



Forgotten

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Description: Jesse Galloway is in trouble again...

PERENNIAL BESTSELLER NANCY ADAMS JOINS NEWCOMER ELLE LAKE IN WHAT BODES TO BE A ROLLERCOASTER OF LOVE, POWER, AND COWBOYS.

The hard partying bad boy of Foley, Texas has hit his stride with his new band, has mostly stayed out of jail from fighting with the Anderson's, and is rocking and rolling through the mid-south when he checks in at a hotel and finds the past rushing back to him. The girl who got away. Charlotte Garafalo.

Charlotte has spent almost a decade trying to forget Jesse, and the pain the abrupt end of their secret relationship caused. But when he walks into her hotel, hundreds of miles away from Texas, she can't help but spend the night acting like the time never passed.

Life comes fast, though, and after mixed messages, missed signals, and the interference of lawmen in Foley, Jesse and Charlotte have a lot of things keeping them apart. Will they be able to move on together, or will they have to move on alone?

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Chapter One

Jesse

Ten years ago

It was the biggest audience we'd ever played, by a lot. At least three hundred people were gathering past the makeshift gates that designate the performance area of the Louisa County Fair. Louisa County, which includes Foley, Texas as one of its many tiny towns, was known for having an outsized county fair every year. Bringing in musical acts from around Texas had always been a big draw for them.

Now my band was one of them.

Several hundred people were still milling around the fair, eating fried food and riding rickety rides, generally enjoying the somewhat cooler weather, at least as much as it could get under the southwest Texas sunshine. Some of them had ice cream or lemonade and were dressed like they were headed to the beach, while others seemed to have embraced the fall theme. Long sleeves, boots, even the occasional scarf. It was a weird smattering of people who seemed to be existing in entirely different weather patterns.

I didn't care what they wore, though. Not if they were in my audience.

"How's it look out there?" Kevin said from behind me.

I turned, grinning, and knew I didn't need to say anything else. Kevin just shook his

head and chuckled.

At one time, this band had been his. A garage thumper from Odessa, The Hitmen were struggling to draw more than their close friends and family to shows. I happened to see them when they swung through town and played at Crockett's bar without a lead singer, who had left for another band the night before.

I thought they were great and asked if they wanted to jam. Before the night was over, Kevin offered me the lead singer spot, and I agreed, as long as I could write new music and rewrite the vocals on their old stuff. He was more than happy to agree.

In the six months after that, we'd played shows every weekend, sometimes during the week, any time I could get away from the ranch. My free time didn't exist anymore. I was either practicing or performing, and I literally couldn't have been happier.

Now even the other members of the group thought of me as the leader of the band, not just the front man. The crowds had grown. People asked us about merch or to open for their own bands. We were becoming a local name. The boys knew what had changed, and I did too.

The difference was me.

Music had always been the only thing I wanted to do with my life. Ever since I was tiny and Dad handed me his old acoustic guitar, I was hooked. Learning how to play by ear, and the occasional lesson Dad was patient enough to handle giving me, I was crooning out old Hank Sr. tunes by the time I was eight, and by my teenage years was secretly listening to Alice in Chains and Pantera, wondering how I could mix their Texas-styled heavier sound with what I'd grown up listening to.

Now I had that chance, and I was taking full advantage of it.

“Hey, boys, you go on in five. Stacy will introduce you.”

I nodded toward the promoter, an ancient hippie from way back, sporting a Willie Nelson shirt I was positive was from atour he did in the early '70s. Greg, the promotor, was known by everyone by his more appropriate name: Green. Green always smelled like pot and always had his now thinning hair pulled back into a silver ponytail that rested over one shoulder.

“Thanks, Green,” I said. “We’ll be ready.”

“Rock and roll,” Green said, his ever-present smile widening. “Knock ‘em dead, boys.”

I glanced at Kevin, who was tuning his guitar for the final tweak, then to Mike, Rick, and Steve. Rick was banging on his thighs and chest in lieu of his drum set, which was already out on the stage, and Mike was absentmindedly fingering a tune on the bass guitar. Only Steve wasn’t tooling around with his instrument; instead, he was peeking through the curtain and taking massive swigs of a bottle of Jack.

“You good, Steve?” I asked.

“I’m all right,” he said. “Just looking for some strange out there.”

“We’re like fifty miles from home, Steve,” Mike said.

“But it’s a fair,” he said. “Lots of good-looking girls I don’t know. Couple of them around that chick Jesse’s dating.”

“She’s here?” I asked, peeking through the curtain. “Where?”

“Front row, bro. She just got here and elbowed her way up,” Steve said.

I saw her, shocked at myself at how excited I got. I'd known her for a long time, and yet something had changed in the last couple of weeks. Ever since her sister damn-near bullied me into a date. When I had dropped Tamara off at home, Charlotte was outside on the porch, and we found ourselves talking late into the night.

When I didn't call Tamara back the next day, Charlotte found my number and called me to ask why. When I told her I was much more interested in her than her sister, things... changed.

We had to be secret, or else it would crush Tamara, but neither one of us was looking for something serious anyway. We just wanted to see each other, see where this went and have fun. That fun had turned into a lot of intense make-out sessions and the impression that things were going to go official really soon.

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Considering I had a hotel room tonight all to myself and Charlotte was in the front row, fifty miles from home, tonight might be that night.

I closed my eyes and let my hands fall down to the fret and strings of the guitar. Moving my fingers from chord to chord, I pretended to strum and began to softly hum the tune of the first song. It was one I'd written just for Charlotte. We'd been practicing it non-stop for days so it would be ready for today.

Charlotte looked fantastic in the front row. Gone was her usual modest dress or sweatpants and hoodie combo that she had been in every other time I'd seen her beside our dates. Instead, she was in a tight pair of blue jeans with a sparkling belt, a T-shirt tied off at the midriff, and glitter makeup, making her stand out in the crowd of cowboys, cowgirls, and families.

Her long black hair fell over one side of her body, and she flung it behind her as Stacy took the stage to announce the beginning of the show. Charlotte screamed happily with the crowd at the excitement, and I grinned. Hopefully, I'd see all kinds of new expressions on her face later.

Of course, that meant we'd have to tell Tamara soon, but that was a problem for then.

We took the stage to a more raucous applause than usual, the three or four hundred people sounding a lot different outdoors than the fifty or sixty we were used to drawing in tiny bars. I waved politely and then winked at Charlotte, who looked up at me with glittering chocolate brown eyes and lips that I wanted nothing more than to kiss.

“This one is for you,” I said into the mic, pointing at her.

She ducked away, red with embarrassment but smiling wider than I’d ever seen.

We launched into the tune, and I felt the electricity flowing through me. I was as alive as I’d ever been, more me than at any other point in my life. This was what I was meant for. This was who I was.

Sweat poured off me, and I yanked at my shirt, eventually just removing it entirely to a chorus of high-pitched cheers. Song after song, we poured ourselves out onto the stage, and as we neared our last two numbers, I paused, going to the stool beside the drum set and grabbing a beer. I downed it in one big gulp to more cheers, this time of the deeper variety, and strutted back to the mic.

Then I saw her.

My stomach dropped and panic swept through me. Why was she here? Of all places, here?

Lacey Banks, a girl I had dated for all of three weeks a year ago, was stalking through the crowd. She wasn’t looking at me but somewhere ahead of her, like she was on a mission. Knowing her, she was. She was a headstrong, stubborn woman, and one who had been adamant I meant way more in her life than I knew I did. Not that it had stopped her from stalking me for a while, though I was sure it had stopped. I hadn’t heard from her since I’d started seeing Charlotte.

Yet here she was, dressed exactly like she had been when I’d met her in that bar in Odessa a year ago. Shorter than seemingly possible jean shorts, her ass hanging out of the back of them, her long legs accentuated by high cowboy boots. A crop top that stopped so short under her ample chest that as she walked, her hot-pink bra was visible underneath. Blond hair pulled up in a bun above her head, and ice-cold blue

eyes staring at her destination, she moved the crowd in her wake to watch her. She was a physical specimen, one that was never ignored, but the problem was the person that package was attached to.

Lacey Banks was nuts.

It had been fun for the week or so we were together and provided some very intense and interesting bedroom experiences, but her clinginess and some of the things she said were just too much for me. I told her I wasn't interested in seeing her again when she reacted to the idea of me going on tour without her resulted in her pulling a knife. In retrospect, breaking up with a girl with a knife in her hand probably wasn't the smartest thing, but I was faster than she was and ran for the door and my car.

I never looked back to see if she followed.

But she had. Just not immediately. And the things she was saying, while I was sure they weren't true, could cause a lot of havoc. Especially if she got to Charlotte. Which was exactly what it looked like she was doing.

The band jumped into the next song, and I was helpless to do anything but watch. As I sang, increasingly upset, I saw Lacey touch Charlotte's shoulder. I saw Charlotte turn and they began to converse. I saw Charlotte's face drop, and then she looked to me for a moment before looking back. I saw Lacey pull out her phone and show her something on it. Then Charlotte turned a deep red.

And disappeared into the crowd.

The last song was thankfully a fast one, and I burned through it to a chorus of wild applause that I didn't care about. Charlotte was gone, but Lacey was still in the front row, taking her spot and smiling like she was my girlfriend.

I thanked the crowd and then hopped off stage, confronting Lacey immediately. I could feel people crowding around me, wanting pictures or autographs or just to meet me and say hi, but I was more concerned with Lacey and Charlotte. I had to get this cleared up now.

“What did you do?” I shouted.

“Oh, hey, Babydaddy,” she said, closing the space between us and bringing her lips to my cheek. She kissed me softly and then whispered into my ear. At one time, that might have been sexy or fun or enticing. But this time, it just sent a cold chill down my spine and make my stomach churn. “It’s time to come home, Jess. You have a baby boy waiting for his daddy.”

Chapter Two

Nine Years Ago

Charlotte

It had been a year since I’d left Texas and everything else behind. And I mean everything. Even my name.

Going by April, my middle name, had been an intentional choice for a multitude of reasons. For one, it would make it harder to track me, so the heartbreak of leaving Texas could stay there. For another, April represented spring, my favorite season, a season of refreshment and renewal. Third, I’d always liked it better anyway. Charlotte seemed pretentious and too big for me. April was sunnier, happier. It was who I wanted to be.

Oklahoma was a change of pace, but not one I wasn’t accustomed to. Tamara and I had different fathers, our mom and my dad having split up when I was just two before

she moved to Texas and met my step-dad. Tamara came along a year later, and while I spent most of my life in Texas, I occasionally made the trip to Tulsa to see my father.

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Tulsa was much busier than Foley, Texas, or even the surrounding towns like Odessa. Being here reminded me of those women on TV who lived in major metropolitan areas, and a part of me had always wanted to try it. I wanted to experience what it was like being young, independent, and living in a city.

Turned out, all that meant was being chronically late on bills and working two jobs and going to school, meaning absolutely zero life and a lack of sleep. Moving in with Dad had been a no-brainer for both of us after I'd been back in town for a couple months. I was drowning in bills and couldn't keep up the way I wanted because I was so busy, and Dad wanted to reconnect. He had an apartment in Tulsa, right by the interstate on Main Street.

So after a six-month lease, I moved in with him and settled as best I could. It was less lonely with Dad there, but he wasn't exactly the most engaging person, and he still drank a lot. At least he was a sleepy drunk. I'd come back from class to find him six or seven beers deep and watching a movie with one eye closed, and then find him in the exact same spot the next morning when I got up for work. His job as a trucker meant that he often wasn't home at all, and my only responsibility was to make sure the place didn't burn down and keep his one cactus alive.

Such was the case when I came home from class on a Wednesday night to an empty apartment. I tossed my bookbag on the floor by the couch and made my way to the kitchen. A box of microwavable Thai noodles in the pantry was what I was making a beeline for, and I got my meager dinner going just in time for my phone to ring.

I didn't need to look at the screen to know who it was. It was eight-thirty. Tamara was calling like she did every single night at this time.

“Hey, you,” I said, answering the phone.

“Oh my God, you are not going to believe this,” my sister said, her voice vibrating with excitement. I tried to go through the Rolodex of all the things I wouldn’t be able to believe from her perspective and settled on it being a boy. Which one was the problem.

“What?”

“Collin Montgomery asked me out!”

I cocked my head to one side in confusion and got my dinner out of the microwave, popping the top and sticking a fork inside.

“Collin? Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she said defensively. “I can tell the Galloway boys apart, Charlotte.”

I didn’t bother to correct her. Mom and Tamara weren’t going to just start calling me April no matter how much I insisted. They were both positive I was going to move back in a few weeks and start going by my first name again. Mom was already preparing my room at the old house, reconverting it from the poorly-thought-out workout room they had initially turned it into.

“I’m just surprised,” I said. “Collin doesn’t seem like the type to ask anyone out.”

“Well, I mean, he didn’t directly ask me out,” Tamara said. “I mean, not in those words.”

I sighed and shook my head. Oh, boy crazy Tamara.

“What did he say, exactly?” I asked.

“He said I should come to Crockett’s tonight,” she said. “He said he’s going to be there and that I should come. But like... suggestively.”

“Suggestively?”

“It’s hard to convey it over the phone,” she said. “But, like, with his eyes. He was saying a lot with his eyes.”

“Ahh,” I said. “Well, are you going to go?”

“Of course not,” she said.

I paused for a moment, trying to work out her logic, then gave up.

“Why?”

“Because Jesse is going to be there, and I’m still not talking to him.”

I tried to hide my emotions at hearing his name. It was rare for me to hear it, but I thought it all the time. We had only been seeing each other a few weeks and hadn’t done much more than get past second base, so it wasn’t like we had some big, intimate thing. And I knew he had been with a bunch of women before. It was why I was hesitant to jump in bed with him. But he didn’t mind. He was into me as I was him.

And then...

I shook my head to get my brain out of it. I couldn’t think about Jesse right now. I couldn’t think about him at all. He was the past. I didn’t need the past.

“Well, I think you should go,” I said. “You can’t deny yourself happiness because of other people. They’re doing another under twenty-one night, right?”

“Maybe,” Tamara said.

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Tamara was not unknown for getting into trouble occasionally. Last year, when I went with Luke Galloway to prom because neither of us had a date and we'd always been friendly, she had snuck in alcohol from her dad's collection. A week later, she snuck us into Crockett's for the first time, saying her best friend was being too sad and she wanted to have some fun. Both times she was lightly punished, far less than I would have at her age.

"Tamara, you are still nineteen," I began.

"Twenty in two months," she interjected.

"That's still under twenty-one. You keep this up and they might bar you from Crockett's before you even get old enough to go regularly. You know how the Andersons are always up there looking for people to get in trouble."

"Yeah, yeah," she said. "Well, they never mind people over eighteen being there if they are with someone and aren't drinking. When you get back home, we can go every week until I hit twenty-one."

"Ahh, right, about that," I said.

"It'll be awesome. I'll be with Collin, and you can date, like Logan or something, and we can party and have a blast," she continued.

I hated to burst her bubble, especially after her best friend moved to California, but I couldn't let her go on like this. Not when I knew I wasn't going back.

“Tamara, I’m not moving back to Texas anytime soon.”

“I know, I know,” she said. “It’ll be a few months at least. But as long as you’re back before I turn twenty-one...”

“No, I mean, I don’t intend on coming back at all,” I said.

There was silence on the other end of the line for a moment, and I thought I heard her snuffle.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “I thought you said living with Dad wasn’t really great and that it was too expensive there. I thought you were going to do school remote from home, like we talked about.”

“Like you talked about,” I said. “You were the only one who ever mentioned that. And I’ll be honest, it has an appeal. But I just... I don’t want to be back in Foley, hon.”

“You don’t have to be in Foley,” she said, sounding a bit desperate. “We could get a place together in Odessa or something. Somewhere a little nicer. Why wouldn’t you want to come be with your sister? We could have so much fun together!”

“We could,” I agreed. “But I don’t want to be in Texas, Tamara. If you want to come up to Tulsa, by all means, we will get a place. But I don’t want to be there anymore.”

“Why?”

I wanted to tell her. I wanted to spill my guts and tell her how Jesse had had a miserable date with her, how Tamara had spent the entire time talking about herself, and when she wasn’t talking about herself, she was being kind of loud and obnoxious the way she had a tendency to be. How Jesse found me on the porch, and we’d talked

in a way that we really hadn't all our lives growing up around each other. How we'd run into each other again and ended up spending an evening at Crockett's together. And ended up in his backseat, with his hand up my shirt and our lips pressed against each other.

How I'd been willing to go all the way right then and there, but that Jesse had stopped.

Because he didn't want to hurt Tamara.

We'd kept it secret for weeks, sneaking around to see each other either out of town or in dark corners of his family's ranch. Every time we kissed, it was more intense, and every time, he was the one to put on the brakes and ask me if I'd told Tamara yet.

So when I knew there was no more time, I wrote Tamara a letter. I told her everything in that letter and left it in her room. Then I went to the county fair, knowing I was going to spend the night with Jesse at his hotel.

And the world fell apart.

"I just don't want to," I said. "Please understand."

"I don't," she said morosely. "But maybe I'll take you up on Tulsa. I'll think about it."

Then, in classic Tamara style, she moved on to the next subject, as if this one had never existed.

After finishing up the call, I drew a bath and poured a glass of wine. It wasn't like Dad was going to miss it. He never drank wine.

I disrobed and climbed into the tub, sitting down and letting the warm water soothe my aching joints. I'd been going since seven that morning, two jobs and three classes, and deserved to relax a bit.

But I couldn't. Not with the memory of that day in my mind. How that woman.... Lacey had been her name, had shattered my whole world. She'd shown me pictures of a baby, and his eyes... they were just like Jesse's. Deep blue, almond-shaped. She said she was his girlfriend, and that Jesse had been cheating on her with me. How he was a father now. How he needed me gone so he could own up to his responsibilities.

When I looked at Jesse, I could see the guilt on his face, even while he continued to sing another song.

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So I'd left. I'd packed my bags that night and got in the car to drive to Tulsa. Mom was beside herself upset, but I calmed her by telling her I would be near Dad and that I would call every night. That turned into Tamara calling me every night, but it appeased her. She knew I was safe. She just didn't know why I'd left. No one did.

As far as I was concerned, Charlotte died in that Louisa County Fair. April arrived in Tulsa and until tonight, hasn't let Jesse have more than a few moments of thought.

But now, sinking into the tub, the wine warming my chest, all that pain and loss came right back like it was yesterday.

It turned out Charlotte wasn't dead after all. She was just hiding, deep in a locked room, with all the pain Jesse had caused.

Chapter Three

Jesse

Two years ago

Another show, another hotel, another fitful night's sleep.

That's what I had to look forward to, and while I could acknowledge that it was the least enjoyable part of the lifestyle, at least I was able to enjoy the other parts too.

My brothers were surprisingly supportive of this eight-week tour, pitching in to cover my responsibilities and encouraging me to focus on the tour. Even Luke, which

surprised me the most. He was always pretty unimpressed by my music career, and often I got the impression he thought I was just going through a phase. But now that I'd been rocking and rolling and honky-tonking for over a decade, he seemed to be a little more content with knowing it wasn't going to stop anytime soon.

Still, this might be my last good shot.

At thirty, I was pushing the edge of the window for superstardom to come. Either it was going to happen soon or it wasn't going to happen at all. Not that I really needed superstardom, since I was happy just to be able to get paid to play music, but it seemed to be all anyone else used as a barometer of success. That included my fellow bandmates.

Only Kevin stuck with me through all the different changes since The Hitmen. Now known as The Jesse James Galloway Band, the change had come gradually but completely over the last few years, pushing the guys who wanted to be the star or wanted to work less out. Kevin, who had recruited me for The Hitmen, stuck by me, though. He said he wanted to be there when I hit it big.

It was Kevin who set us up with our manager, Flynn Moody. Flynn was an excitable city boy through and through. Born and raised in L.A., Flynn promoted himself as a legacy manager, whose family had managed multiple major acts, enough to impress us all, at least. We'd signed with him four months ago, and he'd immediately set up this tour.

Flynn was calling me as I pulled into the hotel, driving my trusty Ford truck the entire eight weeks rather than ride in the equipment bus like a couple of the guys did to save money. I liked the peace and quiet of my car after a show, where I could go over the performance in my head and if I had my phone set up, listen to it and critique myself as I drove.

“Howdy,” I said after swiping the call button right.

“Jesse, how are you, bud? Have you gotten to Tulsa yet?”

“Just pulling into the hotel,” I said. “Looks pretty swanky.”

“Oh, it is,” Flynn said. “I was just there myself last week. Absolutely top-notch place. The boys are staying on the fourth floor, but I couldn’t get six rooms together, so you got moved. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Ah, well, it’s only for the night,” I said. “I don’t have to do a bunch of stairs, do I?”

“Oh, God, no,” he laughed. “You’re going to take the private elevator. You’re on the top floor.”

“The top floor?” I asked. “Like the presidential suites and stuff?”

“Only the best for the star of the band,” Flynn said. “Get used to this kind of treatment, bud. This is how things are going to be.”

“Sure, sure,” I said. I’d heard that before. Plenty of times, from two other managers, in fact. Both of them flaked on us at various points, usually after they had sapped all the money they thought they could from us before providing anything of value.

“Just head on in and give them the name Jesse James Galloway.”

“So I tell them my name?”

“Wait, you mean to tell me your middle name is really James?” Flynn asked, sounding shocked. I rolled my eyes.

“We’ve talked about this before,” I said. “Yes, my dad named me Jesse James. It was his brother’s name, so it wasn’t really about the gunfighter...”

“Right, right, I remember now,” Flynn lied. I knew he was lying because he’d said that before as well. “Well, tell them your name then, and they will direct you up. You have a per diem of \$100 so whatever you want on the late-night menu is up for grabs. I suggest their turkey sandwich, though.”

“A hundred-dollar turkey sandwich?” I asked.

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“You don’t have to spend all the per diem, Jesse. It’s not like you won’t have it again tomorrow in Arlington.”

“Right, right. I think I might just get a drink and call it a night, actually. Kevin brought in some sushi before the show.”

“Great,” Flynn said, and I got the impression that absolutely none of this information was registering with any importance whatsoever. “Have a good night, Jesse, I heard you killed it in Springfield, and Arlington is going to get a hell of a show tomorrow. Good night!”

I didn’t even have a chance to respond before he hung up. I’d love to tell him what I thought of stopping in Tulsa without playing a show there, or how the venue in Springfield was packed but as rundown a place as I had ever played, and how Arlington was going to be a hot drive tomorrow and the six-thirty start time for the show seemed awfully early, but he was already gone.

At least it was just a four-hour drive. I could wake up late, go to a restaurant for lunch, then hit the road and be there in time to warm up before the show. That was something, at least. Stopping in Tulsa made sense when I thought about it that way. I just hated being in a town and not doing a show. It felt like a waste.

The drive from Springfield, Missouri had been particularly better than the drive from St. Louis to Springfield, with a lot less traffic and fewer accidents and construction sites. I was able to make it in just around two hours, which despite not being long at all, still seemed to do a number on my back. Maybe it was just turning thirty that was doing it, but a hundred and eighty miles in a car after performing my heart out was

just difficult.

I parked in an open space near the lobby door and grabbed the only two bags that were going to go in with me. One had toiletries, a pair of socks, a pair of shorts, a T-shirt, and a pair of tennis shoes, and the other had my guitar, extra strings, picks, and some sheet music. Everything else could stay in the car for all I cared. If it wasn't electronic and would melt, it would survive.

Shouldering the guitar and carrying the other bag low, I walked into the lobby to find it quiet and empty. In the distance, I could see the bar area, which also looked empty, with a bartender wiping things down as he was clearly closing for the night. I picked up my pace and got over to him as he looked up with a faint recognition in his expression.

"You're not closed, are ya?"

"Do I know you?" he asked with a genial smile.

"Depends. Will that help me get a drink before you shut up shop?"

He laughed genially and leaned back against the bar.

"Maybe," he said, craning his neck toward the main desk and then looking back at me, searching my face. "I know I've seen you before. You a regular here?"

"First time, actually," I said. "My band is all here already. I was the straggler because I wanted to eat before I got on the road."

"Band, that's it! You're that Jesse James fella, aren't you?"

I laughed. "I am. Jesse James Galloway. Do I know you?"

“Nah,” he said. “I was just at the show you boys did in Oklahoma City last month. Surprised to see you in Tulsa.”

“Did a loop,” I said. “Started in Dallas, ending in Arlington. Just went right up the highway, up to Chicago, Detroit, then back down through St. Louis. I’m actually headed to Arlington tomorrow morning.”

“Aw, man, no show in Tulsa?”

“Despite my attempts to get it booked, no,” I said.

“Well, hell, for you, I can stay open for a few more minutes. Legally we don’t have to close ‘til one, but I shut things down early if it’s dead.”

“I see,” I said, scanning the completely empty bar. “Seems pretty dead.”

“It’s a Tuesday.” He shrugged. “Most of the businessmen were gone by eleven. No one else comes to drink after that except people who really shouldn’t be. And people like you, I guess.”

“Hah.”

“What’ll ya have?”

“Whatever you can give me. Just make it strong.”

“Whisky man?”

“Hell yeah.”

He nodded knowledgeably and reached for a bottle behind the counter. I pulled out

my wallet and grabbed a handful of cash. The per diem was going to good use tonight. How much did I have in there? Three, four hundred? I had barely used it last week, blowing it all at the bar on Sunday. I'd left a hundred-dollar tip there. Might as well leave one here too.

"Here ya go, Jesse," he said. "Now, if you don't mind, I need to make it look like I shut down before the boss sees me."

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“Be my guest,” I said, sitting down on a stool that was just out of the way of the office doors, so if someone came out and glanced, they wouldn’t likely see me.

A whisky and Coke was just what the doctor ordered, especially with how heavy on the whisky it was. It was a hell of a pour, but the ice and soda made it more refreshing than I expected, and I felt myself perk up after the heat and long drive. The bartender made his way around the bar, shutting things down, and when I finished my drink, I placed it on top of two hundred-dollar bills.

“Thanks, boss,” I said, passing by the bartender before he could get back and see what I’d left him. I didn’t want to be around for the attention.

“Good night, sir,” he said, clearly having seen his tip but not knowing what it was.

As I made it back to the desk, I could hear him whisper-shout something exclamatory, and I smiled. Still, there was no one at the desk, but I noticed a bell, so I gave it a ring. When no one arrived after a few seconds, I rang it again.

Weird. For such a swanky place, you would think they would have much better service than this, I thought. Maybe the person that was supposed to be at the desk was in the back. The bartender had mentioned something about the boss, so it was possible they were in the back doing some kind of performance review or something. I honestly wasn’t really sure how all that worked. My only two jobs in life had been working on the ranch and singing for cash. The mysteries of retail and hospitality work eluded me, and because of it, I had a tendency to tip probably far more generously than others.

The whisky and soda was just what I had needed, however, and I wasn't cranky or upset as I waited, tapping my thighs to a beat of a song I was tinkering with in my head. I knew the hook but was still struggling on the rest of it. Surely it would come to me soon. Too late for this tour, but soon.

I rang the bell one more time, and then shrugged. If they were too busy to come out, maybe I should just go see them. No one would be able to blame me if I walked in on a meeting if I was a guest who needed help.

Checking the area to make sure no one was around, with the bartender having long ago left through some back door, I crossed through the little swinging door leading behind the counter. A light was on in a room facing away from me, and I headed toward it. I was prepared to meet some middle-aged manager and give him a friendly review of their customer service when I rounded the corner and came face to face with the manager.

Only it wasn't a middle-aged man.

It was Charlotte.

And she looked just as shocked to see me as I was her.

Chapter Four

Charlotte

Two call-outs at the last minute, on top of two sick people out already.

A wedding party taking up the majority of the top and bottom floors.

A rock band of some kind booked in corner rooms and another one of the suites that I

was absolutely positive was going to get wrecked like the last band we'd had in town.

This was not how tonight should be. Not with everything happening tomorrow.

In eight hours or so, I was due to meet the CEO of Bethel Hotels, Mr. Tom Bethel himself. His father had started the company, and under Tom, it had grown to one of the largest chains of three-star hotels in the Midwest. I'd been working for them for six years, all at this hotel, from working the desk and occasionally helping clean rooms to being the hotel manager. The boss, as they said.

I ran the place like a battleship and usually was on top of everything. But Murphy's Law was coming in hot, and with such a big and important meeting tomorrow morning, tonight was an unmitigated disaster. Multiple ones. One right after the other.

Now that I had calmed most of it, my clerk had gone off to finish the latest emergency, a mother who lost her card getting snacks and locked herself out of her room with her two-year-old inside alone, leaving me alone in the back with a dishcloth over my eyes as I tried to get the thumping headache to go away. As soon as she came back, I was gone.

Unfortunately, she was taking forever, and I started to snooze. It was already past when I generally went to bed, by a couple hours at that, and with the exhaustion of the day, the stress of tomorrow, and the headache, I was dozing off. The bell ringing at the main desk was what woke me up, and I realized I'd been hearing it for a while, connecting it to some stream of consciousness dream I'd been having that involved fitted sheets and candy bars being major points of contention by the CEO in our interview.

I stood woozily, and shook the cobwebs off as I marched toward the open door.

Where the hell was Jessica?

Just before I got to the door, I saw a shadow on the ground. Someone was coming in. Whoever was trying to check in was being impatient, and it pissed me off. Still, I slapped on a big smile and took a deep breath before the tall, lanky figure appeared in my doorway, just steps from me.

Then I completely froze.

So did he.

We stood there for a long, long moment, staring at each other in confusion and shock. Finally, I was able to blurt something out.

“Jesse?”

“Holy shit.”

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“Jesse? What the hell are you doing here?”

“Holy.... Holy shit. Charlotte? Charlotte, what the hell are you doing here?”

“I asked first,” I said, unable to stop the bubbling laugh of surprise from coming out. The smile that came with it triggered one of Jesse’s, and suddenly, my knees got weaker.

He looked incredible. Just stupidly incredible.

Tall and lean, I knew for a fact that he hid a series of stomach muscles under that raggedy T-shirt he wore. A bandana tied around his neck made him look like he’d just gotten done robbing a bank, and his torn jeans indicated that his style hadn’t changed much since he discovered eighties heavy metal. But those eyes... those deep blue eyes, they burned into me with a fondness and recognition that absolutely nailed me to the spot. Absentmindedly, I dropped my phone.

“You dropped your phone,” he said.

“I know.”

“Aren’t you going to... pick it... up?”

He was looking at me like I had lost my mind, which, to be fair, I felt like I had. What was he doing here? Why did he look so good? What the hell happened to the last eight years of growth and distance that I was so dumbfounded and overwhelmed by seeing him that I couldn’t even grip my damn phone?

“Yes,” I said. “In a minute.”

“O... kay,” he said. “Can I get a hug?”

Nodding, I took a half-step forward and hugged him awkwardly. It was the hug of two people who once were close but had been apart for a long time. There was a closeness to it, an intimacy that others wouldn’t have, and yet it was weird and disjointed, both of us pulling away early to not make it any weirder than it already was.

As I hugged him, I could smell the alcohol on his breath. Had he driven here like that? Did his life spiral and I didn’t know it?

“So, hug done, why are you here?” I asked.

“To stay in a room,” he laughed. “My band is already here. I’m supposed to have a room up on the top floor.”

“Wait, your band?The Hitmen?”

He laughed again. “No, no, that band broke up a long time ago. Kev’s still here, though. Just me and him left.”

“Oh,” I said.

“CalledThe Jesse James Galloway Band,” I said.

“Oh. Original,” I said, then felt my skin go beet red in embarrassment. “I mean, it’s not bad! It’s just... just... Wow. How long has it been?”

“Eight years,” he said immediately. He didn’t seem to mind me changing the subject

rapidly but did grin a little, making it even harder for me to remain standing.

“Eight years, wow,” I said. “Excuse me.”

I bent over and picked up my phone, sticking it in the pocket of my black slacks and clearing my throat.

“Anyway, yeah, I just got in and caught the bar before it closed. Got a little drink in before checking in, since no one was at the desk.”

“Right, yeah, sorry about that,” I said. “My clerk went off to help another guest. I didn’t know she wasn’t back yet.”

“Are you the manager?”

I smiled proudly and yet felt insecure all at once. I was proud of how hard I’d worked to get to my position, and it was one where I held a considerable amount of respect and power—and it paid well. But Jesse was a freaking rock star. Because of course he was. It just fell flat in the face of him coming in looking like he did with all his swagger and casually mentioning he was staying on the top floor because he was such a big shot.

“I am,” I said. “I can check you in.”

“Sure, sure, yeah,” he said. “Are you... are you working overnight, or—?”

“No,” I said, “I’m still not a night owl like you. I’m just covering for someone who had to call in. I actually should have left about twenty minutes ago.”

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“Ah, perfect,” he said, and when I cocked my eyebrow at him, he grinned. “I was just thinking maybe you and I could catch up when you got off. Maybe grab a bite to eat. Is there an all-night diner around here somewhere?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “Not near here. We’re in the business section of town. Everything here shuts down at nine, if not earlier. Except us, obviously. And a few restaurants, but by now, they’re closed.”

“Damn,” he said.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that was you asking me on a date,” I said.

It was kind of testy the way I said it, and at first, I felt bad about it, then I decided that I didn’t. He deserved a little testiness. The last time I’d seen him, he broke my heart. While we were dancing around all that, he was reverting right back to being his charming, flirtatious self. I wasn’t going to let him do that without reminding him that we’d tried that already.

And why it hadn’t worked.

“What if I was?” he asked.

“Heh,” I said, settling behind the computer as he went around the desk and stood in front of me. “Wouldn’t your wife be upset about that?”

“Wife?” he asked, then held up his hand. No ring on the ring finger. One on the pinky, and another on his other hand’s index finger. But none on the ring finger. “No

wife.”

“Girlfriend then?” I asked.

“Nope,” he said. “Single, as usual.”

I nodded knowingly. That tracked. Jesse was known for keeping his options open... and his bed full.

“Well, me too,” I muttered.

Why did I say that? Was I trying to flirt with him or not?

At war with my own mind, I typed in his name, messing it up several times because I was so flustered and having to retype it. At least he couldn’t see the screen, and it just looked like I was very busily typing away.

“Well, if you’re single and I’m single, then no one can say anything to us just hanging out for a bit. What do you say?”

“I...” I began. Then I looked up into those deep blue eyes and made a decision.

For eight years, I had been trying to get over this boy. For eight years, I’d had to wake up and take cold showers to forget dreams I had about nights with him. For eight years, I had wondered what life would have been like, even for one day, if we had just gone to that hotel room that night instead of him performing. If he had just skipped out, and we had run off together. What would that night have been like?

Maybe I could find out.

“You know,” I said, “I could probably hang out for a bit. I have to be up early for a

thing here, but I can catch up for a bit. Where do you want to go?"

"Hmm, I don't know," he said. "I don't really know Tulsa. Anywhere you like?"

"Not around here," I said. "The kitchen here is still open with some late-night stuff. We could order a couple sandwiches and find a place to sit and chat."

He smiled again, but this time, a familiar flicker of danger was behind those eyes. Danger for me, that was. Because Jesse was never not in control.

"How about you just bring them up to my room?" he said. "I heard it's a suite, and pretty big. Probably couches and stuff, so we can be comfortable."

I gulped, probably louder than I wanted, and looked down at the screen. Indeed, he was in one of the massive suites on the topfloor. It had been booked at a major discount, at the last second when someone from the wedding party canceled. Whoever had booked this for him got extremely lucky.

But he was right. That room would have tons of space to sit and relax while we ate. It also had a huge floor-to-ceiling window overlooking Tulsa, and a mini-bar that put some actual bars to shame.

Italsohad a massive king-sized bed, too.

"Sure," I said, feeling my heart thumping in my chest and trying desperately not to let on how red I knew my face was getting. "Here's your key card. Head on up, and I'll be there in about twenty minutes."

"Sounds good," he said. "Good to see you, Charlotte." He looked down at my nametag and cocked an eyebrow. "April?"

“My middle name,” I said, feeling light-headed. “It’s what I go by here.”

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“Funny, I go by Jesse James,” he said. “And you go by April. It’s almost like we’re different people. Almost.”

He looked me up and down in an appraising way and swaggered off to the elevators. Meanwhile, I gripped the sides of the computer like I was going to hit the deck.

Jessica came back a few moments later, just missing Jesse, and I clocked out. Swinging by the kitchen, I asked the chef if he had any pre-made sandwiches that he was going to put out in the tiny store tomorrow morning, and he pointed me to the fridge. I grabbed a couple of them, marked them down on the sheet so they could be charged to me, and went to the bar.

Grabbing the bottle from under the register that I allowed to be kept for staff to do shots after work, I took a picture of the label so I could replace it in the morning. Then I headed to the elevator, my nerves jangling as it rose to the top floor.

I had a skeleton key on my keychain, and as I walked up to his door, I took a deep breath. I knocked, gripping the key card tightly.

“Come on in,” his voice said in the distance, punctuated by the sound of a palm resting over guitar strings to silence them.

I pressed the key card to the door and turned the knob. When it opened, I saw Jesse on a chair in the living area of the massive suite. He was shirtless, the guitar resting on his knee, and his cowboy boots just off to the side of his chair.

My fingers were already unbuttoning my shirt before I took my first step.

Chapter Five

Jesse

I nearly threw the guitar across the room. Thank God there was a couch there.

She was heading toward me with a stride that said she had absolutely only one thing on her mind, and it sure as hell wasn't the sandwiches she had put on the table beside the door. Or the bottle of whiskey, though that might be fun to add into things later.

It was as if thousands of dreams I'd had for the last eight years, fantasies I'd tried to work out with the raven-haired cutie who showed up to one of my shows, had suddenly come true. The only girl that ever really mattered to me, the only girl who I would have given up my seemingly free pass to the inside of any girl's panties I wanted, was heading toward me with her fingers tearing at her black blouse.

I wasn't wearing a shirt on purpose. I'd wanted to subtly seduce her, and in my experience, my ab muscles did a lot of that work for me. But she had barely seen me before she started heading over like a locomotive doing a striptease. It was as if all she needed was a feather touch to get to where I wanted her, and my shirtless guitar strumming was more akin to a wrecking ball to the back.

