you think Kara would be amenable to us recommencing what we started.”

“She would be.”

“How do you know?”

“Because, silly...” She poked him in the chest. “She talks about you all the time. She misses you.”

“Aww,” he said, delighted.

“Almost as much as I’ve missed you.”

He adjusted his chin until their mouths were mere millimeters apart. He could feel the puff of air from her lips with her every word. “Is that right? You’ve missed me?”

“Why don’t I show you?”

With that, she pressed her lips to his in a manner that erased any doubts that he may have ever had about her feelings for him. And with this soft reconnection, everything righted itself in his world.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Although their kiss had reignited the flaming embers of what they’d shared that summer, she and Aaron took things slow. Almost as if courting her from days past, Aaron took Joy out on dates that had her back at her apartment no later than eleven at night. Oftentimes, they choose to go out with Kara in tow, and their couple adventures became family-centric ones.

One example happened when they had Thanksgiving at his parents’ abode in Billings. Joy had felt amazed to discover that they lived in a lovely townhome built around a manmade pond frequented by ducks and geese. The backdrop was the Beartooth Mountains in the distance along with the cloudless dome of never-ending blue sky.

“Aaron, this is so beautiful,” Joy told him, lacing her fingers with his as they stood outside on the veranda.

The atmosphere was frigid, but with no wind and the sun out, being outside wasn't a hardship. At least, not for long. She'd been reacclimating to the much colder winter temperatures she'd been raised in, but Kara hadn't been as lucky.

In fact, as she stood at Joy's other side, her teeth chattered. And that was despite her wearing what essentially amounted to a parka.

"Go on back inside, Kara," Joy instructed her, shaking her head. "Your lips are blue."

"I'm okay," the little girl swore to her, but her maternal instincts wouldn't allow it. Maybe it'd be different if she went sledding or did something more active, but simply standing around in the cold had Kara turning into an icicle in no time at all.

"I bet my mom would like some help with the cranberry sauce," Aaron hinted.

"You mean getting it out of the can?" she asked him, and Joy blushed. She'd never been one of those traditional moms who created this gorgeous homemade spread during the holidays. She did good to buy an actual turkey breast and not burn it in the oven. Everything else came out of a box or a can.

But Aaron surprised her.

"Sure do. Why don't you ask her if you can help? I'm sure she'd appreciate it."

That left her daughter to brave going into a kitchen with an older lady she didn't know, and although his mom seemed like the nicest person on the face of the Earth, followed closely by his dad, Joy expected Kara to balk. She didn't, though.

"Okay."

Maybe she really was freezing.

“We’ll get her back out here after lunch. The temp should climb a degree or two by then, and I’ll have Mom give her some stalebreadcrumbs to feed the birds. Or maybe just the ducks. Those geese are hissy little cusses.”

And as if on cue, as he spoke, a pair of teenage girls tried to offer a large goose what looked to be popcorn. But instead of eating it, the giant thing ruffled its wings and chased after them, hissing like a ticked off alley cat.

“Yeah, Kara doesn’t need to be around that. I don’t want her developing a phobia around animals, especially since we’re in the middle of Montana where there are animals every where you look.”

“Could get her a pet,” Aaron suggested, and Joy had been considering it.

The friend Kara had recently spent the night with had both a dog—a corgi—and a cat—a Persian, as well as a pair of parakeets. Kara had been asking about going to one of the nearby farms the next time someone advertised having puppies or kittens to adopt.

“You mean like Roar?” Joy asked, quirking her lips up. Roar had been his hamster, and he’d been aptly named. She hadn’t seen a hamster since who caterwauled like that miniature creature had.

Aaron laughed. “Maybe.”

The meal had been a delight because Angie and Vance Hunter were the same kind and caring people they'd always been. They incorporated Joy and Kara into their holiday festivities as if they'd always been there, even encouraging the eight-year-old to decorate all the pies—pecan, peach, and pumpkin—with whipped cream.

Angie had hugged Joy close when they made to depart later. "It's been so marvelous having you over again," she murmured in Joy's ear, the sentiment so genuine that her eyes burned. "And your little girl is so darling. You're each welcome here anytime."

