



Her Steamy Cowboy

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Category: Romance, Western

Description: This cowboy's best friend is his secret temptation—and a snowstorm just took away his last excuse to resist.

Jace

I've been in love with my best friend for years.

She's all soft curves and bright smiles—everything I've ever dreamed of.

But I know better than to risk our friendship over a crush.

So, I decide to keep my feelings to myself.

Until we get stranded together in a snowstorm.

Now, I want to keep Lindsay warm with more than just my ranch jacket.

I want to make her mine.

And I don't know how much longer I can resist...

Lindsay

I never meant to fall for my best friend.

But then again, Jace Clayton makes it easy.

He's a hot cowboy with a handsome smile.

And the protective way he watches over me makes me want things I shouldn't.

I've got too much baggage to risk dragging him into my mess.

But now we're stuck in a blizzard and sharing a bed for the night.

Should I finally give in to what my heart really wants?

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Chapter One

JACE

I'm not usually the superstitious type.

But even I know that seeing my best friend dangling from a ladder that's older than both of us combined is a bad omen for the new year.

I shake my head as I call out to her. "You're going to give Mary Beth a heart attack if she sees you on that ladder."

Lindsay doesn't startle at my voice. Instead, she glances down over her shoulder at me. "Mary Beth left an hour ago."

"All the more reason for you to get down from there."

Even from here, I can see her rolling her eyes. "I'll be fine," she replies. "I'm almost done. I just need to take down a few more of these decorations."

I cross the room in long strides. The usually pristine gift shop looks like Christmas exploded - half-opened boxes scattered near the register, price tags and ribbon scraps littering the polished wood counter. Between the racks of premium leather goods and hand-tooled saddles, bright garland still winds through the exposed beams like some festive snake refusing to be caught.

I plant my feet at the base of the ladder, steadying it with both hands. "I thought you

were off today.”

“I was, but then Mary Beth had a doctor’s appointment in town and needed someone to cover.” Lindsay shifts slightly on the ladder, and her sweater rides up to reveal a strip of creamy skin above her jeans. “Figured I might as well make the extra cash now that the winter catalog is done. Plus, someone has to make sure this place doesn’t look like Santa’s workshop exploded in here past New Year’s.”

I tighten my grip on the ladder rails. “At least let me help.”

Lindsay arches an eyebrow at me. “I don’t know, Jace. Mary Beth went a little crazy with the hot glue gun this year. Pretty sure half these garlands are permanently attached to the beams.”

“I can handle a few stubborn decorations.”

“That’s what you said about helping with the window display last month.” She tosses a loose ornament hook at me. “And we both remember how that turned out.”

“Those mannequins were asking for it.”

Her laugh echoes through the small space. “Three hundred dollars worth of Western wear ruined because you couldn’t figure out how to dress a plastic cowboy.”

Suddenly, the ladder wobbles beneath her again, and I feel my blood pressure shoot up. “Lindsay, get your stubborn ass down here before this thing snaps in half.”

She looks down at me and giggles. “Sheesh. When did my best friend get to be so bossy?”

I feel a muscle tick in my jaw. “I’m serious, Lindsay. Get down and let me do it.

You're going to break your fucking neck if you keep tugging at it like that."

She rolls her eyes. "Stop being dramatic. I'm almost done."

"Lindsay."

"Don't use that tone with me, Clayton." She tugs at the garland again, sending a shower of pine needles down. "I'm not one of your horses."

"I know you're not." I brush the needles from my shoulder, not taking my eyes off her. "They actually listen when I tell them to do something safe."

Amusement flickers across her face. "Did you just compare me to a horse?"

"You started it."

"Oh, so now this is my fault? Ugh, I swear, I have no idea why Mary Beth wrapped these darn things so tight. If I could just..." She stretches up on her tiptoes, talking more to herself than to me. "Get this last knot...woah!"

Everything happens at once.

The garland comes free with a snap, the ladder lurches sideways, and Lindsay gasps as she tumbles backwards.

Her body collides with mine, soft curves meeting hard muscle, and I stagger back as I wrap my arms around her. Then we hit the floor.

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Hard.

Me first, my shoulder blades slamming against worn floorboards, then her on top of me, every delicious inch of her pressed against my chest.

“Lindsay?” My voice comes out rough as my hands move over her frantically, checking for injuries. “Baby, are you hurt?”

“I’m fine.” Her breath is warm against my neck. Then she groans. “Ugh. I’m so sorry, Jace. I should have listened to you. You were right about that stupid ladder.”

But I don’t give a shit about who’s right and who’s wrong. All I care about is making sure she’s okay.

“Hey.” I brush a strand of hair from her face, needing to make sure she’s really fine. “Look at me.”

Lindsay looks up, and suddenly I can’t breathe.

Her dark eyes are wide, and her cheeks are flushed pink and there’s tinsel caught in her hair. Without thinking, I reach out and graze her cheekbone with my thumb.

We’re too close. Way too close.

I can see the tiny flecks of gold in her eyes, count each of her eyelashes, feel every soft curve of her pressed against me. Her lips part slightly, and my gaze drops to her mouth. Then the world narrows to just this – her weight on my chest, her hands

gripping my shoulders, the way she's looking at me like maybe, just maybe...

"Well, well..." an amused voice shatters the moment. "What do we have here?"

I look up to see my brother Luke standing in the doorway. His new wife, Jasmyn—who officially became Mrs. Clayton just three days ago in a surprise ceremony – stands beside him in her teaching clothes, dark curls escaping her ballet bun.

"Daddy," My five-year-old niece, Maisey, peeks out from around Luke's legs. "Why are Uncle Jace and Aunt Lindsay on the floor?"

Lindsay scrambles to her feet, cheeks flushing pink as she brushes tinsel from her sweater. "We were just, um, taking down decorations."

Luke smirks. "Is that what they're calling it these days?"

I resist the urge to throw a nearby ornament at his head.

"What brings you two by the shop?" I ask instead, pushing myself up and trying not to wince at the ache in my shoulder blades.

"Just picking up some things before heading into town," Jasmyn says as she walks behind the checkout counter. "Those ornaments for the studio still here?"

"Yep. Blue box behind the register," Lindsay says, still fussing with her sweater like she needs something to do with her hands. "Already wrapped them for you."

"Can I stay and help Aunt Lindsay clean up?" Maisey asks, bouncing between her parents. "Please, please?"

"Not today, sweetheart," Luke says, resting a hand on his daughter's shoulder. "But

you'll see Aunt Lindsay at the New Year's party, right?"

I watch as Lindsay and Jasmyn exchange a quick look that makes my stomach tighten.

I've seen that look a hundred times over the years – the silent communication that comes from being best friends since their freshman year of college. The fact that they're doing it now, that quick wordless exchange that usually means they're keeping secrets, sets off warning bells in my head.

"Actually..." Lindsay says, fidgeting with a loose thread on her sleeve. "I won't be at the party. But we'll do something soon, okay Maisey?"

Another loaded look passes between the women before Jasmyn clears her throat. "We should get going."

Something's off.

In the ten years I've known Lindsay, she's never missed a ranch event. And Jasmyn's acting like she's seen a ghost. The knot in my stomach tightens as I try to make sense of their strange behavior.

Luke walks to the door. "You kids behave yourselves," he says with a wink. "And try not to break anything else while you're...decorating."

I discretely flip Luke the bird as Jasmyn and Maisey turn their backs and walk out of the shop.

Once they're gone, an awkward silence fills the space between Lindsay and me. She busies herself with picking up scattered ornaments while I right the fallen ladder.

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“So,” I say, trying to keep my voice casual. “Sounds like someone has big plans for New Year’s Eve.”

“Um, yeah. Something like that.” She won’t meet my eyes, moving to the counter to straighten items that don’t need straightening.

“Must be important if you’re missing the party.” I gather up the fallen decorations, trying to understand why she seems almost angry. “You haven’t missed one since you moved back.”

“I know. But sometimes things change, you know?” Her voice is tight with something I can’t read.

“Guess they do.” I swallow hard. “You heading out of town?”

“Nah, just going to The Pitcher’s Brew. I’m meeting someone.”

The words hit me like a physical blow.

My fingers go numb where they’re gripping the garland, and there’s a roaring in my ears that almost drowns out everything else. But beneath it all, there’s a voice screaming at me to keep it together, to not let her see how those three words just shattered my whole world.

Although I’ve never admitted it to anyone, I’ve been in love with Lindsay since the day she and her mom moved to Cooper Hills ten years ago.

I still remember the first time I saw her, stepping out of that beat-up station wagon in cutoff shorts and a tank top, her long dark hair shimmering in the summer sun. She was beautiful even then, with those wide brown eyes and that brilliant smile that made my heart skip a beat.

But I was just a dumb kid back then, too chicken to tell her how I really felt. So instead, I played the friend role, always there to lend a hand or crack a joke, but never crossing that invisible line.