Diving into my outstretched arms, she continued to yank her shirt down off her shoulders as our lips pressed into each other. I relished the taste of her, which I thought I'd forgotten so long ago, but never really had. I woke up with the taste of her lipson mine many mornings, and now I knew I hadn't imagined the flavor.

Her shirt hit the floor at the same time that her hands found my belt buckle and yanked. I kissed her neck as she hungrily unzipped me and hooked my jeans with her thumbs to yank them down. My boxer-briefs went with them, and suddenly a cool breeze brushed across my stiffened cock just before her warm hand wrapped around

it.

I pulled down on the strap of her bra as my lips made their way down her collarbone. Yanking it down, I exposed one of her breasts as she began to stroke me and I took her nipple hungrily into my mouth. She gasped and giggled at the same time and I made my way back to her lips. My tongue slid inside her mouth for a moment as I reached down and lifted her. She wrapped her legs around my waist as I carried her, kicking my pants off my feet, into the bedroom.

Tossing her playfully on the bed, I laughed with her, feeling the joy overwhelming me. She scooted back until her head was on the pillows and began to struggle with her own jeans. I grabbed the pant legs and pulled, helping her get them off and revealing white cotton panties underneath. She paused, her eyes sparkling as I settled between her knees and reached for her stomach.

Tracing my fingers down her skin, I took the panties in my grip and pulled them down slowly, revealing her soft mound of curly black hair. With the panties off her, I flung them aside to a giggle and crawled up to press my lips to hers again. There was no need for foreplay. Neither of us was interested in that right now.

I settled between her thighs and arched my stomach in so I could aim my cock for her soft, wet core. The head brushed through the folds, and I felt her gasp under me. Our eyes locked together, and I slowly thrust into her, only able to go inside a little as she cried out in a mixture of pain and pleasure, a sound I'd heard often but never as satisfying as this one.

Achingly slowly, her body began to relax, and I was able to drive deeper inside. Gripping my chest, her fingers digging into my skin, she rocked with me with each thrust. Soon, we were moving in concert, her voice yelping with each movement as she drew closer and closer to climax.

Enthusiasm took over, and we rolled and jockeyed for position. Her on top, me on top, from behind, from above, it was as if we were teenagers trying out every position we could think of. Every so often, she would clench and her thighs would shake as she rolled through another orgasm.

Sweat rolled down my back as I gripped her in my arms, pressing her against the wall behind the bed as I thrust up from my knees. I smothered myself between her breasts as she held me tightly to her chest. I felt the finish coming and pulled her away, tossing her down on the bed below me as I slammed into her. She laughed and then moaned at the sudden change of pace, and our eyes locked again.

“Come for me,” she said. “Come for me, Jesse!”

A roar built up in my chest and exploded from me as I slammed into her with abandon. My eyes clenched shut and her voice lifted to match mine as I pulled her thighs tight and emptied into her in one glorious, incredible climax. My body shook as I felt myself completely spent, mind and body, falling into her arms.

She stroked my hair as I breathed heavily onto her chest. When I forced myself up, I grabbed her hand and pulled her with me so we lay with our heads on the pillows. She settled her head into the nook of my shoulder and within moments was fast asleep. It only took me a few more seconds, just enough time to know she was truly asleep and see the smile on her face before I kissed the top of her forehead and closed my own eyes, drifting off immediately.

The sunshine coming from the open window woke me up, and I rolled over to put my back to it and wrap my arm around Charlotte. The only problem being she wasn't there.

Groggily, I opened one eye—the sun was still too bright for both—and searched the bed. Had I dreamed she had been there again? Was it another one of my vivid dreams

about her, where I woke up with her taste on my lips?

My eyes settled on something pink on the sheet, and I reached for it, lifting it up to view it. It was a pink hair tie. Exactly the same one she had been wearing when I'd brought her to bed, the same one she'd dramatically removed as she settled on top of me and rode me for the first time, shaking her hair out like an X-rated shampoo commercial. She must have dropped it during the chaotic, Olympic-level lovemaking that happened afterward.

I smiled. That was one for the books, all right. Perhaps THE one for the books.

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Still, it was curious she wasn't there. I wondered what time it was and realized I had left my phone in the living room with my pants. Searching around for a remote, I found one on the bedside table and clicked on the television. Immediately, in the top right corner, the time appeared. Eleven-fifty-two.

Ahh.

Scooting out of the bed as the Weather Channel continued to show how bright and godawful hot it was going to be today, I made my way into the living room, not bothering to put anything on. I had a mild hope she would be in there, sipping coffee or eating the sandwiches she'd brought over.

Unfortunately, I was alone, and all of her clothes were gone. I searched for a note, something she might have left me with a phone number on it, or any other way to contact her and found nothing. A faint memory clicked in my head that she said she had something to do this morning, and I felt a twinge of guilt for how obviously little sleep she'd gotten, and how she was likely still wearing last night's clothes.

Still, I had a late checkout for one in the afternoon, a requirement I had put in for every room I was booked by Flynn, which meant I had just an hour to get showered, changed, and back on the road. Without another way to contact Charlotte, I had to think of something. I picked up the ancient and out of place hotel phone on the kitchenette counter and hit the button for the lobby. Maybe she was there and would pick up. Wouldn't that be convenient?

"Front desk, this is Stan."

“Hey, Stan,” I said casually. “This is Jesse from room, uhh...”

“Eight hundred,” he said. “It comes up on the screen when a guest calls.”

“Right. Eight hundred. Anyway. I am a friend of Char—I mean, April’s. April Garafalo? Is she in?”

“No, I’m sorry, she left earlier.”

“She left?” I asked.

“Yes, she was with another gentleman around ten. She hasn’t returned, but I can leave a note for her to contact you.”

“Ahh,” I said, crushed. “No, that’s fine. I appreciate it. Thank you.”

I hung up before he could respond and hung my head. Of course she was taken. She was gorgeous and smart and funny and somehow even more of all of those things than she had been eight years ago. She must have not been able to stop herself lastnight and now was going to go back to her normal life, having checked my name off some bucket list.

As depressing a thought as that was, I tried to see the bright side. At least I got to cross her name off my list too. Even if that meant that I now didn’t have a list anymore, because she was the only one ever on it, and everyone else was just a placeholder.

Sighing, I gathered up my clothes and tossed them in a ball on the bed. Opening up my bag, I grabbed my fresh clothes and took them with me to the bathroom. Remembering the bottle by the door, I came back out and grabbed it, popping it open and taking a swig as I turned on the water.

I was sure the bus wasn't going to leave until one. Kevin never got out of hotels on time. For this leg of the journey, I would let him drive my car, and I would ride the bus. The whiskey was going to make sure I wasn't driving.

I got myself clean and mostly drunk before I got out of the shower and got dressed. My phone was ringing on the bed, and I got excited before I remembered I didn't give Charlotte my number. Pulling out the phone, I saw the name and was disappointed yet again.

"Hey, Flynn," I said.

"Hey there, boss," he said. "How was the room? Everything up to your standards?"

I huffed a laugh. "The room was great," I said. "Thanks. I think I am going to ride the bus down today though, so make sure they don't take off without me."

"Sure, sure," he said. "I'll have someone get your car to Arlington. Don't worry about a thing, superstar. I got you. Flynn Moody has always got your back."

"Thanks," I said evenly. People who spoke like that usually had an ulterior motive. I just didn't care what his was. Not right now, anyway. "Hey, just a question."

"Sure, champ."

"When you booked this room, did you speak to someone about it? An April?"

"In April? No, I booked it yesterday, actually."

"No, not in April. An April."

"Oh. No... No, I don't believe so. I spoke to a guy. Stan? Stan, I think."

“Ahh,” I said.

“Why? Was something wrong with the room?”

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“No,” I said. “The room was great, Flynn. It doesn’t matter. I’ll see you in Arlington?”

“You will!” he said. “I’ll be at this one. You’re going to kick ass, my friend.”

“See you there, Flynn,” I said.

I stared at the hair tie for a long moment before placing it in my bag. Maybe she didn’t want anything beyond last night with me, but I wasn’t so sure I was done thinking about her.

Chapter Six

Charlotte

The alarm on my phone going off almost didn’t wake me up.

At first, it was just a pleasant, familiar sound in the midst of a hazy dream, one I’d had many times before and tried to erase immediately upon waking up. One where I was naked, curled in a bed with Jesse Galloway, my body exhausted from an intense night of incredible sex, knowing that all I had to do was slide my hand down his chest, and he would most assuredly be ready for more...

I opened my eyes.

Oh, shit.

The alarm was real, and it was going off on my phone, which was in my pants pocket somewhere on the floor. The floor outside of the bed that I was currently stark naked in and inexplicably curled up with a very real Jesse Galloway.

It took a few moments to process what was going on as I slipped out of the bed and tried to find my pants. By the time I got to them, it had all come back to me, and I was debating the merits of absolute shame or absolute victory over my behavior last night when I saw the time.

I had exactly thirty-two minutes to be in the lobby of the hotel, ready to meet the CEO.

Waking up Jesse was not an option, but being seen in my current state was also unfathomable. Thankfully, I parked my car on the backside of the building, and inside the car was a duffel bag with an overnight kit, just in case I got stuck at the hotel one night for work and crashed in a room rather than go home. It had proven invaluable on several occasions and was looking to do so now as well. I also had a dress hanging in my office, which to my knowledge, was still standing wide open at the moment.

Of course, I'd left my car keys in the office downstairs...

I really didn't have many choices. I had to call in a favor. A huge one, and one that I was going to have to pay back soon.

Still naked and collecting my clothes, I opened a text message to Jessica, the night clerk who would just be getting off her shift in a few minutes.

The text I sent was short, to the point, and asked for extreme delicacy. It also involved an offer to provide her a massive favor at her request no questions asked. As I slipped into the shower and turned on the faucet, hoping both that Jesse would and would not join me there, I used the manager's app on my phone to check the rooms

that were booked. Finding one that was empty, I sent that information to Jessica and got clean as fast as possible, avoiding getting my hair wet.

When I got out of the shower, just a couple of minutes later, Jesse hadn't moved, and I slipped back into my clothes and ran for the door. I contemplated writing him a note, but I simply didn't have the time, and instead, quietly closed the door behind me, ran down the stairs to the floor below, found room 714, and went inside to wait for Jessica.

When she arrived a minute and a half later, carrying my bag, the dress, and her makeup kit, she had a smirk on her face I'd never seen before.

"I never thought I'd see the day," she said as she handed me the bag and walked into the room. "April Garafalo, doing the walk of shame."

I was already in the bathroom with the door open, stripping off the old clothes and putting on the unimpressive but effective dress. It was a simple black dress, but it looked professional, and I could affix my nametag to it and look like I wasn't trying to impress and play it cool, a shift in my planned demeanor for the meeting.

"Yeah, well, now you have," I said, slipping the dress over my head. "What time is it?"

"Eight-fifty," she said. "You've got about ten minutes."

"Then I need to do makeup like the wind," I said. "Bring me that makeup case."

Five minutes later, I turned away from the mirror and looked at Jessica, who stood with her forefinger and thumb on her chin and her elbow resting against her other arm.

“Well?”

“I mean, you don’t look bad,” she said. “But this isn’t CEO worthy either. Especially him. Have you seen that guy?”

“I have. I know. He’s very handsome. He’s also my boss, and I need to look professional at the very least.”

“You look professional,” she said. “I just thought you’d go for your normal.”

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“My normal?”

“Sexy professional,” she said without hesitation. “You know, the power boss look. The reason all the guys here follow you around like a puppy dog?”

“They do?”

Jessica rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, they do,” she said. “You look amazing, and it’s kind of frustrating since you looked amazing even without makeup on. But yeah, usually you look like you are about to walk onto a Marvel movie set as some spy or something.”

“Wow, okay,” I said. “But this works?”

“For literally anyone else, this would be the best look they’d have all month,” she said diplomatically.

“Good enough,” I said.

“Get out of here,” Jessica said. “I think I will cash in part of my favor by keeping this room for the night. I need a night away from everything.”

“Part of?”

She cocked an eyebrow and turned her head to the side.

“Right, fine,” I said. “Part of. Wish me luck!”

I took off down to the elevator, leaving my other things behind in the room, and arrived in the lobby just in time to see Tom Bethel arrive in his limousine. Tall, with dark hair streaked with gray, Tom Bethel was a very attractive older man, and his winning smile and fine Italian suit did a lot of work for him in that way. As he offered to shake my hand, even I felt impressed by him, and I’d met him dozens of times. Though, to be fair, never in a one-on-one situation like this.

We went into a conference room, one of the three our hotel had, and Tom looked around for a moment, as if he were evaluating the place.

“You know,” he said, “I think I want breakfast, but I’ve had the menu at our hotels all week. Would you like to go to Weaver’s Restaurant?”

“Sure,” I said excitedly. “They have amazing breakfasts there.”

“I remember,” he said. “Your old boss took me there when we opened this place. I believe you were working here then at the front desk?”

I blushed as my jaw fell. “You remember that?”

“Of course,” he said. “I don’t forget a face. Or a story. And your story is of particular interest to me, April. Come on. Let’s go get breakfast.”

Ushering me out with him, we walked past the front desk, waving at Stan and heading to his limo.

“You know,” Tom said as the waiter walked away after dropping our breakfast orders off, “your name has come up a lot in conversations at corporate.”

“It has?”

Up to now, we’d been idly chatting about the city, about the oppressive heat wave we’d been in, even about our favorite coffee. Nothing about work, though, and I felt like I was being set up for something. Be it good or bad, I wasn’t sure, but it certainly felt like I was being set up. Now hearing my name was a frequent piece of conversation in corporate seemed to indicate I was about to find out.

“Indeed,” he said, spreading butter on his pancakes with a concentrated exactness, “we absolutely love what you’ve done with Bethel Tulsa. I’m sure I don’t need to repeat your numbers back to you, but suffice it to say, it has been very eye-opening.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking a sip of my coffee to try and hide my wide grin. Everything was coming up roses today.

“Customer satisfaction is at an all-time high, your rate manipulation methods are truly intricate and something we want to teach to other managers, and the place looks immaculate all the time. We have secret shoppers, you know. They come in and take pictures and stay a night in the rooms to test you out.”

“I remember,” I said, sighing. “It was how my old boss got fired.”

“Yes, it was,” he said, shaking his head as if discarding a particularly unpleasant memory.

The thing was it was more than just a dirty hotel or slow room service that had gotten my old boss, Eric Watts, fired. It was the tryst he was having with his night manager that got him in trouble. The fact that the secret shopper happened to catch them in the act in the elevator was purely coincidental. But it opened up a spot for me, and I went from being the head of the front desk to overnight manager, and eventually to restaurant manager after the temporary managers didn’t work out.

“At any rate, your reviews have been spectacular, and we want to see if you can translate that success into another position.”

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“Another position?” I asked. “Like what?”

“We were thinking of creating a new region,” he said. “Expanding a bit, into Texas. We already broke ground on a hotel in Dallas and are looking at expanding through Arlington, Houston, Austin, and perhaps El Paso. We eventually want to sweep west and go through New Mexico, Arizona, and eventually southern California. But it all starts with Dallas and getting a foothold there. And I can’t think of a better person suited for such a unique challenge than you.”

“What can I say except I am extremely flattered,” I said, trying to find better words and failing miserably. As much as I did not want to move back to Texas, this was a huge opportunity, and it wasn’t like I was going to go live in Foley. I’d be in Dallas. Running an entire region.

“So does that mean you accept the position?” he asked, stuffing a forkful of pancake into his mouth.

“Of course, yes,” I said. “Thank you!”

“Fantastic,” he said, smiling. “This means you will be working directly under the COO and myself. Welcome to the corporate world, April. From the bottom to the top.”

Beaming and high on my promotion, I got back to the hotel ready to spread the good news. Jessica was one of the first people I wanted to tell, but there was someone else I wanted to let know first.

It was crazy, but a part of my overly excited mind was creating a fantasy scenario where Jesse and I could get back together. Where I could work and live in Dallas, and he could continue his career. I would even be willing to meet his child and find a way to make that work in our life. Maybe I was drunk with happiness, but it all seemed possible in that moment.

But when I got to Jesse's room, it was empty. He'd already checked out, and nothing remained of his stay. The housekeeping crew was the best in the state, and they had already swooped in and returned the room to its glory before I could get back to it.

I flagged down the head of the crew for the floor on my way to the stairs to go see Jessica. But when I asked if he left anything for me, a note or a phone number or anything, they said no. The room was spotless aside from messed up sheets on the bed and a few dirty towels in the bathroom.

Gutted, I called down to the front desk and got ahold of Stan.

"Hey, did anyone leave a note for me while I was gone?" I asked. "One of our guests? I was expecting someone to drop by and say goodbye before they left."

"Nope," he said. "No notes. Though one guy did call and ask about you. From the top floor suites."

"Oh?"

"He asked if you were around, but I told him you left with that tall guy in the suit. Who was that, by the way? I never pegged you as going for the early-bird silver foxes."

I sighed. "That's the CEO, Stan. His picture is on the wall on the outside of the desk."

“Ahh, that’s where I’d seen him before. I figured he was a movie star or something.”

“You told the person who called that I left with a man? Not the CEO. Just that I left with a man?”

“I mean, yeah,” Stan said. “I didn’t know who he was. Why? Who was it that called for you?”

I closed my eyes and pressed my hand to my head. The headache that I thought left last night was coming back. All the good feelings were being deflated in an instant.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “Not anymore.”

Chapter Seven

Jesse

I passed the sign welcoming me to Tulsa and couldn’t help the small smile that crossed my face. Tulsa always had a weird place in my heart now. Partially amazing, partially a subject for more of my heartbreaking honky-tonk lyrics, Tulsa was a town I avoided like the plague and yet desperately wanted to go back to. Just to see. Just to try.

The Bethel Hotel dominated the skyline as I drove down the highway. It was hard to miss, with its new-age architecture and sparkling glass windows. Considering this time, the drive had been a much longer one, driving straight here from St. Louis, I was more than ready to check into a hotel room and crash, even if it wasn’t a massive suite on the top floor.

Hell, I didn’t care if they shoved me in a broom closet if it meant I got to see Charlotte again. I just needed to know if the man she was with, the one she’d left my

bed for, was still with her. Or if I had a shot. If I ever did, that was.

The truth was, I didn't know if she ever intended on giving me a real chance after my ex, Lacey, told her I was her babydaddy. Which was a load of horseshit. For one, the timing didn't match up. The last time I'd been with her was at least a month before she would have gotten pregnant at the earliest. It was impossible. And while the kid in the picture she showed Charlotte did resemble me, something about it looked off. Like it was too... professional? It was just weird.

I cut contact with her immediately after that and had been hounded by her and lawyers ever since. But none of that mattered if I had Charlotte. I'd deal with a million Laceys if I had Charlotte by my side.

Two years was a long time. Maybe she was married now.

Or maybe she was single again.

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My stomach felt like it was doing flips, and I desperately just wanted a good strong drink. Thankfully, it was still early in the evening, and the bar at the hotel would be open by the time I got there.

Flynn said he would meet me there, which was interesting. Flynn normally didn't go to cities where we had shows, much less cities in between cities we had shows in. With us playing Oklahoma City tomorrow night, Tulsa was a convenient stop for me, but Flynn tended to fly directly to whatever city he wanted to attend a show at. I wondered what was so important that he wanted to meet me here.

I had no idea what room I'd get, since Flynn said he'd book rooms for us, and as I parked the car in the hotel parking lot, I grabbed my overnight bag and guitar case and nothing else. Most of the time, everything else stayed in the car anyway, but if I was going to end up in a tiny place, I didn't like the idea of being cramped.

Mentally, I was going over what I was going to say to Charlotte if I saw her. A lot depended on how she reacted, obviously. If she had a ring on her finger, it would be a much shorter conversation. A quick goodbye and thank you for being so important to my life. Then I'd have to get on with the business of getting over her, something I had yet to do, and wasn't entirely sure was possible.

However, if there was no ring, then I had a different pitch. One that involved running away with me, even just for a night, and then figuring everything else out afterwards. After exchanging phone numbers, of course.

It struck me that both times I'd come through town were almost the same day in July. I absolutely just had to come through here in the hottest time of year, didn't I? The

cool air of the hotel blasting out when the automatic doors open immediately cooled the sweat collecting under my arms and made me uncomfortable for a moment until I got used to it.

A quick glance at the check-in desk was disappointing. A man and a woman were there, looking very much like they were the only two working. The man's nametag read Stan, which seemed familiar, but I couldn't tell for sure if it was the same guy I'd talked to two years ago. The woman, a younger, bubblier blond girl, also looked somewhat familiar, and had a nametag on that I tried to read as I passed her. My heart sank when I did.

Her name was Jessica. And her title read Hotel Manager.

Which meant that Charlotte had either been transferred, was no longer working for the company, or had gotten promoted. And no matter which of those it was, she wasn't going to be here. Dammit.

I glanced ahead of me to the bar area and saw Flynn sitting at one of the tables with his laptop open. He was obsessive about his laptop. While most people had switched to tablets and phones, Flynn was insistent on keeping all his information on the computer and backed up in the cloud, rather than just depending on the cloud itself. He said it was easier to work on the laptop, which I assumed was just a product of the fact that he was a couple years older than me. Technology had moved so fast, just a few years separated entire generations of kids from what they felt was a comfortable machine.

The kitchen was clearly still open, as the smell of hot food filled my nostrils and made my stomach rumble. I'd been so concerned about seeing Charlotte that I hadn't eaten all day, and now it was becoming increasingly obvious that it had been a stupid decision. Flynn saw me coming and waved me down, and I took a seat across from him.

“Good to see you, bud,” he said, apparently incapable of using anyone’s name. Maybe it was a California thing.

“Hey, Flynn,” I said. “You order dinner?”

“No, but I was thinking about it,” he said. “You hungry? My treat. Hang on.”

He looked around for a waiter, but I knew there wouldn’t be one. Instead, I made eye contact with the same bartender from before. He raised his hand to wave at me and then came around the bar to us. I took his hand for a shake, and we exchanged hellos while Flynn looked on in confusion.

“Oh, Flynn, this is Mark,” I said, my eyes flashing over his nametag just in time. I hadn’t gotten his name the first time around. “He was the bartender here last time I came through. Fan of the band. Mark, this is Flynn Moody, our manager.”

“Nice to meet you,” Mark said, shaking his hand. “What can I get you fellas to drink? I’m afraid the last time I gave you a shot of the special house whiskey, and it disappeared the next morning. I think someone caught wind of what I did and punished us by taking it away.”

“Ah, well, I don’t mind paying for the good stuff. Just mix it like you did my last one and I’m good,” I said. “Can I make an order for the kitchen here?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “What can we get for you?”

We placed our orders, and Mark stepped away for a moment, then came back with our drinks. I took a deep sip and savored the warm whiskey going down my throat.

“That’s the stuff,” Flynn said. “Say, Mark, how long have you been the bartender here?”

“Since we opened,” he said. “Before that, I ran my own place just down the street for years. We had to shut up shop about a decade ago or so. They had just built this building, and the first manager was a regular of mine. He asked me to come on, just to help them transition in their opening, and I’ve been here ever since.”

“Fascinating,” Flynn said, and I believed he meant it. While details of the lives of his clients seemed to slip from his mind, he always did seem to be particularly interested in other people, specifically people in service or hospitality jobs.

“Speaking of managers,” I said, “the one that was here when I was here last, April, is she still with the company?”

“Very much so,” he said, nodding. “Moved on up in the world, but very much in the company. She’s a regional manager now. Oversees several hotels, including this one. I’d bet you just missed her by a day or two. I’m sure she was here checking in on the weekend. She’s based out of Dallas now, though.”

“Dallas, really?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm,” Mark said.

I exchanged a look with Flynn, who raised his eyebrows.

“How coincidental,” he said.

“What’s that?” Mark asked.

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“Dallas,” I said. “After Oklahoma City tomorrow, we’re supposed to hit Dallas on Friday.”

“Oh, so no Tulsa show again?”

“Fraid not,” I said.

“Shoot,” Mark said. “Well, just know you have at least one fan working the bar up here who wants you guys back.”

“Duly noted,” Flynn said. “Tulsa is on the list for the next southwest tour.”

“Great,” Mark said, then noticed someone coming from the kitchen with our food and another person bellying up to the bar. “Well, it looks like I’ve got company and you have food. Y’all enjoy.”

A plate with a gorgeous steak was placed in front of me, another plate of fries to one side, and a similar though smaller steak was placed in front of Flynn. I dug in quickly, ordering a beer, which Mark delivered not long after.

“So,” Flynn said after I had demolished a good half my steak and a third of my fries, “who is this April girl again?”

I wiped my mouth with my napkin and took a long sip of my beer, contemplating just how much I was going to tell him.

“Well, her name is actually Charlotte April, and I know her as Charlotte. But she is

an old friend of mine from back in Foley. I ran into her at the hotel too. She was the manager at the time.”

“Ahh,” he said, then waggled his eyebrows. “So you met up with her here then?”

I ignored the embarrassingly on-point insinuation.

“I just haven’t seen her since, and I figured if I was in town, in her hotel again, we could meet up again. But she apparently moved to Dallas, so…”

“So you’ll see her then,” Flynn said. “We will be there in less than a week. You’ve got to introduce me. I never hear you actually mention a girl by name. It’s always, ‘the blonde from so and so,’ or ‘the brunette from such and such.’”

“Yeah, well, Charlotte is a bit different. She’s a very good friend,” I said. “I’m just curious as to how her life is going, that’s all.”

“Well, I’ll make sure we stay in a Bethel then,” he said, bringing his laptop back to life despite our food being on the table. “There’s only one down there. She has to be there. Want the big suite again?”

I shook my head no. “Not for this trip,” I said. “It feels like such a waste.”

“It’s not,” Flynn said, suddenly very serious. “You are a superstar in the making, Jesse. You belong in penthouse suites with runway models. It’s going to be part of what sells the band. Hard rocking country bad boy named Jesse James. Come on. I need photos of you with models, Jesse, and that can’t happen if you don’t throw parties like you used to.”

“I guess,” I said.

How little he knew that if Charlotte was there and available, those days would be long, long behind me.

Chapter Eight

Charlotte

Working in a corporate atmosphere was a little different than being on the floor at a hotel most of the time. For one, it meant wearing what I would have considered ‘impress them’ clothes every single day. The morning routine on its own was pretty heavy.

My mornings would start off with a six a.m. shower, an hour to do makeup and get my hair the way I wanted it, usually in a tight bun on the top of my head, get dressed, and get in the car. Depending on where I was, of course. If I was in Tulsa, I was home in my tiny apartment rather than back with Dad, where my things were the same as when I’d been there every day. I just kept a lot less groceries in the house now.

That’s because often, I was elsewhere. Dallas, Houston, Oklahoma City, and occasionally in areas where we were thinking of expanding, which included New Mexico and Arizona. California would come later. My job was to get us to the border with some big openings before then. I was even eying a possible hotel in Utah.

If I was in one of those cities, I had a suite usually. Sometimes, the suites would be booked and I would schlep it with a regular room, but the company wrote off my stay no matter what room I used, so if a suite was open, I took it. A tiny bit of comfort for me in consideration of the travel.

Today, I was in Houston, but I needed to get out of town pretty soon. I wasn’t heading to one of the hotels, though. No, my sister and her best friend, Amber, had

other plans for me.

“Then, we’re going to go do this big expo thing out in Odessa. They do it once a year for prospective brides where they show off all kinds of services and stuff. They even have giveaways, and you know Amber loves a good giveaway. I swear, that girl. She’s marrying Luke Galloway. She’s never going to hurt for money again. And yet she acts like if she doesn’t at least hunt for a deal in the weeklies then she is being wasteful. Not me. I want to live my best life, and that doesn’t involve scouring websites and newspapers for the best deal on Pepsi, you know?”

It had been like this, non-stop, for a good ten minutes. Tamara was going on and on, and I only punctuated the pauses with the bare minimum effort words.

“Yup,” I said, rotating that one in from the cast of characters that also included ‘mm-hmm’, ‘wow’, and ‘no kidding.’

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“Anyway,” Tamara continued, seemingly unfazed by my lack of participation, “we need you down here at least tonight, and then again in a couple weeks for the rehearsal and the big day.”

“And you’re sure Amber wants me to be a bridesmaid?” I asked.

It wasn’t that I didn’t know Amber. I knew her quite well, in fact. It was just that she was younger than me, my sister’s best friend. She and I had never really hung out much, and aside from when she was a teenager and I was older, we didn’t really talk about anything important. Even then, it was more about me than her. I never really felt like I knew her that well.

“She does,” Tamara assured me. “She’s really excited you said yes.”

“Well, I mean, you didn’t give me a choice, T.”

Tamara laughed. It was her way of saying that while what I said was true, she was not going to take any responsibility for my discomfort in the situation.

“Look, Logan is running the ceremony, Owen is running the security, and Collin is best man. Jesse couldn’t be left out, so he’s also standing with Luke. But Amber doesn’t have anyone else but me and you, so...”

“By default,” I said. “I see.”

“She does really care about you, you know,” Tamara said. “Just because you left when you became an adult doesn’t mean we stopped caring about you.”

There was a note of sad bitterness in her voice that I hated hearing. I knew she felt, in a way, that I'd abandoned her. But I'd had to get out of Foley, and I couldn't tell her exactly why. Not without crushing her.

"I know," I said.

"So," Tamara said, changing her tone as she shifted into a subject she was far more interested in, "is Graham coming?"

I sighed.

I had told her very little about Graham, and her curiosity was overwhelming. I didn't blame her, since I rarely ever dated and hadn't mentioned anyone as a serious candidate to her in years. And while I was secretly excited about the prospect of being in a wedding where Jesse would absolutely be there, the fact was that I was technically seeing someone.

Technically.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't think so. We don't... we don't really do a whole lot together."

"Isn't he your boyfriend, though?"

"Yeah, I guess," I said. "Look, it's a lot different when you get older. You don't just spend every second together because you already have a life. Besides, we're both so busy. I'm busy running the southwest region of the company, and he's the COO, and..."

"So he's just a guy you've been dating," Tamara said.

“Not... exactly,” I said.

The thing was, I knew Graham was a lot more serious about me than I was him. But while we’d gone out a dozen or so times and always had a great time, I’d shied away from being physical with him. I told him I was more into commitment before that, which was true—it just perhaps wasn’t as true as I was letting on. I did value commitment before physical stuff. It’s just that with one very specific person, that commitment was arbitrary, and so were my hardline rules about being physical. And that person was not Graham.

Still, I was getting older. The window for kids was likely closing, if that was something I wanted at all. I was the same age as Luke Galloway, and everyone said he was getting married late as it was. I was practically ancient. Jesse was three years younger than me, and while that meant he was the same age as my sister and Amber, a little younger actually, it meant that he had more time. More options. Especially with his whole... thing. The look, the talent, all that. He could, and often did, get any girl he wanted. I needed to just add his name to my naughty list of memories and move on.

So why couldn’t I?

Graham, on paper, was perfect. Good-looking, successful, kind, wealthy, the only thing he wasn’t was warm. His family had come from money, and had always come from money, and while Graham was a nice man, he seemed to have a block between his emotions and the rest of the world. If he wasn’t smiling or laughing about something, he was blank. It made it harder to connect with him, and while I knew he was developing as much emotion for me as he was capable of expressing, I needed more than that.

I needed passion. I needed danger. I needed drama.

I needed Jesse.

And I couldn't have him.

I'd gotten my one night with him, and I'd chosen to leave the bed and do the interview. I chose my career over finding out where that one magic night could have led. That was on me. He didn't stick around to see me. In fact, he might have thought I was in a relationship already, with Graham's brother, the CEO.

It was a lost cause. I needed to get over it. I was sure he had.

"You never told me how you met him," Tamara said, snapping me out of my thoughts and back to reality. "I mean, I know you work for the same company, but how did you meet him?"

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“At a gala opening for the Houston hotel,” I said. “I went alone, but his brother, Tom, was high on me for promotions in the company and was touting the Houston deal as all me. He introduced me to his brothers, and Graham and I hit it off.”

“He has another brother?” Tamara asked, her interest suddenly piqued a bit higher.

“Yes, but trust me, you don’t have a shot. His husband would likely put the kibosh on it.”

“Dammit,” Tamara muttered. “What about Tom?”

“Happily married for forty years,” I said. “I got the only single one. And he was divorced already when I met him.”

“Always with the luck,” Tamara said.

I was going to argue with her, and then it hit me that while she had pursued both Jesse and Collin Galloway, only one of us had ever actually dated and slept with any of the brothers.

“Anyway, he was staying in Houston for a few weeks, so we went on a few dates. I don’t know, it just kind of snowballed. Every time he’s in a town I’m in, we go out, and we hold hands and kiss and stuff. So I guess we’re together?”

“That sure sounds like a couple,” Tamara said.

“You’re probably right. At any rate, I have to go. He’s here.”

“Here? Here, where?”

“At the hotel. In Houston. Where I am working. I told you this earlier in the conversation, T.”

“Right, right, well, tell him to come. I’d love to meet him.”

I got off the phone just as Graham came striding through the doors of the hotel. Technically, we were not supposed to be dating, so we greeted each other with a short hug and a kiss on the cheek, which could be written away as Graham’s more Euro-centric upbringing than anything intimate. After he checked in with the front staff and did a round of the hotel like he usually did, he met me in my office on the second floor. It was tucked away, looking almost like two rooms of the hotel, mostly because it was. It was a room, and an office, built especially for me or whoever was regional manager or was given access to work there. When I was in Houston, it was mine.

“So what are your plans this evening?” he said as he took off his jacket and sat in one of the chairs across from my desk.

“Well, like I said in the text, I think I might have to go out of town,” I said. “My sister’s best friend is getting married in a few weeks, and she wants me to be a bridesmaid.”

“How exciting,” he said, showing no extra emotion beyond the ever-present genial smile. “Are you going to be there the entire time?”

“Oh, no, no. I don’t like Foley, Texas that much,” I laughed. “I am just going for tonight and then coming back. I might have to go back a few more times, though, until the wedding. I don’t intend on taking more than a day or two off.”

“Ahh, I see,” he said. “Well, that muffles my plans a bit. I was heading into Paris for

a meeting in two days and wanted to see if you would join me. We could share a room or I could get you your own, no pressure. But I thought I could show you some of my favorite places in Paris for a few days while I get some business done there.”

“That sounds amazing,” I said. “I’m sorry I can’t go.”

“As am I. I leave tonight. Perhaps you could join me later?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’d have to set some things up to take care of business while I was gone.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “And this wedding. Do you want me there?”

I hesitated. I hadn’t expected him to ask. Usually, he didn’t, assuming that if I wanted him somewhere, I would ask.

“I see,” he said, when I didn’t answer. “Well, we can talk about why you didn’t say yes later. For now, let’s have a bit of supper before I leave. Shall we?”

He stood, offering his hand, and I took it, wondering what the hell was wrong with me. Why couldn’t I just commit?

Chapter Nine

Jesse

I always enjoyed coming to Dallas.

The venues were always electric, the crowds always ready to have a good time, the food spectacular, and the beer always flowing. Dallas seemed like a city caught between the cowboy Wild-West image it had sported for a hundred years and a

burgeoning artsy metropolis like Denver or Atlanta. Yet, it didn't feel disjointed, as the two worlds streamed seamlessly into each other, offering cowboy boots and ten-gallon hats chumming along with purple-haired punks and Gucci-wearing preppy kids.

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All of them seemed interested in my band, which meant the crowd was huge.

The venue was bigger than my usual ones as a headliner, though I'd played bigger spots as an opener before. It was kind of a test in a way. I knew a few of the record companies were watching our drawing power when it came to mid-to-large venues, and this place was in that category. With us on top, it really weighed on us to bring in the crowd, and it seemed like that hadn't been a problem.

From behind the curtain, I could see the merch tables along one wall of the outdoor concert hall. We'd brought more merch for this specific show than we had for entire tours before, and it looked like we might not have enough. T-shirts were flying off the tables, and we hadn't even played a note. These people knew us already. And they were excited.

The last time we were here, we'd opened for a national act on this very stage. It had felt like the place couldn't possibly get any fuller that night, and we'd rocked the house. Tonight, it seemed like it was every bit as big of a crowd, and the idea that they were there specifically to see us was thrilling in a way not much else in my life ever had been.

This was what making it felt like.

I glanced up, over the bleacher area in the back of the arena and out over the man-made lake behind them. Just a few streets away, the Dallas Bethel Hotel stood in the distance, stuck between two high-rise buildings and across from a restaurant. I'd looked it up online and saw that it was the highest rated hotel in the city, and was booked full almost constantly, meaning Flynn wasn't going to be able to work his

magic and get any of us in.

I wondered if she was there right now. If she was up in one of the top floors, she would be able to see right into the venue. She could watch me from there. Part of me wanted that to be true. I wanted to play for her, to sing the song I wrote for her ten years ago before singing the one I wrote for her a year and a half ago. I wanted her to see me in my element.

Behind me, I could hear a now familiar argument breaking out between Kevin and our bassist Dave. Dave liked to get drunk before a show and thought we didn't know it. It had led to a few shows where we didn't sound our best because he was either blowing notes or outright not playing because he was busy holding himself upright or pounding another beer.

Kevin, meanwhile, had quit drinking entirely last year. He wasn't judgy about it, but he and his young wife were both vegans and teetotalers now. It meant he didn't have as much patience for drunken antics as he'd had when we first formed The Hitmen. I didn't mind. I liked being mostly sober when I performed. I could get drunk afterwards if I wanted, and often did. The party life usually demanded it.

"I'm a damned adult, Kevin," Dave spat. "You can't tell me not to have a beer!"

"It's not the beer that's the problem, Dave," Kevin said, shaking his head. "It's the empty bottle of Jack you have in your guitar bag."

"What bottle?" he said, taking a step back, closer to his bag as if he could hide it with his body.

"We all saw it, Dave," Zach, our drummer, said. "You're not good at hiding it. Just admit it."

“So what?” he thundered back. “Are we or are we not a rock and roll band? What would Lemmy say?”

“Lemmy would kick your ass from beyond the grave for even invoking his name,” I said. “Let’s not get the gods involved, shall we?”

“You can’t be on their side,” Dave said exasperatedly. “Come on, man, not you too.”