"Thank you." She'd forgotten how inviting Aaron's parents had been. They were just the nicest people ever. "Thank you for including Kara, too."

"Happy to."

Kara's ninth birthday was the seventh of December, and since she'd requested next to nothing since their move, when she asked for a slumber party, Joy willingly accommodated her. What she hadn't anticipated was Aaron's reaction to her having to disappoint him.

"I know Fridays are usually our date night, but I doubt you'll want to be here this time."

"Why not?" he asked her.

"Because it's Kara's birthday slumber party, and she's having not one friend over. She's not even having two friends over, either. Oh, no, she'll be having four girls staying overnight to celebrate."

Joy had been planning it for her all week. She'd bought streamers, one of those helium balloon machines that allowed you to inflate the balloons at home, a huge sheet of chocolate cake, and four different flavors of ice cream. And that wasn't even

mentioning the special present she'd be picking up for her as a gift this year.

"Don't you want any assistance with all that? Four girls plus Kara sounds like a lot."

It would be a lot. But Joy had decided it was the least she could do. Her daughter tended toward the well-behaved even on a bad day, and the past couple of years had saddled her with plenty of those. Kara deserved to have some fun, and a slumber party fit that bill to a T. Yet having Aaron be there would be asking too much.

"Have you ever been to a slumber party, Aaron?"

"Well, no."

"Then unless you're keen to experience nonstop giggling, squealing that runs late into the night, and five hyper third graders high on excess sugar intake, I advise you to pass this one by."

Joy was certain that would be enough to scare him off. It'd be enough to scare any other man off. But Aaron wouldn't be dissuaded.

"If it's that hectic, that would be too much for any one adult. I think I need to be there."

"I can handle it."

"I'm sure you can. But I'm still coming."

Joy ended up being incredibly thankful that he was there. She'd never had to deal with a gaggle of young girls from this side of things before. If she'd tried to do it on her own, she might've wound up under her bed babbling nonsense by the conclusion of it. But, of course, Aaron saved the day. And the night.

He pretended to be a horse and let them ride piggyback, put up with all the noise, and never once lost his patience or raised his voice. He seriously was a dream man.

Lately, Joy had begun to ask herself how she'd missed what a catch Aaron had been back when they were younger. Sure, she'd been foolish and naïve. That probably accounted for most of it. Maybe a bit blind, too. But sometimes, life worked out anyway.

She couldn't be more grateful for it. Nor could she be more convinced that Aaron was the right man for her at this point. He always had been. Only a truly devoted man would put up with all that craziness on purpose.

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It was after the blowing out of the candles, during the present opening and just prior to the cake and ice cream eating when Joy had Aaron bring out the big gift. Even if the gift itself was actually quite small.

In his arms, he carried a teeny-weeny tortoiseshell kitten, a pink bow around her neck.

Kara gasped. And when the rest of the girls had squealed in excitement, Aaron had used it as a teachable moment.

“Now, listen, girls. This little creature is a baby and has tender ears. You’ll have to be a lot quieter from now on.” They’d proceeded to whisper for a while. Even if the quiet didn’t last long. That’s why Joy relocated Katie Purry—Kara had taken a vote to name her—to the far corner of the bedroom.

Aaron even kept an eye on the girls as Joy set up all the various necessities of food, water, cat bed, and litterbox. All this would no doubt take some getting used to, but her daughter was worth it. She was more than worth it.

Joy felt half dizzy from the level of sheer exhaustion kicking her in the behind that night, but the girls were at last all asleep. She’d gone around covering those who needed it, and then kissed her now nine-year-old daughter on the crown of her head.

Afterward, she joined Aaron in looking at each individual girl as they laid in a jumble in a pallet she’d prepared in the living room with blankets and pillows. “Thanks for all your help. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“You could have,” he countered with a soft chuckle. “But it would’ve been a nightmare.”

“Truth.”

“She’s super happy, though. You did good, Mama.”

Aaron had never referred to her in such a way before. Joy liked it more than she could express. But there was one sentiment she could express. And now felt like the right time.

“I love you, you know.” She stared into his eyes. Their gazes caught and held.