When she left for Chicago, it almost broke me. I told everyone I was fine. Told myself she needed to chase her dreams, even if they led her away from Cooper Hills. Away from me. But the truth is, nothing felt right until she came back three years ago.

Ever since then, I've been trying to find the right moment to tell her how I really feel. To let her know that she's not just my best friend, but the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with.

But the timing never seemed right.

I always knew that there was a chance that Lindsay would find someone else, but I always thought I had more time.

Apparently, I was wrong.

"Well, sounds like you're going to have fun. Can't wait to hear about it." I lie as I lean against the counter, watching as she untangles a string of lights from the fallen garland. "Want me to stick around until you lock up?"

"No, I'm good." She coils the lights around her arm, and tinsel catches on her sleeve. "Thanks, though."

“You sure?” I reach over and pluck a piece of silver garland from her sweater. “Hate to have my best friend kidnapped on her walk home.”

That gets a small laugh out of her, the sound easing some of the tension in my chest. She ducks her head, dark hair falling forward as she gathers more decorations. “I’m just going upstairs, you goof.”

Right.

Sometimes I forget she lives up there now, in the little apartment above the ranch gift shop. She’d moved in a few weeks ago right before Jasmyn married Luke and moved into the main house with Maisey. She said it made sense to be closer to work, but I think part of her just needed her own space after being Jasmyn’s roommate for so long.

I raise my hands in mock surrender. “Suit yourself.” I push off from the counter and shove my hands in my pockets. “But don’t come crying to me when some masked guy pops out from under your bed and kidnaps you.”

Lindsay snorts and tosses a wad of tissue paper at me. “Maybe I’m into that sort of thing.”

I chuckle and shake my head. “You and your spicy books.”

She grins at me, eyes sparkling with mischief. “Don’t knock it ’til you’ve tried it, Clayton.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” I wink at her before heading for the door. “See you around, troublemaker.”

I start to walk out, my boots heavy on the worn floorboards. The bell above the door

jingles as I push it open, a blast of cold Wyoming air hitting my face.

But something stops me and I turn back to look at her.

“Lindsay?”

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She looks up, her hands stilling on the dustpan. “Yeah?”

The words are right there, pressing against my chest. All I’d have to do is open my mouth and let them spill out. But it’s clear that she’s already made her choice.

And it’s not me.

I clear my throat. “Be careful with that ladder.”

Something flickers across her face – disappointment maybe? – but it’s gone so fast I think I must have imagined it. She brushes hair behind her ear.

“Always am, cowboy.”

Chapter Two

LINDSAY

“I don’t understand why you don’t just tell Jace the truth,” my best friend Rachel says, stirring her martini with deliberate slowness.

The olive bounces against the glass with each rotation, creating a soft clinking sound that somehow manages to irritate me more than the actual words coming out of her mouth.

I take a long sip of my whiskey sour, letting the tartness linger on my tongue before I answer. “You know why.”

“No, actually, I don’t.” Rachel leans forward, her dark curls falling over her shoulders. “Please enlighten me.”

I trace my finger through the condensation on my glass and sigh.

Rachel and I are sitting in a corner booth at a local bar, the Pitcher’s Brew. The bar’s regular crowd mills around us—a mix of ranch hands and office workers trying to make the weird limbo between Christmas and New Year’s feel less empty. Country music plays softly in the background, some sad song about lost love that feels a little too on the nose right now.

“It wasn’t exactly a lie,” I reply weakly. “I do have plans.”

“Meeting your father for the first time in ten years isn’t just ‘plans,’ Lindsay.” Rachel’s vintage cat-eye glasses slip down her nose as she fixes me with that look—the one that says she’s not letting this go. “And you know that’s not what Jace thinks you meant. He probably thinks you’re going on some hot date, which we both know isn’t true. So why not just tell him the real reason?”

“Because I can’t. I’ve been trying to figure out how, but...” I take another sip of my drink, needing the burn of alcohol to continue. “How do you tell someone you’ve lied about your family for ten years? That you’re the daughter of a convicted felon who just got out of prison?”

The lies started the summer I turned fourteen, right after my dad went to prison for armed robbery. Mom and I packed up everything we owned and moved to Cooper Hills to start over.

New town, new school, new story—and telling everyone I’d never known my dad felt simpler than admitting the truth. I was just a kid, desperate to be anyone other than the girl whose father was locked up.

“Lindsay.” Rachel’s voice softens. “Your dad made his choices. You didn’t. Jace isn’t the type of guy to hold that against you.”

“You don’t know the Claytons like I do,” I reply. “Jace’s family is like something out of a Hallmark movie—four hot, perfect cowboy brothers running their family’s ranch, hosting Sunday brunches where everyone says grace and talks about their blessings.”

“So what’s your plan? Never tell him? Keep making up mysterious dates every time he invites you somewhere?”

I groan, remembering the hurt that flashed in Jace’s eyes when I told him I was “meeting someone” on New Year’s Eve.

“I just... I need more time. Dad just got out, and I haven’t seen him in so long. I don’t even know who he is anymore, or who I am around him.” My voice catches slightly. “Can’t I figure that out first, before I complicate everything with Jace?”

“Lindsay, is all of this really about your dad? Or is this about the other thing?”

I shift in my seat, knowing exactly what she means.

I’ve been crushing on Jace since the day I moved to Cooper Hills. But we’ve never been more than friends.

Sure, there have been moments—long looks across crowded rooms, late-night conversations on the ranch’s front porch, his hand lingering just a second too long when he helps me down from his truck. But neither of us has ever crossed that invisible line, and I tell myself it’s better this way.

Safer.

But ever since I moved back and Jace hired me as the ranch's marketing coordinator, there's been this... something between us.

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The way his eyes follow me across a room. How he finds excuses to stop by my office, leaning against my desk while we talk about everything and nothing. The electricity that crackles in the air whenever we're alone together. Sometimes, I catch him watching me when I'm working, and for a moment, I let myself believe Rachel might be right.

But then I remember who I am, where I come from, and all the secrets I'm keeping.

"No, this isn't about the other thing," I lie. "And even if it were, Jace doesn't have feelings for me. He could have literally any girl in town. Meanwhile, I'm just?—"

"Gorgeous," Rachel cuts in. "You're gorgeous. And you know it."

She's not wrong—I know how to dress for my curves, how to accentuate what I've got. But still. "Yeah, well, I'm sure he'll still be the one turning heads on our little road trip tomorrow."

"You're going on a road trip?" Rachel asks, fishing the olive out of her martini.

"Yeah. Jace is supposed to be taking me to Antler Creek. I found this amazing collection of vintage ranch signs up from a retired rancher who lives up there." I perk up despite myself. "You know how I've been trying to give the new welcome center more personality."

Rachel giggles. "The one you said looks like a dentist's waiting room?"

"Exactly. This guy has been collecting signs from the area's old cattle auctions and

ranch sales. We're talking original hand-painted ones from the 1950s and 60s." I sip my drink, remembering how excited I'd been when I first saw the photos. "Each one tells a piece of the region's ranching history. I've been negotiating with him for weeks, and he finally agreed to sell them."

"But now, after yesterday..." I trail off, tracing the rim of my glass. "Jace probably won't even want to drive me anymore. He insisted on going with me when I first mentioned the trip. But now he's being all weird about it."

Rachel snorts. "Please. That man would drive you to Alaska if you asked him to pick up a paperclip."

"He's barely spoken to me since yesterday," I protest, pulling out my phone to check it again. No messages. "And he hasn't responded to my texts all day."

"Because he thinks you're going on a date with someone else!" She throws her hands up, nearly knocking over her martini. "Ugh, you two are exhausting. You know what normal people do when there's a misunderstanding? They talk about it."

"There's nothing to talk about. I can't exactly say, 'Hey Jace, sorry I've been lying to you for the past ten years about my family.'"

"Actually, yes. That's exactly what you could say." Rachel crosses her arms. "Instead, you're going to spend five hours tomorrow sitting in uncomfortable silence, pretending you don't have feelings for each other, while you're both too stubborn to actually communicate."

Before I can reply, both our phones buzz simultaneously.

Jasmyn: Miss you girls! Give me all the updates tomorrow. Maisie insisted on "one more loop" around the rink approximately 47 times

Rachel looks up at me and smirks.

Rachel: Nothing to report. Just Lindsay continuing her decade-long denial of feelings for a certain cowboy

I roll my eyes.

Me: I hate you both

Jasmyn: Aww, don't be like that, future sister-in-law!

Me: I'm blocking both of you

Jasmyn: Maisey says hi! And that Uncle Jace talks about you ALL the time

Me: BLOCKING. YOU.

I toss my phone back in my purse with an exaggerated groan.

“Alright, enough about my love life. How's what's-his-name? The guy from the dating app?”