“Look,” I said. “If you want to be a drunk, that’s your deal. I get it. It’s rock and roll. But if you want to be in this band, we are going to need you more sober than you’ve been while you are on stage. Get it?”

“I’m not drunk,” he said, though his voice belied a measure of uncertainty.

“Yeah, you kinda are,” Kevin said. “Thank God we have two opening bands. Zach, will you get some coffee in him?”

“Sure,” Zach said, standing and crossing over to Dave. The two of them had known each other for a long time before joining our band. Dave didn’t resist when Zach touched his shoulder and took him away from the backstage area.

“I swear,” Kevin said as they left, “we should just do this the two of us and hire touring guys for each leg.”

“It’s not the worst idea,” I said. “I like Zach, though. And Kirk, wherever he is.”

“He’s in the bathroom. Doing his psych-up routine.”

“Ahh, right,” I said. “He’s weird, but I like him.”

“Me too,” Kevin said. “It ain’t like when we were kids, man. This might be... no, this

IS our last shot. Mine anyway.”

“You think so?” I asked.

He nodded.

“I love you, dude. And you know how much I want this to work. But I’m tired of the bullshit. I just want to play music, make a lot of money, and take my wife on exotic vacations.”

“Soon,” I said. “Let’s start with getting through tonight. I have a good feeling about this show.”

Two hours later, we were taking our place on stage to the roar of the darkened crowd. When the lights went on, the swell of their screams and the driving riff of Kevin’s guitar made me feel every bit the rock star I’d always wanted to be. Growling out the vocals, my eyes fell on the crowd, and I found myself going from face to face, searching.

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I knew she wouldn't be there, but I was going to look anyway. I'd probably never stop looking.

As the set went on, I let myself get lost in the performance. I gave everything I had, and when it was time to close it up, I slowly felt my consciousness returning from the place it had gone while I performed. It wasn't exactly like an out-of-body experience. It was more like I let the music, the character I created in order to perform it, put the majority of me in a locked room in my mind. I could see everything, I could hear everything, but the performer version of me was in control. I was just a witness.

But as the last few notes tumbled out, I found myself coming back again and making a decision immediately. I couldn't be here and not know. I had to go to the hotel and see if she was there. I had to find out if she was available, and if I still had a chance to shoot my shot. Or if I should just give it up and focus on being the party animal I'd become known as. The one who could easily take multiple girls in this front row back to my hotel room, party for a while, and end up drunk and naked in a pile of flesh and hair.

As soon as the set wrapped, I ran off stage, heading for the band exit and out to the parking lot. I kind of felt like Elvis, escaping his adoring public, of which I was sure there would be some, and they would be disappointed I didn't stick around for photos and autographs. But I just had to know. I had to know for sure she wasn't there.

I hopped in the car and took off, heading down the busy Dallas street until I got to the Bethel Hotel, parking haphazardly in the guest parking. I was still covered in sweat and a little bit of spilled beer when I walked through the automatic double doors and the AC blasted me, just like it had in Tulsa that first time. I felt a chill roll over my

body and tried to walk it off as I went inside to the gawking glares of what turned out to be a slightly more upscale clientele than in Tulsa.

The check-in area was full of people, so I stalked around it, looking for Charlotte. If she was here, she would likely be out there helping people. But I didn't see her. Instead, I saw a security guard and an employee with a name badge eyeing me suspiciously. Deciding not to wait for them to make a move, I walked directly up to them.

"Hi, my name is Jesse James Galloway," I said. "I just performed down the road at the Double Cross Ranch Amphitheater."

"Oh, of course, of course," the employee said, and the security guard relaxed a little. "What can I do for you? Do you have a reservation? I'm afraid we are all booked up tonight."

"No, it's not that. I don't need a room. I'm here to see if April is in. April Garafalo?"

"Ms. Garafalo is not in, no," he said, shaking his head. "I'm afraid you just missed her. I believe she and Mr. Bethel are flying to Paris tonight, if I heard him correctly."

"Ahh," I said, trying not to let on that my heart felt like it was being crushed into dust. "I see. Mr. Bethel, that's the owner, right?"

"Not that Mr. Bethel," he said. "Graham Bethel, our COO. I know it's technically not allowed, but I think everyone knows they are a couple. But shh. I didn't say anything."

"Right, yeah, of course," I said. "No problem."

"Should I leave a message for when she returns?"

“Nope,” I said. “No message. Thank you.”

Turning on my heel, I headed out of the hotel and back to my car. I drove back to the venue and got out, heading back to the stage where the band was still breaking down. I’d been gone all of twenty minutes.

“Where the hell did you go?” Kevin asked when he saw me. “They wanted an encore. We have people lining up to get pictures!”

“Sorry,” I said. “I had something I had to do. I’m back now.”

Kevin seemed to notice my lack of enthusiasm and put down his guitar case to close the space between us.

“You all right, bro?”

“No,” I admitted. “But I will be. You want to stay up tonight and get really fucking drunk and write music?”

“Like the old days?”

“Like the old days,” I said.

“You know I don’t drink anymore.”

“You can drink soda. Get real fucked up on soda.”

He grinned. “I’ll get real fucked up on soda with you, Jesse. But first can we make some people happy? The ones out there?”

“Yo, check out the blonde!” Kirk said. I followed his gaze to see a tall, blond woman

with a chest that looked like she inflated it herself with an air pump and a shirt that was hanging on to her nipples with the sheer willpower of damp cloth and prayer.

“Blondes aren’t Jesse’s thing,” Kevin said, laughing.

“Who knows?” I said. “Maybe I should expand my horizons. It’s not like I’m holding out for anything. Anymore.”

Kevin’s eyebrow flickered, but I brushed by him, putting a big, fake smile on my face and walking through the curtain to the roar of the mostly still congregated audience.

Chapter Ten

Charlotte

Graham was standing at the door of his limo, which was about to take him to the private airfield where his jet would be waiting for him. It was a common enough refrain from him that I was used to it in theory, but I had never actually flown with him before. All of our dates, such as they were, had been in town, wherever we were. His offer to take me to Paris with him was enticing just for that alone, much less any possibility that I might change how I felt about him on the trip.

I needed to just let go of Jesse and move on. Which I could do once I saw him again and knew it was over. I was positive that was what was going to happen. I'd see him at the wedding, we'd make small talk, and that would be it. We'd part as friends who were once lovers, and that would be that. Then my heart would be free to open up to Graham, and I could go on with my life like it clearly seemed to be unfolding.

Right?

"Well, I hope you enjoy your evening with the girls," Graham said, holding his door open, almost as if he were hoping I'd change my mind. "Are you going to drive?"

"Yes," I said, realizing that it still hadn't dawned on him that not everyone in his immediate life had access to private planes. "Leaving from right here, actually. Should be about a six-hour trip."

"Be safe," he said. "No need to rush. And let me know about tomorrow."

“I will,” I said.

He smiled, and a twinkle of what I thought might be a real emotion, an excited bubblyness, came through. Like a little boy who has a secret.

“You will come, or you will let me know?”

“I’ll let you know,” I said, grinning. “Honestly, I think I’ll end up coming. I could use some time away. Even just a couple days.”

“Yes, you could. And dare I say, we could make some good use of some time away... together.”

There was no note of lasciviousness in that remark, which was different than every other man I’d ever encountered if he said those same words. It was pure. Innocent. He really just wanted to spend time together. Why was this so hard for me?

“I think that would be very nice,” I said.

“Also, and this is just in addition, if you do come, I have something very special for you. A few somethings, actually.”

“Oh?”

“I won’t tell,” he laughed. “But they may help you forget your troubles here and wind down from the stress of helping plan a wedding.”

“Sounds great,” I said and realized I meant it. I was sure Amber wasn’t going to be a Bridezilla or anything, but being around Tamara at a wedding sounded like torture.

“Goodbye, sweet,” he said, and leaned forward to peck me on the cheek.

“Goodbye, Graham,” I said.

As he got into the car and shut the door, I took a step back and tried to analyze why this all felt so strange. Was it just that he was older and that he wasn’t particularly warm? Was it that he kissed me on the cheek and called me ‘sweet’ instead of trying to stick his tongue down my throat and calling me ‘babe’?

Or was it just that he wasn’t Jesse?

Frustrated with myself, I made my way back to my car and started the engine. I’d filled up on gas last night in preparation and had also filled up the two coolers in my passenger seat. One had ice and drinks in it, the other had a little bit of ice and a bevy of road snacks. Chips, candy bars, all the things I usually avoided eating, packed into one tiny cooler. Road trips were my weakness. I did not believe in eating healthy during them.

The drink cooler was full of water, sodas, and a few cold coffees, and I pulled one of the coffees out before I put the car in drive. I wanted a little caffeine hit before I left. No sooner had I gotten a sip in than the loud ringing of my phone blaring through my Bluetooth speakers in the car startled me enough to almost spill it all over myself.

I hit the answer button without even looking at who it was, but if I had to take a guess, I probably would have nailed it on the first try.

“Sis?”

“Hey, T,” I said. “What’s up?”

“Are you coming?”

“Yes,” I said.

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Tamara squealed in the background.

“I can only stay tonight this time, though,” I said. “I have some stuff I have to do, and I fly out tomorrow.”

“Fly out? To where?”

“Paris,” I said.

“Oh, right, the boyfriend,” she said. “Well, then you need to get your butt here now. Amber is already here, and we have a lot of stuff planned for today.”

“Hon, I am at least six hours away.”

“Three hours away,” she corrected. “We are heading toward you. There’s a bridal show we want to go to that starts in three and a half hours. I’ll text you the address. We should get there about the same time.”

“Oh lord,” I said. “All right. Send it to me.”

“See you there, sis,” she said.

Four and a half hours later, I was weighed down by bags full of samples and brochures from what seemed like every bridal group in the country. When they’d mentioned it was a bridal show, I don’t know what I thought the size would be, but it was nothing like this. It was a whole damn mall turned into a massive wedding-centric theme park. There were even rides. A company had a fleet of horse-drawn

carriages that they were taking people around the venue on.

We'd entered several contests, of which Mrs. Miller had won a couple, and were feeling we might be about done with the venue. I had expected to spend the entire evening there when I saw how massive it was, but Amber and Tamara went in with a game plan that rivaled any football coach in history.

Now with a host of samples, winnings, and pamphlets, we headed back out to the cars and stuffed them all in the one Mrs. Miller had driven. Tamara was driving her ancient convertible, and I was leaving in the morning, which meant Mrs. Miller got stuck with all the swag. She didn't seem to mind. She just kept looking at her daughter with an expression of pride and a twinge of bittersweet memories.

Tamara and Amber decided to ride together, leaving me alone in the car for the last chunk of the drive down. Deciding to stop and stretch my legs at a rest area, I let them get ahead of me for a bit and took my time coming back. Sneakily, part of me was hoping Mrs. Miller had something planned for dinner. She always made the best food and was the primary reason I'd never had a problem babysitting my sister and Amber when we were kids. She always left something for us to eat.

By the time I rolled into Louisa County, it was getting dark, and when I crossed the Foley city limits, I had to have my lights on to navigate the backroads toward their house.

A small part of my brain kept reminding me that the Millers were right across the street from the Galloways. As in, you could see the main gate of their property from the Millers' front porch, and in the distance, you could see several of their barns. Jesse had often been on top of one of them when he was home. Meaning he'd be able to see right over to me, if I stood in their yard.

Cranking the radio to drown out thoughts that I knew were following that particular

realization, I sang with the pop tune until I got to the Millers' residence. There was a small problem, however. There were too many cars. Only six cars could fit in the driveway, and Mr. Miller's old sportscar was always one of them. Then they had two other cars as well. Then there was Amber's beat-up jalopy of a car, Tamara's sports car, and...

A cop car.

I rolled my eyes. Not the Andersons. Anyone but the damn Andersons.

The Anderson brothers were three of the meanest, dumbest men I'd ever had the displeasure of knowing. Having grown up the sons of the sheriff, they went into law enforcement themselves as adults and immediately began to wreak havoc on the town. Now the only reliable police force were state troopers, since the Andersons ran Foley like their own personal playground.

It didn't help that the Andersons and the Galloways had been feuding since as far back as anyone could remember, and the Galloways' ranch was one of the largest and most profitable pieces of land in the county. The Andersons at one time had a lot more land themselves but somehow ended up with just a small plot that butted up against the Galloways' on one of the far edges. I wasn't sure of the whole story, but I knew there was one, and it was deep and twisted and brutal, all the way to the present-day kids.

Of course, that didn't touch on the very personal reason an Anderson might be at the Millers' place when Amber was preparing for her wedding, either. Arnold, the eldest of the boys and the current sheriff, had been pursuing Amber since high school. His rivalry with Luke Galloway over her affections only added to their historic family feud, and it had all apparently blown up a few months ago.

People had spent time in jail, there were lawsuits, and the Andersons had been

investigated by the FBI. Apparently, Arn had gotten out on a technicality and was back home in Foley, though no one had seen him. I had a feeling that he might be making himself vividly visible now. If nothing else other than to stop a wedding that I was sure he thought he was supposed to be the groom in.

A part of me wanted to back up, head over to the Galloways', and let them know what was going on. If I did that, though, that meant leaving them alone with whichever Anderson boys were in there now. As much as I knew Tamara could likely take any two of them on herself for a while, I didn't want to risk anything overtly bad happening to anyone. Even if that badness might be what would happen to an Anderson if they put hands on Amber in front of Tamara.

Groaning at the impending situation, I put the car in park just outside of the driveway, hoping no one would sideswipe me on the curvy road, locked it up, and headed for the porch. I could hear voices as I stepped onto it, and it was like a visceral memory walloped me in the ears when I heard a deep, angry male voice.

It was Arnold Anderson, all right, and he was giving it one more go with Amber.

I grasped the doorhandle of the screen door and pulled it open, stepping through into the lamp-lit living room that smelled heavily of pot roast and clean cotton. Arn turned to see me, and his eyes narrowed, like he was trying to work out who I was, then it dawned on him, and his brows furrowed.

"Charlotte Garafalo, as I live and breathe," he said.

"Arnold Anderson," I said defiantly. I'd never liked Arn, and I'd never held back letting him know it. Not when we were teenagers and not now either. Sheriff's badge be damned. "To what do I owe the curse of seeing your ugly face around here?"

Chapter Eleven

Jesse

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A week off the road doing nothing but working on the ranch was starting to really pay off. It was good for me to occasionally get back to my roots and do the things I'd been doing since birth. It wasn't like the ranch couldn't use my help, either. Luke was busy with the running of the family business and doing whatever Amber asked of him to prepare for the wedding. Collin was always more of the bookish one and did all the paperwork for us, but when he was out on the field, he had a tendency to space out. Logan was a fireman for the county and often wasn't around, and Owen was the baby of the family, much more concerned with the animals and whatever it was he did in his off time.

Luke had been awfully permissive lately about us taking time off. Usually, he was much more of a hard-liner, invoking memories of our father and his stern approach to Family First when it came to work and play. But with his impending nuptials, I guessed he just was a little easier to deal with both because he was distracted and overwhelmed, but also because he was finally getting laid on a regular basis.

It probably didn't hurt that Amber seemed to be a fan of my music. While I had toned down the rock elements a bit when I played Crockett's, it was still very much my style, and even Luke seemed to enjoy it, which was a first. Usually, he reacted to any music from the last twenty-five years with a disdain that had 'get off my lawn' energy. Either Amber made him a little more receptive to life in general, or her influences were starting to rub off on him. Maybe both. Either way, I was just glad to see my brother happy, and a small part of me was selfishly happy to see him not think my music was crap.

Being able to pursue music had been a sticking point in our relationship for a while. He'd thought it was just a phase when I was younger, then tried to convince me that

there was no future in it as I got older, that working on the ranch was reliable and helped the family. That music was a fun hobby but not something I could bank on.

I guess I'd worn him down. Either that or he just got tired of arguing with me. But the crowd at Crockett's should have shown him that I had become a bigger deal than he thought, and if he had seen the crowd in Dallas, I was sure he'd be impressed.

Today, Luke and Collin were in town, filing taxes or some such thing that I'd forgotten ten seconds after they told me. Whatever it was, it sounded boring. Logan was at work as well, though he'd dropped by this morning to help out and said he would be able to drop by after work if there were no calls.

That left me and Owen.

Thankfully, Owen was up at dawn to take care of the animals, leaving me to roam around looking for something to do. There was always something to keep you busy, and I just needed something mindless to do so I could mentally check out. I found writing music, especially lyrics and main melodies, were a lot easier if I spent a little time on the ranch doing anything except music. By the end of a week, I was usually brimming with ideas and little hooks that got stuck in my head, partial verses and choruses that I'd hum under my breath until I wrote them down and brought them to life for the first time.

Around lunch, I broke out the old acoustic and sat down in the kitchen alone to pick at it a bit. It had been Dad's, and one of the few things we'd had in common was our talent for guitar. Dad was a godawful singer, from what I remembered, but he could play an acoustic like a madman. I remembered sitting by his feet and watching him pick his way through a bluegrass tune that sounded so good I thought for sure he was secretly a world-famous musician and he just wasn't telling us.

He gave me my first guitar when I was seven, a tiny little thing that was light enough

for me to wear pretty much non-stop around my neck. I noodled with it day and night, never letting it out of my sight for more than a few minutes to go to the bathroom. By the time I was old enough for an adult-sized guitar, I'd mastered playing most chords and had learned a ton of songs by ear.

Dad was supportive of me learning but figured it would be the same as him. He'd break out his guitar if we had friends or family over, playing a few tunes while everyone sang along, or he'd be called on to play a wedding or a funeral on occasion. He always took those very seriously, but not as a performance. It was a ritual thing for him. He took it seriously because he was asked to do it, not because he wanted glory.

When I told him one day that I wanted to sing professionally, he didn't express any emotion, simply nodding and clearing his throat.

"Horse stalls need to be mucked out," he'd said. "Horse stalls will always need to be mucked out. Keep that in mind."

And I did. I worked as hard as I could on the ranch every day, and when I was done, I spent my entire night playing guitar. When I was sixteen, I started going around with girls, but even then, my guitar was with me. And once in a while, I'd be in the living room and Dad would pull out that old acoustic I'd played at lunch and we'd duet a few old western tunes before he'd head to bed.

After a long day of work on the farm, tilling and preparing for the winter crop and working on the roof of the shed outside of the horse barn, I was wiped out and decided to take a little siesta in my favorite spot. The horse barn's second floor was full of hay and a few tools and things we might need for the horses but didn't want to clutter up the space with. A little roof area along the back of the house faced west, and a door opened up onto it for airflow. I loved going out and lying on that roof, watching the sun set and the stars appear. Sometimes I'd drift off to sleep up there for

a while, which, while dangerous, were some of the best naps I'd ever had.

Facing west also meant I could see the Millers' farm in the distance, down the road. There was a sharp curve between the two homes, but their farm rested at the top of a bit of a hill, making it visible from our front door and from the west side of the barn. Sometimes I'd see Hessa, Mrs. Miller's favorite cow, lurking along the fence that she'd tried to escape from earlier this year.

The quiet and darkness of the evening was broken by a short, loud whoop of an alarm and flashing blue lights.

Crap. I knew what that meant.

I lifted my head from the makeshift pillow of a pile of hay I'd made and peered over the edge to see if they were in our yard. As I looked toward our front door, I caught sight of the lights in the distance and followed them to where they were coming from. The Millers'.

Anger boiled in my stomach immediately. I hadn't forgotten what they'd done to me a few months ago, and I still hadn't gotten revenge for it. Luke had told me I needed to let it go, that Arn might have learned his lesson and that we needed to give them some space. But I knew that was just giving them time to lick their wounds. They'd be back. Looked like they were already starting.

With Luke gone to town with Collin, that meant Amber might be alone over there at the Millers' place. Without Luke, the only person there to defend her would be her dad, who was still recovering from his health issues and wasn't in shape for a fight with an Anderson.

By the time I got back into the barn, down the steps and to the side door of the house, Owen was already in the living room, putting on his boots.

“You call Luke?” he asked.

“Nah,” I said. “This one’s gonna be just us.”

“Ah, shit,” Owen said. “I got practice tonight. I can’t be dealing with this.”

“Practice?”

Owen shook his head, grimacing. He didn’t want to talk about it, whatever it was. Considering I often disappeared to practice myself, I really didn’t have the right to argue with him. I shrugged.

“All right then,” I said. “Maybe it’s something simple. If we just show up, they might scatter. Come on.”

“Let’s hope so,” Owen said. “I know the girls are there.”

“The girls?”

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“Yeah, Amber has her bridesmaids over.”

“Wait,” I said, my heart thudding in my chest. “You mean Charlotte is over there right now?”

Owen shrugged. “I would think so,” he said. “She’s one of the bridesmaids. Luke was saying something about her coming into town for tonight, which is why he went with Collin into town. Amber was going to be busy.”

“Son of a bitch,” I muttered. “You bringing anything?”

“Anything?” he asked, confused.

“A weapon,” I said. “It’s the Andersons. They’ve got guns.”

“Yeah, but they don’t use them,” he said. “They aren’t that stupid. If they pulled a gun, that’d be the end of them, and they know it. Besides, if we roll up there packing, that’s us escalating.”

“I guess,” I said, my teeth set on edge as I waited for him to finish getting his shit together.

“Look,” he said, “you make sure Charlotte’s all right, and I’ll talk to the Andersons. I’m bigger than all of them, they won’t try anything on me. I can get the situation calmed down, all right?”

“Yeah, all right,” I said. “Let’s go, Owen. You’re taking a long damn time.”

“Perfection ain’t quick,” he said, grinning. “It’s going to be fine, Jesse. Chill out.”

“I’ll chill out when they are gone, and I know the girls are fine. Luke’d kill us if something happened to Amber and we didn’t stop it.”

“I don’t think Amber is your main concern right now,” he quipped. “Is she?”

“Let’s just go,” I said.

Chapter Twelve

Charlotte

“That ain’t no way to talk to an officer of the law.”

“I thought you got fired,” Amber said, her arms crossed as she sat on the couch beside Tamara.

The tension in the room was so thick you could slice it with a butter knife.

“I took a leave of absence,” Arnold said through gritted teeth. “That’s not the same thing. No one fired me. I’m the sheriff. It’s an elected position.”

“Yeah, about that,” Mr. Miller said. “If I recall correctly, the last three elections, the only person running was you. And before that, the last two people running against you mysteriously dropped out right before the election. I’ve been meaning to ask you about that.”

“I wouldn’t have the slightest idea why anyone would drop out of a race, Bill,” Arnold spat. “I’m sure they had their reasons.”

“Rumor was, the reason was you threatening them,” Mr. Miller said defiantly. “Which, after your behavior on my front lawn a few months ago, I absolutely believe.”

Arnold took a deep breath and let out an annoyed sigh.

“As I have stated repeatedly, that night has been misconstrued, and I have been cleared of any wrongdoing by the FBI.”

“I thought they just dropped the case,” Mr. Miller continued, needling Arn for all he was worth. “That doesn’t mean you got cleared; it just means they stopped pursuing it. For now.”

“It’s irrelevant,” Arn said, his eyes going back to Amber. “What’s relevant here is that I need to speak with Amber. Alone.”

“Absolutely not,” I said. “You have no authority to compel her to, nor does she have any reason to come with you.”

“Public intoxication,” Arn said.

“In my own house?” Amber shot back.

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“While you were out,” he said. “I saw you stopping at the gas station just past Louisa county line. You seemed like you were having a lot of trouble with your balance.”

“Who cares?” Tamara interrupted. “She wasn’t driving. I was. And I am stone cold sober. You can check.”

“I didn’t say she was driving intoxicated,” Arnold said, frustration creeping deeper and deeper into his voice. “I said public intoxication. She was in public and intoxicated. I am doing a welfare check. As such, I need to speak with her without interference from the peanut gallery.”

“Get a warrant,” Mr. Miller said, standing laboriously from his chair. “Otherwise, get out of my house.”

“Amber,” Arnold said, ignoring him, “we can do this the easy way. You just need to come with me.”

“Where?” she asked.

“Amber, no,” I said.

“Just outside. For a minute. I just want to talk to you.”

“About what?” Amber asked. “About me marrying Luke? Because I’m going to marry him.”

“Amber, you are making a massive mistake,” he said. “You don’t know these people

like I do. The Galloways are bad people. Bad.”

“Who was it that got investigated by the FBI again?” I interjected.

Arn turned toward me with an expression so full of rage that I actually backed up a step.

“Stay out of this, Charlotte,” he said. “You should just get on back to Oklahoma.”

“I don’t live in Oklahoma,” I said. “I live in Texas.”

“I don’t give a fuck where you live!”

Silence filled the room as Arnold sagged, knowing he’d let his temper out again in the worst possible situation.

“Amber, please, I just need to say my peace and then you can do what you will.”

“Over my dead body,” Tamara said.

“Don’t tempt me, Tamara,” a voice said from the door.

I turned to see Eugene Anderson standing in the doorway, another car now parked in the yard. I rolled my eyes. Of course, he wasn’t going to be alone. It was always about pressure with the Andersons. They set up the situations so that it was impossible to say no to them, and then when you complained, they were able to say that everything you did had been done willingly. I had experience with it. Bitter experience.

“Take a step in my house, Eugene, and I swear to God I will find a way to trespass you,” Mr. Miller said. “And you, Arn, I think I have given you enough of my time.

You have no reason to be here other than my invitation, and I am officially revoking it right now. Unless you are prepared to put someone in handcuffs and charge them with something, then you need to get out.”

“What if I charged you with interference with an investigation, Bill?”

Mr. Miller’s jaw set, and he took a step closer to Arnold.

“Is that a threat, Arnold?”

“I’m just saying,” Arn said, predictably backing down a step. “Everybody in this room is under my jurisdiction. As sheriff, I am the law. So when I am investigating a serious situation, like a woman who may or may not have been inebriated in public and caused a nuisance, then I need cooperation, not resistance. And if I get resistance, I have legal remedies for it.”

“Try it,” Mr. Miller said. “Put me in handcuffs and see how fast I sue the county and get you and your whole crooked family out of Foley forever.”

Arn grinned.

“That’s an awful lot of confidence for a man with a heart condition,” he sneered. “Amber, I am going to go out in this front yard. And I am going to be there for a while. You can either sit here with your friends and look at the pretty blue lights shining through your living room, or you can come out and you and I can have a civil, adult conversation. Alone.”

Arn turned on his heel without waiting for a response and headed for the door. Eugene held it open for him and glared inside before following his brother down the steps. As soon as they were out of eyesight, Amber crumbled to the couch, tears welling up in her eyes. Tamara was on her feet, using her phone to make a call, and

Mr. Miller was making his way to his daughter.

“That rat bastard,” Mr. Miller said. “He’s such a loser.”

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“Yes, he is,” I said. “A loser with a badge. There’s nothing worse.”

“Luke?” Tamara said into her phone. “Luke, it’s Tamara. We have a problem. Arnold Anderson just showed up at the Millers’. He’s trying to get Amber outside to talk.”

“Oh God, he’s going to kill him,” Amber said.

“No, he won’t,” I said, not knowing if I was lying to myself or not. “He’s smarter than that.”

“You don’t understand,” Amber said. “Arnold and Luke both want to kill each other already. This is just going to set him off.”

“Well, maybe his brothers will hold him back,” I offered.

As if on cue, shouts were heard outside.

“Luke, is that you out there?” Tamara said on the phone, her eyes wide. She turned to me and shook her head no.

“Aw, hell,” Mrs. Miller said, looking out the window. “It’s Jesse. They’re going to kill each other on my front lawn.”

“Jesse?” I asked, my throat closing up and my skin flushing.

“Yup,” Mr. Miller said, joining his wife at the window. “Looks like Owen behind him.”

“That’s who’s shouting,” Mrs. Miller said. “It’s Owen trying to stop Jesse.”

I took off from where I was, bounding through the door and down the steps. Indeed, Jesse was coming up the driveway, Owen trying to pull him to the side and hold him off while Arn and Eugene advanced on them.

“You worthless piece of shit,” Jesse shouted. “You leave them alone, you hear me?”

“You want to talk about worthless?” Arnold argued. “You are the worthless one, Jesse. Look at your brothers. The whole group of you are worthless bums, but at least they aren’t long-haired pretty boys pretending to be a country star. How fucking pathetic.”

“Screw you, Arn,” Owen said. “You don’t know shit about shit. Get on out of here.”

“And you, you big, dumb oaf,” Arnold said. “How’s that dream career coming, huh? Oh, you thought I didn’t know, didn’t you? How’s it feel running around in your underwear?”

“What the hell is he talking about?” Jesse said.

“Just, nothing, just leave it be,” Owen said, then turned to Arn. “You keep your mouth shut, Arnold. Or else I swear I will shut it for you.”

“You threatening an officer?” Eugene thundered, stepping in front of his smaller brother. “You want to say that to me, big boy?”

“I’ll say it all damn day,” Owen said. “But you need to leave us be. And the Millers too.”

“Get out of here, Arnold,” Jesse said. “Now.”

“Jesse!”

His name came out of my mouth just as I saw him lunge, and it stopped him cold. He turned, and our eyes met for the first time in two years. Owen took the opportunity to move his brother out of harm’s way and drag him a little closer to the house, around the Andersons’ cars. Jesse put up a small fight, but then gave up when he realized he didn’t really have a choice in the matter, and he was being brought closer to me anyway.

“Charlotte,” he said.

“Come with me,” I said, reaching out my hand. He took it, and I yanked him, Owen letting go just as I did, and Jesse stumbled after me.

I didn’t know exactly where I was going, but I knew it had to be somewhere away. Away from the Andersons, away from Tamara and Owen and Amber. Away from the whole world. Somewhere it could be just me and him and I could calm him down.

“Where the hell are we going?” Jesse shouted as I pulled him behind a shed.

“Right here,” I said. “Jesse, you have to stop. It’s only going to make this situation worse.”

“I don’t care if it makes it worse. That dumbass deserves a fist to the jaw for having the damn gall to be here at all right now.”

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“Jesse, please, you need to stop. You need to stop right now.”

“Why? What is it to you? Worst that’s going to happen to me is he’s going to throw me in jail and beat me up again. I’ll live.”

“Jesse, please,” I said.

“Charlotte, I have to...”

I cut him off by closing the space between us and smashing my lips into his. At first, he stood stock still, like I was kissing a brick wall, but then he softened, his arms wrapping around me and folding me into the kiss. When I pulled away, his eyes were distant and spacy.

“Now, shut up,” I said. “You and I need to talk, and we don’t need their bullshit in the middle.”

Chapter Thirteen

Jesse

“That’s twice,” I said.

She stared at me for a moment, confused, and then turned her head to one side. If I hadn’t been so hopping mad, I’d have found it adorable, like a puppy who doesn’t understand a command. But my blood was boiling, not just at Arnold and Eugene but now at Charlotte too.

“Twice what?” she asked.

“Twice,” I said, “that you’ve cheated on your boyfriend with me.”

Her eyes closed, and she sighed, breathing out slowly before taking another deep breath in and opening them. Tears were clustered up in the corners of her eyes, but she didn’t look particularly sad. Almost relieved, in fact.

“Jesse, we need to talk. About a lot of stuff. There is a lot you need to know, and I need to know, and we need to go over.”

“You’re right,” I said. “There is. But not right now. I have business to take care of.”

“Jesse, stop. Nothing you can do or say right now is going to make anything better.”

“Yes, it will,” I insisted. “Without me and Owen being here, I can bet he was going to try to get Amber alone outside. And then what? Who knows? Maybe we wouldn’t see her for a few days, and when we did, she’d be on a video call saying she was calling off the wedding and never speaking to anyone again.”

“That’s a jump,” Charlotte said.

“No, Charlotte, it’s not,” I growled. “You’ve been gone a long time. You don’t know what these people have done. They are one hundred percent capable of doing something like that. Or worse. I don’t trust them as far as I can throw them.”

“I don’t trust them either, Jesse, but they aren’t going to just kidnap Amber.”

“Yes, they would,” I argued. “Like I said, you don’t know them. I do.”

I pointed to the scar on my skull and then to the one across my bottom lip. Scars put

there by the Andersons when they beat the shit out of me, Collin, and Luke and threw us all in jail. They almost killed Luke when Collin and I got out, and if it weren't for Amber nursing him back to health, who knows how bad off he'd be right now.

“What is that from?”

“The last time I got into it with an Anderson,” I said. “It was a lot worse, trust me. I promised myself I'd never back down from those jerks, and after they gave me these, I don't intend on going back on that.”

“Jesse, it's dangerous. And stupid. They're cops.”

“They're assholes,” I said. “First and foremost. And second, they are messing with my soon-to-be sister-in-law. And you. And I am not going to stand around and let that happen. So step back and let me do my job, as a man, and get rid of these idiots.”

“Oh my God, you haven't changed at all, have you?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You're still that teenage boy, the one who got into fights and caused havoc for everyone all the time. Aren't you? You're still the same Jesse James Galloway that you've always been.”

“Why would I change?” I shot back. “I never pretended to be anything other than who I am.”

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It came out before I fully thought it through, and I could see the hurt on Charlotte's face as the words sank in. Charlotte, who was April in her professional life, but Charlotte when I was around. She knew who she really was. And it hurt to be reminded that she'd run from it.

She shrank backwards, her mouth hanging open as if she were going to say something, but nothing came out. Shame built up inside me, and I turned away from her so I didn't have to see her cry. It was too late to take it back. And what was happening behind me was too pressing.

Ole had arrived now, and was standing beside his brother Arnold, while Eugene had retreated to his car. My concern was Eugene was gathering weaponry, so my first move was to head toward him. But before I could make it more than a few steps, Ole and Owen had bucked up against each other and were eye to eye.

"Hey!" I called out. "Get away from my brother! Step back, Oland!"

"Or what?" Oland spat. "This little punk is old enough now to catch some hands. He's the only one of you boys I haven't had the pleasure of making bleed yet."

"And you never will," Owen grumbled. "But if you make one more move, I swear to all that is holy I will beat the brakes off you and your brothers by myself."

"Oh, really?" Oland said, grinning. "I think that sounds like one hell of a challenge being laid out."

"Everybody stop!"

The voice came from the porch, and I turned to see Mr. Miller standing there, leaning on his cane with his wife trying to pull him back inside. Behind him, Tamara and Amber were in the living room, Tamara still on the phone.

“Mr. Miller, get back in the house,” I said.

“Andersons! You might be police, but you have no right to be here right now! Get off my property immediately, or there will be a massive problem. Do you understand?”

“What are you going to do, old man?” Arnold shouted.

“I’m going to call Agent Griffin is what I am going to do,” he said.

Arnold laughed, and like a chain reaction, so did Oland and Eugene.

“Agent Griffin got reassigned,” Arnold said. “The whole damn case fell apart. My charges were dropped. She can’t and won’t do a damn thing.”

“You paid off the judges, didn’t you?” Owen said. “Or did you just threaten them like you do everybody else?”

“You listen here, little punk,” Arn said, pushing his brother away and getting in Owen’s face. Owen towered over him by a few inches, but the ego of Arnold Anderson was so damn big that it seemed not to faze him at all.

“I ain’t little,” Owen grumbled.

“One more word,” I said, joining Owen by his side. “One more word to my brother, and you will be looking for your teeth for the rest of the night.”

Arn and Owen continued to stare at each other for a long moment before Arn slowly

slid his gaze to me. A slight grin crossed the corner of his mouth, and he spat on the ground directly in front of me. Oland and Eugene stood behind him, backing him up and making sure we were well aware it was two against three. Not that it was going to make us back down. Owen and I would have fought a hundred Andersons if we had to.

“The only person who should be worried right now is you, Jesse,” Arn said ominously.

“Oh yeah? Why is that, Arn? You gonna lock me in the jail and beat me up like you did Luke? Because I guarantee you, if you try that bullshit again, not only will we all make sure you don’t spend another day in your uniform, but I will personally see to it that you have difficulty with various body parts well into your old age.”

“Heh,” Arn said, shaking his head. “No, you just don’t understand, Jesse. Things are much worse for you than they are for the rest of your idiot brothers. The whole Galloway clan is a bunch of backward redneck con-men, but you, you’re the worst out of all of them. The absolute worst.”

“What’s the matter, Arn? You don’t like it that I have a band? Is that it? You jealous? Like you are of Luke, because Amber wants to be with him and not you?”

“Amber is making the mistake of a lifetime,” Arnold said. “And one day she will see it. Luke, just like the rest of you, is a no-good, dirty bastard. But she will wake up one day and see it. And when she does, I’ll be right there for her. Because I, unlike you or your family, am a good man.”

“That’s a fucking riot,” I said.

“And you, you are a deadbeat piece of crap, Jesse,” he continued. “See, I know someone who wants to see you in handcuffs really badly. Someone who, all they need

to do is file the right paperwork, and I'll have the authority to put you in the back of a car and bring you to jail. And when they are done with you, you'll either be spending the next decade behind bars, or that family of yours is going to have to give up all that hoarded-up land you have and return it to its rightful owners. Foley might finally be free of you once and for all."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Owen said. "You keep dancing around saying something. Just get on with it."

Arn grinned wider now, sporting a gold tooth I hadn't noticed before. A remnant of a real solid shot Luke must have given him a couple months ago. It glittered in the blue lights from the cop cars.

"Oh, you'll see," Arn said. "You'll see when I slap the cuffs on you and read you your rights, Jesse."

“For what?”

“Default,” Arn said, his words dropping like lead, “on child support.”

Chapter Fourteen

Charlotte

I felt like I couldn't breathe.

The words reverberated in my mind and brought back painful memories, emotions that had long since hidden themselves deep inside. Thoughts about who I'd thought Jesse was and how that might not have been correct flashed again through my consciousness, and my stomach churned. It was like I was going to be sick.

Was it for real?

“You and I both know that's bullshit,” Jesse said, stepping to within inches of Arnold's face.

“I'll tell you what I know, Jesse. I know you are a piece of crap. You are a petulant child in a man's body, someone who slept with every girl he could get his hands on because he has no shame, no self-control. Do I believe you knocked up that girl and then took no responsibility for it? You're damn right I do. And anyone who knows you would say it's not only plausible, it's downright probable. Hell, ask your brothers.”

“I don’t need to,” Jesse said. “But what I feel like I need, right now, is to knock you the fuck out.”