“You do?”

“I really, really do.”

“Well, I love you back.”

She smiled at him. “I know. So, why don’t you show me how much?”

He kissed her with as much emotion as he had when she’d first returned to Rocky Ridge, and she relished every second of it.

“I’m going to go,” he said between lip locks, and she merely nodded as she kissed him again.

“All right.”

They kissed over and over again on his way to the door, grinning at each other at the same time. She felt so much buoyancy filling her from head to foot. To know that

even though he might be heading home, he'd be back. To feel all those pieces of her life that had been off kilter click into place. Joy knew this time she and Aaron would last forever.

She'd make sure of it.

EPILOGUE

Aaron didn't want to think of his agitated feelings as being the jitters, but there was honestly no other way that he knew how to describe them. So much rode on today, and even though he felt confident that this would all work out in his favor, some mean little part at the back of his brain kept reminding him of his past failures involving Joy.

He wasn't failing this time, and their relationship had been strong for months and months now. But much as he tried to stomp it out, that annoying niggling never seemed to vanish altogether. That was probably the main reason he kept glancing down at his hands to find them shaking.

"You okay?" Joy asked him, dragging him from his worried thoughts.

"I'm terrific."

He plastered what he hoped was a relaxed and pleasant expression onto his face as they entered the Overlook Grand Mountain Lodge. Although he'd driven past this locale on several different occasions, he'd never had cause to set foot inside it until now. And the only thing he could think to call this place was swanky. At least by Rocky Ridge, Montana standards.

The exterior was constructed of dark wood and had a pale stone façade that fit right in with the rustic nature of the area. The walls were either painted or had been coated in

rich bold colors of wallpaper, and the carpeting was so thick that he couldn't even hear the sound of his boots stepping on the floor.

It wasn't overly fancy like a museum, but it was upscale enough to have Aaron removing his hat upon entering. This made his hands tremble all over again.

"Hello and welcome," said a woman with a shiny badge on her shirt that read Layla Bruce, Spa Manager. Despite being inside she was wearing several layers—a turtleneck and a sweater with corduroy pants. "How can I assist you today?"

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Layla had a delightful southern accent that was rarely heard in these parts. Suddenly, Layla's outfit made sense. The southern transplant was cold in the mountain climate.

"We're Joy Randall and Aaron Hunter. We have an appointment for 2pm."

The spa manager consulted a small electronic pad. "Ah, yes. The couple's massage followed by afternoon tea and some time in one of our private saunas. I'd live in that sauna myself for days if I could. Especially this time of year. Come right this way."

As Layla took the lead, Joy turned her beaming face toward Aaron and hopped up and down in enthusiasm.

"I can't believe we're doing this," she mouthed silently, but he could read every word. He'd learned that this would be her dream date while fishing for the information over the past year. This needed to not only be special. It needed to be perfect.

And deep down, even though it might be somewhat petty, Aaron couldn't help but feel a miniscule amount of smugness. Joy had confided in him that Wayne had never once whisked her away for such pampering, mainly due to the expense of it. It was expensive, and there was no getting away from that fact. But Aaron didn't mind dropping some major bucks for Joy's sake.

He wanted her to know how much he treasured her. How much he would continue to treasure her.

Besides, Wayne was holding his own now. Not only had he not relapsed after going through his rehab program, he'd become something of a sensation on Futile Passions.

His character, a fitness instructor, had already had three different relationships, all of which had blown up in a spectacularly dramatic fashion. It made the ratings for the show go through the roof.

Also, Wayne seemed more stable overall. This past summer—very much on a trial basis—Kara had gone to spend a week with him during the show's hiatus. At first, Joy had contacted her three times a day to check on her, but Kara had a blast. By the end of the week, she'd even asked to stay a little longer, and after discussing it with Wayne, Joy had allowed it. Kara's dad had been going above and beyond to spoil her, so that likely had a lot to do with it.

Yet as long as Wayne didn't mess anything up, Joy was all right with Kara spending time with him. Aaron, for his part, still had his doubts. But if Joy was willing to give him a chance, he supposed he should, too.

Even if Aaron gave him that chance begrudgingly.