Rachel's shoulders slump. “Ghost town. We had two great dates, and then—poof.” She makes a little explosion gesture with her hands. “I should be used to it by now, but apparently showing up to dinner in a dress with tiny Shakespeare quotes printed all over it is still too much for some people.”

“His loss.” I reach across the table and squeeze her hand, grateful for the millionth time for this friendship. “You just need to find someone who appreciates your particular brand of... enthusiasm.”

Rachel arches an eyebrow. “My particular brand of what now?”

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I giggle. “You know what I mean. Someone who gets excited about your random facts about medieval literature and doesn’t mind that you name your houseplants after dead poets.”

“Emily Dickinson—the succulent—is thriving, thank you very much.”

“My point is,” I continue, grinning, “you need someone a little grumpy to balance out all your...” I wave my hand at her general essence, from her literature-themed tattoos to the pencil stuck through her messy bun. “Self.”

Rachel rolls her eyes. “Says the woman who’s about to spend five hours in a truck with her own personal Mr. Darcy in cowboy boots.” She grins. “Though I guess Jasmyn beat you to the whole ‘falling for a Clayton brother’ thing.”

“Don’t remind me,” I groan.

“At least someone in our group is getting their happy ending,” Rachel says, but her tone is affectionate. We both miss having Jasmyn around as much, but it’s hard to be bitter when she’s so obviously happy.

“And on that note—” I drain the last of my drink and grab my purse, “—I should head home. Five AM comes early.”

Rachel’s voice turns serious. “Please at least consider telling Jace the truth.”

I walk around the table and pull her into a tight hug. “I will,” I whisper. “Thanks for listening to all of my crazy ramblings.”

“That’s what friends are for,” she murmurs back. “Even if one of us abandons us for a hot cowboy.”

I laugh against her shoulder. “Poor Jasmyn never stood a chance.”

As I step out into the cold December night, my phone buzzes again. It’s Jace:

Jace: Hey. Sorry for being MIA all day. Wyatt called in a panic bc one of our pregnant heifers was having complications. Ended up having to help pull the calf.

Jace: Phone died somewhere between hour 2 and 3 in the barn

Me: No worries! Hope mama and baby are okay.

Jace: Both good. Pretty sure Wyatt owes me a new pair of boots tho

Me:

Jace: Shit

Me: What’s wrong

Jace: You’re mad

Me: No I’m not

Jace: That was the most “I’m annoyed but trying to play it cool” emoji if I’ve ever seen one

Jace: I get it tho

Me: It's really not!

Jace: I'm sorry that I didn't text you back sooner sweetheart.

Jace: I'll grab breakfast burritos from Rosa's tomorrow. Extra guac for you

Did he just call me sweetheart? My heart does a little flip in spite of myself.

Me: I'm really not mad. And you don't have to drive me. I can just drive myself.

Jace: Your check engine light's been on for two months.

Me: I can get a rental.

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Jace: I'm taking you. End of discussion

Me: I'm sure you have better things to do than drive ten hours round trip.

Jace: There's nowhere else I need to be. I'll see you in the morning

I huddle deeper into my coat and head for my car, my heart doing that stupid little dance again.

How does he do that? Make me feel so secure even when things are weird between us?

My phone buzzes again.

Jace: And don't even think about leaving before I get there.

Chapter Three

JACE

I pullup outside of Lindsay's apartment above the ranch gift shop at 4:57 AM, killing the engine but leaving the heat running. I take a moment to breathe in the quiet.

To remember all the reasons why I need to let this stupid crush go.

Lindsay deserves to be happy, and if that happiness is with someone else, then I need to be the kind of friend who supports that.

Even if every time I think about her with another man, it feels like someone's taken a hot brand to my chest.

I've spent the last hour setting up the truck exactly how she likes it—her favorite blanket from the ranch house folded in thirds the way she showed me (“It keeps the warmth in better, Jace”), and her go-to road trip playlist queued up on my phone.

Two gas station coffees sit in my cup holders—the fancy cappuccino she claims is “basically milk with anxiety” but drinks anyway, and my plain black that she'll inevitably steal half of. I'm so attuned to her habits that it's become second nature, this choreography of caring for her without letting it show too much.

I grab my phone from the center console and text her:

Me: Your chariot awaits, princess.

Lindsay: It's not even 5 yet!

Me: Some of us believe in being on time.

Lindsay: Did you remember to bring the tacos?

Me: Yep, got em right here. And they're getting cold.

Lindsay: Coming!!!

The front door of her building opens and Lindsay walks out.

She's wearing that oversized cream sweater that keeps slipping off one shoulder, paired with her favorite worn jeans that hug every curve. Her dark hair falls in waves around her face and she's doing that little shuffling run she does when she's cold.

It's so freaking cute that I almost groan.

I grip the steering wheel harder, forcing myself to remember the decision I made after she turned down my New Year's invitation.

Friends. We're friends. Best friends.

And I'm not going to ruin that just because my heart doesn't know how to stay in its lane.

"Look who's actually on time," she teases as she climbs in, bringing a burst of cold air and the scent of her vanilla shampoo with her. "And he comes bearing gifts."

"You're my navigator, remember?" I hand her the cappuccino, careful to keep my eyes on the cup instead of the way her sweater has slipped further off her shoulder. "Can't have you falling asleep on me."

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“Please.” She takes a long sip. “Like I could sleep through your old man country music.”

“First of all, George Strait is a legend.” I pull out onto the empty street. “Second of all, this is your playlist, princess.”

Lindsay yawns. “Glad to know I’ve at least had some influence on you.”

There are shadows under her eyes that suggest she didn’t sleep well, and I fight the urge to brush my thumb across them, to ask what’s keeping her up at night.

“So,” I say instead, merging onto the highway. “These signs better be worth freezing our butts off at five AM.”

“They are.” Her whole face lights up, and damn if it doesn’t make my heart stumble in my chest.

She launches into the history of each sign, and I find myself smiling despite everything.

This is what I fell for first—her passion for everything she does, whether it’s modernizing our marketing or preserving the ranch’s history. She talks with her hands when she gets excited, nearly spilling her coffee twice, and I have to resist the urge to catch her gesturing fingers in mine.

“—and Mr. Henderson said his grandfather painted them himself, can you believe it?” She pauses, catching her breath, and I realize I’ve been staring at her instead of

the road. At the way her eyes sparkle when she's excited, at the dimple that appears in her right cheek when she really smiles. "What?"

"Nothing." I force my eyes forward, reminding myself of all the reasons why I need to stop looking at her like that. "Just wondering how someone can be this energetic before sunrise."

She huffs, pulling the blanket up to her chin. "Says the man who gets up at four AM to check the cattle."

"That's different. That's work."

"And this isn't?"

"This," I say, gesturing between us, "is you dragging me on a ten-hour road trip because you fell in love with some rusty metal."

"They're not rusty, they're vintage." But she's smiling, and for a moment it feels like normal. Like we're just Jace and Lindsay, best friends who bicker and laugh and definitely don't think about each other in the middle of the night when the world gets too quiet.

Then her phone buzzes, and the smile falls from her face as she reads the message. That same shadow I've been seeing lately passes over her features, and she turns to look out the window.

"Everything okay?" I hate how careful my voice sounds, how much I'm trying to hide the jealousy that burns in my throat.

"Yeah," she says too quickly. "Everything's fine."

It's a lie.

I know it's a lie because I know all her tells—the way she tucks her hair behind her ear, how she suddenly finds the passing scenery fascinating. We've been friends long enough that I can read her like one of those romance novels she thinks I don't know she keeps hidden in her desk drawer. But lately, she's become a chapter I can't quite understand.

The sun is starting to peek over the horizon, but it's a losing battle against the dark clouds rolling in from the west. The first few snowflakes are starting to fall, dancing in the headlights like tiny stars.

My weather app's been lighting up with storm warnings all morning, but Lindsay was adamant about getting these signs today. When she sets her mind to something, there's no talking her out of it—it's one of the things I love most about her, even when it drives me crazy.

Her phone buzzes again, and this time she makes an impressed little sound in the back of her throat.

“What is it?” I ask, trying to keep my tone casual.

“Oh, it's just Rachel.” Lindsay turns the phone to show me a photo of some sleek-looking bookshelves. “She's officially starting her interior design business now that she's done with the dating apps.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Uh oh. What happened?”

“Remember that guy she was seeing? The one who seemed promising?” Lindsay shakes her head, still looking at her phone. “Apparently he ghosted her after she showed up to dinner wearing a dress covered in Shakespeare quotes.”

I snort despite myself. “Seriously? That’s what scared him off?”

“Right? I told her it’s his loss.” Lindsay’s voice gets that protective edge it always does when she talks about her friends. “She deserves someone who appreciates her weird.”