“Jesse,” Owen said, putting his massive hand on Jesse’s chest and pulling him back a step, “we don’t need to do this right now. He’s got you hot. Let’s just take a minute.”

“No, I don’t want to take a minute,” Jesse said. “I want you, Arn. I want you and me to go. Right now. Right here!”

But Arnold wasn’t biting. He’d finally gotten under Jesse’s skin and was backing away, heading to his car. All three of the Anderson brothers got into their cars and pulled away, turning off their lights as they pulled onto the road, laughing softly to themselves as Owen literally held Jesse back from jumping them.

“Come back, you cowards!” Jesse shouted as the last of the Anderson cars pulled away. “Come back and fight like a man, dammit!”

“Jesse, calm down,” Owen said. “It’s over. They’re gone.”

“They’ll be back, Owen!” Jesse shouted. “They will always be back! Until we take care of them for good, they will just keep coming back like cockroaches. Our whole lives have been dealing with these pricks, and I’m done with it. I’m done!”

“Jesse,” I said.

My voice was quiet but firm. I felt like I had been rooted to the spot, sadness and anger roiling into a tight ball in my chest. Yet through it, I found strength. I found defiance. I stood my ground and spoke his name, and he stopped. He turned. And he knew.

“Charlotte,” he began.

“We need to talk. Right now.”

“Go to the ranch,” Owen said. “Ain’t nobody there. Luke and Collin are bound to come here, and I’ll stay and wait for them.”

“Yeah, all right,” Jesse said, the vitriol and anger he’d had when the Andersons were there seemingly vanished. “Come on, Charlotte. Let’s go over to the ranch.”

“Fine,” I said.

As we walked down the curved road, Jesse stayed quiet beside me for a long time. We were almost to the entrance when he finally did speak.

“So you heard what Arnold said.”

“I did,” I responded coldly.

“It’s not true.”

“Seems pretty consistent with what she told me ten years ago, Jesse.”

“It’s still not true. That baby isn’t mine.”

I groaned as he led me through the ranch house’s front yard and to the side porch, where he opened the door and let me in. I flopped onto one of the loveseats as he disappeared into the house, flicking on the overhead fan from a switch on the wall as he went. When he came back a moment later, he had four of a six-pack of beer in one hand and a pitcher of lemonade in the other. He sat them down and then pulled out two plastic cups from his back pocket.

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“Beer,” I said, holding out a hand.

I wasn’t a beer person, but I felt like I might need the alcohol to get through the night. As I cracked it open and took my first guzzle, I noticed that it actually wasn’t bad. It was some beer I’d never heard of, but it had a big ‘Made in Texas’ logo on it.

“I believe that’s the first time I’ve ever seen you drink a beer,” Jesse said, sitting on a chair near me and cracking open his own beer.

“Don’t get used to it,” I said.

Jesse nodded, taking a sip of his and then leaning forward so his elbows rested on his knees. He cleared his throat and stared into his beer can as he talked.

“I met her about a year after you left. We didn’t go out at first because I thought she might be a little nuts, but she was in a friend group I was in, so I saw her pretty often. When I finally did go out with her, it was out of boredom. I seriously just wanted someone to go see a movie with, and she was available. We went, saw the movie, and she got clingy.

“Like I said, I thought she might be a little crazy, so I didn’t drop her hard. I was going to let it play out for a week or two and then just kind of let her down easy.”

“You mean ghost her? Like you did a bunch of other girls? Including my sister?”

He shifted uneasily in his seat and took another sip of his beer.

“Look, I know I haven’t been the best boyfriend material guy in my life,” he began. “But the thing is, I didn’t really give Lacey any indication we were even a couple.”

“You mean besides having sex with her?”

That seemed to cut deep, and I actually found myself feeling bad for the way I’d shot that particular arrow.

“I didn’t have sex with her,” he said. “At least not that I remember. We went on the one date. We saw a movie, and then I brought her home. That’s when things got fuzzy.”

“What do you mean, fuzzy?”

“I... I remember bringing her to her door, and she invited me in for a drink. I didn’t want to, but she kept begging me for just one drink with her, so finally I gave in. I went in... and ... I kind of remember her giving me a drink. But then, the next thing I knew I was in my truck and it was four in the morning. Her house was dark, the door shut, and I had my keys in my lap.”

“You don’t remember being with her?”

“No,” he said. “I don’t think I was. My clothes weren’t disheveled or anything. I didn’t have any signs that I’d done anything. Just... just that I didn’t remember.

“I did ghost her after that. Ignored her calls and everything. If she roofied me or something, I wasn’t going to deal with that nonsense, you know? And it wasn’t like I could go to the cops. Who would I call? The Andersons? No.”

“So you just kept that to yourself,” I said.

“Kinda, yeah. I told Luke. He told me to call the police anyway. Go right to state troopers or something. I just wanted to move on. Whatever happened happened, you know? I didn’t see her again for a couple days. Then she just showed up at the ranch. We had it out on the front lawn, and she made this big deal out of me not remembering being with her. Then she took off.”

“When was that?”

“About a year before we reconnected,” he said. “I didn’t see her again until she showed up at that show. She’d emailed me, but I deleted them without reading them. Same with her voicemails. I had no idea she was going to show up, but as soon as she did, I knew she must have known about you. She made a beeline for you.”

“Did you do a paternity test?”

“She won’t agree to one,” he said. “I tried. I’m more than willing to take one. But she listed me as the father on the birth certificate, and even though I didn’t sign it, apparently that’s as good as gold in Texas. I’ve been fighting it for eight years, and I can’t compel her to do a paternity test.”

“Are you positive the child isn’t yours?”

“As positive as I can be. And if it is, then I will deal with that. But I am ninety-nine percent sure it isn’t mine.”

I sighed, hanging my head for a moment and then rubbing my eyes to get rid of the tears that were still spilling occasionally.

“That’s why I left all those years ago,” I said. “I thought you were hiding a relationship from me. A kid, no less.”

“I found out about that the same time you did,” he said. “I heard rumors she got pregnant, but I thought she had been seeing someone else. I forget who. But she got knocked up, and I thought, hey, great, she will leave me alone. Then she kept emailing me and calling, and I figured she just wasn’t happy and wanted me back. I had no idea she was claiming that baby was mine until she confronted you.”

I nodded. I believed him. I didn’t know if I was being an idiot or not, but I believed him. At this point, why would he lie? And the smug look on Lacey Banks’ face when she showed me those pictures... I could believe that was a woman who would do anything, absolutely anything, to get what she wanted. And what she wanted at that moment was for me to be gone and for Jesse to be under her thumb.

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Jesse's eyes were soft and tender as he looked at me, and I felt the weight of my own secret pulling. I needed to tell him what had happened more recently. He deserved to know, and he deserved even more to know what my situation was right now.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. This part was going to suck. A lot.

Chapter Fifteen

Jesse

"I have something you need to know," Charlotte said.

I lifted my head from where it hung, looking down into my beer and at my boots, knowing that everything I said depended on her trusting me, which she had no reason to do. Yet I hoped she would. I didn't know what could happen from here, if anything, but I wanted her to know I was telling the truth, so far as I knew it to be.

"Go ahead," I said. "It can't be worse than what is going on with me."

Her face twisted up in a mask of unease, and I sat back. Whatever she had to say, it wasn't pleasant. Or she was expecting a reaction that wasn't. I had to steel myself against whatever it could be just so I wouldn't react however it was she thought I was going to.

She shifted in her seat and took a deep, long swig of the beer that was still novel to see her drink. When she pulled it away from her lips, she cleared her throat and looked directly into my eyes. As if she wanted to know the words settled in me and

that I heard every last one.

“When we met up two years ago, I was single. I didn’t lie to you about that.”

“But you left with your boyfriend,” I began.

“My boss. Not my boyfriend. Mr. Bethel, Tom Bethel, is the CEO of the company. He was there to meet me about a possible promotion. I told you I had something important in the morning. That was it. I had a meeting with him that was supposed to take place in the conference rooms downstairs. But at the last minute, he decided he wanted to go out to eat, so I went with him. I ended up getting the job, actually. But when I came back, you were already gone.”

“You have to be kidding me,” I said. “All this time... you were single, and you came back for me?”

I didn’t know if I should feel elated or furious. Maybe both. What was that guy’s name again? If I ever figured it out, I might wring his damn neck. Two years down the drain.

“I did come back. But you were gone, and I assumed it was like all the other girls. You got to bed me, after all that time, and you were going to move on. I didn’t blame you. I wanted more, but I wasn’t going to push it. Besides, I didn’t have your number or anything.”

“I thought you’d leave me yours,” I said. “Before you left.”

“I was in a massive hurry,” she said. “I thought you’d still be there when I got back. I didn’t expect to go out to lunch or for it to take so long.”

“So if you had come back, and I’d been there, what then?”

She blushed and smiled as she shook her head.

“Probably picking up where we’d left off the night before.”

I grinned and had to change my seating position as parts of my body awoke to the memory of that night. Of how her skin tasted, covered in sweat and hot from effort. How her body felt under my palms. How I’d made her quiver, and she’d made me shake.

“So what now?” I asked.

“That’s where it gets complicated,” she said.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.”

“So... you have a boyfriend? Fiancé?” I swallowed hard, glancing at her hand for a ring, but not being able to see clearly. “A husband?”

“Technically,” she said, “I have a boyfriend. But... well, it’s complicated.”

“Ahh,” I said. “I might have some experience with this. It’s just a physical thing?”

“Actually, no,” she said with just the faintest hint of judgment in her voice, “it’s not physical. It’s the opposite.”

“Oh?”

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I didn't know why, but my spirit buoyed at this. She was an adult in her thirties. She'd clearly had physical relationships other than me. But to know that she wasn't currently engaged in one lifted my spirits and added to my hunger.

"He's older. And technically my boss."

"Bethel?" I exclaimed. "So you went from me thinking you were dating him to actually dating him?"

"No, I told you, he's married. I'm technically dating his brother."

I felt like my world was spinning out of control. I breathed out through my nose, trying to calm myself. What the hell?

"His brother? You're dating some old, rich dude?"

"Technically," she said, "yes."

"I see."

"But I would give it up in a heartbeat to be with you."

All the anger seeped out of me in an instant. I looked up into those dark eyes and felt myself falling into them again, just like I had every time I saw her, every time I dreamed about her. She was as beautiful as she ever was, perhaps even more so, and though my mind had hardened at the idea that she was unattainable, knowing she would give up her rich boyfriend to be with me was everything my thundering heart

could ask.

“Are you sure about that?” I asked, trying to keep my voice level and calm.

“Absolutely,” she said.

“What about our lives? They don’t mix. You’re off in these hotels, and I’m on the road or at the ranch all the time. We’d never see each other.”

She shrugged. “Frankly, that’s what I have right now anyway with Graham. We’ve only really gone out a dozen or so times, and it’s almost always some event or something. Not a real date. We barely know each other. We never see each other. He texts me and asks if I want to accompany him to an event in a few days, I say yes, and he sends a car for me the day of. I don’t even usually see him until I arrive wherever it is.”

“So he flies you all over for events? And you wouldn’t miss that kind of life?”

“Honestly, no,” she said. “Graham is a nice man. A kind man. But he’s not someone I could ever fall in love with. Especially when I already fell in love with you a decade ago.”

“Do you mean that?” I asked.

“I do,” she said.

I nodded. “I have feelings for you, Charlotte. I do. I’ve been thinking about you all the time. For years and years now. You were the only girl I wished I could have held and never let go. The things I feel for you are deeper than anything I ever felt for anyone else by orders of magnitude. But... but so much time has passed, and our lives are so different. I’d have to think about it. But there is a massive problem we’d

need to address before we could go anywhere else.”

“I know,” she said, sighing and sitting back, taking another deep pull from her drink. “I understand. Hell, I might need some time to think too. Just because I’ve been thinking about you for a decade doesn’t mean it would work now. But, Jesse, I want you to know I never stopped thinking about you. Not once.”

“Me either.”

“So that just leaves the massive problem.”

“Yes, it does.”

Then, at once, we said the same thing.

“Tamara.”

She groaned and leaned back in her chair, wincing.

“You know you have to tell her,” I said. “Before this goes any further, you have to tell your sister about us. And it doesn’t do any good to start from right now. She needs to know the whole truth. Even the part about me ghosting her and then going out with you. She needs to know the truth, or else it will come back to bite us later.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “Is it worth telling her everything?”

“I think so,” I said. “I wouldn’t hide any of that from my brothers. I know that.”

She nodded. “You’re right.” For a long moment, we sat in the quiet, then she stood. “I should go back. They’re probably worried over there.”

“Probably,” I said.

“I’m... I’m supposed to leave in the morning,” she said.

“Okay.”

“But I need your number. Because I don’t know what I am going to do.”

I grinned. “You’re learning.”

She laughed, and I reveled in the sound. Even after everything that happened tonight, to end it on a note of her laughter was sublime.

We exchanged phone numbers, calling each other to test it and make sure, and then slipped our phones back into our pockets.

“Well,” I said.

“Well,” she repeated, falling into that awkward space where neither of us knew how intimate we should be. Should we hug? Kiss? No, she was technically still with someone. Just a hug? Or nothing at all?

“Come here,” I said, holding my arm out.

She sank into my arms easily, and for a brief moment, I felt like my entire body was tingling, especially the top of my head. Feeling her body molded into mine, smelling her hair just under my nose as I held her head to my chest, it was enough to

overwhelm me in the best of ways. I closed my eyes and let myself loose in the moment. When it ended, and she began to pull away, there was the slightest hesitation, as our eyes trained on each other's and her lips parted ever so slightly.

Oh, how I wanted to kiss those lips. More than I'd ever wanted anything else.

But it would have to wait. The time wasn't right. Not until everything was settled.

"I'll let you know what I'm doing tomorrow," she said.

"I'll look forward to your text."

"Goodbye, Jesse," she said, opening the door to the side yard. I followed her and took the door from her.

"Good night, Charlotte."

I watched as she crossed to the front, went out through the gate, and made her way down the road. I didn't take my eyes off of her until I saw her disappear behind the tree that blocked my view of their front porch. When I was satisfied she was there and safe, I finished my beer, cleaned up, and headed upstairs to bed.

Chapter Sixteen

Charlotte

Mixed emotions made my stomach do cartwheels as I walked back to the Millers' house. On one hand, I'd finally told Jesse what happened and learned his side of the story as well. I felt like I'd cleared away years' worth of cloudy misconceptions and assumptions in one fell swoop. Knowing he'd left, not because he didn't want to be with me, or that he was avoiding any kind of commitment, and that he just thought I

had a boyfriend, both saddened and lifted me. I was sad for all the time that we'd missed, the opportunity at reconnection lost, but happy that that's all it was.

He'd never stopped having feelings for me, just like I'd never stopped having feelings for him. No matter how angry we were at each other, over years of time, we still wanted each other, even if that want was a secret to ourselves. From ourselves.

I looked back only once, when I was across the road and almost to the curve just after the Millers'. Jesse stood in the door of the side porch, holding his beer in one hand and watching me, waving with the other. I waved back and then turned back, my cheeks burning and a smile so deep that I couldn't have gotten it off with a jackhammer.

Entering the Millers' yard brought back some of the memory of the hectic night that had preceded my talk with Jesse. Deep tire marks in the mud where the Andersons had parked their cars were going to send Mrs. Miller into a fit in the morning, I was sure. One of her flowerbeds had been trampled as well, and I was sure that was on purpose. Oland Anderson had a history of doing just that, and it was one of those things everyone knew about him but no one said anything about.

The lights were off, save for the kitchen light and the porch light. As I came up the stairs, I looked down at my phone, trying to turn on the flashlight, and realized I'd been gone for almost an hour. It was funny, it sure didn't seem that long.

I shined the flashlight on the doorknob, half expecting to try it and find it was locked and need to search for a spare key, but the door came open easily.

Mr. Miller and Mrs. Miller were already off to bed, it seemed, and Amber's door was also shut. Tamara was on the couch, tapping away at her own phone, and looked up at me when I came in.

“Hey,” she whispered, “how didthatgo?”

“I’ll tell you about it tomorrow,” I said, dancing around the obvious question in her eyes. She wanted to know what Jesse and I could have possibly talked about that wouldn’t involve her. But I didn’t have the heart to tell her tonight.

“Fine,” she said, yawning. “I’m tired anyway. You can take the guest room if you want, or you can sleep on the couch. Either or.”

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“We could share the bed,” I said. “If you snore, I’ll just kick you, like I did when we were kids.”

“Fine by me,” she said. “As long as I can elbow you for talking in your sleep.”

“As long as you write down what I say,” I said. “Did Luke come?”

“Yeah, he’s in Amber’s room. I get the impression he’s staying the night.”

“I would think so,” I said. “Come on. Let’s get to sleep. I have to be up early.”

“All right, all right.”

She followed me into the guest room, and we shut the door quietly. I took the right side of the bed, just like I had when we were little and slept on the same king-sized mattress. It didn’t take long after I plugged my phone into the little charger that Tamara had that I fell into a deep sleep.

When I woke up, there was a text waiting for me.

Tamara was already out of bed, but I got the impression that I’d probably woken up to the door shutting, so she hadn’t been awake long. Muffled low voices were speaking in the living room, and I thought I caught the cadence of Luke and Amber. I sat up, stretching, and then checked the blinking message on my phone.

It was from Graham.

You'll need to leave Texas by ten PM. I'll have the plane waiting for you in Dallas.

While it wasn't a rude message, it did have that approach of a wealthy person who is used to giving orders. It was something I'd noticed about Graham but had filed away as normal for someone like him and excused the behavior. It was as if he expected the world to behave, and when it didn't, he got a little cross. Not angry, per se, and never outright rude, but certainly grumpy when things didn't go the way he wanted. Me not coming with him to Paris initially was one of those things, and he was making it clear he expected me to behave and take the plane he provided tonight.

I got out of bed, wondering what exactly I should do. I needed to talk to Tamara first, that was for sure, but I also owed it to Graham to tell him what was going on. Especially in person. Especially if he was thinking of doing what I had a suspicion he was going to do.

It didn't make any sense, and yet, it might make perfect sense for him to propose. He was an older man who didn't have time for games. I was a pretty piece of arm candy he could depend on. Even if we didn't have much of a real relationship, he probably assumed that a woman in her thirties was out of most of her options anyway and would be grateful for a union with someone of his stature.

He was probably right. Any other woman in my position might be elated to be in this situation. Yet, for me, it was a nightmare. I didn't want to hurt him, not only because he didn't deserve it, but also because he was technically one of my bosses. But there didn't seem to be a way around it. If I texted him from here or called, it would be a wildly impersonal way of ending things. If I went with him to Paris, it would feel like I'd strung him along and used him for a free trip.

I didn't know what to do. But before I could get to all that, first things first. I needed to talk to Tamara.

Tamara and Luke were in the kitchen, standing by the counter with coffee mugs in their hands. Tamara saw me and immediately grabbed a mug, filling it and bringing it to me black.

“Where’s Amber?” I asked.

“Getting ready for the day,” Luke said. “She’ll be out in a minute.”

“Ahh, all right. Hey, Tamara, do you mind if we go talk for a minute?”

“Sure,” she said. “You want a donut?”

“There’s donuts?”

“Wanda made them,” Luke said. “She makes the best donuts.”

Indeed, the little closed glass tray full of glazed donuts smelled amazing when Tamara opened it, and I took one of the gooey treats and headed for the door. There was a little bench out near the garden, so I headed that way as Tamara came out behind me, bringing a couple of napkins and her own donut and coffee.

“What’s up?” she asked as she sat down beside me.

“I wanted to talk to you about last night,” I said. “About Jesse.”

“Ah, right,” she said. “Go on.”

I took a deep breath and started at the beginning, going over how Jesse had gone on a date with her, thought he would ghost her and then talked to me. How we kept it quiet because we wanted to give her time to move on from him and then before I could say anything, his ex, Lacey, ruined it all. How we’d reconnected in Oklahoma and then

miscommunication made us lose touch again and how now that we'd reconnected, I didn't know where things were going to go.

She took it quietly, taking sips of her coffee and staring out into the garden, occasionally dunking a piece of her donut into the light brown, sugary beverage and shoveling it into her mouth absentmindedly.

“Well, I can't say I'm not disappointed,” she said finally, sighing heavily.

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“I know. It wasn’t okay for me to do that to you. You clearly had a big crush on him, and...”

“No, not that,” she said. I stopped in confusion, and she smiled slightly, shaking her head. “I know... I know I’m boy crazy sometimes. I know I get these intense crushes and that it’s a bit silly and no one ever responds to them. I know that about myself, Charlotte. You dating Jesse isn’t what I’m disappointed about. I’m happy for you, if that’s what makes you happy. What I’m disappointed in is that you didn’t tell me. You kept it a secret, and that hurts.”

“I’m sorry, Tamara,” I said. “Gosh, I’m so sorry. I just, I thought you’d hate me for even going out with him.”

“Never,” she said. “It’s just a boy. Another one comes along eventually. Hell, I had five Galloways to choose from, each one of them as hot as the last. Sure, Jesse is the bad boy of the group, and that’s super hot when you’re a teenager, but now that I’m older, I think I prefer the nerdy one.”

“Collin?”

She shrugged and grinned. “There’s something about how cute he looks when he sits down with a book in the middle of a crowd of people and just checks out into his own world. He gets this grin on his face, like he’s doing something secretive. I started reading the books he reads. They’re really interesting.”

“So you don’t hate me?”

“No,” she said, leaning over to bump my shoulder with hers. “I love you, sis. I wish you were around more, and I wish you felt like you could tell me everything, but I love you anyway.”

Chapter Seventeen

Jesse

I slept fitfully, tossing and turning the entire night, unable to find a position I was comfortable in for more than a few minutes. It happened every so often, usually when I was having a particularly nasty bit of songwriter’s block, as if the music and lyrics were logjammed somewhere in my spine and wouldn’t let me get comfortable until I got them out.

When I finally did zonk out, it was late into the night. Waking up to my alarm much too soon, I shuffled in my bed and went on high alert when I realized someone was in the room with me. The shadow by the window, with the light coming in behind them, turned and as I squinted, I realized it was Logan. He was looking out of the window and was holding something in one of his hands.

“What the hell is going on?” I asked.

As my vision became clearer, the cobwebs of the short night’s sleep going away, I realized what it was he was holding. It was Dad’s old pump-action shotgun. Why in the world would he have that, unless...

I hopped out of the bed and went to the other window which looked out over the main road and down toward the Millers’.

“Look at the fence,” Luke said.

“Shit.”

In the distance, there was movement in the early morning light. It looked like a person, but it could have been an animal. It was too far away and there were still too many shadows to be able to tell. Thankfully, I’d gone to bed wearing clothes this time, so I yanked on my boots and grabbed a shirt as Logan turned toward the door to go out and downstairs.

I followed him as we thundered down, and I wondered where everyone else was. Luke must have stayed with Amber again, and I couldn’t blame him for after everything with the Andersons. Collin should be here somewhere, though—Owen too, unless he ended up staying over where he went last night after everything was over.

“Should I go get the revolver?” I asked as I got to the bottom of the steps.

Logan was already to the front door.

“No, just follow me,” he said.

I nodded, taking off after him and heading toward the side of the house where we’d seen the shadow. We ran for what seemed like a long time, well past the Millers’ place, and spread out a bit to see if we could find the owner of the shadow. Slowly, we came to a stop, and looked at each other.

“We must have missed them,” Logan said.

“Unless they were already gone before we got out here,” I said. “Or worked around us and headed back to the house.”

“Ah, shit,” Logan said. “Nobody’s there. We need to get back there.”

The house was over a hill, which was fine running down as we headed that way, but was a hell of a lot harder to run up. It was a pretty steep hill, and I was terrified that when we crested it, we'd see the house on fire or something. Instead, it loomed in the distance, perfectly fine, and for a second, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Son of a bitch!” Logan yelled.

“What?” I called out.

Logan had come up closer to the fence than I had, and was looking straight ahead. I followed his gaze and saw what he was upset about. A part of the fence was completely destroyed, leading to the road. Some of the animals had already started to wander out that way, chickens crossing the street and one of the horses walking up it toward the Millers’.

“Go, go, go!” I shouted.

Panicked, we ran toward the animals, me taking off toward the horse while Logan went after one of the pigs that had sauntered out toward the road but hadn’t crossed it yet. He tried to guide them in as I grabbed the horse by the neck and calmed her down. It was Bently, the only foal our mama’s personal horse, Sunshine, ever had.

“Come on, Bently, come on boy,” I said, guiding him off the road and back around toward the fence.

I didn’t have a harness or anything else, so all I could do was try to guide him by the neck or hop on him bareback. If he didn’t follow me, I’d have to hop on him, and I had no idea how that would go.

Thankfully, Bently didn’t fight, and I was able to get him back to the broken area of the fence and into the field, where I slapped his rump and he took off for the barn. All that was left now were the chickens, who, while not the smartest animals in the world, at least were smart enough not to stand in the middle of the road. After a few minutes of chasing, Logan and I had collected them all and brought them back into our field.

“What the hell happened here?” Logan asked.

“I don’t know, but it wasn’t a storm,” I said. “Look, this looks like it was chopped in half.”

Logan looked down at the place I was pointing to. Several beams had been either

removed or destroyed, leaving three whole sections where animals could escape. I scanned each spot and saw some of the same signs on each, anger building in my chest with the dawning realization that this wasn't an accident.

It was sabotage.

"You think it's some dumb kids?" Logan asked. "There was that little group of teenagers who broke into the Crocketts' barn that time a couple years ago."

"No, I don't think so," I said. "This doesn't look like the work of some dumb kids. This was purposefully letting animals out. Whoever did this snuck onto the land, let the animals out first, then broke the fences and encouraged them to leave. Then they got the hell out of here fast."

"Unless they're still on the land."

Logan and I stared at each other for a long moment.

"We can't just leave the fence like this," I said. "One of us will have to stay here and fix it."

"I'll go check out the barns and stuff. See if I see anything."

I nodded, and Logan took off, heading across the fields toward the various barns and pens where animals were kept. Since Owen hadn't gotten home yet, most of them should still be locked up, making it easy to account for everybody. Meanwhile, I took a look at the fence and tried to see if I could piece it back together at least partially. The fence itself didn't need to be all that strong, it just needed to be sturdy enough that it wouldn't fall apart if an animal touched it.

I was able to cobble together enough to get one section fixed up temporarily while

Logan was gone, and when he returned, I could tell by his expression that he hadn't found anything. The shotgun was still in his hands, but he was carrying it low, clearly annoyed.

"Nothing?" I asked.

"Nope," he said. "Just the ones we got out of the road. Whoever did it wasn't very thorough."

"I don't think they aimed to be," I said. "I think this was a message rather than a mission. You know? Whoever did this wanted us to be afraid."

"You think it was Arn?"

I didn't answer at first, letting it roll around in my mind. I had to admit it was my first thought. But I tried to keep my mind open to all possibilities. Yet, one by one, all the others seemed less plausible.

"Probably," I said. "Do you remember when Amber first came back to town and Luke and Collin had to help her rescue Mrs. Miller's cow, Hessa?"

"I do," he said.

"I remember Luke said something strange about it. He said it had branches down over it like it had fallen and broken the fence, but the beams themselves looked like they'd been cut in half. He said it looked weird."

"I called Luke. He should be here in a minute. He's just across the street."

"Good," I said. "Because someone's going to have to go with me up to the station and keep me from getting arrested."

Luke was at the house just a few minutes later and came down to where we stood by the fence in the farm use truck, bearing all the wood and tools we'd need to fix the fence. Hopping out, not saying a word, he went to work, and the three of us got the fence functional in just a little bit of time, wrapping barbed wire to keep them all together and in place with the others.

"I heard you wanted to go up to the sheriff's office," Luke muttered as he put the tools back in the truck.

"I do," I said.

“Then hop in.”

Logan headed off to the house to get ready for work as Luke and I went onto the road and north to the sheriff’s office. We didn’t speak in the car, but as soon as we pulled in, Luke put the truck in park and grabbed my arm.

“Don’t say anything until I do,” he said. “Logan knows we’re here. If we don’t come back, he’ll come get us, but we don’t want to give them a reason.”

“Speak for yourself,” I said. “I want a piece of Arn’s teeth.”

I slammed the door of the truck as I got out, stomping my way inside with Luke trailing behind me. He wasn’t going to try to talk me out of anything anymore. The Galloways rolled deep, and we rolled together. If one of us was going to scrap, the others were too.

Arnold and Oland were relaxing at two of the desks, their feet up on them when we came in. Immediately, they got to their feet, but I didn’t give them any warning. I lunged and planted a fist into Arnold’s jaw.

The scuffle was quick, but it ended with me in handcuffs and Luke being told to get the hell out. That I was under arrest for assaulting an officer.

“How can I assault an officer when the man I punched isn’t legally wearing a badge?” I grumbled.

“I’ll get you out,” Luke said. “Just keep your mouth shut. And if he is any more beat-

up than he is right now when I get out, there will be hell to pay, boys.”

“Get moving before I arrest you for threatening an officer,” Oland said.

“It ain’t a threat, Oland. It’s a promise.”

As Luke headed out of the door, running back to the truck to go gather the others and figure out how to get me out, Eugene grabbed me from behind and bodily threw me into the first available cell. I landed hard on my chest, and they slammed the door shut without bothering to uncuff me.

Chapter Eighteen

Charlotte

“Well, this is weird,” I muttered to myself as I stood in the empty driveway of the Galloway ranch.

I’d never in my life been there when it was empty. I didn’t even think it was possible for it to be empty, not with the stranglehold Luke had on scheduling for the boys and how seriously they all took their jobs. Jesse’s truck was parked along the side, along with Luke’s, but all the other cars, including the ancient farm use truck, were gone.

I knocked on the door several times, wondering if maybe someone was inside and sick, but no one responded. It was starting to concern me. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I scrolled until I found Jesse’s number and called. It rang three times and went to voicemail. I tried again, and it did the same thing, so I texted. When no message came back after a few minutes of sitting on their porch, I figured no one was going to.

Unfortunately, I didn’t have anyone else’s number. Not even Amber’s, since the last

number I had for her was a decade ago. The only thing I had left was to keep trying Jesse and hope that he answered at some point.

I tried again, expecting to hear his voicemail pick up again as I kicked a rock away from where I sat on the Galloway porch. It looked like someone had been in a rush to get out of there. A pile of lumber was sitting beside the house, which was odd. Luke was, as far as I remembered, very particular about things being put away properly at all times.

Lost in thought, I didn't process that the phone had been answered for at least a few seconds.

"Hello?" I said, suddenly realizing it. "Jesse?"

"No," a voice responded. It wasn't Jesse and sounded distinctly female. Old worries and jealousies cropped up for a second, and I tried to tamp them down.

"Who is this?" I asked.

"Umm..."

"Hello?"

"This is Trisha Anderson," the voice said hurriedly.

"What the hell, Trish? Why do you have Jesse's phone? What's going on?"

"Look, Charlotte, I don't have anything against you, so I will give you this warning," Trish began, her smug, condescending voice like nails on a chalkboard. "Jesse is a no-good bastard. He's a womanizer and a drunk and a deadbeat dad to top it off. You should head on back to Oklahoma and forget he ever existed, all right? That's advice

from someone who doesn't have skin in the game, Charlotte. You get on back to Oklahoma before he knocks you up and leaves you too."

Before I could respond, the phone clicked, and the line went dead.

I tried to call back, but it didn't even ring. She'd turned the phone off.

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That bitch.

Stomping back to the Millers', I went inside and found Tamara's keys, grabbing them and heading for the door. I was sure she'd understand when she found out. I just needed them for a few minutes.

Long enough to look Trish in the eyes and decide whether or not I was going to throw her ass through a window.

I revved the engine and took off, trying to remember where the jail was. I knew it was all one building and had been renovated but was essentially in the same lot the old jail had been. I'd only been there once, as a field trip by a DARE officer, who wanted to keep us off meth or something. It had been terrifying then, and that was when Old Man Anderson was still just a deputy in the force and only Eugene had joined as a rookie.

Thankfully, there were signs along the road downtown, what counted as downtown in Foley anyway, and I followed them to the jail. The courthouse was across the street, and the sheriff's office was next to the jail. I parked in the visitor's parking lot and locked the car up before heading inside, my eyes blazing and scanning for Trish.

What I saw when I walked in the door shocked me and froze me where I stood.

Trish wasn't in the room, and neither were any of the Anderson boys. Instead, there were two young rookie deputies and a woman. Someone I had hoped never to see again. She turned to me with a disdainful look and scoffed a laugh.

“Lacey Banks,” I said, almost under my breath. “What are you doing here?”

“Charlotte,” she said. “I thought you wised up and moved to Oklahoma or something. Are you here for Jesse?”

She sounded shocked, and I hated the condescension in her smile.

“Where is he?”

“He’s locked up, of course,” Lacey said. “Where he belongs.”

“Jesse does not belong in jail,” I said. “Is this your doing? Did you get them to arrest him?”

She laughed again, and I felt like smacking her right there. How dare she be so flippant?

“No,” she said. “No, Jesse got into this mess all by himself. Punched a cop, if you can believe it. And I know you can. Oh, you know how Jesse gets. Violent and angry. It’s why I could never actually allow him near our child. He’s not trustworthy.”

“He said that baby can’t be his,” I said. “You’re a liar.”

“Me?” she scoffed. “Am I the one who dated every girl in Louisa county and then ghosted half of them once he got in their pants? Am I the one who is willing to lie about his relationship status to get another girl in his grip? Am I the one who is literally known as being the bad boy of Foley, Texas?”

“No, Charlotte. I am a victim. You are too. You should be on my side. Jesse screwed you over too.”

“Jesse hasn’t screwed me over,” I said, unsure if that was actually the truth in retrospect.

“Oh, babygirl, yes he did,” she said, sarcasm dripping off her voice like wet paint. “He got in your pants, didn’t he? Gave you a little of that old Galloway pipe?”

“You’re disgusting.”

“No, Jesse is disgusting. That whole family is disgusting. They’re all a bunch of liars and thieves. Jesse just happens to be the worst. I have proof that baby is his. Let me guess, he says he didn’t ever sleep with me, doesn’t he?”

I nodded.

“Look,” she said, pulling out her phone. She scrolled through until she found what she was looking for and then turned it so I could see.

It was a screenshot of a message thread. At the top, the name said Jesse, and the conversation had clearly been flirtatious. Timestamps showed the time and date, and Lacey pointed at one of the messages, where Jesse thanked her for a lovely evening and asked if she was able to walk correctly, and clicked the screen with her finely manicured nails.

“This right here, that’s when the baby was conceived,” she said. “That night. It was exactly eight months, three weeks and four days before I gave birth. Jesse knocked me up that night, and then... nothing. He never responded to another text. He never answered another call.”

“And you just told the hospital the baby was his and they took your word for it?”

She shrugged. “They knew I wasn’t lying. I was so ashamed he wasn’t there. He

should have manned up and been there, Charlotte. But that's not who Jesse is. He's a deadbeat. He deserves to be in jail. He deserves to be miserable for all the misery he's caused all over Texas. Including what he's done to you. I just hope you wake up and see it."

I paused for a moment, and then looked at her critically.

The perfect hair, perfect nails, high heels. Fantastic figure, a bare midriff that showed no signs of stretch marks or scars. Something felt... off.

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“Where is the baby now?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“The baby. Your baby. Where is it, right now?”

“I... I don’t like giving that information out,” she said, stumbling over her words. “Especially to someone who might still be on Jesse’s side. I don’t want him having anything to do with their life.”

“But he’s with someone, right?”

“Of course. He’s with a babysitter,” she said.

“I see.”

“Charlotte?”

I turned to see Eugene stepping into the office.

“Eugene, I need to see Jesse,” I said.

“No.”

“No?”

“No,” he repeated. “As a matter of fact, not only no, but I need you to leave. Anyone

who was involved in the altercation last night is barred from the office. That includes you, Miss Garafalo. I need you to get on out of here.”

“This is ridiculous,” I said.

“They’re the rules,” he said. “I didn’t make them. I’m just following orders.”

I knew it was no good to argue. I was on his turf. He was wearing a badge and was in the sheriff’s office, and I was just a woman who wanted to see someone they had locked up. I would lose this argument every single time.

“Fine, but I will be back when he is released,” I said.

“Mmm-hmm,” Oland said, sitting heavily down in his chair and picking up a magazine.

Turning, I headed out of the office and back to the car. Opening the door, I took one last glance back and peered inside. I could just make out Lacey, standing by a desk, conversing animatedly but in a friendly way with someone else. Someone with dirty blond hair and a black shirt.

Trish.

They laughed together like old friends, and my blood boiled. Starting the car, I kept my eyes on them for a long moment, wondering if they knew, or cared, that I was watching. The Andersons were always so sure they could get away with anything. I wanted more than anything to shake that idea up. But I didn’t know how.

Chapter Nineteen

Jesse

I was getting really tired of sitting in this stupid jail.

How many times had I been here? A dozen? More? Usually, it was trumped-up stupidity, when the Andersons just wanted me out of the way or to annoy me over something trivial and tossed me in, only to let me out in the morning without a charge. A brake light was out and I was 'swerving' or something.

Then there were the fights. I'd had a few of those. Not all of them involved Anderson brothers, but a couple did. Usually, I'd be attacked by some guy who was upset that his girl looked at me the wrong way, or I flirted with her when she approached me or something like that. I'd fight back and usually knock the guy out. Then his buddies would attack, there'd be a brawl involving one or more of my brothers, and all of us would end up here.

When that happened, usually, we all buried the hatchet behind bars, would exit without a charge, and all go for a beer together and apologize for getting stupid. It was the Texas way. Even the night in jail to cool off without a charge was part of that, and the Andersons understood it enough to go along.

But then, sometimes, an Anderson would get involved. Either to break it up too early, or they were instigating in the first place, and one of them would catch a black eye or a busted nose. Then someone had to go to jail, and they had to hurt while they were there. That was the rule. An Anderson got touched and whoever did it was going to be minus a functional rib or puking up blood for a little while in a jail cell.

That was me, this time. They'd done a number on me as soon as we were alone. I didn't even make it into the cell before I was dropped with a nightstick to the back of my knee and then kicked repeatedly until blood was coming out of my mouth. Then they dragged me into the cell and shut the door.