In less tempestuous news, Sam and Whitney's twins had grown into precociously adorable one-year olds. They were walking and talking, even though half the time, they seemed to prefer talking only to one another.

"It's a twin thing, apparently," Whitney had explained to him as they fed Bessie together one day in the barn. "This private communication thing. Guess Sam and I are just going to have to get used to always being kept a little on the outside of their conversations."

Despite being preemies, neither Colby nor Faith seemed to suffer any permanent ill effects, a fact the whole Duncan family celebrated during their recent first birthday party.

Within minutes of entering the inn, Aaron and Joy had been escorted into changing

rooms and set up with pristinely white terrycloth robes that felt extremely luxurious to him. He'd never put something so extravagant on his body in his life.

“Now, I'll have Joy come out first and get her all covered with her towel. Then, once you're ready, Aaron, we'll do the same for you. Your masseuses' names are Candace and Arabella. Just wait for Arabella to come get you.”

A ball of nerves, Aaron agreed to all this. But even once on the massage table that was right next to Joy's, he couldn't relax. Not even after thirty minutes of a surprisingly firm and thorough rubdown.

“Sir, you've got knots all over your back here. Exhale for me, and I'll try to work them out again.”

He didn't have the heart to tell her that he couldn't relax. Not until after he performed the task he'd set for himself.

And depending on how that went, maybe not even then.

Once they'd dressed and gone to lunch in one of the largest and most high-end dining rooms he'd ever entered, he prepared for what he had to do. But their server kept intruding. He didn't think the kid meant to. He—Rocky—seemed to just be doing his job. But it turned out that the lunch Aaron had signed them up for had seven courses.

Seven.

“Here's your second appetizer,” Rocky had strolled up to them right as Aaron had been building up his courage. Then came their soup course. And after that, their salad course.

Why couldn't they bring it all out at the same time like normal restaurants did?

But Aaron wasn't truly frustrated with the employees of The Aviary, the name of this elegant eatery. He was frustrated with himself. He felt almost frozen with both his need to do what he'd come here specifically to do and his nervousness surrounding it.

Finally, gathering up every ounce of his determination, Aaron decided to push through no matter what. That ended up meaning that he waved Rocky off when the kid appeared around the corner with their next course, one carried on a tray and hidden beneath two silver dome-shaped coverings.

But Aaron went for it. He dropped to one knee, reaching into his lapel pocket. He'd bought a sports jacket for the first ever time for this very occasion.

"Joy," he began, drawing her attention away from the koi pond set up nearby. She'd been highly enamored with it and had even mentioned bringing Kara here to see it. They could do that, he decided, but only after he got through this.

"Aaron..." She seemed startled to find him on the floor. "What are you doing?"

Rather than explain, though, he kept going.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“I’ve loved you all my life, and I think it’s time that we made our love official to the entire world.” He handed over the little box he’d already opened for her. “If you put that ring on your finger, you’ll make me the luckiest man alive.”

Yet Joy didn’t put the ring on her finger. Not for several endless heartbeats. Instead, she simply stared at it until her eyes began to water.

Uh-oh. What did that mean?

“Ummm,” Aaron cleared his throat and glanced away from her to see Rocky still standing there. The kid was motioning with hand signals to him, and if Aaron was interpreting them right, the server was telling him to keep going. So, after swallowing, Aaron did. “You’re crying. I’m not sure what to make of that.”

Joy said nothing. Instead, she simply attacked him, nearly bowling him over.

“Yes,” she whispered into his ear. “Yes, yes, yes!”

“Yes?” Aaron questioned, not quite able to believe her answer.

“The lady said yes,” Rocky appeared right at their side, and with a gesture Aaron didn’t know the meaning of, suddenly everyserver in the place was surrounding their table to congratulate them. One of them even brought over a huge piece of cake to

share.

“Our engagement dessert is always on the house,” she said.

With that, reality finally struck Aaron as he looked at Joy. “We’re engaged,” he said, hearing the awe in his own tone.

“Yes, we are.”

And standing, then tugging her to her feet as well, he dipped her like they were in some old movie before kissing her again. His bride to be. His childhood friend. The love of his life.