“Everyone’s got their own brand of weird,” I say, thinking about how Rachel’s literary enthusiasm matches Lindsay’s passion for ranch history. “Some people just haven’t figured out how to embrace it yet.”

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Lindsay turns to look at me, something soft in her expression. “That’s... surprisingly insightful, cowboy.”

I shrug. “I have my moments.”

She’s quiet for a minute, fidgeting with the corner of the blanket. “Do you think she’ll find someone? Who gets her?”

The question feels loaded somehow, like we’re not just talking about Rachel anymore.

“Yeah, I do. Sometimes the right person’s been there all along, you know? You just have to be brave enough to see it.”

The words hang between us, heavy with meaning I shouldn’t be putting there.

Lindsay’s already finished her coffee and is eyeing mine with those big brown eyes that have always been my undoing. Without a word, I hand it over, trying not to notice how our fingers brush in the exchange, or how that small touch sends electricity racing up my arm.

“My hero,” she says softly, and I have to look away from her smile before I do something stupid.

Like beg her to tell me who she’s meeting on New Year’s Eve, to give me a chance to prove I could be better for her.

An hour into our drive, the visibility has gone from bad to worse. The snow is falling harder now, thick flakes that promise the storm isn't messing around. Lindsay's been quiet for the past twenty minutes, obsessively refreshing her weather app and chewing her bottom lip—something she only does when she's really worried.

"This doesn't make sense," she mutters, tapping her phone screen harder than necessary. "I checked three different forecasts last night. They all said the storm wasn't supposed to hit until tomorrow afternoon."

I squint through the windshield, trying to make out anything beyond the wall of white. The wipers are fighting a losing battle, and the wind is starting to push at the truck in a way I don't like. "Weather's got a mind of its own out here."

"But the signs—" Her voice catches. "Mr. Henderson is expecting us. He specifically said today was the only day?—"

"Hey." I reach over without thinking and catch her hand, stilling her nervous movement. "It's going to be fine. We'll figure it out."

She stares at our joined hands for a moment before pulling away, and I try not to feel the loss. "I should have checked again this morning. I should have?—"

The truck slides slightly, and I tighten my grip on the wheel. "What you should do is help me look for somewhere to stop. We're not making it to Antler Creek in this."

"But—"

The protective instinct that always flares up around her is in full force now. "No buts, sweetheart. I'm not risking it."

Lindsay looks like she wants to argue, but another gust of wind rocks the truck and

she presses her lips together. “Okay. Yeah. You’re right.”

“There’s a ranch about two miles up that runs a B&B. The Circle J, I think. We’ll stop there. Wait until this storm passes.”

It takes us fifteen tense minutes to find the turnoff, and another five to navigate the winding driveway. Through the curtain of snow, the Circle J B&B emerges like something out of a winter postcard.

It’s a sprawling two-story ranch house with a wraparound porch and warm yellow light spilling from every window. Smoke curls from the river rock chimney, and someone’s hung evergreen wreaths with red ribbons on the front doors.

Under different circumstances, it would be romantic as hell.

I park as close to the entrance as I can, knowing Lindsay’s going to make a fuss about me being overprotective. Sure enough, when I jump out to help her down from the truck, she gives me that look—the one that says she’s perfectly capable of handling herself.

But the snow’s already halfway up to our ankles, and the wind is whipping her hair around her face, and sometimes a man’s got to risk annoying the woman he loves to keep her from falling on ice.

Somehow, we manage to make it to the front door of the inn in one piece. Before we can knock, the door swings open, bringing with it a rush of warmth and the mingled scents of cinnamon and woodsmoke.

The woman who greets us is exactly what you’d expect from a ranch B&B owner—silver hair in a neat braid, laugh lines around her eyes, and a warm smile that reminds me of my mama.

“Lord have mercy, you two look half-frozen,” she says, ushering us inside. “I’m Grace Jenkins. Been watching folks battle their way up our drive all morning. This storm’s turned into a real doozy.”

The entryway opens into a great room that could have been pulled straight from a magazine—soaring ceilings with exposed beams, a stone fireplace tall enough to stand in, and comfortable leather furniture arranged in conversational groupings. A massive Christmas tree still stands in the corner, its white lights twinkling against antique ornaments. Several other couples are scattered around, all looking as wind-blown and grateful for shelter as we must.

“We’re really sorry to drop in like this,” Lindsay starts, pulling off her snow-crusted gloves. Her cheeks are pink from the cold, her hair a mess of static and snowflakes. “We were trying to get to Antler Creek, but the storm?—”

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Grace waves off the apology, moving behind a weathered desk that looks like it's seen a century of travelers.

“Don't worry about it, honey. You're hardly the first folks to get caught out in one of our surprises. Though—” She pulls out a heavy leather ledger, running one finger down the page with a slight frown.

Something in her tone makes me tense.

I've heard that note before, usually right before someone's about to tell me something I don't want to hear.

Sure enough, after a few moments of page-flipping, she looks up with an apologetic smile. “Well folks, I'm afraid I've got good news and bad news. Good news is, I do have one room left.”

“And the bad news?” Lindsay asks.

Grace's eyes flick between us, and I swear I see something knowing in her expression. “Bad news is, it's got just the one bed.”

Chapter Four

LINDSAY

One bed.

Of course, there's only one bed.

Because, apparently, the universe has decided that my life needs to be even more complicated right now. As if keeping secrets from my best friend isn't hard enough.

"We'll take it," Jace says immediately.

My head snaps up to look at him, but his expression is unreadable. There's something almost challenging in the set of his jaw, like he's daring the world to make this a bigger deal than it needs to be.

"Are you sure? We could?—"

"I'm sure." His eyes meet mine for a brief moment, and something in my stomach flutters. He's using that tone—the one that means he's made up his mind and nothing short of an act of God is going to change it.

"Do you have maybe a rollaway cot or—" I start to ask Grace, my voice embarrassingly breathless. I can feel the tips of my ears burning. A cot would be safe. A cot would mean not having to lie next to him all night, trying not to remember how many times I've dreamed about exactly that.

But Jace cuts me off smoothly. "We'll make it work," he tells Grace, already reaching for his wallet. "Thank you for accommodating us on such short notice."

My mind is racing with the implications of his words.

We'll make it work.

What does that even mean? Is he planning to sleep on the floor? Is he expecting me to? Or does he really think we can share a bed like it's nothing, like we're still the

same people we were before I started noticing the way his shirts stretch across his shoulders or how his voice gets all gravelly when he's tired?

Grace is already pulling out registration forms, her pen scratching against the paper.

"Room 12, up the stairs and to the right. There's extra blankets in the closet, and the bathroom's fully stocked." She slides an old brass key across the desk. "Dinner's at six in the main dining room, but we've got soup and sandwiches in the kitchen if you're hungry now."

"Some soup would be great, actually," Jace says, glancing at me. "You haven't eaten since breakfast."

The fact that he noticed, that he's been keeping track—it does something to my chest that I really don't want to examine right now.

"I'm fine, I?—"

"Lindsay." He gives me that look. "You get hangry. Remember the Jensen contract meeting?"

Despite everything, I feel my lips twitch. "That wasn't hunger, that was justified irritation at their ridiculous demands."

"Uh-huh." His eyes are twinkling now. "And I'm sure it had nothing to do with skipping lunch."

I reach for my wallet, desperate to change the subject before I do something stupid like tell him how sexy he is when he's being overprotective.

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But Jace beats me to it, pulling out his credit card. “I got this.”

“Jace—”

“Lindsay.” There’s something in his voice that makes me pause, something that makes the air between us feel suddenly thick with possibility. “Let me take care of it. Please.”

The please undoes me, like he probably knew it would. I’ve heard him say that word a thousand times—please pass the coffee, please help me with this spreadsheet, please come to the New Year’s party—but never quite like this. Never with this edge of something I’m afraid to name.

While he handles the payment, I pretend to be fascinated by the collection of old ranch photographs on the wall. They’re beautiful, actually—sepia-toned snapshots of life on the Circle J through the decades. Anything to avoid thinking about how this night is going to play out. About how I’m going to lie next to him and keep all my secrets—about my dad, about my feelings, about everything—when he’s close enough to touch.

“All set,” Jace says, appearing at my elbow with our bags.

He’s standing closer than strictly necessary, and I catch a whiff of his cologne mixed with leather and cold air. It’s not fair that he can smell this good after hours in a truck and a trek through a snowstorm.

“These are pretty incredible photos,” he adds, nodding at the wall. “Look at this

one—must be from the first cattle drive through the valley.”

I lean in to see where he’s pointing, trying to ignore how his proximity makes my skin tingle. “The composition is amazing. We should do something like this for the welcome center too.”

“Already thinking about work?” His voice is teasing, but there’s warmth there too. Understanding. He knows how much the ranch’s history means to me, how passionate I am about preserving it. It’s one of the countless reasons why being just friends is getting harder every day.