I'd brought this one on myself. I knew it was Arn the second I saw the fence, and I

wasn't going to let him get away with it without some repercussions. Luke had patience, forethought, the ability to think through a situation and get the best revenge possible. I, on the other hand, tended to fly into a fight like a spider monkey and start wailing on the first person I saw that I identified as a problem.

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Arnold Anderson was a problem, and I'd hit that dumb bastard right in the jaw. It was worth the beating I took, seeing him reel backward and knowing that he went down because I hit him. Even if it wasn't Arn, and it was one of his brothers who did the sabotage, I liked to think they all felt it when I rocked him. I was sure they all heard about it.

There was a small sink in the cell, and I went to it to wash off my face and spit again, to see if blood was still coming. When there was no blood, I washed my mouth out, splashed some water on my face, and tried to decide if it was safe to take a nap. The adrenaline had worn off, and I was exhausted all of a sudden, but I didn't want to make myself an easy target.

Suddenly, the door opened, and I patted my face dry with my shirt to see who it was. Shocked, I smiled and went over to talk to them.

Oland was coming in, followed by both Luke and Flynn. Flynn looked starstruck by the experience, and Luke looked as annoyed as I would expect he would be after spending more than a few minutes with the city slicker band manager.

"You're free to go, for now," Oland said. "Arn could still charge you, so stay in town."

"Eat my ass," I said, brushing by him and joining my brother. I gave him a big hug, and he returned it before pushing me ahead of him through the door. We didn't speak until we were outside, and I smelled fresh air.

"Oh man, I hate that jail," I said.

“As you should,” Luke muttered, opening the passenger door of the farm truck so I could get in. “You hurt?”

“Busted ribs. That’s about it, I think.”

“Lucky.”

“I think we are glossing over a lot of facts here,” Flynn said from outside of the truck.

“You coming?” Luke asked.

“Yes, but I need some answers first,” he said. “Specifically, what the hell are you thinking punching a cop?”

I glanced at Luke, and we exchanged a knowing look.

“It’s a long story,” Luke said. “Get in.”

“Well, I have all day,” Flynn said. “So start talking.”

“Don’t let him fool you,” I said. “You’ll talk and he will listen for a little bit, but he has the memory of a goldfish.”

“I heard that,” Flynn said. “You might want to watch what you say about me. I’m this close to dropping your band.”

“Why?”

“Why?” he shouted as he took his seat and fumbled with the seat belt. “Why? You just punched a cop. I had to spring you from a jail! These are not normal circumstances, Jesse.”

“You realize my name is Jesse James,” I said. “Don’t you think you could do some marketing magic and make that work for you?”

“I ...” He paused, his mouth open and one finger in the air, then slowly, his jaw shut. He swallowed and let his hand fall to his lap. Clearing his throat, he kept his face forward and seemed to have calmed down. “Just tell me about why this is a normal thing for you, please.”

As we drove toward the farm, Luke and I gave him the short version of the Anderson and Galloway feud. When we arrived at the ranch, we all got out, and I began to head to my own car. Flynn followed me, with Luke behind him.

“Where are you going?” Flynn asked.

“I have something I need to do,” I said.

“No, no, no,” Luke said. “Last time you had something to do, I brought you to the jail and you hit Arn in the face.”

“It’s not that,” I said.

“Hang on,” Flynn said. “Just hang on, please. For a minute. Let me think this through.” He paced back and forth for a moment while Luke and I watched him. Running his hand through his rapidly thinning hair, he muttered to himself for a few moments and then turned sharply on his heel and faced us both. “I’ve got it.”

“Good. What is it?” I asked.

“We are going to get you away from Foley for a few days,” Flynn said. “Maybe take you down to the Gulf for a bit. Get out on a boat fishing or something. Let you relax and think about music. I think there are some songs in all this. Don’t you?”

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“Probably,” I said. “They won’t be very nice, though.”

“That’s fine, you’re damn near a hard rock band as it is,” he said. “But I think I can play this to our advantage if I can get you out of here for a bit. Really churn this idea that you are an outlaw to the highest order. But I need you not in jail when we go on the road in a few weeks.”

“I give my blessing to this,” Luke said. “You’re a hothead, Jesse. It’d be good to have you out of town while I work this out with the Andersons.”

“I’m a hothead?” I shot back. “Who was it that got into a fistfight at one of my shows?”

“Fair,” Luke said. “But who was it that just socked an Anderson while he was standing inside the jail? Not the smartest place to assault someone, Jess.”

“Fine, you win,” I said. “I’m a hothead. But I have to go now. I have something I have to do.”

“What in the world could be more important than your career, Jesse?”

I glanced at Luke, who nodded. I didn’t know how he knew, but I got the feeling he did. Maybe Amber had told him. Of course, I had no idea how Amber found out, so I was still lost. But somehow, some way, Luke seemed to know.

“I’ll be back,” I said. “I’ll call you, Flynn.”

I hopped in the car before he could protest any further and headed over to the Millers'. Getting out, I could see Flynn and Luke in the truck, heading away to wherever Flynn's car might be parked, or wherever Luke had picked him up.

I knocked on the door and waited until Mrs. Miller answered. Behind her, Amber was sitting on the couch, Tamara right beside her.

"Hey, Mrs. Miller," I said.

"Jesse, hi," she said, smiling brightly. "Come on in. We're about to have lunch."

"Oh, no, I'm fine," I lied as my stomach grumbled at the idea of some of Mrs. Miller's homemade cooking. "I'm just here to see Charlotte. Is she not here?"

"No," Mrs. Miller said, looking back to Amber and Tamara for confirmation. "I thought she was with you."

"Me too," Tamara said. "She said she was going to go see you this morning, and I haven't heard from her since."

"She came to find me?" I asked. "That's weird, no one told me I had a visitor."

"You had a visitor?" Mrs. Miller asked. "Where?"

"At the... never mind. It doesn't matter. If you see Charlotte, will you tell her I came by?"

"Of course," she said.

"Thanks," I said, pulling out my phone.

Where the hell was she? And where had she gone when she tried to come find me?

Chapter Twenty

Charlotte

The cool breeze was a welcome change to the oppressive heat that August had brought, and on the wind, a hint of the coming fall's slightly cooler weather. Granted, Texas didn't really experience fall the way most of the country did. Even Oklahoma had a mild fall and winter, but it was better than Texas. I often wondered if I would be happier somewhere north, where I could actually experience all four seasons instead of four different variations of Hell's front porch.

Sitting on a bench in the park hadn't been a plan; it was just where I ended up. I needed somewhere to think and calm down. I vaguely recalled the plans for a park being built in this area that used to just be a collection of trees and dirt, and sure enough, in the time I'd been away, it had been turned into something functional. Swing sets and a playground in the front, a couple baseball fields in the back, and a walking trail through a few trees was what constituted the Louisa County Park. The bench sat at the very front, overlooking it all, and I'd been sitting there for quite a while.

Lost in my thoughts, I suddenly realized I hadn't checked my phone for some time. I had a terrible habit of silencing it and then forgetting to turn that off. As usual, when I pulled out my phone, I saw that I'd done it again and had over a dozen notifications.

Some were missed calls, either from Tamara or Jesse, which surprised me. A text from Jesse, from just minutes before, asked where I was. I decided to call him back rather than text, just so I could hear his voice.

"Jesse?"

“Charlotte, thank God. Where are you?” he asked, sounding exasperated.

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“I’m at the park, down the street from the jail. Where are you?”

“Back at the ranch,” he said. “I thought you might be at the Millers’ so I went there.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well, I’m here. Do you want me to come there?”

“No,” he said. “I’ll come to you. Just don’t move.”

Twenty minutes later, I watched as his car pulled up and parked in the little parking area. I waited on the bench as he hopped out and made his way over. His lip looked slightly swollen, and he seemed to be favoring one of his sides as he sat beside me.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey. So...”

“So I went to the jail to get you out,” I said.

“You did?”

I nodded. “Lacey was there.”

“Lacey? Banks?”

I nodded again.

“She showed me some screenshots of text messages you sent her. Thanking her for a

good night and asking if she could walk correctly. They were timestamped to nine months before the baby was born.”

I let the words hang in the air. Not exactly an accusation, but clearly looking for an explanation. I waited as he shifted in his seat.

“I’m sure she did show you some text messages,” he said. “But they aren’t real. I don’t know how she faked them, but I never texted her. The problem is, I changed my phone twice since then. Even if I thought I might have sent them, I can’t look them up or anything.”

“So you think she faked them?”

“I have no recollection of them, and yes, I don’t put it past her to have faked them.”

I nodded.

“When I was leaving,” I said. “I saw her and Trish talking. They seemed like they were close. Like they had been friends a long time. Did you know she was friends with Trish?”

“Absolutely not,” he said. “That would have been a non-starter from the beginning. If she became friends with them, I think it had to have happened after we dated.”

“So ten years ago. But why all this? What’s the point?”

He shrugged. “Never put it past an Anderson that any action they are taking is an attempt to defraud or destroy the Galloway name. I’m sure it traces back to them somehow. I just don’t know how.”

“You think Trish and the Andersons befriended Lacey and are doing all this just to

get back at you?”

“I know that sounds farfetched,” he said. “But yes. I think that is a very real possibility. And until further notice, it’s the idea I am going to believe.”

We sat silently for a few moments, looking at the park with the children playing. I wondered how likely it was that maybe he just didn’t remember. That this child really was his. If that was so, then would I be able to deal with that? Knowing someone else had his child? Knowing that I’d never really get to know that child, unless it became an adult and wanted to know him? It was a lot to process.

At the same time, he might be right. It might be some grand conspiracy. Even I had my doubts about certain elements of her story. Why did she keep calling her child ‘the baby’ when it would be nearly ten years old now? Why didn’t she have any pictures of him on her phone to show? Why did she have text messages from eight years ago all cued up? And not anything with her and this child that should resemble Jesse so much that it was impossible to say?

So many questions swirled in my mind, but above all of them were the words I needed to say. Things that needed to be cleared up before I could even contemplate a scandal like this one. I cleared my throat and shifted on the seat.

“There’s something else we should talk ab—” I began, but I was cut off by my now unsilenced ringer.

“You should check that. It might be your sister.”

Sighing, I pulled the phone out again and glanced at the screen. My blood felt like it turned to ice. On the screen was a picture of Graham with his name. Jesse saw it, and I looked up to him, expecting to see anger. Instead, his face was unexpressive, and he simply nodded toward the phone.

“You should take that.”

“But we’re talking,” I said.

“Seriously, you should take it.”

Groaning in frustration, I swiped the call open and put the phone to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Charlotte,” Graham said on the other end. He sounded like he was somewhere busy, with lots of voices around him, enough that he felt he needed to almost shout into the phone. “Charlotte, can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can hear you,” I said. “What do you need?”

“I was just making sure you were going to be on the plane before ten,” he said. “I didn’t want to spoil it for you, but there is an event in Paris tomorrow night. Something I’ve been putting together for a while, and I need you there with me.”

“Graham, I...” I began, but Jesse stood and looked down at me. The words froze in my throat as he smiled painfully, nodded, and turned to walk away. “Graham, I have to go.”

“Yes, of course. Ten p.m., though. Make sure you are there! I wouldn’t want you to miss this event!”

“I’ll call you back,” I said.

Hanging up unceremoniously, I stood, watching as Jesse walked away with a determined stride.

“Jesse!”

He didn’t stop. He kept moving toward the car, and I felt like the world was presenting me with a flashpoint moment. I could let him go and maybe never hear from him again. I’d go to Paris and see Graham and likely move on. Or I could chase him down, throw everything else away, and see where this could take us.

I knew which one was the smart play. I knew which one that anyone else would tell me to do.

But I also knew what my heart was saying.

“Jesse!” I shouted again. “Wait!”

I took off running behind him, phone in my hand, knowing that if I caught him, I might be throwing everything I’d worked for since I moved to Oklahoma into the trash. Just for the chance. The chance to make something with Jesse, with all his drama and problems.

Was I really ready for that?

Jesse turned, and in his eyes I saw the hurt and sadness that I’d never wanted to see there. But I also felt like I could change that sadness. If he would just give me a chance.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jesse

I turned to see Charlotte running toward me, her phone in her hand. It looked like it was off, but did it really matter? Not after what I just heard. It was clear I wasn't really in the running here. Not by any real stretch of the imagination.

"Jesse, wait, don't go," she said.

"Why?" I asked. "Why would I stay? How in the world could I compete with that?"

"What are you talking about?"

I groaned, looking to the sky for some form of strength and finding none.

"Look, just go to Paris with your boyfriend. Forget I exist."

Charlotte's eyes widened, and she took a step closer to me, one hand rising to land on my chest. Her touch was like a sledgehammer to my will, but I had to stay upright. I had to keep strong.

"I don't want him. I want you," she said.

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I searched her eyes and found nothing there but honesty. At least she thought she was being honest. But how could she be? I was just some moron cowboy singer, who often ended up in jail and had crazy ex-girlfriends who were trying to ruin me. This Graham guy wanted to fly her to Paris. Tonight. For some event. It was like comparing a prince in a Disney movie to some schmuck who bagged groceries. It wasn't even comparable.

"This Graham guy," I said, "he's your boss?"

"Sort of, yes," she said.

"And his last name is the same as the hotel chain?"

"Yes," she said. "Where are you going with this?"

"So he's probably, like, what? A billionaire?"

"I... I don't know. I've never talked to him about money."

"Because you never had to," I said. "Because there will never be a moment that he can't afford something. He can afford to jet off to Paris and send you a plane later just to accompany him at some event. Don't you see how ridiculously different that is from the life you'd have with me? Just look at where my life is right now, Charlotte. Being beat up by cops, thrown in jail, have a woman chasing me swearing I owe her child support, and trying to become a rock star in my thirties. I'm pathetic. Go be with your boyfriend and stop letting me ruin your life."

“Jesse, please.”

“I am a fuck-up, Charlotte. I always have been. If it weren’t for my brothers, I’d be in prison or dead. This guy... he’s older than you. He’s in the same business as you. You have things in common, and he could give you a stable life. A life with me is not stable. It’s chaos. Always chaos. I know what my life is like because I live it, and no one should have to be part of it that doesn’t have to.

“Just go to Paris with him. Live your life. Be happy. Don’t complicate everything by being with me.”

“I want to complicate my life with you,” she said through gritted teeth and tears that welled up in her gorgeous almond eyes. “I have wanted you since the first time we talked. I have wanted you even when I thought I was the other woman. Even when I thought you ditched me in Oklahoma. I have always wanted you, Jesse James Galloway, and no one else. Why won’t you let me love you?”

For a moment, I didn’t know what to say. Neither of us had said that word yet, and while it wasn’t direct, it was there. We both seemed to recognize the significance of it, and it broke down a wall between us. At the same time, it raised the stakes, and the only way to get her to go and do what she knew she should would be to say something that I couldn’t take back.

“Just forget me,” I said.

“I could never forget you,” she said.

“Sure you could,” I said. “You did for eight years. Why not now?”

She gasped and stepped back, her face a mask of anger and pain. I felt awful saying it, and immediately regretted it. Why was I doing this? Why was I pushing her away

so hard?

Because I loved her. That's why. And I didn't want her to have to deal with loving me back.

"Charlotte, I ..." I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Now was the time for honesty. "I love you. I have always loved you. But because I love you, you need to go. Because I will hurt you. Just like I hurt everyone else in my life. I don't make smart decisions. I don't do the right thing. I act impulsively, and it comes around to bite my ass all the time. You don't deserve that. You deserve the best the world could possibly give you.

"Graham can give you that. He can give you the world. All I can give you is struggle. Go be with him and leave me here. You have a plane to catch. You'll miss it if you don't get going."

I took a step back, then another, then turned my back to her and walked away, gritting my teeth and trying to will the emotions away. If I focused on the anger in my chest, I couldn't feel the sadness at the same time. At least that's what I told myself.

But I couldn't look back. This was the last time I was going to see her, and at least I was able to tell her how I felt. But she deserved so much better than me. She deserved to be happy. And with me, she never truly would be. I knew that about myself. I wasn't worth that kind of love. I wasn't worth the effort.

What I could do to make things better was to take the bullet for my family and get even with the Andersons. And if someone went down for it, it would be me. That was my role. The sacrificial one. I didn't have anything else to give.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Charlotte

The drive back to the airport was already a long one, but through the tears, pain, and sadness, it felt like it was a million times longer. Sign after sign showed the miles tick away, and yet I felt like it would never end. When I stopped for gas and food about midway through, I texted Graham to let him know my progress and that I was on my way.

I was angry and hurt, rejected in such a way that I felt guilty for taking the advice he'd given, yet without another option. Jesse wasn't ready for a relationship, if he was ever going to be ready at all. He was too hurt by the past, and the timing of Graham's call couldn't have been worse.

I wondered if it would ever change. If there would be a time when I could see him again and we could start fresh, or at least from a different place. Or if this had been my one chance to finally get back with Jesse.

Tamara called twice during my drive, the first time to remind me that I'd left a couple of items at the Millers' place, and then again with Mom on the phone. I hadn't gone to visit her while I'd been down, and I felt terrible about it, but she understood. She was as one-track-minded as I was and often forgot to eat, much less check in with loved ones. She and my stepfather were busy with their own work and didn't even know I was in town to begin with until Tamara told them.

I wished I could confide in her about all this. My relationship with my mother had never been great, and though I knew she loved me, and she knew I loved her, we didn't have much in common other than our drive to succeed. Most of my childhood, she was distant, working constantly and spending what little time she had off with my stepfather, who craved adventure and wanted to travel. I'd ended up raising Tamara for much of her life as the built-in babysitter.

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It was why the Millers were so important to me, even though Amber was Tamara's best friend. They'd acted like a loving aunt and uncle to me, and I was always welcome in their home. Often, I would bring Tamara over after school and go sit in the guest room, just so I could have a little bit of time without the responsibility of being the babysitter. They always seemed to understand, and I appreciated them for that.

By the time I finally reached the airport, the tears had dried, and I felt empty. Parking the car and walking across the tarmac felt surreal. I was boarding a private jet to fly to Paris, a city I'd always wanted to visit and never had, to go to an event with a wealthy, handsome man who adored me. Yet all I really wanted was to be in a cheap motel, somewhere far away in the Texas desert, with a cowboy who had trouble with the law.

I boarded the plane and took a seat, greeting the pilot who knew me from a couple of short flights across Texas I'd taken with Graham, and checked my phone. Graham had sent me a text an hour before, and I hadn't gotten it until now. I opened it to see a picture of a gorgeous black dress, laid out on a bed along with a box containing a necklace and a pair of earrings. The message with the text read:

Will this work for tomorrow?

I wanted to say no, to tell him that I wasn't coming and that I was going to get off the plane and head back to Foley, but...

But I didn't. I said yes, that it would work and let my head fall back into the cushioned seat as the plane began to taxi.

I'm glad you said yes. I hope to hear that again later.

Oh no.

The plan was already airborne, and there was no turning back, but I knew what that meant. My worst suspicions were true. He clearly saw us as much more than I thought we were and planned on making it official. This wasn't just some even trip to Paris.

This was so much more.

Tortured and unable to do anything about it, I put the phone down and tried to close my eyes. The only escape I could find would be to sleep. Even for just a little while.

When I awoke, we were over the Atlantic Ocean, about halfway there. I'd slept for quite some time and was stiff and groggy. I opened my phone and texted my sister, spilling about everything that had happened so far and asking for her advice. It felt weird to ask my little sister what she would do, but she was the only person who knew. The only person I could trust.

Unfortunately, she also seemed to either be busy or asleep. It was the middle of the night in Texas, so I couldn't blame her, but it meant I was alone in this. For now, anyway.

The sun was up, and I watched it for a long while, glittering its reflection in the waters below. My thoughts kept going back to Jesse, and how I wished I could have done things differently. How I wanted to make things right. How much of a mistake it was to even be on that plane.

Around four in the afternoon, Paris time, we landed, and I got off the plane to find a limo waiting for me. It took me to a Bethel hotel in Paris, and I knew Graham was

likely somewhere in there as well. I checked in and was taken to a suite, one with a view of the city below, though not the same as every television version of Paris. This one overlooked a sea of buildings and markets, restaurants and cafés littering the distance. A patisserie and a cheese shop looked enticing and quaint, and the city felt alive in mid-day.

I wanted to go explore it, to live that dream I'd had to see Paris, but I had no heart for it. And no time. The event was at nine, and I needed to be ready at eight. The dress was lying across the bed when I arrived, along with the box of jewelry, and I went to them, touching them gently. It was sweet of Graham to get them for me, but I knew I couldn't wear them. I never would.

Because I was going to have to tell him. Tonight.

I went into the bathroom and started a shower. As I slid inside, the hot water raining down over my face, I felt the clouds clear in my mind. I knew what I had to do. I knew what I wanted. And I knew how I was going to go about getting it.

My mind slowly turned to Jesse and the night we'd spent together in Oklahoma. How his body had hardened under me as I straddled him. How he'd brought me to an ecstasy I'd never known, and how I craved that experience again. How intense the sensation was as I stared into his eyes while the climax rolled through me, shaking me to my very core.

My fingers slid between my thighs as I envisioned that night again, the hard drops of water from the showerhead pelting my skin and making my nipples stand on end. I let myself go into the fantasy, the memory, and soon, I was clenched against the wall, doubling over as I brought myself to climax.

But it really wasn't me. It was Jesse. In my visions, it was Jesse bringing me there, eagerly, and not stopping until I was writhing, begging him for a moment to breathe.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jessie

I stared at the number in my phone for a long time. I hadn't called it, ever, and had just recently put the contact back in there. I only had it because she had still been emailing me, going straight to my junk email address, all the way up to last week. At the end of each email was her name and phone number.

This was what she wanted. She wanted to get me to talk to her, one on one. So she was going to get it. I highlighted Lacey's name, pressed my thumb down, and hit the call button.

"Hello?"

"It's Jesse," I said.

There was silence for a long moment, then a shuffling sound and a door closing. It got quieter, and I could hear her breathing before she cleared her throat.

"I've been waiting for you to call me for a long time, Jesse."

"I know," I said. "But I don't want to talk on the phone. I want to meet in person."

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“It’s pretty early in the morning,” she said. “I have things I have to do. Can we just talk here?”

“No,” I said. “If you are serious about wanting to talk to me, you will meet me in the park down the street from the sheriff’s station. I’ll be here until you get here.”

“It might take me a little while. Your son needs to go to the babysitter.”

“Take as much time as you need. I’m not going anywhere,” I said. “Call me when you get here.”

I hung up before she could protest and walked across the park to a food truck that had parked outside. Food trucks were a rarity in Foley, but in the greater Louisa county area, you could catch them occasionally. This one served wraps with hot chicken or lamb, and I ordered one. I hadn’t eaten since yesterday, which was probably a massive mistake considering the amount of booze I had in my system. But ever since I’d walked away from Charlotte, I just couldn’t imagine putting anything other than alcohol down my gullet.

I looked terrible. I could see my reflection in the glass of the truck and tried and failed to smooth my hair out to make it look reasonable. I was still wearing the same clothes from yesterday and looked like I’d been hit by a truck.

Oh well. It wasn’t like I was going to impress anyone anymore. I didn’t care about anything. Nothing except setting the record straight with Lacey and getting this part of my life moving forward.

I sat down and ate my wrap joylessly. When it was finished, I threw away the wrapper and walked back to the truck to buy a soda. It wasn't the whisky I'd been downing all night before I turned to beer, but it was better than nothing. Sitting on the bench where I'd sat with Charlotte only made me angrier, and the anger built as I waited for Lacey to arrive.

Finally, after an hour, she showed up, and I was mostly sober, dehydrated, and absolutely done with everything when I saw her recognize me in horror. She almost recoiled at the sight of me, and I crossed the space between us.

"Jesse, what happened to you?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "I want to take a paternity test. You owe me that. I will do whatever you want, pay whatever you want in child support, whatever. But I want proof. Give me that."

"No," she said, taking a step back. "Jesse, you're scaring me. What the hell happened to you? And you don't need a paternity test. You know it's yours."

"No, I don't," I said. "All I have is some pictures. No proof."

"You don't call this proof?"

She pulled out her phone and swiped to her camera roll. A picture came up a few seconds later of a little boy with curly hair that looked like a mix of my own and Lacey's. He had a big, crooked smile like mine, but nothing else about him struck me as looking particularly like me. I could see the resemblance to Lacey, sure, but it wasn't as convincing as the baby pictures she'd shown me years before.

"No, I don't," I said.

“He’s your spitting image,” she said. “How dare you deny him?”

“Wait, let me see that again.”

She resisted showing me the picture again, but I was fast and grabbed the phone, pulling it toward me. She relented, and I stared at the picture, not at the child, but at something else. Something in the background that caught my eye. I pinched the screen to zoom in and tried to make out what it could be. It was a familiar shape, but...

“What is this?” I asked.

“What is what?”

“This,” I said, letting her take the phone back.

She froze, her eyes going wide before pinching the screen back into place, clicking the button on the side to darken it, and then shoving the phone into her back pocket.

“It’s nothing,” she said. “Just a toy on the coffee table.”

“That was no toy,” I said. “I know what that is, and it was no toy.”

“You’re crazy. What do you think it was?” she demanded, an incredulous smile on her face.

“It’s not what I think. It’s what I know. That was a badge. Specifically a deputy’s badge for Louisa county.”

“What? No,” she said, shaking her head. But the lie was written across her face. She knew she was caught.

“Where did you park?” I asked.

“Back that way,” she said, pointing vaguely.

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“We can talk again later,” I said, “after you think about my offer. But I should walk you to your car first.”

“No, it’s fine, I can walk myself.”

“I insist,” I said.

“Jesse, no, I don’t need you walking me to my car.”

“It can be dangerous out here,” I said, my eyes on the distance where I figured she’d parked. There were only a few cars out there.

“Jesse, you just stay here. Away from me. I will call you when I have thought about it, okay?”

She was walking away, and I followed her. She picked up her pace, and I saw her make a movement with her arm, like she was trying to tell someone to go. An engine cut on, and I looked up to see where the sound was coming from.

An unmarked car was parked in the back of the tiny parking lot. Inside was someone I knew very, very well.

Oland Anderson.

“What the hell is he doing here?” I thundered.

The gig up, she took off for Oland’s car, and he got out of the driver’s seat to come

around toward me. He seemed to be ready for a fight but not exactly itching for one. The last time Oland and I had squared off one on one, I'd left him with a broken nose and a ton of embarrassment.

"Jesse Galloway, you need to back up," he said.

"Or what, Oland?"

"I said back up," he repeated.

"This was you, wasn't it? All this time, it was you. You were setting me up! But why?"

"Jesse, you're acting like an idiot," Lacey said. "Thank God there aren't a bunch of people here, or else you'd be a fool in front of everyone."

"I've already been the fool, haven't I?" I shouted. "I saw your badge in that picture, Oland. I know you were there. So tell me, is that baby yours? Huh? Was all this just an attempt to extort money out of me?"

"Jesse, I'm going to give you to the count of three to calm down," Oland intoned.

"You can count to a hundred, Oland, I'm still gonna be mad as hell. You set me up! You both set me up!"

"I said shut your mouth," Oland said, closing the space between the two of us and getting in my face.

"I'd back up if I were you, Oland."

"You back up, punk!" he said.

“Who would believe you, Jesse?” Lacey said, laughing. “Lord, you are stupid. I knew you were stupid, but not this stupid. Everyone already thinks you are the father. They think you are a deadbeat dad. You won’t beat that rap. So you have two choices. You can do what I say and pay me to make it seem like you are a decent human being, or I will drag your name through the dirt and let Oland do what he wants to you.”

I shrugged.

“I warned you,” I muttered.

“Warned me what?”

Normally, I detested cheap shots. I liked it best when the other person threw the first punch; that way I could respond not only morally, but I’d have the advantage usually of getting a clean shot in while they recovered from their miss.

But sometimes, in rare instances, it was better to take the first shot. This would be one of them.

I reared back and slammed my head forward, crunching into Oland’s nose and feeling the crack of his healed nostrils breaking once again.

“I tried to warn you,” I said.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Charlotte

Graham texted me his room number while I was in the shower, and I sighed when I saw it. He expected me there soon, so we could go together to the event, but I was running late now. It threw a wrench into my hastily laid plan.

I had hoped to talk to him before the event itself. To sit him down and explain what had happened, how I'd gotten here, and why I needed to break it off with him. If I could delay it a day, I would have, but with him making it seem like there was a possibility he might make some grand gesture tonight, I had to do it quickly or risk embarrassing him.

Graham didn't deserve that. He was a nice man and had treated me well. I had no complaints about him. It was just that he wasn't Jesse.

I couldn't not tell him tonight. I had to figure it out. Maybe if I got dressed fast enough, I might catch him in the room still.

I put on the dress he' left me but left the jewelry in their box. I'd pay him for the dress if he wanted, but he could return the earrings and necklace. Stuffing them into my purse, I got ready as quickly as I could, blow-drying my hair and digging through my bag to find the one emergency pair of pantyhose I kept tucked in there. Not going home and packing before this trip meant I was at the mercy of the clothes I'd brought to Foley, and I thought I might have an issue showing up in jeans.

I took a look at myself in the mirror and almost broke down again. This was a woman staring back at me who was about to risk everything. I was going to throw away a relationship that most women would kill for, all so I could find a way back to Texas and chase down a man who didn't believe he was enough. A man with more problems than an algebra book. A man with a crooked smile, deep blue eyes, and a voice like velvet.

Keeping myself together as well as I could, I finished my makeup and slipped out of the room, heading to the one Graham had told me he was in. But when I got there and knocked, no one answered. I waited for a long moment, but he never came to the door, and my phone dinged again.

It was Graham. There was a limo waiting downstairs for me. He would meet me there.

Groaning, I reluctantly took the elevator down to the main floor. This hotel was even more opulent than the ones I'd worked in and fit the glamorous feel of Paris itself. Passing by women in fur and Chanelle, men in expertly tailored suits and tie clips that were worth more than my car, I made my way to the door leading outside.

A limo waited there for me, the driver holding a sign with my name. I acknowledged him and he opened a door for me to get inside. I spoke little French, but I knew how to say thank you. I hoped that would be enough.

The limo took me across town, and I had to keep from crying as I passed all the monuments, the museums and nightlife that I'd longed to see. It was as beautiful as I'd always envisioned it would be, and here I was riding through it but knowing I wouldn't experience any of it. That I would leave tonight and perhaps never return.

But if it meant I was with Jesse, it would be worth it. That thought kept me from spilling tears. If I was wrapped in Jesse's arms, not even Paris could pull me away

from him.

I was surprised when the car parked at the side of a restaurant and the driver got out. He opened the door and said something in French I didn't understand. I got out, and he shut the door behind me, going back to the driver's side and driving away as I stood there, looking at the building in front of me.

There was no gala. No ball. No event.

He'd brought me to Paris to go to this restaurant. To propose.

A doorman was staring at me, waiting for me to walk up, but I was frozen on the streetcorner. How could this be my life? This gorgeous building, with the smell of fresh bread and browned butter filling the air, a restaurant that I was sure would be an experience I would never forget, was waiting for me. For me to walk inside and live the fairy tale that so many budget books at the bottom rack of bookstores everywhere spoke of. The handsome, wealthy man who swept the girl off her feet. Who brought her to romantic Paris and proposed over cheese and wine.

I'd read that book. It certainly didn't end with the girl leaving the handsome businessman for a cowboy.

"Mademoiselle?"

I looked up to see the doorman, who had taken a few steps toward me cautiously.

"Sorry," I said. "Sorry."

"Speak English?" he asked in a thick accent, his eyebrows raising high in hopes I would say yes.

I nodded.

“I do,” I said.

“Ah, pardon. English is not strong. Are you well?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “Thank you.”

“Are you for here?”

I nodded again.

“Please,” he said, opening the door, smiling, and bowing a little.

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I took my first step toward the building, and my eyes brushed across the tall, dark windows. In one of them, I saw a familiar shape. Graham, sitting at a table, an empty seat across from him, a bottle of wine between the two seats and his glass partially full. He swirled the wine like he always did, then took a sip.

He was preparing for a monumental moment in his life. And I was going to ruin it for him.

Miserably, I took the remaining steps to the door and walked through, the doorman shutting it behind me.

I had to steel myself. I had to do what was right, no matter what. No matter how scary or sad it was. I had to do the right thing.

Because at the end of the day, I was in love. But not with Graham.

With Jesse James Galloway.

And I needed to go home.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Jesse

Oland was back up quickly, slamming his elbow into my stomach and sending me backward, bent over.

“You stupid bastard,” he shouted. “You broke my nose again!”

“Good thing you’re ugly. No one can tell,” I said.

Oland let out a growl and dove after me. I sidestepped him, and he tripped over my outstretched foot, landing hard on the concrete. Behind me, Lacey screamed, beginning as a high-pitched wail and descending into a hate-filled yell. She whacked me with her palm in the back, and I turned to face her.

“Leave him alone, you idiot,” she shouted.

“Why?” I said. “Because he’s your boyfriend? Is that why you want me to stop?”

I could sense movement behind me, and I turned, putting up my fists in a boxing stance before Oland could swing. I ducked it and threw a left to his stomach, returning the favor, and he stumbled away a few steps.

“I said stop it,” Lacey shouted, clearly used to getting her way when she ordered people around like children. “Oland, stop!”

“I’m not stopping,” he grunted. “I’m going to kick his ass!”

“You sure about that?” I shot back. “Looks like you’re the one getting their ass kicked, pal.”

He charged again, but this time threw his whole body at me in a football tackle. I wasn’t able to completely evade him, and he got his arm around my foot, tripping me. I went down to one knee, and he yanked himself to his feet, tackling me again. We both hit the concrete hard, and I felt my forehead drag against it.

Oland’s hands reached for my eyes, but I kicked at him, and he changed tactics,

throwing fists into my shoulder and arm. I tried to headbutt him again, but he was too far away, and I felt an elbow smash into my lip instead. Dazed, I fell back a bit, and he pounced, mounting me and throwing punches at my head. Some ricocheted off the top of my skull, and others were blocked by me getting my arms up, but a few got through, rocking me and cracking something under my eye.

An alligator roll was enough to get him off me, and I scrambled to my feet, diving at him with my knee toward his head. It connected, and he went down, and it was my turn to rain fists down on his head. But it didn't last long. Lacey grabbed me from behind, yanking on my hair and slamming her closed fist into the side of my face.

I got to my feet and wiggled away from her, refusing to put my hands on a woman no matter what she was doing, and turned my attention back to Oland. I kicked him hard in the stomach, and he rolled away before I caught sight of Lacey airborne out of the corner of my eye. I tried to move out of the way, but her fingers were out like claws, and she caught my face with them, slicing down my nose and cheek and taking a hunk of skin with her.

"Why didn't you just pay me?" she shouted. "We'd have your fucking ranch and you would finally pay for being such a womanizer."

"Excuse me?" I said, stepping back a few feet to catch my breath and check how much blood was coming out of my face. "You wanted the ranch?"

"The ranch that should belong to us," Oland said, standing. "The Andersons. Your grandfather stole that land."

"The hell he did," I said. "He bought it fair and square, and your grandfather tried to start a damn war about it."

"Liar," Oland said. "All you Galloway boys do is lie."

“All you Anderson boys do is bully,” I said. “But you can’t bully me anymore. I don’t have anything to lose.”

“I’ll take that ranch from you,” Oland said. “One way or the other.”

“Like hell you will,” I said.

We both charged at the same time, fists flying, and it was me who rocked him first. He tried to take a step back, but I hit him with an uppercut that sent him flying, landing on the hood of his unmarked car and sliding off and to the ground, motionless.

I turned to Lacey, who was backing away now. She had tears in her eyes, but I knew they were just crocodile tears. She was only sorry she’d gotten caught.

“You tried to ruin my life,” I said. “And for what?”

“You shouldn’t have ghosted me, Jesse,” she said. “I would have been such a good girlfriend to you. I would have loved you. I would have even been permissive if that’s what you needed. But no. You had to go shack up with that Garafalo girl. That whore.”

“All this?” I thundered. “All this because I dumped you ten years ago? Are you insane?”

Suddenly, she stopped backing up. A wry smile crossed her lips.

“No. I’m not insane. But I will win.”

I barely felt the thump in the back of my head before the lights went out.

I came to a while later, how long I didn’t know. I was in the back of a car, my head

throbbing. Sticky blood had dried cold to the back of my neck and down my shirt. I had been tossed into the backseat of a car unceremoniously, and it was driving fast down what sounded like a gravel road.

“What do we do?” I heard Lacey demand. “Oland, what do we do? You killed him!”

“I know,” he grumbled. “I know, dammit. Just let me think.”

“We don’t have time to think!” she shouted hysterically. “How am I going to get any money if he’s dead, Oland? They will figure it out! We will go to prison!”

“No, we won’t!” he shouted. “Just shut up for one damn second, woman!”

“Stop calling me woman,” she snapped back. “You know I hate that!”

“There are bigger problems right now than my choice of words, woman,” he screamed.

The voices got quiet for a long moment, and I felt a hand touch my shoulder. I tried not to respond, but I didn’t really need to do anything. My body wasn’t responding to any of my commands. My eyes wouldn’t even open. All I could do was listen.

“Does he have a pulse?” Oland asked, grimly.

Cold, shaking hands reached for my neck and missed completely, but held themselves on a random part of my throat.

“I don’t feel one,” she said. “Oh God, you killed him. You killed him, Oland.”

“We. We killed him,” he said. “This has to be we from now on, or else both of us are going to burn for it, you understand? It doesn’t matter if I hit him with the gun or you

did. The fact is, he got hit, he went down, and his skull must have cracked. So we have to find a way to get out of this mess.”

“How?” she said, her voice quiet now. “How are we going to get out of this? What about our life?”

“We will have our life,” he said. “All three of us. On the ranch. Like we planned. But first, we need to dump this body. Then we need to call Arn and have him and Eugene clean the scene where he was bleeding so much. If they can get that clean before someone notices Jesse’s missing, we might be able to come up with a story as to how he got out here.”

“Maybe... maybe he pissed off someone,” she said. “Maybe he got in trouble with the mob.”

“In Texas?” he shot back incredulously. “No. Not the mob. Jesus. No. Maybe... maybe he made one of his brothers angry. What if he tried to hit on Amber? What if it was Luke that killed him?”