I take a deep breath and reach for the key. “Well, I guess we should?—”

“Oh!” Grace calls after us as we head for the stairs. “I forgot to mention. The heat’s been acting up in that wing of the house. Maintenance is coming tomorrow, but for tonight...” She gives us an apologetic smile that doesn’t quite hide the twinkle in her eyes. “Just thought you should know.”

Jace’s hand finds the small of my back as we climb the stairs, steady and warm through my sweater.

It’s a casual touch, the kind of thing he’s done a hundred times before. A gesture that says I’ve got you, I’m here, trust me. But now, knowing we’re about to share a room—a bed—it feels different. Everything feels different.

And we’ve still got hours until bedtime.

After Grace’s revelation about the heat, we made a detour to the kitchen.

Despite my protests, Jace insisted we eat something, and I have to admit—not out loud, of course—that he was right. Grace’s homemade tomato soup and thick-cut

sandwiches were exactly what we needed. It's hard to maintain anxiety on a full stomach, even if watching Jace roll up his sleeves to eat created a whole different kind of tension.

Now, following him down the hallway to our room, I feel marginally better.

At least about the hunger part.

The rest of my nerves are still very much present, doing a complicated dance in my stomach as Jace unlocks our door.

The room is... cozy. That's the polite word for small, right? A queen-sized bed takes up most of the space, topped with a handmade quilt in shades of blue and cream. There's a wooden dresser, a small sitting area with a worn leather armchair, and—thank god—a decent-sized bathroom.

The window looks out over snow-covered pastures that are rapidly disappearing in the growing storm.

“Home sweet home,” Jace says, dropping our bags by the dresser. He seems so calm about all of this, like sharing a tiny room with me is no big deal. Like the sight of that single bed isn't making his heart race the way mine is.

I watch, trying not to be obvious about it, as he shrugs out of his coat.

His henley pulls tight across his shoulders with the movement, and I have to look away. But then he runs a hand through his hair, messing it up in that way that makes him look unfairly attractive, and I'm staring again.

My phone buzzes, interrupting my spiral. It's a text from my dad:

“Looking forward to seeing you, sweetpea. Still good for New Year’s eve?”

I look up to find Jace watching me with an expression I’ve never seen before. “So what’s his name?”

I blink at him. “Who?”

“The guy.” He’s trying to sound casual, but I know him too well. “The one you’re meeting on New Year’s Eve. The one you’ve been texting all day.”

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“There’s no guy, Jace.”

He holds up his hands. “I get it. You don’t have to tell me.” His jaw tightens. “I just thought... I thought we were close enough that you’d tell me if you were seeing someone.”

I swallow hard. “I’m not seeing anyone.”

Jace quirks a brow at me. “You sure? Because every time your phone goes off, you look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“It’s...it’s just...” My heart is pounding so hard I can barely hear over it. “I’ve been texting my dad.”

Jace’s eyebrows shoot up. “Your dad?” He takes a step closer. “I thought you said you never knew your dad.”

“I know I did.” My voice is barely a whisper. “I lied.”

“Lindsay.” The word is soft, gentle in a way that makes my chest ache. “What’s going on?”

I wrap my arms around myself, trying to hold it together. But after years of carrying this weight alone—except for Rachel and Jasmyn—I want someone else to know. I want him to know.

“My dad’s been in prison for the last ten years.” The words feel like they’re being

pulled from somewhere deep inside me. “He just got out a few days ago.”

Understanding dawns on Jace’s face as he takes in my words. I can see him piecing it together - my nerves, my evasiveness, the secretive texts.

“That’s who you’re meeting on New Year’s Eve.”

I nod, my throat tight. “Yes.”

Jace is quiet for a long moment, his expression unreadable. I know what he’s probably thinking. What anyone would think.

“I know what you’re thinking,” I blurt out, unable to stand the silence. “But it’s not-”

“You don’t know what I’m thinking,” he interrupts.

“Yes, I do.” I take a step toward him, needing him to understand. “I know prison sounds bad. Really bad. But my dad... he was a good dad, before he went away. The best.”

My vision blurs with tears. “I’ve been so scared to tell you because your family is everything mine isn’t—stable and respected and whole. I didn’t want you to look at me differently. I didn’t want to be the girl with the convict father who doesn’t deserve to work at Clayton Ranch.”

Suddenly he’s right there, one hand coming up to cup my face. “Baby, breathe.” His palm is warm against my cheek, and I realize I’m trembling. “Just breathe.”

I take a shaky breath, then another. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I was scared, and then it got harder the longer I waited, and every time you invited me to family dinner or talked about ranch traditions, it just reminded me of everything I didn’t have.

Everything I couldn't give you."

"Lindsay, look at me."

I do, and the tenderness in his expression nearly breaks me. His thumb brushes away a tear I didn't even know had fallen.

"There is nothing—" his voice is fierce now, "—nothing you could tell me that would make me think less of you. Do you understand?"

I manage a small nod, but the tears are falling faster now. All the stress of the past weeks, all the fear and secrecy, it all comes crashing down at once.

"I thought... your family... everyone at the ranch looks up to the Claytons, and I didn't want?—"

"My family," Jace says firmly, "is not perfect. We've got our own history, our own struggles. And even if we didn't..." His other hand comes up so he's cradling my face between his palms. "The only thing that matters to me is you."

The weight of those words hangs between us. I can feel his heart pounding where his wrist brushes my neck, or maybe it's mine. Maybe it's both.

A soft laugh escapes him, and his thumbs brush away the last of my tears. "So there's really no guy?" he asks, and there's something new in his voice, something that makes my pulse skip.

"No guy," I confirm, unable to stop the shy smile that tugs at my lips. "Just my dad."

Jace's eyes darken, and his hands slide from my face to my neck, fingers tangling in my hair. "Good."

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I lick my lips as I look up at him. “W-why good?”

“Because I’m going to kiss you now.”

Chapter Five

JACE

I've dreamed about what it would be like to kiss my best friend more times than I care to admit.

But even my wildest fantasies pale in comparison to the reality of her soft lips moving against mine.

Her kiss is sweet and tentative at first, but as I pull her closer, she melts into my embrace, parting her lips to grant me access. I deepen the kiss, my tongue exploring her mouth as my hands roam her curves.

I want to touch every inch of her, to memorize the contours of her body with my fingertips. Lindsay's hands tangle in my hair, tugging gently as she matches my fervor. We're both breathless when we finally break apart, our chests heaving in unison.

“Jace,” she whispers. “Are you sure about this? We've been friends for such a long time. I don’t want to ruin that.”

“We have been friends for a long time. And now I want more.” I cup her face gently.

"I'm done pretending I don't feel this way about you." I rest my forehead against hers, breathing her in. My body's on fire, aching to claim her. But I force myself to go slow.

"Tell me you want this too," I murmur. "Tell me I'm not crazy for thinking there could be more between us."

Lindsay's eyes open, meeting mine. There's heat there, and something else - hope?

"You're not crazy, Jace," she whispers. "I want you, too."

And then she's kissing me again, her lips insistent and passionate. I respond with equal enthusiasm. My hands slip beneath her shirt, caressing the smooth skin of her back as our tongues dance together.

Outside, the storm continues to rage, the wind howling and snow swirling in a frenzied ballet. I pull back slightly, nodding towards the window. "Looks like this storm isn't letting up anytime soon. We might be stuck here for a while."

Lindsay's eyes darken with desire. "Is that so?"

I trail my fingers along her jaw. "Mmhmm. Whatever will we do to pass the time?"

She leans into my touch, her breath hitching. "I'm sure we can think of something."

"How about we make up for lost time?"

Lindsay nods, her hands already working at the buttons of my shirt. "I like the sound of that."

Those two words ignite a fire within me. I capture her mouth in a searing kiss as I

walk us backwards towards the bed. My hands find the hem of her sweater and I tug it over her head, revealing creamy skin and a lacy bra.

Fuck, she's gorgeous. My best friend. The woman I've loved for years. And she's here, in my arms, letting me undress her.

I take my time, savoring each inch of newly exposed skin. I want to worship her body, to make her feel cherished and desired. When she's down to just her panties, I lay her gently on the bed, drinking in the sight of her.

"You're so beautiful," I murmur, trailing my fingers along her collarbone, down between her breasts. "I can't believe I get to touch you like this."

But when my hand roams over her soft stomach, Lindsay flinches and looks away.

I frown. "What's wrong?"

She bites her lip, avoiding my gaze. "It's just... I know I have a bit of a belly. I'm not exactly model thin."

My heart aches at her words. How can she not see how breathtakingly beautiful she is? I take her hand gently and guide it to the straining bulge in my jeans, letting her feel how hard I am for her.

"Baby, feel what you do to me," I growl, pressing her palm against my rock hard cock. "I have never been more turned on in my life than I am right now, with you."

Lindsay's eyes widen as she explores the contours of my cock through the denim. I groan at her tentative touch, my hips rocking involuntarily into her hand.

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"Lindsay, I love your body," I tell her earnestly, holding her gaze. "Every inch of you drives me wild. Your curves, your softness... Fuck, you're perfect."

To emphasize my point, I lean down and press a reverent kiss to her stomach, just below her navel. Her skin is like silk beneath my lips and I can't resist flicking my tongue out for a taste. Lindsay gasps, her back arching off the bed.

"Jace," she whimpers, threading her fingers through my hair.

I continue my journey south, trailing open-mouthed kisses along the waistband of her panties. "I love this belly," I murmur against her skin. "I love these hips." I nip playfully at the flare of her hip bone.

"I love these thighs." My hands skim along the outside of her legs, caressing her soft flesh. "And I really, really love what's between them."

I hook my fingers in the sides of her panties and glance up at her, silently asking for permission. Lindsay nods, lifting her hips to help me slide the scrap of lace down her legs.

And then she's bare before me, glistening and open and so fucking beautiful that it steals my breath. I take a moment just to admire her, committing every detail to memory.

"You're exquisite, baby," I murmur, settling between her thighs. "Every part of you."

I part her lower lips with my thumbs, revealing everything to my hungry gaze. She's

so wet, her arousal coating her pink flesh and making my mouth water. I have to taste her.

I lean in and run my tongue along her slit, humming in appreciation at her tangy-sweet flavor. Lindsay cries out, her hands fisting the sheets as I circle her clit with the tip of my tongue.

"Oh yes, Jace," she pants, her hips undulating against my face. She arches off the bed with a cry as I thrust my tongue inside her.

So fucking tight.

I add a finger, groaning at the way her walls grip me.

Suddenly, a thought occurs to me. I still my movements and raise my head. "Baby, are you a virgin?"

Lindsay nods shyly. "I'm sorry, Jace. Do you want to stop?"

I shake my head vehemently. "No, baby. Of course not. I'm honored that you trust me enough to let me be your first."

Inside, the possessive part of me roars in satisfaction. She's mine.

Only mine.

I haven't even been inside her yet, but I already know that I will never share her with another man. Lindsay belongs to me, just as I belong to her. Completely.

"I'll go slow, sweetheart," I promise, pressing a tender kiss to her inner thigh. "I'm going to make this so good for you."

I return my attention to her dripping core, determined to bring her pleasure like she's never known. I lap at her folds, painting her with broad strokes of my tongue before focusing on her sensitive pearl.

Lindsay writhes beneath me, her breathy moans filling the room. I slide a finger into her tight channel as I suckle her clit, pumping gently as she adjusts to the intrusion.

"Oh wow, Jace!" she keens, her inner muscles fluttering around my digit.

I add a second finger, curling them to stroke that spongy spot inside her as I work her clit with my tongue. Her arousal coats my chin as I thrust my fingers faster, matching the rhythm of her rocking hips.

"That's it, baby," I encourage her. "Come all over my face. I want you to drip down my fucking chin."

I suck her clit between my lips, flicking the bud rapidly, and that's all it takes.

Lindsay shatters with a scream of my name, her thighs clamping around my head as she gushes into my mouth. I lap up her release greedily, prolonging her pleasure until she collapses back onto the bed, spent and panting.

I crawl up her body, pressing kisses to her quivering skin as I go, until I reach her lips. She opens for me eagerly, moaning as she tastes herself on my tongue.

"Ready for me, sweetheart?" I ask as I reach down to position myself at her entrance.

Lindsay nods, wrapping her legs around my hips. "Please, Jace. I want to feel you inside me."

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I push forward slowly, groaning as her tight heat envelops me inch by excruciating inch. I pause when I feel her barrier, my heart thundering in my chest.

"This might hurt a bit," I warn her, brushing my lips over hers. "But I promise it will feel so good after. Hold onto me, baby."

She links her arms around my neck, her breath coming in short puffs against my jaw. With a final push, I breach her barrier, sheathing myself fully inside her wet heat.

Lindsay gasps, her nails digging into my shoulders as she adjusts to the stretch. I hold myself still, peppering her face with soft kisses, murmuring words of praise.

"You feel incredible, baby," I groan, nuzzling her neck. "So tight, so perfect. Like you were made just for me."

Lindsay relaxes around me, her inner muscles gripping me like a velvet glove. I start to move, slow and shallow at first, allowing her to get used to the sensation. She whimpers, lifting her hips to meet my gentle thrusts.

"More, Jace," she pleads breathlessly. "I need you to move."

I oblige happily, picking up my pace. My hips piston faster, driving into her again and again as I relish the feeling of her silky walls caressing my length. The room fills with the erotic sounds of our coupling—the slap of skin against skin, our mingled panting, the wet squelch of her arousal with each plunge.

"I feel so full," Lindsay moans, rocking up to meet me thrust for thrust. "Harder, Jace."

Please. I need more."

Her dirty words spur me on, and I let go of my restraint, pounding into her with wild abandon.

I hook her leg over my arm, changing the angle of my thrusts to hit that magic spot inside her. Lindsay cries out, her back arching off the bed as I hammer into her g-spot relentlessly.

"You like that, sweetheart?" I growl, my hips snapping sharply. "You like it when I pound this tight little pussy? When I fill you up and make you scream?"

"Yes! Fuck yes!" she wails, her head thrashing on the pillow. "Don't stop, Jace. Please don't ever stop!"

I wedge a hand between our sweat-slicked bodies, finding her swollen clit. I rub the sensitive nub in tight circles with my thumb as I continue my merciless assault on her core. Lindsay's nails rake down my back, her inner muscles beginning to flutter around my shaft.

"That's it, baby," I coax gruffly. "Come on my cock. Soak me with your come. Let me feel you fall apart."

A keening cry rips from her throat as her orgasm crashes over her. Her pussy clamps down on me like a vise as she convulses beneath me, waves of ecstasy wracking her body. The sensation of her coming undone, knowing I'm the one to make her fall apart, is almost too much. My orgasm hits me like a freight train and it takes me a good ten seconds before I can catch my breath.

"Fuck, baby," I groan as I drop my forehead to hers. "I should have known you'd be a rockstar your first time."

Lindsay blushes, ducking her head shyly. "You really think so?"

I can't help but chuckle. "Sweetheart, you are amazing at everything you do. Of course, you would be a natural at this, too."

She bites her lip, looking up at me through her lashes. "Really?"

"Really," I assure her, pressing a tender kiss to her nose. "You blow my mind, Lindsay. In every way."

She smiles at that, but then winces slightly as she shifts beneath me. I frown in concern, suddenly realizing that she's probably sore.

"You okay, baby?" I ask, carefully easing out of her and rolling to the side.

Lindsay nods, but I can see the discomfort on her face. "Just a little tender," she admits. "I guess I'm not used to... all that."

My heart swells with a mixture of masculine pride and protective instinct. I gather her into my arms, nuzzling her hair. "I have an idea," I murmur. "How about I run us a nice, warm bath? We can relax and get cleaned up."

Lindsay sighs contentedly, snuggling into my chest. "That sounds amazing."

I press a kiss to her forehead before extricating myself from the tangle of sheets. "You just lie back and relax. I'll get everything ready."

I pad naked to the ensuite bathroom, my body already missing the feel of hers. I turn on the faucet, adjusting the water until it's the perfect temperature. As the massive clawfoot tub fills, I add some scented bath oil that I find on the counter, filling the room with the soothing aroma of lavender and chamomile.

When the tub is ready, I return to the bedroom to retrieve my girl. Lindsay looks up at me with a lazy smile, her hair a wild, sexy mess against the pillows.

"Your bath awaits, my lady," I announce with a gallant bow.

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Lindsay giggles as I scoop her up bridal style, carrying her effortlessly to the bathroom. She loops her arms around my neck, nuzzling my jaw. "Such a gentleman," she sighs dreamily.

I lower us carefully into the steaming water, settling her back against my chest. Lindsay sighs contentedly, melting back into my embrace as I trace patterns on her flesh.

"This is nice," she murmurs sleepily. "I could stay here forever."

"Mmmm, me too," I agree, tightening my arms around her. "Although we might get a bit prune." "

Lindsay giggles. "A small price to pay for such bliss."

I reach for the bottle of shampoo on the ledge of the tub. "How about I wash your hair for you, sweetheart?" I offer. "Pamper you a bit."

Lindsay turns her head to look at me over her shoulder, her eyes soft with emotion. "You don't have to do that, Jace."

I press a kiss to her temple. "I know I don't have to. I want to. Let me take care of you, baby."

She bites her lip, then nods shyly. "Okay. Thank you."