“It would be easier to get the ranch,” she said, sounding excited now. “He’s the only one who could really fight us. Maybe he also knew Jesse was going to get sued and lose part of it to us. So he killed him.”

“I like it,” Oland said. “All right, we dump him here. Come on.”

The car came to a stop, and I tried desperately to get my eyes to open. They refused, just like the rest of my body, to cooperate. Instead, Oland lifted me like a sack of potatoes and carried me through crunching brush for a few moments. Then he dropped me hard. I hit the ground and tried to suppress any sound from coming out of me.

“All right,” Oland said from above me. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Wait.”

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It was Lacey. Her voice was distant. Cold.

“Wait what?” Oland said. “We need to get out of here before someone sees my car.”

“No,” she said. “You need to shoot him. We need to be sure.”

“Excuse me?”

Panic went up my spine. I needed to get up. I had to get my body working again.

“You need to shoot him. In the head. Make sure he’s dead.”

Oland made a disgusted sound and seemed to pace for a moment.

“Lacey, I can’t shoot him.”

“Why? Are you a coward? Don’t you love me?”

“Of course, I love you, dammit!” His voice echoed through the air as I struggled to move anything. A finger bent. It wasn’t much, but it was something. “I love you with my whole heart, Lacey. But I can’t shoot him. All I have is my service pistol. They could trace the bullet.”

“What kind of a cop are you that you only have one gun?” she growled. “Jesus. I’d shoot him if you had something.”

Someone was stomping toward me, and then yanked me over to lay flat on my back.

Thick, meaty fingers pressed against my neck. It was close enough to my pulse that I held my breath in anticipation, but they moved away quickly and the footsteps began to move away.

“He’s dead, Lacey. Come on. Let’s get out of here. This will all be over tomorrow.”

I waited until I heard the car pull away, and well past the time that I’d last heard their engine.

Then I tried to open my eyes again.

And the world came into light, with a large red tint.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Charlotte

Graham sat across from me, his expression passive and difficult to read. One hand still clutched the stem of his wine glass, and the other was holding the box of jewelry that I’d brought him back. His eyes searched mine, and I tried to hold it together, not to show emotion and break down. I needed to stay strong.

“That’s it?” he asked.

I was taken aback, unsure of how to respond.

I had this all built up in my mind that he would be angry, or sad. He would be bitter and argue or cajole me. He would feel betrayed and let me know that, demanding that I find a way home myself and that I return the dress. I was expecting him to yell or at least be angry.

Instead, he just looked... disappointed. His kind eyes drooped a little, and a sad little smile curled up one side of his mouth. He shrugged and took a sip of his wine and set the glass down.

“What do you mean? I don’t understand.”

He sighed and looked away for a moment, then back to me. There was no anger there. No viciousness.

“I mean, you being in love with this Jesse fellow. That’s all? That’s what you are upset about?”

“Yes?” I said, my eyes squinting as I tried to figure out where he was going with this.

“That’s... that’s kind of a problem, isn’t it? To be in a relationship with someone and be in love with someone else?”

He laughed softly and shook his head.

“My dear, we are in France, are we not?”

“What?”

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I was completely lost, and his genial smile wasn't helping. I felt like there was a joke going on and I'd missed the punchline.

"Look, Charlotte, you are a beautiful woman. You are smart and accomplished and have an incredible drive to improve yourself and your station. I admire that. It's the sign of someone who succeeds that they never stop grinding. You are a grinder.

"The fact of the matter is, I have been single for twenty years. My first wife divorced me and took half of everything I owned, and in the last twenty years, I have gained all that back and more. Multiple times over. I am wealthy beyond my wildest imagination, and so is my entire family. But I have found it boring to be wealthy alone. You understand?"

"No," I said. "No, I can't say I do."

He sighed again and took another sip of his wine.

"I need a wife, Charlotte. Someone who can accompany me to events, who can be my representative when I can't be there, who can share in my wealth and success, and one day inherit it. But I don't want just anyone. I want someone who deserves it. Someone who understands the business and knows how hard it is to build it up to where it is now. Someone trustworthy, with respect and ambition. Someone that if I left everything to, I would know they wouldn't just be a silent partner, letting the company fall apart while they collected checks.

"You fit that bill perfectly, Charlotte. You are all of those things, plus you are... special. Everyone loves you. Anyone that meets you raves about you. And, like me,

you have spent a long time working so hard that you also have not found a partner. We found each other because neither of us had time to find someone else, or so I thought.”

“I don’t quite understand,” I said. “You wanted to be with me because you wanted me to take over for you one day?”

“In a way, yes,” he said. “But also because of all those other things I said too. And you deserve to be in this position. You deserve to be taken care of and never have to worry again. It will free you to be even more creative, even more explosive and successful. I believe that. And if you need this Jesse fellow, well, bring him along. He can live in a guest house with us. You can spend every night in his bed, and as long as we keep it quiet, you can be with him as much as you want.”

I sat dumbfounded for a long moment. His expression had never changed much. Mild amusement perhaps. Disappointment. But nothing big, nothing moving. Just mild forays into emotion. I sat back in the chair as a waiter came by, bringing an appetizer plate and setting it on the table.

“Madame,” the waiter said, offering me wine. I really shouldn’t have, but I nodded anyway. I felt like I might need a drink. When the waiter had walked away, Graham shifted in his seat and cleared his throat.

“What I am suggesting is not so strange. I understand it might be odd for someone who isn’t accustomed to it, but this is how the wealthy live. Many marriages are more of a partnership. The veneer of an intimate relationship is all that’s required, just so we can play along for cameras and those who work for us and require we be like them. Board members like married COOs better than single ones. That sort of thing.

“It’s not like you would be the only one enjoying fruit on the side of your plate. If I were to find a woman while out, I would be discreet as well. No one would have to

know about our personal lives. It would be a secret between you, me, and our house staff.”

He laughed. “They tend to know everything. That’s why I pay them so well. For their silence.”

“I see,” I said, a pressure sitting on my chest being lifted by the moment. He wasn’t in love with me. He never had been and probably never would be. I wasn’t sure he was capable of it. “I hope you understand, that won’t work for me.”

He sighed again, this time with a note of frustration.

“I understand,” he said. “But I am a little confused.”

“About what?” I asked.

“Why are you here?” he asked. “Not to be rude, but why did you come? You had to know what I was planning. I wasn’t subtle. I’ve found that the best way to surprise someone is to give them hints what that surprise might be. Then they are never disappointed. You must have known from my text what I was hinting at.”

“I figured it out,” I said.

“So why didn’t you just tell me? I would have understood why you didn’t want to come. It wouldn’t have affected me more than just disappointment.”

“I...”

I couldn’t get the words out. A flood of emotions was coming up, and I grabbed a napkin to dab at my eyes. I was so hurt. So confused. Nothing seemed to be going the way that it should or that made sense.

“What is it, dear?” he asked, leaning forward. He put a gentle hand on my shoulder to comfort me, and I sobbed quietly, even harder, into the napkin.

“I feel like I might have lost Jesse forever now,” I said. “I shouldn’t have come. I should have stayed there. Instead I hurt everyone. Including myself.”

“Shh, shh,” he said soothingly. “It’s going to be okay. Here, Charlotte, here.”

I looked up through tear-stained eyes to see him offering me a handkerchief from his pocket. I took it and wiped away my eyes with the soft cloth.

“Thank you.”

“Of course,” he said. “Listen. I want you to do me a favor, okay? As a parting gift of our relationship, I want you to go find this Jesse. I want you to find him and love him as I know you would have tried to love me. I want you to be happy, Charlotte. And don’t worry about work. I hold no hard feelings. I won’t stop your meteoric rise in our company, and in fact, I will be your head cheerleader.”

“Thank you,” I said through sniffles, trying to get my composure again. “I really appreciate you being so kind.”

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“Absolutely,” he said. “Do you think it is imperative that you get back right away, or can you enjoy one last meal with me? As friends?”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I must look like a mess.”

“You look beautiful, as always. This Jesse, he is a very lucky man. Let us toast to him, eh? To Jesse and Charlotte. For love. And when you are good and fed, you can either spend the night in Paris or leave under the cover of darkness, but either way, you can take my jet back. And these. I don’t need them. I want you to have them. Keep them, sell them, whatever you like. They were a gift to you.”

He slid the box of jewelry across the table to me and smiled, raising his glass. “To love?”

“To love,” I said.

He clinked his glass against mine and took a deep sip, smacking his lips playfully afterwards and sitting up in his chair.

“Now let’s eat. I am absolutely famished.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jesse

I’d tried to get to my feet a dozen times and fallen each one. But each time, I had slightly more strength, made a little more progress, and protected myself a little more

on the fall. Now as the day turned to evening, I struggled again to my knees. Progress. Just a little progress.

The heat was finally starting to die off as the sun disappeared. But the heat would simply be replaced by an encroaching darkness that was just as dangerous. I was dying of thirst, and I had lost a lot of blood. I was pretty sure I wasn't bleeding a lot anymore, but the wound on the back of my skull was pretty bad. Bad enough that they thought they'd killed me, sobad.

My head throbbed as I tried to crawl toward a tree. If I could get to that, I could use it to rest in a sitting position and not have to struggle so much. I could also use it to help me stand. Any help was appreciated at this point.

I made it to the tree and leaned against it, letting my elbows rest and trying to will the world to stop spinning. Everything hurt. I couldn't believe he'd gotten the drop on me like that, and what's more, I couldn't believe he thought he'd killed me and just dumped me in the woods. On top of being the biggest idiot I'd ever met, he was even more callous than I thought he was.

And Lacey... My God, Lacey.

She was the one pushing for him to shoot me. She was colder than ice. She led me to believe that child was mine, knowing it wasn't, just so they could take the ranch? I wasn't even sure I followed their logic, but then again, I had been hit in the head pretty hard, so I might just not be thinking correctly.

I felt another wave of strength and hoisted myself up on my knees. Moving one leg out from under me was painful as hell, but I got my foot planted firmly on the dirt. Step one, as it were. Reaching for the tree, I wrapped my arms around it like I was hugging a long-lost friend and leaned into it, sliding my other leg out from under me and planting that foot as well.

Then I stood.

Everything was spinning, and I felt like I might throw up, but I was upright. Knowing how close I had come to taking a dirt nap, I was going to count that as a win. Now I needed to get the hell out of here and find some help. Fast.

I stumbled a bit as I walked, reaching for the next tree to guide me as I made my way out of the thin forest area toward the road. Occasionally, I heard a car zoom by and wondered if I could flag someone down. Not after nightfall, I was sure of that. If I came out of the woods all bruised and bloody, and tried to flag someone down in their headlights, they would think I was some ghoul and likely run me over on purpose. People around here were convinced *The Walking Dead* wasn't just a TV show, it was a prophecy.

Going down to one knee only once, I made it to the edge of the treeline with a little daylight left. There wasn't much of a gap between the trees and the road itself, so I didn't have a lot of space to stand and try to get someone's attention. My best bet was to try to get to where I could dive back into the woods if I needed to and wave as frantically as my exhausted body would allow.

I stepped out into the space between the road and the grass and saw a car coming in the distance. I raised one arm and tried to wave. The car seemed to be completely oblivious of me until the absolute last second, when it swerved away, spun in a circle, and came to a stop facing the other direction.

"Holy shit, Jesse?"

My ears were telling me one thing, but my mind was telling me that, rationally, it wasn't possible. I must be hallucinating. There was no way that the person coming out of that car and heading toward me, mouth agape, was Kevin. Kevin, my bandmate and brother on the road for a decade. Kevin, who should be down at the Gulf right

now.

“Kev?” I asked.

“Jesus, Jesse, what happened to you?”

“I... help?”

Kevin caught me as I fell forward and dragged me as best he could toward his car. A woman got out, her voice so hysterical that I didn’t even realize it was his girlfriend, Sarah. They stuffed me into the back of their car, and I got a sick feeling at how familiar it felt.

“Hand me the phone,” Kevin said, and I heard them shuffling around in the front.

“Thank God we were here,” Sarah said. “My God, what happened to you? We were coming to spring you out of jail!”

“What?”

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“I heard about you getting arrested again,” Kevin said. “We cut our vacation short to come down here and hold a little intervention. Flynn said you were causing all sorts of havoc down here and might jeopardize the whole band, so I figured we could talk some sense into you. I was going to yell at you for screwing things up, but... I guess what you were saying about the Andersons was true, huh?”

“How did you know?” I groaned.

He shook his head and looked back at me through the rear-view mirror.

“I just had a feeling. So this is a bit worse than some one-off brawl like you had a couple months ago. What happened?”

“Just drive. I’ll tell you on the way.”

“I’ll call 9-1-1,” Sarah said. “Let them know we are on the way with him.”

As Kevin drove, and after Sarah got off the call with the hospital, I tried to recount what had happened to the best of my ability. But as the car ride wore on, I kept finding myself zoning out. When I came to the last time, the car was stopped and the back door was opened. Hands reached for me and pulled me out of the car feet first and straight onto a gurney.

Voices above me were shouting instructions, and something closed over my nose and mouth. An intrusive amount of air started filling my lungs, and I coughed.

“Doctor!”

“What?”

“He coughed. Look.”

“Is that coming from the back of his skull?”

“Yes.”

“Get him into room three, right now. And flip him on his side. I need to see the back of his head.”

Further instructions were shouted out. Several CCs of this. A shot of that. Clothes were torn off of me, and a gown was draped overtop. Painful prodding was going on in the back of my head as they laid me on my side and held me there. A bandage was wrapped all the way around my skull, stopping just short of my eyes, and then taped off before I was laid back down on my back.

People came in and out of the room, a nurse coming and covering me up so I wasn't so cold after they had washed and cleaned the wounds on my legs and hips. I hadn't even been aware of them until they began brushing them with alcohol. Then I becameveryaware of them.

Eventually, things quieted down, and I dozed on and off with whatever drugs they were pumping me with. When I had moments of lucidity, I was pleased to see Amber there, working as one of the nurses and helping me out. I could trust her. Whatever was going to happen to me now, I knew I was in good hands.

As I closed my eyes again, my mind drifted to the only thing that could make me feel better.

I dreamed of a field on a cool fall afternoon. A light breeze was blowing the grass and

clouds, making shapes in the sky. Lying in the grass beside me was Charlotte. She pointed to a shape above her and laughed. She curled into my arm, and I kissed the top of her head. It was a memory, one from many years before, but one I came to when I wanted to just feel that warmth again. That happiness.

For that moment, all was good in the world, and I could see a future where it would only get better.

I let myself drift to sleep thinking of that memory, letting it envelop me until it was real, all around me. Until I was lying in that grass with Charlotte's body curled into mine. Looking up into the clouds and laughing at what we saw.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Charlotte

I'd tried calling him three times now, but he wasn't answering. I knew he was probably still mad at me, but something just didn't feel right. Jesse would answer—even if it was just a text message telling me to stop calling him, he would answer. He hadn't responded to texts either. Something was wrong. It had to be.

I had changed out of the dress once the plane got airborne, folding it up and putting it in my bag. I wasn't going to need that again for a long time, if ever. I didn't know what I was going to do with the jewelry, but Graham had been insistent on me taking it. It was wildly expensive, I could tell, but he would hear nothing of me returning it to him. He even told me to sell it and buy something wonderful if I wanted to.

Pacing in the plane for a few moments, I went to the little bar and opened it up. I had left right after the meal, and though I'd had a couple of glasses of wine, I felt like I still might need a little something to keep my nerves in check. It would have helped if he had answered any of my messages, but as it was, whiskey was looking like the

best course of action.

I poured a small glass and turned on the television. I had to admit, this was the kind of lifestyle a girl could get used to. If I had never met Jesse, maybe I would have been content to have a loveless partnership. Probably not, but it was fun to imagine a life like this. Though I wondered if it would be all that fun if it were every day, or if the only reason it was so neat was because I never experienced it otherwise.

Trying to relax was proving useless, though. None of the shows were of any interest, and I didn't want to start a movie knowing I'd end up leaving before it finished. The only other thing left was sports, and I had even less interest in that. So I put on a cooking show and left it on in the background while I stared out of the window and wondered how much longer it would be before I was on the ground.

I went back to the bar, looking for something to munch on and found a bag of pretzel chips. They weren't exactly the healthiest thing in the world, but they were something. I was so nervous and so upset I needed to chew on something, even though I was still pretty full from the dinner in Paris hours ago.

I kept looking down at my phone, checking to see if he'd seen my messages or if he was calling back. I was a half hour away from landing when I decided to try one more time. I dialed his number and waited for the familiar fourth ring pickup of his full mailbox.

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Instead, on the third ring, it picked up.

“Hello? Jesse?”

Silence greeted me on the other end.

I strained to listen and could hear something in the silence. It sounded like people talking, but they were muffled. Had Jesse answered my call accidentally?

There were two voices, a man and a woman, but the man’s voice didn’t sound like Jesse. Instead of the smooth, velvety baritone he spoke with, this was gruff and deep and brutal. It was also weirdly familiar, though I couldn’t place it. It was right there, on the edge of my memory.

The woman’s voice spoke again, and it seemed like she must have shifted because everything became clearer.

“...because I don’t want to, that’s why...”

“...tonight... again.”

“.... God, Oland.”

I froze.

Why would someone be talking to Oland with Jesse’s phone? And why would there be Oland and a woman talking and not Jesse? Something was wrong. Something was

very, very wrong.

They seemed to be arguing, though I couldn't quite make out about what. Their voices were raised, and they were shouting, but it was garbled, and the volume sometimes reached the top of what the phone could make out individual sounds for. I tried to listen as closely as I could until I heard another word that made my blood turn to ice.

"... the body..."

Suddenly, the call went dead, and I sat there staring at it for a moment, trying to process what I'd just heard. I couldn't tell who that woman was, but I had a feeling it wasn't Trish. I could recognize her voice, and that wasn't it. But it did sound familiar. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like it was Lacey Banks. But why would she be talking to Oland? And why would she have Jesse's phone?

Unless...

I tried calling it again, but this time it didn't even ring. It went right to the voicemail, which was full. I gave it a few seconds and tried again, and again, it went to the mailbox. Whoever had his phone had turned it off. They'd turned it off because they realized that I'd been able to overhear something.

I was going to try one more time when my screen lit up with an incoming call. It was Amber, which was odd. Amber never called me directly. I swiped it open, fully prepared to tell her that I couldn't talk right now and why, only to have her cut me off.

"Charlotte? Are you there?"

"Yes, Amber, what's going on?"

“Are you still in Texas?”

“Sort of. I’m on a plane that’s landing in Dallas in just a few minutes. Why? What’s going on?”

“You need to get to Foley. Actually, you need to just get to Louisa county. As fast as possible.”

“Amber, you’re scaring me. What’s going on?”

“Meet me at the hospital. Text me when you are close. You need to come here. It’s Jesse. He’s alive, but you need to be here.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Jesse

Fading in and out, I was able to take some note of my surroundings as the hours passed. People came in and out of the room, mostly nurses, and it would wake me up for a moment before I went back to a dreamless sleep. Once I woke to see my brother Luke and Amber above me, talking quietly. Another time, Collin was in the room and Logan was in a corner on a chair, playing a video game on his phone. Collin made some comment about how bad he was at it, and they laughed. I tried to smile. Then, nothingness.

I slowly started to come to again, and for the first time, I could feel the soreness all over my body. Everything hurt like hell. My arms felt like hot rods had been stuck down my bones, and my legs were like jelly. I tried to clench my fingers and found that only one of them moved, my thumb on my right side. All the others were heavy as lead, and I gave up rather quickly.

The throbbing in the back of my head was almost unbearable. It felt like there was a giant hole in the center and pins and needles were sticking in it, then covered by a bandage. I was overheated too, and sweating. I wasn't dehydrated anymore, but my throat was extremely dry, and my lips were stuck together. Not that I could open them anyway.

My eyes were heavy, but I forced them to stay open as long as I could. It must have been late at night, because the only people in the room I could see were asleep. Luke was curled up against the wall in one of the chairs, comically lanky and in an impossible position to be comfortable in. Owen was also in the room, though he was more traditionally sprawled out, his legs out in front of him and his head resting against the wall behind. Considering he was the physically biggest of all of us, he was probably the least comfortable.

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Besides me, of course.

The door slid open quietly, and in walked Amber and another nurse. At first, they didn't look directly at me, Amber coming in and checking on Luke and the other nurse going directly to the machine beside me and looking at my vitals. It was Amber who noticed my eyes were open.

"Jesse," she whispered. "You're safe. We're taking good care of you. Just try to relax. Is your pillow comfortable? Just nod if you can."

I tried to speak, but it came out as a garbled groan.

"Shhh," Amber said. "Don't try to talk. Are you thirsty? Here."

She brought a cup close to me, pointing the straw toward my lips. I separated them as best I could, and the straw went inside. The relief of the room-temperature water going into my mouth and down my throat was immeasurable, and I immediately felt a lot more relaxed.

"How's the vitals?" Amber asked.

The nurse said a series of things I didn't quite understand, and Amber nodded. She looked back down at me and put on a sad smile. I must look like hell.

"We're going to get you through this, Jesse. Don't you worry. She will be here in a minute, okay? I know you want to see her."

I didn't know what she was talking about, and thought maybe the medicine was messing with my hearing. I sipped the last of my water before she took the cup away and tried to speak again, to ask her who it was that was coming. But I didn't need to. The door slid open again, and Charlotte walked through.

She had a bag over her shoulder and tossed it down as soon as she was inside. She looked up at me and gasped and ran over, but Amber stopped her before she got too close. She took her to the side, and they spoke quietly for a long moment. Charlotte's eyes kept floating back to me and then to Amber, increasingly worried.

Luke had shifted and now was awake, listening to Amber. He looked angry, and I knew that meant it was bad. Whatever injuries I'd sustained, it was enough that Luke looked like he was ready to create a posse and go to town. Charlotte just looked devastated, and I wondered how she'd gotten here.

She was supposed to be in Paris. I wasn't supposed to see her again.

"We're going to give you a little of the good stuff now, Jesse," the other nurse said, close to my ear. "You won't be feeling that wound in just a second."

I didn't want her to give me anything though. I wanted to talk to Charlotte. I wanted to tell her how wrong I had been to send her away. How I wished I had fought for her instead. How I'd rather walk through hell and back than have her go away again, and how just having her there made me feel like I might make it through this okay.

Seconds later, though, my eyes were closing. I was gone in a matter of moments.

I came in and out of consciousness over the next few hours, it seemed. Night turned into early morning, and I saw various people sleeping in odd positions in the chairs nearby. Luke came and went, as did Logan and Owen and Collin. One of them was always there. Amber came and went as well, though when Luke was gone, so was

she. I assumed they went somewhere together to sleep, and then returned when she went back on shift. Tamara came in a few times, and once I saw Mr. and Mrs. Miller.

But every time I opened my eyes, there was one constant. Charlotte. She stayed by my side, either in a chair nearby or literally standing or sitting beside me, holding my hand. Every time my eyes opened, even slightly, she was there.

The curtains shut, blocking out the light, and the room went dark again. Charlotte scooted a chair all the way up to the bed and rested her head on the mattress beside my legs. With her hand over mine, she fell asleep, and I let myself drift off as well.

I didn't know how much longer it was, but I woke up to find Charlotte across the room, scrolling through her phone and occasionally looking out of the window. She looked tired, big rings under her eyes and her hair slightly disheveled. She had changed into sweatpants and a T-shirt, and Tamara was asleep in a chair nearby. She must have brought her clothes.

Against all odds, I actually felt a lot better. I was still in tremendous pain, and the throbbing was still there in the back of my skull, but it was a lot more manageable now. A dull throb, and aches rather than outright searing pain. I tried to take that as a good thing, but the second I tried to move my head, the world got dizzy, and I had to close my eyes for a long moment before my stomach didn't feel like it was doing flips anymore.

When everything settled again, I opened my eyes once more and watched as Tamara hugged Charlotte and left. It left Charlotte alone in the room with the exception of Collin in one corner, sound asleep. Poor guy. Usually, he was up with the sun, chipper and enjoying life. Today, he was out like a light in what had to be mid-morning judging by the thin sliver of sunlight that came through the center of the curtains and sliced across my bed, creating a yellow line across my stomach.

I shifted and must have made a little noise, because Charlotte spun around and saw me. Her eyes lit up, and she came over, kissing my forehead and settling into the chair beside me. I tried to smile, and wondered how terrible it must look. She smiled too, but there was so much sadness, so much worry behind it, that it didn't feel the least bit joyful.

“Hey, you,” she said. “Welcome back.”

Chapter Thirty

Charlotte

It had been a rough twenty-four hours.

The second I came into the room, my heart sank at the sight of Jesse in the bed. He was clearly in a lot of pain, and his face was swollen where he was bruised. His lips were cut, and a deep purple bruise below his eye looked like someone had painted a garish eyeshadow there. The faintest trace of red stains on his skin near his neck were apparently from an open wound on the back of his head that had been stitched up.

I wanted to hold him. To kiss him and tell him that he would be okay. That I was there and I wasn't leaving. That I had chosen him and always would.

But Amber stopped me, telling me how serious the situation was. How I needed to let him rest. I needed to let him recover. How close he'd come to not being here.

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His bandmate Kevin had found him, in a stroke of luck that could only be fate. He had been coming back to Foley to have an intervention with Jesse over his troubles with the Andersons and how it was risking the band's livelihood. Kevin and his girlfriend had gone to spend the night at the ranch, Luke offering them his room as he planned on being with Jesse and Amber all night.

Collin had taken the lead on reporting the crime, and when I got there, he was just leaving, having given a statement to the state troopers and learning that Oland had disappeared, as had Lacey Banks. I was ushered into a room to talk to them as well and gave my statement on the strange call, itching to get back to the room with Jesse the entire time. I didn't want him waking up and not seeing me.

Logan and Owen had essentially acted as gophers, going out for food and supplies and taking people back to the ranch to get some real rest in an actual bed. Logan took time off work, and Owen went back to the ranch in the morning to take care of the animals so everything could keep running smoothly. Collin was supposed to join him later.

That left me, Tamara, who came a couple hours after I did with some extra clothes and things for me, and Amber, who was almost exclusively working with Jesse when she was on shift, and then hanging out with him and Luke when she wasn't. I admired her so much seeing how dedicated she was to taking care of him and continuing to do her work in the hospital as well. She was also doing extra duty keeping Luke sane. He wanted to go rip the Andersons limb from limb.

I watched all these things happen as I waited for Jesse to wake up. I knew the drugs would keep him down for a long while, but it was possible he would come out of it

early, and I wanted to be there for him if he did. I scooted a chair close to his bed and slept with my head near his legs for a while. Eventually, Amber brought in a small cot, which I was able to line up against the end of his bed and nap in and not keep the nurses from being able to around to the sides.

It was scary to be there, to feel that tension as we all waited to find out just how badly he was hurt. Amber kept reassuring us that she thought he was going to be okay, but that they needed the surgeon and the head doctor to give their reports. The surgeon had come in from Odessa to be part of the initial reconstruction, which I wasn't there for. The fact that he was needed at all meant it was worse than just split skin and a concussion.

Sitting in a chair and playing a word puzzle game on my phone, I waited for him to wake up. There were several false starts, where he looked awake but then drifted back to sleep. Eventually, Collin returned, taking a seat in the corner and zonking out. Tamara decided to head back not long after, and I gave her a big hug to send her on her way. As soon as she was out of the door, he shifted behind me.

The elation I felt when his eyes opened and I saw recognition in them was beyond compare. I ran to him, kissing his forehead and silently thanking whatever was looking out for him that they brought him at least this far through.

"Hey, you," I said. "Welcome back."

"Hey," he was able to force out.

"You don't have to talk," I said. "I know your mouth must hurt a lot."

He tried to shake his head, barely moving it enough to say no.

"I want to talk," he said, his voice airy and raspy. "My throat hurts."

“Oh, here,” I said, bringing the water to his lips and letting him drink. “Amber said you can drink now, as much as you want, whenever you’re awake.”

“Good,” he said after almost draining the entire cup. “My throat is very dry.”

“I bet,” I said. “How do you feel? I mean, I know terrible, but... you know.”

“I feel okay,” he said, smiling as much as his lips would allow. “Terrible, but okay.”

“I know what happened to you,” I said. “At least as much as Kevin knew.”

“Did they get him?”

I pursed my lips and nodded.

“They arrested him just a little bit ago,” I said, relaying the information Collin had when he came back. “Lacey too. They had run off to New Mexico, but they got caught using his ID.”

“Good,” he said. “Idiots.”

“Jesse, you almost died,” I said, trying to control the emotion in my voice. “They tried to kill you.”

“I know,” he said. “What about Graham?”

I was confused for a moment, temporarily unsure of what he meant. Then it hit me. The last time he saw me, I was leaving for Paris.

“I broke it off with him. For good. I chose you.”

He smiled again, closing his eyes. “I knew you would.”

I leaned forward and kissed his forehead again, and as I pulled away, I heard the low, soft breathing that told me he’d fallen back to sleep.

I sat there, half on the bed for a long time, waiting to see if he would come back to me. Eventually, Amber came back into the room, and I turned to smile at her. She didn’t return the expression.

“He wake up?” she asked.

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I nodded. “Just for a minute. But he was lucid.”

“That’s good,” she said. “Very good.”

“Is everything okay?” I asked. “You look upset.”

She paced for a moment, looking at the sleeping Collin and then back to me.

“Look, I know you two are a ... a thing, right?” she said. I nodded. “I’m not supposed to say anything about his condition unless one of the brothers is listening, but I’ve talked about things in front of you and they didn’t seem to mind. Luke said you were as good as family. So I’m going to tell you what I know, but you can’t let anyone know that you heard it, okay?”

“Sure,” I said. “What’s going on?”

She sighed heavily and sat down on one of the empty chairs that lined the room.

“Come over here,” she said. I did as I was asked and sat next to her. When she spoke again, she kept her voice calm but low. “I am trying to figure out how to tell Luke. He’s going to want blood. Essentially, they cracked his skull. Whatever they hit him with, I believe Kevin said that he told them it was a gun? Whatever it was, it had the force of a baseball bat to the skull. It hit him right above the spinal cord. A fraction of an inch lower and the impact would have either killed him immediately or would have damaged his spine.”

“Oh my God,” I said, gasping.

“Now the good news is, the doctors think he will make a full recovery. Probably pretty quickly at that. He’s in terrific shape, and we had some very talented hands working on him. But the damage to the skull was intense. Whatever Oland hit him with, he intended on killing him. He almost did.”

“He thought he had,” I said. “According to what he told Kevin, they thought he was dead when they left him.”

“They were almost right,” she said. “The thing is, even if he does recover, there is a significant chance he won’t recover fully. We don’t really know a lot about the brain, you know? And injuries like this... they can change people. You should know that right now. The Jesse that walks out of this hospital may not be the same one you knew before he got hurt.”

“I understand,” I said.

“Will he still be able to play?”

The voice came from the doorway, and we both looked up. A man was standing in the doorway, tall and skinny with black hair swooped to one side and dark-rimmed glasses with a namebrand on the temple piece sliding down his nose. He pushed them up and acknowledged us both with a small wave.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Flynn Moody,” he said. “I manage the Jesse James Galloway Band.” He gave a small smile, but it faded almost instantly into a defeated look. “Or at least, I used to. Right now, I’m not sure about the future of the band.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Jesse

The kitchen smells like fresh bread and coffee. Charlotte walks in, shocked to see me with a washcloth over one shoulder, an apron around my waist. Little does she know I have been learning from Collin how to cook for months. I want to be able to eat on the road without having to dine out, and the boys have been talking about getting vacation houses rather than hotels.

I shut the oven door and go to her, sweeping her up in my arms and kissing her deeply. She giggles as I set her back down on her feet, her heels clicking on the linoleum. I don't recognize this kitchen, yet I know it. It's home, but it's not the ranch. Where I am, though, is home. I live here with Charlotte. And soon, more.

Kevin is in the living room with his girlfriend. He is picking at his guitar, working on a tune I wrote in my sleep. He comes over often and stays in the guest room. We write music and record in the basement. Charlotte brings us snacks and beer while we work.

I tell her I have a surprise for her, and she laughs in delight. She sits at the kitchen table and closes her eyes. I take a box out of a drawer, and when she opens her eyes again, I have opened it. Inside is a key. She is confused, and I laugh, taking her hand and leading her outside. I turn and show her the house. I tell her that it's ours. The whole world is ours. And the whole world exists in that home.

Her face drops, and she nearly bursts into tears. What about my job? I tell her not to worry. She can travel all she wants. But home will always be home. And it can be anywhere.

She relaxes into my arms, and we go back inside. The house is full of people now. All my brothers. Amber, the Millers, everyone. We sit at the table and eat fresh bread and grapes and salted meat. It's Thanksgiving, and turkey appears as if by magic.

Charlotte is now in a dress with turkeys on the bottom. I love her. I love her so much.

We drink and enjoy our life with our family and friends. They leave, one by one, and then it is just us. But not for long. No, not for long at all. A baby is living inside her. The next generation of the Galloways. I take her hand and walk outside, and we are at a venue. I take her with me onto the stage in front of thousands of screaming fans. I sing to her. I sing to the baby. When the song is over, I pull her to me, and our lips press against each other once again.

I close my eyes.

I opened my eyes.

It felt so real, and yet, in those few moments of being awake right after a dream, I can see the moments that didn't make sense. The random changes of time and space, the way things suddenly appeared and disappeared. It was just a dream. But a good one. A really, really good one.

I tried to move but found myself unable to. I was tucked in tightly in the bed, and there was no wiggling out of it without thrashing, and I wasn't in a position to thrash just yet. Everything hurt too much.

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Charlotte was asleep on a cot at the end of the bed. I could just see her hair and the bottom of the cot. Kevin and his girlfriend were also there, in chairs along the wall, their heads resting against one another. Kevin was snoring. I'd heard that snore all too often in the last fifteen or so years. It was like a wet chainsaw.

Cool air touched my fingertips, and I realized I wasn't as tucked tightly in as I thought I had been. Wiggling my fingers until my hand came loose, I was able to pull it out completely and reach over to the other side, freeing my other arm. A remote device hung just over my shoulder, and I touched it, pulling it so I could see it. A button to make the back lift up into a seated position was at the top, and I touched it.

Silently, the bed shifted, and I had to stop. The pain was immense. But I wanted to sit up. I wanted to be awake. I'd been asleep for so long. I felt like I'd been asleep for a decade.

I pushed the button again and let it slowly bring me to a seated position, gritting my teeth through the pain and hoping I didn't catch any wires or tubes in the folding mattress. When I was sufficiently sitting up, I glanced around the room again. Everyone was asleep, despite the dim daylight outside. It must have been another long day for them.

A notepad was sitting on the table beside me, and I grabbed it and the pen on top. Then I took the drink and sipped down the water until there was nothing left. It was the greatest thing I'd ever tasted in my life. Simple water.

I opened the notepad, an idea forming in my mind. A snippet of the dream was still bouncing around in my head. A song lyric that wouldn't go away. A hook to go with

it. I had to write it down.

The notepad was one of Charlotte's, and I flipped to an empty page. Carefully, I took the pen and made the first mark on the paper, the excruciating pain becoming more manageable the longer I used it. It took everything out of me, but I got the lyric down, and then a few more to go with it. A verse and a chorus. It wasn't a lot, but it was something. Something productive.

Content that the song of my dream had been given the breath of life by being written down, as if my guitar was a golem, just waiting for sheet music to bring it to life, I laid back in the chair and pushed the button to lie back down again. I didn't go all the way down, though. Just most of the way. I still wanted to be a little bit upright.

Slowly, I drifted back to sleep, though this time no dreams came to me. No houses or concerts or Thanksgiving dinners filled my mind's eye. Just darkness and the passage of time. When I awoke, it was morning yet again. The bright sunshine coming through the folds of the curtain were blindingly bright. I shifted in my seat to see Charlotte, across the room. She had the notepad in her hand and was reading something.

I knew what she was reading.

I smiled.

She put the notepad down and looked up at me, seeing me awake for the first time. She smiled back at me. Standing and crossing over, she bent down and placed a soft kiss on my lips.

"Good morning," she said. "I'm so glad to have you back."

"I'm glad you came back too," I said.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Charlotte

Jesse was back to sleep, having been given another dose of pain meds, as most of us settled in for lunch. Logan brought in food from the station, which mostly consisted of various styles of wings, but at least it was something, and they were cooked well. Normally, I wasn't one for wings, but Logan was pretty darn good as the firehouse cook, so I managed.

Tamara arrived not long after Logan left and pulled me aside as I finished up my wings.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Mom just called," she said. "Someone is apparently there to see you."

"Oh God, it's not Graham, is it? He didn't change his mind, did he?"

Tamara shrugged. "I don't know. But Mom sounded weird. I think we should both head over there and find out what's happening."

I looked back to Jesse and grimaced. I didn't want to leave him.

"How long has he been out this time?" Tamara asked.

"Not long," I said. "But Amber said that he will be out for a while. Probably a couple of hours. I don't want to leave him, but I don't like how you said Mom sounded."

"It could be nothing," Tamara said. "It might be some salesperson or something. You know Mom; she just lets anyone in to talk. As long as they will eat her food, she will

talk to anyone.”

“Yeah, well, we need to work on that. The world is a bit more dangerous than Mom likes to believe it is.”

“So you want to head out now?”

“Let me tell Collin.”

“Wait, Collin’s here?”

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The excitement on her face was palpable, and it made me chuckle. I nodded and pointed into the next room, where the bed had been empty so long that the head doctor had given us permission to use it as a temporary sleeping unit.

“Do you want to tell him?” I asked.

“Yes, please,” she said, turning on her heel and heading to the room without further instruction.

I rolled my eyes and headed back to Jesse. Kissing him on his head, I whispered that I would be back soon and headed out. A few moments later, Tamara came out, her face flushed.

“You good?” I asked.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“You look like the cat that swallowed a canary,” I said.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Oh God, what happened?”

“Nothing.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Nothing happened,” she protested. “Nothing. Even though it could have.”

“What in the world are you talking about, Tamara?”

“Did you know that Collin.... sleeps... in the nude?”

I closed my eyes and shook my head tightly once. “I did not know that, nor did I need to know that.”

“Yeah, well, I know that now,” she said, beaming. “I know alllllll about that.”