I pour some shampoo into my palm and work it into a lather, then gently massage it

into Lindsay's scalp. She sighs in pleasure, her eyes fluttering closed as my fingers work through her silky tresses.

As I wash her hair, a thought occurs to me. "You know, I never got to thank you earlier," I murmur.

She blinks up at me quizzically. "For what?"

I brush a sudsy lock from her forehead. "For trusting me enough to tell me about your dad. I know that must have been really hard for you."

Lindsay's gaze drops and she worries her lower lip between her teeth. "I wanted to tell you for so long," she admits quietly. "I hated keeping that part of my life a secret from you. I just... I didn't know how."

"Hey," I murmur, tilting her chin up gently to meet my eyes. "I get it, baby. And I'm honored that you felt safe enough to share that with me. It doesn't change anything about how I feel about you."

Her eyes search mine intently. "Really?"

"Really," I assure her firmly. "You're still my Lindsay. My beautiful, amazing, strong best friend. Nothing could ever change that."

A single tear slips down her cheek and I brush it away tenderly with my thumb. Lindsay turns fully in my arms, looping her arms around my neck as she presses her forehead to mine.

Suddenly, a thought occurs to me. I draw back slightly so I can see Lindsay's face clearly.

"I have an idea," I venture carefully. "What would you think about inviting your dad to the New Year's Eve party at the ranch?"

Lindsay's eyes widen in surprise. "You'd be okay with that?"

"Of course. He's your dad. I can only imagine how much you've missed him since he's been away. This could be a chance for you to reconnect, to start building a relationship again."

She chews her lower lip. "I don't know, Jace. It might be too soon. I mean, he just got out and everything is still so new and raw..."

"I get that," I assure her gently. "But the ranch is a safe place for you. You'll be surrounded by people who love and support you. And I'll be right there by your side the whole time."

Lindsay searches my face, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "You're really okay with this? Having my dad around?"

"Lindsay, I want you to be happy. I know how important your dad is to you, even with everything that's happened. If having him at the party will bring you joy, then that's all that matters to me."

A slow, hopeful smile spreads across her face. "You're amazing, you know that? I'm so lucky to have you."

I press a soft kiss to her lips. "I'm the lucky one, sweetheart. I'm just grateful you're giving me a chance to be more than just your friend."

Lindsay winds her arms around my neck, pressing her bare chest flush against mine. "Definitely more than just friends," she agrees with a impish grin. "In fact, I think we

need to do a lot more 'friendly' activities together. You know, to solidify this new aspect of our relationship."

I laugh, nipping playfully at her jaw. "Oh, I fully intend to engage in many, many 'friendly' activities with you, baby. In fact, I plan to be an extremely attentive friend from now on."

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"Is that so?" she purrs, wriggling suggestively in my lap. "Care to give me a preview of these friendly activities?"

I groan as I feel myself hardening again beneath her. "I thought you'd never ask."

Chapter Six

LINDSAY

The conference room at Clayton Ranch has been my second home for the past three years.

Normally, I live for these meetings—color-coded notes ready, marketing proposals polished, and social media analytics compiled. Being the marketing coordinator here isn't just a job for me, it's everything I've worked for.

But today, all I can focus on is Jace.

He's sitting directly across from me, one boot propped casually on his knee, looking every inch the cowboy businessman in his pearl-snap Western shirt and dark jeans. His chair is also angled just slightly toward mine, even though he's pretending to be absorbed in the budget report.

It's amazing how quickly everything can change.

We didn't get back to the ranch until late last night—Mr. Henderson had insisted on telling us the history behind every single vintage sign before we loaded them up.

By the time we pulled into the ranch, the moon was high and bright over the pastures. Jace walked me to my apartment door, and even though every part of me wanted to pull him inside, we both knew we needed to at least try to maintain some professionalism. One lingering kiss turned into several before we finally managed to say goodnight.

Now it's Monday morning, our first time seeing each other at work since everything changed, and I'm failing miserably at acting normal.

We're in the last meeting of the year, and all I can think about is how his hands felt on my skin, how his voice got rough when he whispered my name.

"Lindsay?" Wyatt's voice draws me back. "Thoughts on the spring festival timeline?"

Jace shifts in his chair, and I make the mistake of looking directly at him.

He's got that subtle half-smile playing at his lips, the one that says he knows exactly what I'm thinking about. The same smile he gave me this morning when I ran into him at the coffee maker and had to pretend my skin wasn't burning where his fingers brushed mine as he handed me my mug.

"Actually," I manage, forcing my attention back to Wyatt, "I've been working on some new ideas for family engagement. If you look at page three of my report?—"

I stand to point at the projection screen, very aware of how Jace's jaw tightens as I walk past him. "We could set up activity stations throughout the property."

"Like the reading corner we did last fall?" Wyatt asks, but I barely hear him because Jace is doing that thing where he runs his hand through his hair when he's thinking.

It shouldn't be this distracting. I've seen him do it a thousand times before.

But now I know how that hair feels between my fingers.

"Exactly," I say, proud of how steady my voice sounds. "We had great feedback from that event. I'm thinking we could expand the concept, maybe partner with local schools..."

I continue my presentation, hyper-aware of Jace's eyes following my every movement.

He keeps making little noises of agreement at all the right moments, playing the part of the attentive ranch manager perfectly. But I recognize the heat in his gaze now, the way his fingers tap restlessly against the table when I lean forward to point out something in the budget.

Finally, Wyatt closes his laptop. "Alright. I think that covers everything for the year. Good work, everyone. See you all at the party tomorrow."

The room starts to clear out. I'm gathering my papers when I feel it—that electric awareness that means Jace is close.

Sure enough, when I look up, Jace is casually leaning against the conference table next to me, looking for all the world like he's just making friendly conversation.

"Got a minute?" His voice is perfectly professional, but his eyes are anything but.

"Sure." I snap my laptop bag shut and spin around to face him. "What's up?"

He waits until the last person leaves, closing the door behind them. Then suddenly I'm pressed against the conference table, his mouth hot on mine. I make a surprised sound that turns into a moan as he deepens the kiss, one hand tangling in my hair while the other grips my hip.

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"Do you have any idea," he mutters against my lips, "how hard it is to sit through an entire meeting watching you and not being able to touch you?"

I laugh breathlessly, pushing at his chest. "We're at work, Jace."

"Meeting's over." He nips at my bottom lip, then soothes it with his tongue. "Stay with me tonight."

"What?"

"At the main house." His hands slide up my sides. "I hate watching you walk up to that apartment alone. Stay with me instead."

"There you go with that bossy tone again," I laugh, trying to ignore how my heart flutters at the thought of waking up next to him again.

He growls against my neck. "You love it."

The truth is, he's right—I do love it. Love this new confidence between us, the way he's suddenly so sure about what he wants.

But I can't resist teasing him a little.

"I don't know..." I pretend to consider, even as his lips trail down my neck. "My apartment has better water pressure."

He pulls back just enough to look at me, one eyebrow raised. "Really? That's what

you're going with?"

"And my coffee maker?—"

His mouth captures mine again, effectively ending that line of argument. When he finally lets me breathe, I've forgotten what I was protesting about.

"Stay with me," he says again, softer this time. His forehead rests against mine, and I can feel his heart racing where my hands are pressed against his chest. "I'll even let you bring your fancy coffee maker."

"How generous of you." But I'm already melting, already knowing I'm going to say yes. It's impossible to deny him anything when he's looking at me like this, like I'm everything he's ever wanted.

A noise in the hallway makes us jump apart. Jace runs a hand through his hair, looking delightfully rumpled, while I try to straighten my blouse.

"Tonight?" he asks. His voice is still rough around the edges.

I bite my lip, pretending to check my calendar on my phone. "I suppose I could clear my schedule..."

Quick as a rattlesnake, he pulls me back against him. "You're playing with fire, baby."

"Good thing I've got a cowboy to keep me safe," I whisper against his lips.

His answering growl sends shivers down my spine. "Seven o'clock. Don't be late." He steals one more kiss before heading for the door, and I definitely don't watch the way his jeans fit as he walks away.

Okay, maybe I watch a little.

Seven o'clock finds me slipping through the side door of the main house, the one that leads directly to the back staircase.

My heart is pounding, but not just from sneaking around—there's something thrilling about this, about knowing Jace is waiting for me upstairs.

The Clayton house is a sprawling ranch-style house with a separate second-story addition. It was built by Jace's great-grandfather and expanded over generations. Now, all four Clayton brothers live here, along with their significant others.

Usually, the house is full of life—boots thumping on hardwood floors, country music drifting from the kitchen, screen doors banging as the brothers come and go.

But tonight, the house is quiet.

Everyone is off doing their own things, which means it's just me and Jace, and the thought makes my pulse quicken.

I know these stairs by heart—which steps creak and which don't—from countless late nights working on ranch projects in Jace's office. But this time feels different. This time, I'm heading to his bedroom instead.