“Let’s go,” I said, desperate to change the subject. “Mom’s waiting on us, I’m sure.”

“Oh, I’m good to go now,” Tamara said, tagging along. “I’m good for a while.”

As we pulled up to the house, anger flooded my system once more. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Not only had they done what they’d done, and bothered the Millers, the Galloway, and me, but now one of the damn Andersons’ cop cars was in my parents’ driveway.

I slammed the car door shut as I stomped up to the front door, not bothering to ring a bell or knock. Why should I? It was my childhood home. I had every right to just waltz right on in. Tamara came along after me, struggling to keep up with my power walk.

When I opened the door, I wasn’t as surprised as I was blindingly angry. Standing in my mother’s living room were Eugene and Trish Anderson.

“What thehellare you two doing here?” I demanded.

“Now before you get worked up,” Eugene started.

“Before I get worked up?” I shouted, clearly well past that line. “Your brother tried to kill Jesse Galloway, and you are standing here telling me not to get worked up?”

“Charlotte, for real, calm down,” Trish said.

My eyes turned to her, and I must have had one hell of an expression, because for the first time I could remember, Trish Anderson took a step back. She had always been the type of girl who prided herself on being able to say and do whatever she wanted because of her brothers. But not even Eugene standing beside her gave her any indication she was safe when she was within my reach.

“We just dropped by to update you on the case,” Eugene said, trying hard to put on some kind of diplomatic voice.

It was usually Eugene’s job to try to calm things down after his brothers caused a mess. Eugene was the calmer of the three, though in my experience, the more calculating. Smarter than his brothers, he tended to hang out in the background and let Oland and Arnold do most of the fighting.

“Well, don’t you think that’s a bit of a compromised situation there, Eugene?”

“You tell me,” he shot back.

“Excuse me?”

Eugene stared for a long moment at me and then seemed to decide to move past it.

“Look,” he said, “let’s look at reality here, shall we? For a moment, let’s just look at this as it is.”

“Please, enlighten me,” I said with as much sarcasm as I could possibly muster.

“It is highly, highly unlikely that anything will happen to Oland,” he said. “I know, before you even start, I know. You are positive he did it. But the thing is, no one has any actual proof, do they? There’s no evidence at the crime scene. There’s no blood in the parking lot that he claimed there was a fight. There’s no indication anywhere that Oland was directly involved in any of it.”

“You lying son of a bitch,” Tamara began.

“Keep your mouth shut, young lady,” Eugene said.

“Don’t you threaten her,” I shouted.

“Don’t raise your voice to my brother, Charlotte,” Trish said, and I turned on her again.

“I swear to all that is holy, Trish. If you don’t keep your stupid mouth shut...”

“Enough,” my step-dad said, interrupting all of us with his deep, booming voice.

“Eugene, I only know what I’ve been told about this case, but from what I understand, it’s a bit stronger than just he-said, she-said.”

“There is... a little bit of physical evidence. It doesn’t directly tie my brother to it, but it does implicate him. Which is why I am here. I can’t go talk directly to the Galloways. They won’t see me, and I don’t necessarily blame them. What happened to Jesse was beyond the line. But...”

“But?” I scoffed. “But? There is no but, Eugene. Jesse almost got killed. Oland needs to pay for what he did.”

“Oland is willing to testify that it wasn’t him,” he shot back. “That it was Lacey Banks instead.”

The room fell quiet for a moment.

“You mean to tell me that Oland is willing to flip on his girlfriend and testify thatshewas somehow able to beat Jesse half to death on her own?”

“Something like that,” Eugene said. “In exchange for dropping Oland from the accusation, he will testify that he witnessed Lacey attempt to murder him, then tried to convince her to turn herself in. He will take a modicum of responsibility for Jesse not receiving immediate care, though hedidreport that something was amiss at that spot in the woods to the Louisa County Sheriff’s Office. We sent a dispatch out there, but by the time we got there, Jesse had already escaped.”

“You mean was rescued,” Tamara said. “Not escaped. No one was holding him there. Saying escaped means you didn’t expect to find a live body. Did you?”

Eugene paused, his teeth gritted as he stared holes into my sister. He didn’t just hate that he’d gotten caught; he hated being interrupted at all.

“I misspoke,” he said. “Anyway. Oland can testify that he accompanied Lacey away, trying to convince her to turn herself in and that the call he made to the office, which is documented as happening, was a rescue and recovery call. It will absolve him of most guilt and allow him to return home with expedience.”

“Sounds like you have it all worked out,” I said.

“I do,” Eugene growled.

“Unfortunately, I think you are an absolutely disgusting piece of trash for even trying that,” I continued. “Oland will rot in jail. We will see to it. Just like Arn should be. And maybe just like you should be too. Because if it turns out you had any idea this was going to happen, or you, Trish, same thing... If either one of you knew what was about to happen, then I promise you, you will never see the sunlight again.”

“Sounds a lot like a threat, brother,” Trish said.

“Shut up, Trish,” Eugene said. “Don’t make things any fucking worse.”

“Get out of my house, please,” Dad said. “And don’t come back. Ever.”

“Just think about it,” Eugene said. “No more going after Jesse. It will be a settled issue. Just... just tell them to think about it.”

“I’ve already thought about it. The answer is, and I believe I speak for the Galloways here, get fucked.”

“You rude bitch,” Trish said, stomping past her brother and getting in my face. “How dare you talk to us like that? Don’t you know how close you are to being arrested yourself?”

“Are you an officer?” I asked.

“Well... no,” Trish said.

“Good.”

She didn’t see my fist coming. Mostly because I started it before she even spoke. It hit her directly in the nose, and she rocked back like she’d been shot.

“Dammit, Charlotte,” Eugene said. “Turn around and put your hands behind your back. You’re under arrest for assault.”

I did as I was told. As Eugene slapped the cuffs on me, I found myself eye to eye with Tamara, whose jaw was gaping like a fish.

“Worth it,” I muttered.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Jesse

Every time I woke up, I felt a little bit better. This most recent time, I actually felt great. There was only one problem. Charlotte had been missing for a couple of hours, and no one knew where she was.

I assumed she had just gone somewhere to sleep. That made the most logical sense. She’d been back in town for at least a day and had spent the entire time in the hospital with me. She couldn’t have possibly gotten much rest, and this was after flying back from Paris overnight. I didn’t think much of it until Luke came into the room, pulling

Amber aside and having a hushed conversation, in which I heard her name several times.

“What’s going on?” I asked when Amber made her way back to me.

“Whoa, you’re talking,” Luke said. “You look like you feel better.”

“I do,” I said. “Quite a bit. Still feel like I got hit by a truck, but maybe a smaller truck now. What’s going on with Charlotte?”

The two of them glanced at each other, and Collin, who was also in the room, perked up as well.

“Well, he’s going to have to find out,” Amber said.

“Youjustsaid not to tell him because it might stress him out too much.”

“Yeah, but if you don’t knowwhenthey will have her out...”

“Excuse me,” Collin said. “Can you just tell me what’s happening? I don’t have a heart condition at the moment.”

“Might as well tell them both,” Amber said, sighing. “Do you want to, or me?”

“You do it,” Luke said, exasperated.

She nodded and turned back to me, putting on a huge fake smile.

“Oh lord,” I said. “What happened?”

“Well, so, you see, Charlotte went to see her mom, and, well, there was someone

there. And, look, a lot of things kind of happened quickly, but you need to know things are going to work out, okay? You just need to remain calm. But..”

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Luke interrupted, “Charlotte is in jail. She punched Trish in the nose, might have broken it, and Tamara is up at the station to bail her out.”

“Yeah, that,” Amber finished, lamely.

“She’s in jail? For punching Trish?” I asked.

“Yes,” Luke and Amber said at the same time.

I glanced at Collin, who also looked at me. It felt like both of us had the same shocked and perplexed expression.

“Charlotte?” I asked again.

“All right, so, when she got to her mom’s place, Eugene and Trish were there, apparently,” Luke said. “I don’t know the exact words because Tamara was a little bit... upset. But the long and short of it is, Eugene wanted to float some crazy idea, and it pissed Charlotte way the hell off. Trish got in her face about her not respecting Eugene, and Charlotte dropped her like a sack of potatoes. Eugene arrested her on the spot, and now everybody’s hopping mad.”

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“Wow,” Collin said. “Way to go, Charlotte. That’ll teach that brat.”

“She’s actually in jail, though?” I asked, still reeling and trying to mentally produce an image that just wouldn’t come. Charlotte Garafalo. In jail. It just didn’t make sense.

“Yes,” Amber said. “Tamara is down there now to bail her out.”

“I sent the money for it out of the fund I keep for your misadventures,” Luke said.

“Wait, you have a specific fund for when Jesse ends up in jail?” Collin asked. “How do I not know about this?”

Luke shrugged. “You know how I have that old car garaged that I’ve been restoring?”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Well, it’s been restored for a long damn time now. I don’t know how you didn’t put that one together.”

“You mean to tell me every month, from the budget, you’ve been taking money to restore old cars and putting it into a slush fund to bail Jesse out of the slammer?”

“Well, all of us,” he said. “But mostly Jesse.”

Collin was laughing now, getting past his initial betrayal of financial transparency. Luke even cracked a smile.

“I guess the important thing to talk about now is how you want to handle Oland,” Amber said. “Luke should explain that part a little more.”

“Right,” Luke said, pulling up a chair and bringing it closer. “Okay, so the situation is that they claim there isn’t much, if any physical evidence tying Oland to this other than him being caught with Lacey. They might have your DNA on the bottom of his gun, but we don’t know that yet. So Oland has cooked up this idea, and essentially is willing to flip on Lacey if you admit you don’t know for sure that Oland had anything to do with the actual assault and attempted murder.”

“Wait, so I’m supposed to believe that Lacey did all this?”

“Yes.”

“She hit me with the gun, she dragged me into the car, then drove me to the woods, dragged me out of the car, and left me for dead?”

“Yes.”

“And Oland would get away scot-free?”

“Well, no,” Luke said. “He definitely was an accomplice. But they would only charge him with what they could prove, which was that he helped her try to escape, which he claims he was trying to talk her into turning herself in, and possibly that she stole the weapon from him and he tried to cover it up.”

“Wow,” Collin said. “What a snake in the grass.”

“It’s worse,” I said. “They weren’t just in on this together. They are... or were... a couple. I believe Oland is the father of her baby, assuming there is an actual baby at all.”

“Wait, you think she was never pregnant?” Amber asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “She’s a serial liar. I think it’s entirely possible, yes. But I think the most likely situation is that I broke up with her, Oland dated her and knocked her up, and then they concocted this plan to pin it on me and get money from me by way of child support. When I denied it, they went all in on it, thinking that they could take me to court, win without a paternity test, and somehow get access to the ranch through litigation.”

“I’ve said it before,” Collin said, “Oland Anderson might just be the dumbest man on Earth.”

“Dumb, but not that dumb,” Luke said. “He’s figured out a plausible way to get out of most of the trouble. It would be a slam-dunk case on Lacey if you went through with this. The implication is that the Andersons would be willing to work with us a lot more, maybe cool their jets on us, if we did them this favor.”

“Wow,” I said again. “Just wow.”

“So that brings us to you,” Amber said. “We can save ourselves a lot of legal headache and time if we go with their plan. But...”

“No,” I said. “The answer is no.”

Luke grinned. “Thatta boy.”

“Oland tried to kill me,” I continued. “Lacey wanted me dead, absolutely, and was the most upset that they weren’t able to put a bullet in my head, but Oland not only is the one who actually hit me, but he thought he killed me and was fine with dumping my body and blaming someone else. I even heard his first plan, which was to blame you, Luke.”

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“Me?”

I nodded. “He thought they could float the idea that you were mad at me. Maybe that I’d made a pass at Amber or something.”

“That rat bastard,” Luke said. “As if I’d kill my own brother and dump his body in the woods.”

“It’s what they would do,” Collin said. “Projection. If it’s a plausible story to them because it fits their actions, then it’s plausible to them that everyone else would behave the same way.”

“Oland tried to kill me. He deserves to pay for that. If it weren’t for the fact that he only had his service pistol, I fully believe he would have put a bullet in my brain. Fuck him.”

“Fuck him,” Luke repeated. “Agreed.”

The door opened behind him, and Logan and Owen walked in. Logan looked mighty pissed off, and Owen was even more unusually quiet.

“Hey, Tamara just called,” Logan said. “She told me what happened.”

“Jesse said we’re still going after Oland. Fuck him.”

“Right on,” Logan said. “Owen and I are behind you whatever you decide, but... yeah. Oland can eat it. If you want us to go storm the police station right now and tear

it down piece by piece, we're down for it."

"No," I said, knowing that wasn't just fluff. Logan and Owen were the biggest two of all of us and the strongest physically. If they wanted to take every brick apart by hand, they could do it. "I don't want anyone else in trouble. We will get Oland. But first and most importantly, I need to make sure Charlotte is okay. I know how the Andersons get when they have one of us cornered in jail. If she has a hair out of place, then we can tear the place down."

Logan nodded. "I'm on it. They won't mess with me. They don't want the entire fire department on their ass."

"Go get her," Luke said. "And make sure they know that their offer was found to be... lacking."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Charlotte

Weirdly, sitting in a jail cell wasn't the worst thing that had ever happened to me.

For the past couple of hours, I'd been in a small cell, mostly staring at brick walls, and yet, it was the most at peace I'd been in a long time. I felt good, actually.

All my life, I'd done the right thing. I'd never caused any trouble in school, had good grades, never was out past my curfew, all that stuff. While Tamara tested boundaries, I never did. I went to work as soon as I was able to and created a savings account when I was sixteen. I did my taxes early and always returned the shopping cart to the corral.

The only time I'd ever done anything remotely against the grain was when it had to

do with Jesse. Dating him secretly, sleeping with him as a one-time-thing in Oklahoma, kissing him twice while technically having a boyfriend. Now, I was sitting in a jail cell, something Tamara had never done, because I punched a girl in the face after she defended her brother for almost killing Jesse.

What was weird was that I didn't feel despair or shame. I wasn't upset with myself. I didn't blame Jesse or lament that maybe life would have been better, that I would be a better person had I not encountered him. No, I was happy. I was more content with myself than I'd ever been. Because the bottom line was, Jesse hadn't made me do anything. I'd chosen to do those things. I'd chosen to punch Trish in the face. Me.

And I'd do it again if I had the chance.

Who was I? Who was I becoming?

I wasn't sure. But I did know that whoever it was, I wasn't going to fight the transformation. I was looking forward to it.

In the hours I'd spent in that jail cell, I'd made a few decisions about how I was going to live my life. The solitude and time to think provided me with an opportunity. There was a version of me that had gone into this jail, and there was going to be a version of me that was going to come out of it. There was no going back.

The main door opened, and I looked up through the cell bars to see light pouring in.

"Are you decent?"

It wasn't one of the Andersons, but it was a voice I recognized. All I could see was the arm, holding the main door open, waiting for my response.

"Yes," I said.

Suddenly, the owner of that arm came into view. Logan Galloway walked in, flanked by one of the rookie deputies, who was fumbling with his keys. Logan found me, clenched his jaw and nodded, and then guided the deputy over.

“Here we go,” Logan said. “I’m here to get you out, Charlotte.”

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“Thanks, Logan,” I said.

“Tamara is in the office, signing paperwork,” Logan said. “Did you have anything that they took from you?”

“My phone,” I said. “I don’t think I was wearing any jewelry or anything.”

The cell door opened, and I stood. Part of me was kind of sad to leave. So much had changed inside me while sitting there that I felt a special kind of connection to it. Besides, I was pretty sure Jesse had spent time in that cell at some point too. Just by virtue of there only being six of them if nothing else.

Among the various things I’d decided about how I was going to live my life going forward was the acknowledgement that I wasn’t going to hold back how I felt about people anymore. Namely Jesse. Which meant I was going to be as honest as I could be without being cruel. Tamara had already indicated she was fine with me and Jesse, but I needed to make sure, just for my own heart. She needed to know I was serious. I needed to know there would be no harsh feelings.

“Hey, you,” Tamara said as we made our way back into the intake area.

“Hey, I am going to marry Jesse,” I said, all as one thought.

“Uhh, what?”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. That wasn’t how that was supposed to come out.

“I mean, I made a decision,” I said. “I’m going to make a real go of this thing with Jesse. Like, serious serious. I need to know you are okay with that.”

She looked confused and taken aback, probably more for my forward attitude than what I was actually saying. I was usually so much more timid.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she said. “Like, for real. I got over my Jesse crush a long time ago. Knock yourself out.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she said, emphatically. “Jesse isn’t my target anymore.”

“Collin?” I laughed.

Her eyes flickered, and her face went very red. Suddenly, she became extremely interested in the paper she was signing. Slowly, I turned and saw Logan, hands in his pockets and staring out of the window, as if he had gone on standby, his brain powering down temporarily like a laptop. I turned back to my sister, who was handing the paper back to the deputy.

“Logan?”

“So, let’s get you out of here,” she said chipperly, clearly blowing by my observation.

“Wow,” I said. “I mean, I knew you had a thing for all the Galloway boys, but Captain Muscles?”

“Shut up, sis,” she said, mostly under her breath.

“Logan? Really? He has the personality of a steel beam!”

“Shut up, Charlotte,” she said, her voice going high in a sing-songy way. “And you don’t know him. He’s actually very interesting.”

“And you do?”

“I mean... I’ve been around a lot recently. We’ve... talked. About stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Things. Weather. Fire.”

“Uh huh.”

“He’s stupid hot, okay, Charlotte? Sometimes that’s enough.”

I raised my hands in surrender and laughed.

“All right, all right,” I said. “Enjoy the new crush.”

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“Not new. Just newly the focus,” she muttered. “All right, Logan, we’re ready!”

The pitch of her voice shifted so dramatically when she spoke to him, I almost burst out laughing.

“Cool,” he said, powering back on and returning to human form. I was convinced I’d see a panel where his circuit board was if I looked hard enough. “Do you need to go by your house, or do you want to go straight to the hospital?”

“Me?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Actually, there is somewhere I’d like to go,” I said.

“Can we all just ride together?” Tamara asked. “I had Mom drop me off.”

“Sure,” Logan said.

“I call front seat!”

“It’s a truck,” Logan said. “All the seats are front seats.”

“Oh. Well, I call middle!”

Logan glanced at me, and I shrugged.

We made our way to his truck, which was surprisingly old, and hopped inside. Rolling the windows down all the way to fight the oppressive heat, he cranked the car on and backed up. Jesse's voice came out of the speaker, and I smiled.

"Sorry," he said, turning it down. "I like to crank it when I'm alone in the car."

"Was that Jesse?" Tamara asked.

"Yeah, it's a bootleg he made me. They don't have a record yet, but he recorded me all their studio stuff they have so far."

"Sounds great," I said.

"Yeah, it does," Logan said. "He should keep pursuing it."

It was a test. I could feel it. Logan was testing me to see how supportive I would be of his brother. It was cute.

"He should," I said. "He could be a big star one day."

"So where do you want to go?" he asked, nodding as if I'd passed his impromptu hurdle.

"Madie's," I said. "The sandwich shop up the block."

"I don't think I've been there in years," Logan said. "Not since the old lady died. I thought they shut down."

"They did," Tamara said. "But her daughter opened it back up."

"Still make the same sandwiches?" I asked.

“Pickle and all,” Tamara said.

“Good.”

When we arrived, I went inside and felt a wave of nostalgia wash over me. Tamara and I used to go to the shop when it was the original at least once a week as kids. The pickle on the side, which came with every order, was my favorite food item in the world. It was so silly. I had pickles all the time, but there was something so special about the ones I got from Madie’s.

I ordered a slate of sandwiches, enough for not only Jesse and me, but for the entire crew. It took them only ten or so minutes, and when they were done, I had to enlist Tamara to help me carry them all out to the truck.

After the second trip, we were all packed in, and Logan put the truck into drive.

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“That’s a lot of sandwiches,” he said. “You just wanted to bring everyone lunch?”

“Yes,” I said. “But also, it means something to Jesse. It’s kind of a thing between the two of us.”

“Sandwiches?” Tamara said. “Now that’s the kind of love language a girl can get behind.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Jesse

For once, I was alone in my room. Collin had gone back to the house for a bit, Owen had left as well, and Luke and Amber had gone to get some rest. Occasionally, a nurse would come in and check on me, but otherwise, I was left alone for an hour or so, and I found myself kind of enjoying the quiet. After a little while, I decided to actually try and stand, since my legs hadn’t been anything more than cut up a little and bruised.

It took a few minutes to extricate myself from the bed, but eventually, I had my feet on the floor, those pale blue sticky bottomed socks helping me grip, and I pushed off the bed to stand.

Immediately, I realized it was a mistake.

Still, I couldn’t just fall, so I held myself upright and waited for both the dizziness and the weakness to cease. My legs were shaking trying to hold me up after so long,

but I was able to hang in there, and after a few curses, a couple of countdowns and a self-pep talk, I felt like I might be able to let go of the death grip I had on the bed.

My room was one of the ones with a tiny bathroom attached, a novelty of the new hospital built in town, and I shuffled my way over, bringing my fluid packs with me. When I made it out again, I got almost all the way to the bed when the door opened, and I turned to see Charlotte, who looked as shocked to see me as I did her.

“Jesse!”

“Charlotte!”

She put down a massive bag she had in each hand and ran over to me, wrapping her arms around me and squeezing, pressing her lips to mine. It was a little rougher than I expected, and there was pain involved, but I wasn’t going to complain. I had Charlotte’s lips against mine. I could fight the world.

When she pulled away, I saw Logan and Tamara coming in behind her, each also carrying massive red and white bags. They looked around the room, as if surprised to see it empty.

“What are you doing standing?” Charlotte asked.

I shrugged. “I got bored,” I said. “Everyone left, and I was here alone, and I wanted to see if I could make it to the bathroom. Guess what? I can.”

“I can see that,” she said. “Oh Jesse, I am so glad you’re doing so well. I was so worried. I’m still so worried, but this makes me feel so much better.”

“I feel much stronger,” I said. “My head is still... wobbly? But I feel a lot better. How did you get out of jail?”

Her lips pulled in on themselves in a comical expression, and I laughed.

“You know about that already, huh?” she asked.

“Yeah, I do,” I said. “How did that go for you?”

“Not bad, actually,” she said. “I was able to get some time to think about things.”

“Oh?”

“We will talk later,” she said. “For now, I brought food. Where is everyone?”

“I believe Luke and Amber are sleeping in whatever cot they have somewhere in the hospital. Collin went back home, and Owen headed there as well, I think, to take care of animals. Kevin and Sarah are probably at the ranch too.”

“I’m here,” a voice said from the doorway. I looked past her to see Flynn standing there, looking exhausted. “I’ve been here the whole time. Just been on the phone, handling some things. Namely postponing our next tour.”

“Ahh,” I said. “Sorry.”

“Would you like a sandwich?” Charlotte asked. “I brought plenty for everybody. Especially us.”

That last bit was quiet and private, just for me. I grinned. It was just like when she’d arrived at the hotel that night we spent together, only this time instead of a bottle of whisky, she had a couple six-packs of root beer, and the sandwiches looked like they were from Madie’s downtown rather than the fancy hotel restaurant downstairs at the Bethel.

Something told me she'd done that on purpose. A little nod that only I would understand.

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Sandwiches were passed out, and Tamara and Logan decided to eat theirs outside. Flynn took his and said he was heading down to the ranch to get some sleep, and everyone agreed it was fine to leave me alone if Charlotte was there. Provided, of course, I didn't try to get up and walk anywhere without help this time.

I pulled myself back up onto the bed, physically pulling my legs up so they crossed and letting Charlotte get on the other end. A platter of sandwiches sat between us, and the root beer sat on the table beside us, still somehow cold to the touch. We ate in relative silence for a few minutes, simply enjoying each other's company, until I'd polished off one sandwich and was halfway through another and she was just finishing her first.

"Man, that's just as good as I remember," she said.

"Yeah, Madie's granddaughter seems to have picked right up from the original," I said. "I went there a couple weeks ago and was stunned at how similar it felt."

"Well, I'm just glad Foley has something to draw people to it again. I remember people used to come from all over for Madie's sandwiches."

"Yup," I said. "Lord knows we made the twenty-minute drive all the time. Dad practically lived on them when Mom died."

An unexpected pang of pain went through my heart and I tried to shake it off. It had been a long time since I'd let myself think of those dark months after she passed and Dad tried to figure out how to survive with five boys. It wasn't easy, but there were some rare bright spots. Carrying little Owen around and bringing him to the tiny park

that used to be beside Madie's after we all ate lunch there a couple times a week was one of them.

"So that actually brings me to something I wanted to talk to you about," she said.

"All right."

"I was thinking, we're going to make a really serious go of this, right? Like, no fooling around, we're going to be a couple and try to make it work. Right?"

It was the first time either of us had addressed our future, and though the question was serious, I couldn't help but grin.

"Damn right," I said.

She returned my grin with a smile. "Right. So I was thinking, it might be a little difficult if I am in Dallas or Houston or wherever all the time. Like, that might make being in a real relationship rather difficult."

"Sure," I said. "But we could make it work."

"I think we could," she said. "That's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is, at least for the beginning, I think it would be a lot better if I were in town more. Like, here."

"Home? In Foley?"

She nodded. "I was thinking about taking a leave of absence... or maybe even quitting my job."

"No way," I said. "Absolutely not. You love your job. Don't quit because of me. I wouldn't be able to live with knowing you did that."

“No, no, stop,” she said. “Hear me out.”

“All right,” I said.

“I was thinking, and I might be crazy, but, I’ve been around the hotel game for a long time, right? I know all the ins and outs. As a matter of fact, I’ve probably got more experience from the bottom to the top of the hotel industry than just about anyone my age does in the country, if not more. So...”

“So...”

“So I was thinking, what’s one thing this town really needs?”

“Fewer Andersons,” I joked.

“Besides that,” she said, rolling her eyes playfully. I shrugged. She dipped her hand into her bag and pulled out one of the extra-long pickles and took a bite. “A hotel.”

“Wait, what?”

“I want to see if I can do it on my own,” she said. “Run a hotel, that is. And Louisa County needs one. We have that rundown truck stop a mile out of the county, but ever since the old Louisa Lodge shut down when I was a kid, there hasn’t been a real hotel in town. What if I were to open one?”

“I think it’s a hell of an idea,” I said. “I just worry there won’t be enough clientele. Who wants to visit Foley?”

“Well, there’s Madies,” she said. “And I heard something about Collin wanting to start some kind of dude ranch experience.”

“Heh, yeah there is that,” I said, shaking my head at the long-sought plan by Collin to convince Luke that turning part of the ranch into a tourist destination was good for everyone.

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“So I could start a hotel right here, in Foley. I could build it from scratch. And, what’s more, I could make sure it has something that Foley also needs.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“A permanent entertainment venue.”

I gawked at her for a second. She grinned madly, and I huffed a laugh.

“You mean a stage? Like a real one? With speakers and lights and the whole deal?”

“The whole deal,” she said. “But I would need someone who knows more about that sort of thing to help me. Do you know anyone?”

I reached forward and grabbed her shirt lightly. Pulling her toward me, I kissed her softly on the lips.

“Yeah, I think I might know somebody. You might know him, he’s kind of famous around here. His name is Jesse James, if you can believe it.”

“Oh,” she said, grinning. “Sounds kind of hot.”

Chapter Thirty-Six

Charlotte

The idea had come while I was sitting in the jail cell. It was simple really. I had all

the know-how one needed to run a hotel. I could handle the operation from top to bottom. From how the rooms should be decorated and set up to cleaned and turned over, from rates and amenities to how to play the delicate game of guest Tetris that presented itself on the regular. From how to spruce up an old building to how to start from absolute scratch and oversee the construction and building of a brand new one, all of it. I had done it all.

So why wouldn't I be able to handle a hotel of my own?

I hadn't signed any kind of non-compete clause with Bethel hotels, primarily because I had been promoted from within rather than hired from outside. There was nothing legally stopping me from applying my knowledge and experience to building something new. Besides, it wasn't like they were planning on expanding in West Texas anytime soon. Arizona and New Mexico, and eventually Southern California, sure, but not West Texas. It was a dead area for them.

But I knew West Texas. It was home. I could work here, could thrive here. I knew what the customer base wanted and needed, and without the pressure of having to try and appeal to high-end clients, I could focus on making a more functional, almost commercial place.

The real kicker was the venue. I could do all the hotel stuff in my sleep, having opened over a dozen hotels for Bethel and acting as the general and then regional manager over them. I knew the ins and outs better than anyone one else. But a venue was something this area of the state desperately needed. National acts had nowhere to come to, and local acts had nowhere to aspire to. Building something here meant we could draw crowds from all over the region and be something unique.

On top of that, I happened to know some people who knew a thing or two about event promotion.

Flynn would be the perfect mind to pick. Having only barely met him, I could tell the type of person he was already. A motivated self-starter, if I could convince him to take the lead on promoting the space, I could fill it with acts regularly, and give the hotel and the surrounding area a draw beyond a place to stop between Dallas and Juarez.

It would also be a chance to give Jesse somewhere his band could play regularly. Almost like Vegas, where acts would do shows for years, Jesse could have a standing spot and perform whatever he wanted with regularity. It would give him some stability, give the area a homegrown act to draw people in, and give us both a chance to see each other more often.

All this had settled in my mind while I sat in that jail cell, and now, as I sat on the bed with Jesse, finishing my sandwiches, I started to lay it all out. As I spoke, I grew more and more excited, and he grinned wider and wider. He seemed to like seeing me so stoked about the idea and occasionally peppered my rant with ideas of his own.

“What about construction?” he asked. “If we have to build something from scratch, that’s a huge investment. Plus, there’s all the red tape to go through.”

“I have a savings account that I’ve been putting money into since I was a kid,” I said. “I’ve made really good money the last couple of years. And I’ve met a lot of investors too, who would come and stay for long periods of time. I might be able to call on a few of them. But even without them, I think I can convince a bank to give me the business loan based on my experience and what I can put down of my own capital.”

“The Galloways will invest too,” he said. “Obviously, I’ll have to talk to the brothers, but Collin has been looking for something to invest in locally that he can diversify with. This seems like it’s right up his alley.”

I nodded. “If you guys want to invest, obviously, that will help. I can’t imagine that together we won’t be able to at least get the starting funds. This is a real idea. This could really happen.”

“All right,” he said, finishing one of the delicious pickles and taking a sip of the root beer. “So if you really want to do this, I am fully supportive. But I have one major concern.”

“Okay,” I said. “Go ahead.”

“I am just worried about you quitting the job that I know you love,” he said. “You’ve been working there for over a decade, and as you said, you worked your way up from cleaning rooms and working the desk to being a regional manager and handling all these locations at once. You’re a rockstar in that company, and I worry that you will be throwing away all that work to do something that you think will make our relationship stronger.”

“Jesse...”

“No, really. I don’t want you to do this because of me. I will find a way to see you as much as I can. We will make this relationship work. No matter what. I love you.”

“And I love you,” I said, my skin tingling as I said those words.

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A small, quiet moment passed as we both seemed to register those words being said, honoring them by giving the moment time to breathe. Then, as if to punctuate it, he leaned forward, and I met him more than halfway with a soft but firm kiss.

“As I was saying,” he said, seeming to need a moment to recover and remember where he was, “we can make this thing work. We can find a way. But I don’t want that to be you quitting your job and starting something because you think that’s the only way, or because it’s what I want.”

“It isn’t,” I said. “Look, while I was sitting in that cell, I don’t know how to explain it, but, when I was sitting there, it was like a lightbulb went off in my head. A dozen lightbulbs in fact. All the lightbulbs.”

“Very bright,” he joked.

“Yes,” I said. “It was.”

“Pickle?”

“Yes,” I said, taking another pickle and chomping on it.

“Go on.”

“Right. So all these lightbulbs went off, and I realized I’d been doing the safe thing all my life. I’d been a good girl, doing good girl things forever. The only times I didn’t were with you. And you know what? Those were the only times I ever felt good. The only times I ever felt alive.

I realized that I spent so much time trying not to be my father, trying not to make mistakes and doing the safe things, that I hadn't really lived. I'd thrown myself into work and kept my nose to the ground and not enjoyed anything life had to offer if it wasn't a five-minute break and then getting right back to it. So I decided that I was done with that. I wanted to enjoy life like you do. I wanted to live like you do."

"Maybe not entirely like I do. I think I might need a dose of your nose to the ground-ness, honestly. I'm kind of tired of going to jail and being beaten half to death."

"Well, yes, there is a balance," I said. "But the thing is, I want to find that balance. I don't want to live the life of a goody-two-shoes anymore. I want to enjoy what life has to offer. I want to take a ride on the Jesse James train and see where it takes me."

He grinned. "As much as I like the wording of you taking that ride, I just want to make sure you know it isn't always a smooth one. Things can get a little crazy."

"You mean like you almost getting killed and me punching Trish Anderson in the nose so I could spend a few hours in jail?"

"Well... yeah. Actually, yeah, that's about it."

I smiled. "I think I've already bought my ticket and boarded, Jesse."

"Fair enough," he said. "You really hit her?"

"I did."

"How did that feel?"

"It felt incredible," I laughed. "Honestly, I've never hit anyone before. Besides slapping Tamara one time, and I felt horrible about that. We were just kids, and she

kicked me in the shin and I turned around and smacked her. She cried so hard, and I felt like the worst sister ever.”

“Lord, me and my brothers have had way worse tiffs than that. One time, Logan folded Collin into a pretzel so bad that it broke his wrist, and Collin got him back a year later by knocking him out cold when Logan said something Collin didn’t like about Mom.”

“Wait, how old were they?”

“Collin was thirty,” he laughed. “Cowboys can get rough, Charlotte.”

“I see that,” she laughed.

“So no more April Garafalo?”

I shook my head.

“No, I’m afraid she has retired,” I said. “She was a good egg, but I don’t need her around anymore. She was the representation of everything I was running away from. She was me, but not me. Me trying to be this person I never really wanted to be in the first place. But now, now I can just be Charlotte. Charlotte Garafalo. Jesse’s girlfriend.”

“I like the sound of that,” he said.

“Me too.”

“You know something?”

“What’s that?”

“I have to admit, the idea of you thumping Trish... it’s kind of hot.”

It was my turn to put on a devious grin.

“Well, there might be more of that kind of aggressiveness ahead. I hope you’re ready for that.”

“I am absolutely ready for that,” he laughed. “Just... I might need a few days. I’m kind of almost dead.”

“I’ll be gentle. At first.”

Smiling, I leaned in and kissed him once more.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Jesse

“All right, you ready?”

“Yeah, let’s do it.”

“Up.”

My fingers curled around the bar, and I lifted, bringing it off the rack before taking a

step back.

“Down,” Owen said.

I did a full squat, the weight on my shoulders, coming up slow and smooth. As Owen counted them off, I went up and down, making sure not to overtax myself but pushing until I felt the pain and exhaustion just beginning to really set in.

“And on the rack,” Owen said, coming up behind me to brace the weights.

They clanged into place, and I walked forward, relieved and feeling lighter. Sweat stained my tank and ran down my neck, but I kept my hands dry. Worst thing you could do let a weight slip out of your hand.

“That felt good,” I said.

“Getting closer to pre-injury,” Owen said. “I mean, lightning fast. It’s only been four days since you got out of the hospital.”

“Yeah, well, they didn’t jack up my knees. Just my head.”

“Which is why we have to keep it slow,” Owen said. “Concussion protocol says you can lift light weight and do light exercise. None of your heavy sets for at least a couple more weeks.”

“I know, I know,” I said.

“Well, that’s it for today. I think I’m going to skip leg day.”

“Oof, you never skip leg day,” I said.

“Did a lot of running yesterday,” he muttered.

“Yeah, about that,” I said. “Where? Because I know you weren’t here on the treadmill.”

“I was doing some stuff,” he said. “Don’t worry about it.”

I made a face, and he made one back. Clearly, Owen was hiding something, but I had no idea exactly what it was. Whatever it was, though, I was sure I’d find out sooner or later. He couldn’t keep it secret forever.

I did know one thing about it, though. He was bulking up quite a bit, and it had something to do with it. He was at least ten pounds heavier than he had been two weeks ago, and I recognized the cycle of bulking and cutting from Logan’s days of amateur bodybuilding. Owen never had an interest in that, though. It was curious.

“So you up to anything today?” Owen asked.

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“Actually, yeah, I had something I thought you might be able to help me with.”

“What’s that?”

“You know Mr. Pratchett? The old man who owns all that lakefront property by the park?”

“Yeah, of course,” Owen said. “I helped him rebuild his shed last year.”

“We’ve all done something as a favor for him,” I said. “He was one of Dad’s best friends. Luke makes sure to take care of him, and he’s done some stuff for us too that he’d never, ever brag about.”

“He has?”

I nodded.

“You’re too young to remember, but Mr. Pratchett helped save our hides a few times in the days right after Mom passed. Same with Dad. I don’t think Luke would have made it without him and Mr. Caudle.”

“Oh, wow.”

“Anyway, I was going to head on up to see him. I wanted to get in his ear about something, and I thought he might appreciate a couple of us going and taking care of any yardwork or upkeep he needs done. If there’s more than just one of us, it won’t take all that long.”

“Sure,” Owen said. “Let me get my boots on.”

I headed up the stairs and out of the gym we’d created out of the old playroom we’d had as kids and got in my shower to rinse off. By the time I got out, Owen was waiting in the living room with Collin, both looking ready to get to work.

We piled into Collin’s truck, which was the nicest of all of them being that it was brand new and he went in for all the bells and whistles. It was the one thing Collin seemed to not have any issue spending money on. He always said he could be frugal everywhere else, but there was no sense in being frugal when it came to your car, not when you needed it as much as we often did.

Mr. Pratchett’s place was about twenty minutes out, and while we traveled, we listened to some radio country, much to my chagrin. When we arrived at the house, I was more than happy to hop out first and try to physically shake the generic earworm out of my skull.

“Howdy, boys,” Mr. Pratchett said as he came out onto the porch before we all made it out of the truck. “What can I do you for?”

“Hey Mr. Pratchett,” I said. “We came to see if there was anything you needed doing. I also had a couple questions for you, but that’s beside the fact.”

“Oh, well, thank you, boys. Come on in. I got some cold beer in the fridge, and the only thing I need doing right now is some yard work if you got the time.”

“We sure do,” Collin said. “I brought our stuff to hit the hedges and the bushes. Is your riding mower still in good shape in the shed?”

“As far as I know,” he said. “Had that Bronson boy out here to mow couple weeks ago.”

“I’ll get the grass, you get the hedges?” Collin asked Owen. Owen shrugged. He was taller, so it made sense for him to get the big bushes and stuff anyway.

I headed in after Mr. Pratchett as my brothers began working on the yard. I didn’t feel too bad letting them get to it while I talked to him, since the last couple of times I’d gone down there alone. Mr. Pratchett led me into his living room, offering me a seat on one of his chairs while he grabbed us a beer. When he sat down, he made that little groaning sound I associated with all old men who’d done physical work all their life.

“So how are you, Jesse?” he asked. “I heard about all that terribleness with Oland. Glad to see you up and about.”

I nodded. That was about as much sympathy as he was going to show unless I milked the situation. He was a hard man—kind but hard, and knew that other men of his type didn’t take well to sob stories over recent injuries. As far as his generation were concerned, you didn’t bitch about an injury until it was a decade old or you’d gotten it in a war.

“I’m a lot better, thank you,” I said. “Glad to be walking.”

“By God’s grace,” he said, almost like a verbal tick rather than an actual thought that ran through his mind.

“Indeed.”

“So you said you wanted to talk about something?”

“I did,” I said. “I heard from the Eads that you were thinking about selling your land out by the lake and moving back to Odessa.”

“Yeah,” he said, taking a deep sip. “I got my brother out that way, and he don’t get

around too well. His kids help him out a lot, and we both thought it might be nice for us to be closer, so we can all help each other. Besides, if I sell all that land, I might get enough that I can build us a good little place out that way so we don't have to go to a home in a few years."

He laughed, but I knew there was a truth behind that.

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“Sounds like a good idea,” I said.

“I thought so. Why, though? Are you interested?”

Here goes. It’s now or never.

“Actually, yes,” I said. “I know that you never wanted to do anything with it because the Andersons got it zoned for commercial development, and you didn’t want to give them the satisfaction, but you know anyone who does buy it will have to use it for commercial, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” he said, somewhat dejectedly. “It’s such pretty property. But I just won’t sell to the Andersons. That’s why they did it. They got it all zoned commercial so I’d sell it to them, then they’d do whatever they wanted with it, including zoning it back if they so chose. I just couldn’t let them win.”

“Well, maybe I have an idea,” I said. “What if I buy it and develop it?”

“You?” he asked. “No offense, Jesse, but you ain’t exactly a businessman. I’d half expect Collin to come in with some plan, but you?”

“No offense taken. You’re right about that. But the thing is, it’s not really for me. It’s for Charlotte Garafalo.”

“Charlotte?” he asked. “Tamara’s sister? I thought she moved out to Oklahoma.”

“She did,” I said. I recounted how she’d gone to work for the Bethel company and

how she rose through the ranks. How she felt like she knew the ins and outs of the hotel business and her idea to build one in the county.

“I see,” he said. “So you want to buy it to give to her?”

“Sort of,” I said. “I want to buy it and develop it with her. I plan on marrying that girl.”

He grinned. “As I live and breathe, Jesse Galloway is actually sweet on a girl? I’ll be damned. Darned. Darned. Sorry, Lord.”

“I am,” I said. “And I believe in her. Completely. I’ll even sweeten the pot and make you a part owner of the hotel once it’s built. No financial risk on your part.”

“That’s awful nice, but not necessary,” he said. “If I sell that land to you, I sell it knowing that I got my money’s worth and that it won’t be destroyed. I trust you boys not to make me regret it.”

“Well, what were you looking for, price wise?”

He went quiet for a moment, stroking his chin contemplatively.

“You know, I haven’t really put much thought into the price,” he said. “I was going to have a surveyor out to figure it all out. I’ll tell you what, though, you get me an estimate and make me an offer. I trust it will be fair.”

“Really?” I asked. “You’re willing to sell it to me without a price attached?”

“Son, I knew your father for fifty years before he went to the Lord. I’ve known each of you boys since you were in diapers. Hell, I helped change a few of them. I’m an old man now, and I don’t need a whole lot. You need that land way more than I

need to make some big profit. You make me an offer, and I'll trust that it's good."

He held out his hand, and I could barely keep the excitement inside. I took it and shook.

"Thank you, Mr. Pratchett," I said.

"Terry," he said. "You're old enough now, and we're making a deal between men. If I can call you Jesse, you can call me Terry."

"Thank you, Terry," I said. "I promise you won't regret it."

On the car ride back, Owen and Collin pestered me a bit about what we'd talked about. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore and spilled the beans, swearing them to secrecy. Collin was the first to talk.

"So this thing with you and Charlotte... it's for real?"

"After all this time, after all the girls I've dated, yes," I said. "I'm done. Everyone else was just a placeholder until I had Charlotte."

"Well," Owen said. "It's about time."

"Hey, I got one more stop," I said. "Do you mind?"

"Naw," Collin said. "Where to?"

“Family Jewels,” I said.

“The ring place?”

“The ring place.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Charlotte

“Good lord, how old is this?” Tamara asked, holding out yet another piece of clothing that I assumed was from the early nineties.

“Old enough to have voted multiple times,” I said. “Toss it.”

“Ugh,” Tamara said. “And this? What is this? It looks like a costume for someone going to school as a depressed clown.”

“That’s mine,” I said, yanking the striped shirt out of her hand and pulling it tight to my chest. “It was a look, all right. I was an emo kid for like five minutes.”

“I don’t remember that at all,” Tamara said. “You didn’t do the bangs, did you?”

“Yes she did,” Mom said from her place among a stack of boxes. “She hated it. Said I didn’t do the cut right. But I wasn’t about to make her look like one of those skater girls.”

“I still maintain you stunted my individual growth there, Mom,” I said.

“I stunted your ability to have embarrassing pictures in middle school is what I did,” she said.

“Mom, why did you keep all this crap?” Tamara asked. “You could have donated all of this a decade ago if not more.”

“I didn’t want to,” she said. “I wanted to keep it around. It made me feel like I was keeping a little part of the two of you around.”

I felt the pain in that statement. She had been hurt when I moved to Oklahoma to live with Dad. She didn’t understand, and I didn’t tell her why I did it. It was still so much of a secret that I felt I needed to keep it. But knowing now how much it hurt her, I wished I had found another way.

“Ooh, this is pretty,” Tamara said. “Look.”

She was holding a dark blue dress, one of Mom’s from when I was little. I vaguely remembered her wearing it. She looked over and smiled.

“I was wearing that the day I found out I was pregnant with you, Tamara,” she said. “After I gained weight with you, I never fit in it again. But I couldn’t bear to get rid of it. It’s so pretty.”

“It really is,” Tamara said. “Look, I think it’ll fit you, Charlotte.”

“You think so?” I asked.

“Fashion show time,” Tamara said. “Let’s go.”

“We’ve got too much to do here,” I said. “Trying to unclutter this house is going to take way more time.”

“We can take five minutes and try on a dress, sis,” she argued. “Let’s go.”

Shrugging, I followed her back to my old room, which was still mostly the same as it ever was. There was a newer, smaller bed, and a lot of my stuff was either packed away or with me, but some of the furniture and other things were still in their place. Tamara sat on the bed as I disrobed, then stepped into the dress and pulled it up.

“That looks great on you,” she said as I looked in the mirror at my reflection. It did seem to fit quite well, and I loved the fabric.

“I like it a lot,” I said. “I wonder if Mom would be okay if I wore it sometime.”

“I think she’d be fine. Maybe you could wear it on a date with Jesse.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“Speaking of,” she began.

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I knew she was going to pry. That was her way. She always wanted to be in the middle of the gossip. Plus, I was her sister, and this was a boy she'd had a crush on forever. It made sense.

“Yes?”

“Is this thing really real?” she asked. “I mean, you and Jesse. Do you think you’re going to get married?”

“I don’t know,” I said, then shook those doubts away. “Actually, no, I do know. Yes. I think we will. I love him, and he loves me. It’s going to happen.”

“I love that you are so confident,” she said. “But I do have to, as your sister, make sure you are seeing things clearly. This is Jesse James Galloway we are talking about. Known ladies’ man. Known for not settling down for more than a week with anyone. Ever.”

“Except me, now.”

“Except you, now,” she admitted.

“I know about his past, Tamara,” I said. “I’m not jealous, nor does it make me fear anything. Jesse loves me. He’s been waiting for me. This is real, and it’s going to end with us being old and gray together. But, honestly, for right now? I’m not going to push him to make some big gesture of commitment. I know it’s different from how he’s always been, and I don’t want to make him act like someone he’s not. It’s enough that we are together. I’ll take that.”

“I see,” she said. “I guess I get that.”

She seemed distant all of a sudden, and I turned to look at her.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she said. “It’s just that... well, I spent my whole life pining away for these Galloway boys, you know? I’ve dated around, don’t get me wrong. I kissed my share of boys. But in the back of my mind, I always just thought I’d end up with one of them. Now both my best friend and my sister actually have ended up with a Galloway, and I don’t think I will. It’s just... it’s weird in a way, you know?”

“I understand,” I said. “I think. I mean, I get expectations being thrown and all that.”

She nodded. “It’s fine,” she said. “If none of them give me the time of day, that’s just what that is. I’ll find my forever partner. Eventually.”

A car door shut outside, and I looked out of the gauzy curtain to see who it was. Walking across the yard, carrying a giant bag of corn feed, was Logan Galloway.

“What’s all that about?” I asked.

“Logan?” she asked. “He’s just doing a favor for Mom. You know how they all are. If they can be useful, they will. She bought a bunch of feed at the store yesterday and couldn’t get it home in her car, so Logan said he’d get it for her today.”

“That’s awful nice of him,” I said. “Were you there?”

“I was,” she said. “He asked me if we needed help.”

“He asked you?”

“Yeah.”

She didn’t seem to pick up what I was insinuating, so I had to be a little more clear.

“You mean, he didn’t ask Mom if she needed help. He asked you.”

“Yeah, I guess,” she said. “So?”

“And he came over with the feed, and is now just standing in the yard, looking around, like he’s looking for someone.”

“He probably lost his phone or something.”

“Tamara?” Mom called from the other room. “Tamara!”

“Yeah, Mom?” she called from the bed.

“Logan Galloway is outside,” she said. “He asked if you were around. I think he wants to say hi.”

“Oh.”

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“Oh,” I said knowingly.

“It’s nothing, really,” she said. “He’s just being nice, like always.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that,” I said. “Go on. Go see him. I’ll put this dress back and go in to help Mom some more.”

“I’ll be back in there to help in just a minute,” she said.

“Or not,” I teased. “No rush. You have fun.”

“Right,” she said. “Fun talking about corn feed. What a happening life I live.”

She was using the best sarcastic voice she had, but there was something else there too, something that maybe only her sister would be able to pick out. Excitement. Real, pure excitement. The same schoolgirl excitement that comes from finding out a crush is going to be your lab partner for the day, or finding yourself walking along the hall side by side with them as you both head to class.

As she headed out of the door, I watched her demeanor change. She tried to be cool, but within seconds, she was clenching her hands behind her back and swaying, her big eyes blinking heavily as she looked up admiringly at him. Touching his shoulder when she laughed at what I assumed was some dry, cornball joke.

I watched happily as she did everything in her power to flirt with Logan and was surprised when I saw signs that he was flirting back. She might deny it, she might try to convince herself otherwise, but he looked awfully interested in extending the

conversation as long as he could.

Leaving them to their flirting, I went back into the living room, carrying the blue dress, and handed it to Mom. She looked at it for a moment, then handed it back.

“This is yours now,” she said.

“You don’t even know if it fit,” I said.

“Yes, I do,” she said. “It fits.”

“How do you know?”

“Because of the grin on your face,” she said. “You envisioned yourself wearing it with Jesse, didn’t you?”

I didn’t say anything, but the blush of my cheeks probably said all that needed to be said.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Jesse

Things were almost perfect.

Almost.

The house was empty for the night, which took some doing. Luke and Amber went out of town to stay in a bed and breakfast, which was easy. Getting Collin out of the house was not. I ended up having to essentially bribe Logan to get him to take Collin over there and spend the night hanging out. Owen was easy, doing whatever secretive

thing he was up to and deciding to spend the night there. He said he was going out of town too, but I had no idea where or why.

It didn't matter. It just meant the house was empty.

"Hey, Jesse?"

"Yeah?"

Chef Rousey, the resident chef for the Bethel hotel in Arlington, came out of the kitchen wiping his hands with a paper towel.

"Looks like you're good to go. I have the entrée in the oven to stay warm, and the pie is in the refrigerator. Is there anything else?"

"No, Chef, you've been great. Again, I appreciate you."

"Hey, you paid me more than fairly," he said. "Besides, she's a great lady. I'm glad to help give her a good surprise."

Chef Rousey left a few minutes later, and I went to work as I checked the time. She would probably be there in just a few minutes, and that didn't leave me a lot of leeway to finish getting ready. Lighting a hundred or so candles was surprisingly time-consuming.

As far as Charlotte knew, she was coming over for dinner. She didn't even know there wouldn't be anyone else here. She just knew it was dinner. As far as she was concerned, some of the other boys would be here too, most likely Collin.

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This wasn't where I was going to pop the question. Not yet. But it would lay the groundwork. I wanted her to feel special, and now that I was finally feeling like I was my old self again, or rather, my new self, I wanted to show her what life would be like going forward.

I was still me. I was still going to pursue music and be a little wild and party. But my days of having women hanging on me, going days without sleeping properly or eating or in general taking care of myself were over. Now I was going to perform, just like I always had, and then, much like Kevin, I was going to go find my woman and spend the night working out all that amped-up energy showing her how special she was to me.

I couldn't wait for the first show I got to do with her as my girlfriend. It was going to be one hell of a night. Maybe tonight might come close.

A knock on the door got my attention just as I finished putting away the long-lighter and I checked my reflection in the hallway mirror. I'd shaved for once. That alone should be a shock. I almost always had a day-old stubble at least.

"Hey—oh my God," she said, all as one word, when I opened the door. "What is going on here?"

"You," I said. "Any time I get a chance to have a private dinner with you, it's special."

"Private?" she asked, her eyes widening, sparkling in the candlelight.

“Just you and me,” I said.

“Well then,” she said, coming across the threshold and taking off her purse. “I feel wildly underdressed.”

I looked her up and down appreciatively. She was wearing a pretty blue dress I’d never seen her in before and matching flats, her long hair brushed out and hanging on both sides of her face, framing her in a dark forest of gorgeousness.

“Not at all,” I said. “Though maybe later, we can both be wildly underdressed together.”

She laughed, playfully slapping my chest as she fell into my arms for a kiss.

“You’re bad,” she said.

“I thought that was why you liked me.”

“It is,” she said. “One of the reasons, anyway.”

“And the others?”

Her cheeks reddened, and she looked over my shoulder, her nostrils flaring and confusion crossing her face.

“I thought you said we were alone,” she said.

“We are.”

“Did... did Collin cook and then leave?”

“Not Collin,” I said.

“You didn’t make whatever that smell is,” she said. “I would know if you could cook like that. I would, wouldn’t I?”

I laughed and guided her toward the kitchen.

“You would,” I said. “Unfortunately, my cooking skills are still fairly rudimentary, no matter how hard Collin tries. But this wasn’t him either. I brought in Chef Rousey to make us a meal.”

“Randy?” she said. “You got him all the way down here to cook dinner?”

“I did,” I said. “He was happy to do it. You’re one of his favorite people.”

“Wow,” she said. “You really went all out tonight.”

“You have no idea,” I said. “Come on. Sit down. I’ll get you some wine.”

I held the chair out for her, and she sat down. Pouring a glass of wine, I waited on her to tell me when to stop. When the glass was almost full, I realized she had no idea she was supposed to, and I had just poured a wildly suggestive half-bottle in her glass.

She didn’t complain though.

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I took my seat across from her, pouring a matching massive glass of wine that I most likely wasn't going to drink all of, and held it out for her to clink hers against.

"To us," I said.

"To us."

I took a deep pull of the dark wine and sat down the glass.

"You know, I might actually get into wine one day," I said.

"It's fine," she said. "I like you being a beer and whiskey guy."

"Good, because I was lying, and I still think this tastes like dry sour grapes."

She giggled and took a sip of her own.

"It takes a refined palate," she said.

"Well, that explains a lot. If dinner was up to me to make with my palate, we'd be having cheeseburgers and beer."

She shrugged. "That wouldn't be so bad," she said. "I could get down with that. What's on the menu for tonight, anyway?"

I took a breath and closed my eyes, reciting the menu as I had memorized. She laughed at my performance, but when I opened my eyes, she had that glittery smile

on again. I felt my heart return it tenfold.

“Well, that sounds amazing,” she said. “I’ll have to thank Randy.”

“Hey, I was the one to choose which of the menus to do tonight,” I said playfully.

“Well, then maybe your palate is better than I thought.”

“Damn right,” I joked.

“So what is all this about?” she asked. “What are you up to? Are you buttering me up for something? Some worldwide tour where you’re going to be gone for a few months?”

“No,” I laughed. “Nothing like that. I’m surprised you don’t know, though.”

“Know what?”

“Today,” I said. “It marks two years exactly since we met at the hotel.”

“Really?” she asked. “I didn’t know what day it was, exactly.”

“I remembered,” I said. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget it. It was the best night of my life up to that point.”

“It was a pretty darn good night.”

“Anyway, the way I look at it, that was the night all of this started.”

“Not ten years ago?” she asked. “I thought that would have been the beginning, no?”

I shook my head. “No, that was a trial run. We were still young. We didn’t know what life was going to do to us, and we needed life to do it. I know how much I missed you, how much I wanted to find you again, but I am kind of glad I had that chance to realize what I was missing in you.”

“You really missed me that much?”

“Every day,” I said. “You see, every night, I had trouble getting to sleep. I’ve had trouble sleeping since I was little, but ever since you left that first time, it was way worse. It was like I was missing something, and my brain knew it. I couldn’t fully relax. So at night, I would lie in my bed and try to think of something to relax me, something to calm my brain down and let me sleep. You know what I ended up thinking about?”

“What?”

“You,” I said. “I would let my mind conjure an image of you beside me. Nothing dirty or anything like that. Just you, under the covers, curled up with me. Your head on my chest, my arm around your shoulders. If I really concentrated, I could remember the smell of your shampoo. I could focus on that and how at home it made me feel. How calm it made me. And I would sleep. And I would dream.”

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“You would dream about me?”

“I would dream about us,” I said. “I would dream about the us that could have been. The us that I was positive never would be. The us that we actually can be now.”

“What were we like in those dreams?”

“Happy,” I said. “Blissfully happy. Just like I am right now, with you, at this dinner table.”

She smiled. “I’m happy too.”

“I love you,” I said.

“I love you too.”

“Good. Now, can I offer you an appetizer?”

“As hungry as I am,” she said, one eyebrow rising deviously, “I feel like I might be ready for the main course.”

I grinned widely. “Patience,” I said. “If I’ve learned anything over the last ten years of waiting for you, it’s that patience makes everything that much better.”

Chapter Forty

Charlotte

Saying I was overwhelmed would be an understatement. I was completely blown away.

Jesse was more romantic than he'd ever been, and everything was so perfect I found myself lost in the moment. It was far more perfect than a night in Paris. I realized that in that moment, we could be anywhere, as long as it was the two of us, and it would feel just as perfect as I thought Paris would be.

"This is delicious," I said, putting the last bite of the incredible pie into my mouth before I tapped out. "I mean, Randy really outdid himself here."

"He sure did," Jesse said. "I have to hand it to him, I could not do that. Ever."

I shrugged. "Keep working at it and you might get there. I will help teach you."

"Now that sounds fun," he said. "We could have a lot of fun in the kitchen together."

"Depending on how many other people are in the house, we can have a lot of fun."

Jesse smiled as he wiped his lips with a napkin and placed it over his plate. Standing, he came around to my side of the table and offered his hand. I took it, and he pulled to lift me up as he scooted my chair back for me.

"Come with me," he said. "I would love to take a little walk with you."

"A walk sounds nice," I said. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see," he said.

Giving in to the moment, I took his hand and walked with him through the house and out of the back door. It was a nice night for once, the oppressive August heat

dampened by a couple days of rain and a cool wind coming down from the Rockies. The dress helped too. I felt so pretty in it, and it was breezy, which helped. It even had pockets.

We ambled slowly across the back yard, crossing by where the chicken coop was and out into the fields. He guided me past an old tree that stood majestically against the clear, starry night. A half-moon hung in the sky, a little fishing hook for the gods, and it lit the ground so well that we didn't need flashlights or our phones to find our way.

I was a bit puzzled as we made our way to one of the horse barns, but he brought me inside. I laughed in surprise when he let go of my hand and disappeared into the darkness.

“Why did you bring me here?” I laughed. “Are we going on a midnight ride?”

“No,” he said from the shadows. A sound like a heavy door opening filled the night, and he reappeared, wincing. “That was loud. Sorry. Come with me.”

“Where?”

“Up.”

“Up?”

“Up.”

Shrugging, I took his hand again, and we walked into the darkness. A second or two later, my eyes began to adjust, and I saw what had made the heavy door sound. Thin attic stairs were extended from a hayloft above, and he was heading for them. He let me go ahead of him, in case I fell, and as I reached the top, I realized this must have been prepared for a while.

There were three windows and two big barn doors up there. All of them were open, letting the breeze through and giving a lovely view of the night sky. In the center of the room was a thick comforter, a few more folded blankets below it. A bucket of ice, somewhat melted, sat on a table nearby, a bottle of champagne in it and two glasses beside the bucket.

“Oh, you thought this through,” I said.

“I don’t get many chances without people crawling all over the place,” he said. “I wanted tonight to be perfect.”

“So far, it has been,” I said.

The blanket was close enough to the barn doors that it was almost outside of it. He led me to it and sat down, kicking off his boots. I sat down beside him, taking off my flats as well, and we lay back, our heads at the barn door, the night sky bright above us.

“This is amazing,” I said.

“It’s my favorite place,” he said. “A lot of times, I actually sit out on the roof itself, but I don’t want to make you go out there. It’s a little dangerous for two, I would think.”

“I appreciate that,” I said.

“But here, we can still see the stars. It’s just like out there but safer. I love it.”

“Is this where you would dream about me?” I asked sassily.

“Yes,” he said flatly. “Often.”

I curled up into his arms, forgoing being able to see the stars for being able to hear his heartbeat. The smell of his cologne mixed with the hay was intoxicating, though I had put away a half bottle of wine by myself, so that might have played a part.

My fingers traced the buttons on his shirt, going up and down his chest as we lay there in the quiet. A hand reached down and touched my chin, and I lifted my face to his. Our lips pressed against each other for a long, sweet kiss. When it broke, he shifted, and I sat up with him.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. “Why did you sit up? Is everything okay?”

“More than okay,” he said. “I just... I need to ask you something.”

My heart dropped. What could possibly ruin this moment? Was he still worried about Graham? Or that he wasn’t good enough? Whatever it was, I just wanted to assure him he was wrong. I was here. For good. And his.

“Go ahead,” I said, my voice trembling.

Jesse turned, reaching for the table, and I assumed he was going to grab the champagne. I breathed deeply and looked out of the barn door at the gorgeous night.

When I turned back to him, he wasn’t holding the champagne or the glasses. He was holding a small box and smiling.

My breath hitched and then simply stopped. The whole world seemed to zero in on that box. When my eyes finally floated back to his, he opened it, and the glittering diamond inside shined in their reflection.

“Charlotte April Garafalo, will you marry me?”

I couldn’t speak, but I could nod. So I did. Tears streaming down my face, I nodded until he grabbed me and pulled me into his arms. I buried myself into his shoulder and let my tears dry on his shirt. As I pulled away, he kissed me deeply.

As he slipped the ring on my finger, I felt like every part of my body was tingling with excitement. If I had been overwhelmed before, this was completely over the top. He leaned in to kiss me again, and I let myself fall back. He came with me and slowly settled over me.

His lips moved from mine to my cheek and down my neck, and I let my arms fall loose when he took the strap over my shoulder in his teeth and moved it down. I gasped as the cool air brushed over my nipple when the fabric folded past it. He took it into his mouth and warmed it, his strong, wet tongue flicking it playfully.

“I need you,” I said.

“I need you.”

My hands reached down to his belt and pulled. He hovered above me, pressing his lips into the center of my neck and moving to the other side of me. I unzipped him and pushed on his waistband until I heard him shuffling his pants down. When his lips met mine again, I could feel his thick, hot cock pressing against my soft, cotton panties.

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I reached down and hooked them with my thumbs, pulling them down slowly, until he took them and pulled them the rest of the way. Tossing them aside, he grinned and lowered down over me again. I opened myself to him, and he settled between my thighs. The head brushed through my folds, and I gasped. I was wet and hot and ready.

He slid inside.

Never in my life had my body felt more alive. As he rocked slowly into me, he stretched me, and I molded myself around him. Soft moans filled the air as he increased his speed, and I grasped the back of his neck with my hand and stared deeply into his eyes.

We made love under the stars for hours, our bodies dripping with sweat against the cool air, naked and exposed in the open doors of the barn. It was a freedom I'd never even contemplated. It was pure. It was carnal. It was incredible.

I rode him until he couldn't take it anymore and rolled me to my back again. His head buried into my neck as he grunted with effort, slamming into me as I drifted in and out of reality, a seemingly never-ending climax lighting my body on fire, bringing it anew, rebirthing me into this person that I was becoming.

April was gone. Charlotte had grown.

I was not just me.

I was his.

Fully, completely, totally his. And he was mine.

My voice raised into the night until his matched it. He roared as I cried out into the stars, and he came. Slowly, joyfully, he lowered himself, completely spent, into my arms. And there we lay for quite some time, naked and peppering each other with kisses, under the velvety black night and its bright, shining moon.

Chapter Forty-One

Jesse

It had been a month since I asked her to be my wife, and things had moved quickly. We didn't want to set a date yet, not with Amber and Luke still to be married. It took a lot to even tell anyone about it because we didn't want to usurp their day. But she wanted to wear her ring, and we knew that wasn't going to last long, so I took Luke aside and told him while she did the same with Amber. They both gave their blessing to let people know, and things started rolling.

Unfortunately, the legal battle began almost immediately after that. Papers were served to the Andersons, and Oland was arrested again. I refused the deal they'd proposed, and now he and Lacey were going to be tried criminally for what they'd done. That had triggered another investigation by the feds, and the governor got involved personally, suspending the Andersons from their positions and hiring interim deputies.

I'd been dealing with that for days when I woke up to a text message that was much better news. Smiling, I stuck the phone back in my pocket and went to pick Charlotte up at her parents' house. She'd gone back to Dallas to officially quit, and they'd given her a pretty nice severance package to stay for two weeks and train the next regional manager. When that was over, she essentially moved back home, though she spent quite a few nights at the ranch with me.

“Where are we going?” she asked as I drove her along the road.

“You’ll see,” I said.

“Last time you said that, it was a horse barn,” she laughed.

“Well, I can assure you, it’s not a horse barn this time,” I said.

“All right,” she said, settling back in her seat. “I’m game. Can we listen to some music?”

“Sure,” I said.

She placed her hand over mine before I could hit the button for the streaming station on my phone.

“I want to hear your stuff,” she said.

“Really?” I asked. “Aren’t you sick of it yet?”

She shook her head, and I shrugged.

“Play the song you wrote for me.”

“Which one?”

“You know which one,” she said.

I grinned, cueing up the song that I’d written for her after our meeting in Oklahoma. It was my first hit with my self-named band, and the lyrics were pretty damn clear about who it was for.

As we pulled up to the lake, she leaned forward in her chair and peered out curiously. Glancing back at me, she looked almost sad.

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“I didn’t bring a bathing suit,” she said. “Or any picnic stuff. Why didn’t you tell me we were coming here? I would have loved to do a whole thing.”

“You couldn’t know because I have a surprise,” I said.

“What?”

“Come with me.”

I led her to the edge of the lake, looking out at where I envisioned the hotel would be.

“See that, right there?”

“Yeah,” she said.

“That’s where the hotel is going to go.”

She looked out over the lake quietly for a moment before looking back up at me.

“What?”

“I bought it,” I said.

“The lake?”

“The land around it, so, yeah, kinda,” I said. “Mr. Pratchett owned it and wanted to sell. So I bought it. It’s already zoned for commercial use because of the Andersons, so...”

“So you thought we could build the hotel here?”

“Exactly.” I waited for some kind of reaction, but when none came, I looked down curiously. “What do you think?”

“I think... I think you might be the greatest man who has ever lived.”

The smile that spread across her face was like the sun shining through dark clouds. She jumped into my arms, and I held her aloft as she kissed me repeatedly. I laughed through the kisses, trying to catch a few of them and then giving up and just letting her pepper my face.

“This is incredible,” she said. “Absolutely incredible. I can see it. I can see it.”

“We might have to wait just a little while, first, though,” I said.

“Oh?”

“Not long. It’s just that Luke and Amber want to do their wedding right here. At the lake.”

“Oh, well, that’s a good enough reason,” she said. “That’s fine. Can we talk about the hotel, though?”

I loved seeing the excitement in her face, and we linked hands. Taking a long walk around the lake, we discussed all the different things we could do with the land. Where the building would be, the amphitheater, a playground and the parking. Our visions were nearly identical, and we fed into each other’s creativity, though her ideas were routinely better than mine.

When we finally returned to the car, the sun was slowly going down over the lake.

She leaned over to lay her head on my shoulder, and I kissed the top of it.

“So Luke and Amber want to get married here, huh?” she asked.

“Yup,” I said. “It was apparently an idea of hers way before I asked Mr. Pratchett about buying it, so I couldn’t say much.”

“I don’t mind,” she said. “It’s a gorgeous place for it. It will be beautiful.”

“It will,” I agreed.

“What about us?”

“Hmm?”

“What about June?”

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“For our wedding?” I asked. “Next June?”

“Yeah,” she said. “I always loved June.”

“It’ll be hot,” I said.

“We can get married indoors,” she laughed. “With air conditioning.”

“Ahh,” I said. “Then yes, June sounds perfect.”

“We’re going to be very busy this month with helping them with their wedding.”

“I know,” I said. “But it’ll be fun practice.”

“I love practicing things with you,” she said coyly.

“Same, same,” I said, grinning. “Would you like to go home and do a little practice now?”

“I would like to do some practice right here in the truck, but there are still people around, so that’s not going to work.”

“Good enough,” I said. “It would be a lot easier if there were a hotel around here somewhere.”

“Someday,” she laughed.

“Someday soon,” I said.

I stood against the lake, watching my brother take his bride’s hands in his and recite his vows. Collin had taken control of the wedding to the point that Logan gave up on being the minister, and Mr. Pratchett ended up being called in for duty. He had been so serious about getting certified by the state that he said he might want to go into doing weddings as a little side business from now on. Something to occupy him in retirement.

As Luke kissed Amber and the crowd erupted, I glanced over to Charlotte on the other side of the aisle. Her eyes matched mine, and the whole world faded away. It was just us and the lake, the rest of the world doing whatever it wanted to do around us.

When Luke and Amber walked back down the aisle, I took Charlotte’s hand, and we followed them. The reception was under a huge tent in the same place the lobby of the hotel would eventually go. As we walked toward it, I could see the future in my mind.

Not just the hotel. Everything.

I could see how we would live here, occasionally traveling, living in every moment together. I couldn’t see children in our future, but I didn’t discount it. I would love kids, but I never wanted to force one into the world. Life would find a way if it wanted, as far as I was concerned. Unless she told me she wanted one. Then it would become a job.

A job I would have alotof fun going to.

I could see how we would grow together, how our lives would intertwine further and further. How this hotel would be a legacy for us, for our families. How we would

transform this part ofFoley, Texas into our vision. The businesses would come. The tourists would come. The world would come.

And I could not be happier to do it all with her by my side. I wouldn't be able to do any of it without her. And I never wanted to.

Charlotte was mine. And I was hers. And on this lake, we would make our future together, one that would be filled with love, surprises and music.

A love that hit all the right notes.

Epilogue

Charlotte

I couldn't help but feel subdued as we went home after the wedding. I knew he was noticing it, but I didn't know quite how to tell him what was going on. I didn't want to do it now, that was for sure. Ruining this wonderful moment was not what I had planned.

I wasn't sad. I made sure he knew that. But he could tell something was off. As we drove back to the ranch, I knew he was going to ask and tried to prepare myself for it.

"Hey," he said, "are you all right?"

"I'm fine," I said. "Just tired. It's been a long week."

He nodded, punching the gas a little harder as we got out on an open road.

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“Yeah, it has,” he said. “I was looking for you when they all went to get drinks. We were doing a big celebration thing, but I didn’t want to drink since I was driving. I thought for sure you’d be part of it.”

“I just wasn’t feeling well at the moment,” I said, which was true. “Didn’t feel like more alcohol.”

“Ahh,” he said. “Still, you should have been there. It was a lot of fun. Luke is a blast when he’s the center of a party.”

“I saw,” I said, grinning. “I’m not sure any of those moves count as actual dancing, but they certainly were enthusiastic.”

He laughed, and I relaxed a little.

“I figured you didn’t eat enough today,” he said. “I didn’t see you stop to eat at all, actually.”

“Yeah,” I said. “That probably was part of it. If I drank any more, I’d have gotten really sick, so it was better that I didn’t.”

“Makes sense,” he said.

We stayed quiet for a little while as we kept driving. I heard him start to speak again a little while later, but I had begun to doze, and when he saw my eyes closed, he drifted off, not wanting to wake me up. Instead, he pushed the AC vents up so I wouldn’t get cold and turned the music down low.

I slept for what only felt like a minute, but when I woke up, I noticed we were on the highway. I looked at the clock and an hour had passed, and we were still on the road.

“Hey, where are we?”

“Almost there,” he said.

“Almost where?”

“Odessa,” he said.

“Odessa? Why are we going to Odessa?”

“Because it’s the closest place with a nice hotel,” he said. “And you deserve to be somewhere quiet with me tonight and not have to deal with a bunch of drunk Galloways.”

I smiled. “Did you think of that before or just now tonight?”

“Tonight,” he said. “But before we got in the car.”

“You are wonderful,” I said. “You know that?”

“I’m all right,” he joked. “Here we go.”

The hotel he pulled into was the nicest one in Odessa, but that wasn’t saying a whole lot. It was a chain, and when we pulled in, I could have recited from memory what the breakfast menu was going to be in the morning. And by breakfast menu, it mostly meant food that no one had to cook and a waffle iron so the guests could cook for themselves.

Jesse got out and went inside to check in, getting our key card and then coming back out. He parked along the side of the hotel, and we went in, riding the elevator to the top floor. It turned out he had sprung for a suite, and I smiled as I opened the door to find it was laid out much like the one he had been in at the Bethel in Oklahoma. Just much, much smaller.

He ducked into the bathroom, and I could hear him changing and decided I couldn't wait anymore. I knew he thought something was wrong, and I wanted that off his mind. He deserved to know, probably as soon as I knew, but that moment had passed earlier today.

Now was as good as I could do.

"All right," he said, coming out of the bathroom. "I brought a bottle of whiskey, but if you want food first, we can order pizza. There's a place just down the street, so I can even go pick it up and it'll be faster than having it delivered."

"Pizza is fine, but I don't want to drink," I said.

"Oh," he said. "Is something wrong? I mean, it's fine if you don't want to drink, but you're just acting a little... weird."

"Come here," I said.

He crossed the room, closing the space between us, and I took his hand.

"I can't drink," I said. "I have a reason."

“You do?”

I took his hand and placed it, palm first, on my stomach. He looked at me strangely for a moment, and then, slowly, a dawning realization crossed his face.

“I didn’t want to say anything and upstage Amber’s moment. She was already so gracious to not be upset that we announced our engagement right before their wedding.”

“Is it... are you... is this...”

I nodded.

“I’m pregnant,” I said. “I found out today. Last night, I guess. That’s when I took the first test, but I wanted to be sure. I had to wait until this morning to go get a few more. But things were so crazy, and I was so busy with Amber, I couldn’t tell you. And I didn’t want to tell you and distract you anyway. I wanted to wait until it was just us.”

“We’re going to have a baby?” he asked, his voice soft with reverence but tinged with excitement. “We’re going to have a baby?!”

I smiled and nodded again, and he lifted me in the air. Pressing his lips against mine, he kissed me and sat me back down.

“Oh my God, I can’t believe it. I’m going to be a dad! You’re going to be a mom!”

“I know,” I said, sharing his excitement and feeling myself finally experience it myself.

I’d spent the whole day worrying. It was silly, but I worried about how he would react. That it would burst the bubble we’d developed between us. That it would ruin our wonderful union and everything we’d built with a serious responsibility that would be too much for him.

But watching him dance excitedly in the room, occasionally grabbing me for another kiss and then dance some more, was delightful.

“We have to keep it a secret,” I said. “Just for a little while. A couple of weeks, max.”

“Are you kidding?” he said. “I can’t keep this secret. I’m too damn excited.”

“You have to, silly,” I said. “For your brother’s sake if nothing else.”

“Ahh, dammit,” he said. “All right. All right. But if I am going to keep a secret, I will need your help.”

“How can I help?” I asked, laughing. “What can I do for you?”

“I need you to distract me,” he said. “When I get excited and want to tell the world, I need you to find a way to get my mind off blurting our secret out.”

“Oh,” I said. “So something like this?”

I reached down and lifted my dress, pulling it up and over my head. My breasts bounced as they fell out of the top, and I smiled at the reaction on his face.

“Yeah, that’ll do it,” he said. “Come here, you.”

He swept me off my feet, planting a kiss directly on my lips as he carried me to the bed. Gently, he laid me down and crawled on top. I pulled his buttons open as I giggled, and we both ended up just ripping each other's clothes off. As the clothes hit the ground, he pulled the blanket up and over us, and I settled beside him, letting him lift my leg and settle between my thighs.

“This is how we got into trouble in the first place, you know,” I laughed.

“I know,” he said. “And I plan on getting into a lot more trouble with you for the rest of our lives.”

“Me too,” I said.