His room is at the end of the east wing, far from the others. I've only been in here a handful of times over the years, usually to grab something for him when he was sick or injured. Now I pause outside his door, suddenly nervous. Before I can overthink it, I turn the handle and slip inside.

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The room is exactly like Jace—masculine but comfortable, with dark wood furniture and cream-colored walls. A king-sized bed dominates one wall, and a stone fireplace graces another. Through the French doors that lead to his private balcony, I can see the last rays of sunset painting the mountains gold.

"You came."

I turn to find Jace leaning against his bathroom doorframe, fresh from the shower. His hair is damp, his feet are bare, and he's wearing nothing but worn jeans and a soft gray t-shirt. The sight of him like this, relaxed and casual in his private space, makes my mouth go dry.

"Did you think I wouldn't?" I ask, aiming for playful but my voice comes out breathier than intended.

He crosses the room in three long strides, and suddenly I'm in his arms, my back against the door.

His kiss is different from the ones we shared in the conference room—deeper, hungrier, like he's been holding back all day and can't anymore. One hand tangles in my hair while the other spans my lower back, pulling me flush against him.

I grip his shoulders, feeling the solid muscle beneath soft cotton. His mouth trails down my neck, and I gasp when he finds that sensitive spot below my ear.

"Been thinking about this all day," he murmurs against my skin. "About you. Couldn't focus on a damn thing after that meeting."

"That makes two of us," I manage, sliding my hands into his damp hair. He makes a low sound in his throat that I feel more than hear.

"I could get used to this," he whispers between kisses. "Having you here every night."

The words send a shiver down my spine. How many times have I imagined this? Being here with him, belonging here? His thumb traces my cheekbone as he pulls back just enough to look at me, and the intensity in his eyes takes my breath away.

"Jace—" I start, but he kisses me again, and whatever I was going to say dissolves into the feeling of his mouth on mine, his hands holding me like I'm something precious, something he never wants to let go.

The kiss turns molten, Jace's tongue delving deep to tangle with mine. His large hands roam my body hungrily, sliding under my blouse to span my bare back. I arch into him, craving more, and he groans against my mouth.

He strips my blouse off and tosses it aside. My bra quickly follows, leaving me bare from the waist up. Jace's heated gaze rakes over me possessively.

"So gorgeous," he murmurs, cupping my breasts. His calloused thumbs brush over my nipples and pleasure jolts through me. "Love these perfect tits."

I moan as he dips his head, taking one aching peak into his hot mouth. He sucks hard, teeth grazing, before laving the sting with his tongue. My head falls back against the door as he switches to the other breast, giving it the same toe-curling attention.

"Fuck that feels good," I whimper, my hips rocking against the thick ridge of his erection.

I'm so empty it aches.

Jace releases my nipple and kisses a path down my stomach. Then he sinks to his knees.

"Look at you," he growls as he gazes up at me. "So fucking sexy." He grabs the waistband of my jeans and pulls. With a few efficient tugs, my jeans and panties join my blouse on the floor. His hands skim up my thighs, spreading them wider. "I could spend hours worshipping this pretty pussy."

I whimper as he leans in, his breath hot against my aching core. "Please, Jace..."

Jace nuzzles my inner thigh. "Please, what?"

"Your mouth," I gasp. "I need your mouth on me."

His answering groan vibrates against my skin. "With pleasure."

And then his mouth is on me and I'm lost. His lips and tongue work me expertly, licking and sucking, stoking the fire inside me higher and higher. He grips my hips, holding me steady as I grind against his face, chasing my pleasure.

"That's it, baby," he encourages between long licks. "Ride my face. Get yourself off with my tongue."

Obscene wet sounds fill the room as he devours me. I tangle my fingers in his hair, tugging him closer. The coil inside me winds tighter and tighter until it finally snaps.

"Jace!" I cry out, my back bowing off the door as I come hard against his mouth. He groans, lapping at me greedily, prolonging my pleasure until I'm boneless and trembling.

He kisses his way back up my body until he can claim my mouth in a searing kiss. I can taste myself on his tongue and it makes me burn for him all over again.

“I love the faces you make when you come,” he says roughly, his forehead resting against mine. "You're so beautiful when you let go, baby.”

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My heart flips at the unguarded tenderness in his eyes.

He walks us back towards the bed, his mouth never leaving mine. When his legs hit the mattress, he sits, pulling me astride his lap. I can feel the hard length of him pressed against my bottom and I rock against him, making us both groan.

"Fuck, you feel good," he rasps, his big hands cupping my ass. "Love having you on top of me like this."

I reach between us, palming his erection through his jeans. He hisses, hips bucking up into my touch.

"These need to come off," I murmur, working at his fly.

He helps me push his jeans and briefs down, freeing his impressive length. I take a moment to admire him, my hand wrapping around his thick shaft. He's so hard, the skin like velvet over steel, and I can't resist stroking him root to tip.

"Lindsay," he groans, his head falling back. "Baby, you gotta stop or this'll be over before it starts."

I smirk, loving the effect I have on him. "Well, we can't have that, can we?"

I lift up on my knees, positioning him at my entrance. We both groan as I sink down slowly, inch by delicious inch, until he's buried to the hilt inside me.

"Do you have any idea how long I've wanted this?" Jace rasps, his large hands

gripping my hips as I adjust to the feel of him stretching me. "How many nights I've laid in this bed imagining you riding me just like this?"

"Tell me," I whisper, rising up until just the tip of him is inside me before sinking back down.

His groan is guttural, his fingers digging into my skin. "Imagined you naked and needy, sinking down on my cock over and over. Dreamed about these perfect tits bouncing in my face while you use me for your pleasure."

His filthy words make me clench around him and we both moan. I brace my hands on his chest and find a rhythm, rolling my hips to take him as deep as possible on every downstroke.

"That's it, baby," he encourages, his voice strained. "Just like that. Make us both come."

I brace my hands on his chest, using the leverage to ride him harder, faster.

Jace slides one hand around to where we're joined, his thumb finding my clit. I cry out at the added stimulation, my movements becoming erratic as I chase my release.

"Come on, Lindsay," he coaxes, rubbing tight circles. "Come all over my cock. I want to feel you."

His words are my undoing.

I shatter with a hoarse cry of his name, my inner muscles clamping down on him like a vice. Jace curses, his hips snapping up once, twice more before he buries himself to the hilt with a guttural groan, finding his own release deep inside me.

I collapse against his chest, both of us panting harshly. Jace wraps his arms around me, holding me close as we come down from the high.

Eventually, he rolls us gently so we're lying side by side. I wince a little as he slips out of me, already feeling deliciously sore in the best way.

Jace props himself up on one elbow, his other hand tracing idle patterns on my stomach.

And that's when it hits me that this is the third time we've had sex without using any birth control.

"You know we should really start being more careful," I giggle. "Or else we're going to have a little Clayton running around sooner rather than later."

Jace's hand stills on my stomach. When I glance up at him, his eyes have gone heated and intense again, boring into mine.

"Would that be so bad?" he asks. "You, pregnant with my baby?"

My breath catches at the possessive edge to his words, at the image they conjure. "Of course, that wouldn't be bad." I bite my lip. "I'm just saying we should be careful."

Jace rolls on top of me, settling between my thighs. I can feel him getting hard again already. "Being careful is overrated."

He punctuates his words by reaching between us, scooping up some of the wetness leaking out of me and shoving it back inside with two thick fingers. I gasp at the sensation, my hips bucking up to meet his touch.

"But we....," I protest, even as arousal starts to curl through me again. "We just

started this...whatever this is. And a baby?—"

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"Would be perfect." Jace cuts me off. He withdraws his fingers only to notch the broad head of his cock at my entrance. "You're mine, Lindsay. And now that I have you, I'm not wasting any more time."

He pushes inside me with one smooth thrust and I cry out, my hands flying up to grip his biceps.

He starts moving immediately, setting a deep, purposeful rhythm.

"Doesn't this feel right, honey? Your best friend buried deep inside you?" Jace groans as I start meeting his thrusts, tilting my hips to take him even deeper. "You're made for me. Made to take my cock, to carry my child. I can't wait to put my baby inside you, so everyone knows you belong to me."

I'm too far gone to argue, lost in the steady drag of him inside me and the filthy promises falling from his lips. Jace is relentless, his thrusts never slowing, like he's a man possessed.

"Tell me you're mine," he demands, his hand finding my breast and squeezing. "Say it, Lindsay."

When his hand slides between us to rub my clit, I feel my third orgasm of the night start to barrel toward me. My body starts to clench around him rhythmically.

"I'm yours," I gasp out. "Only yours, always."

A second later, I shatter with a scream.

Chapter Seven

JACE

I stir from my deep sleep as I sense movement beside me.

My eyes flutter open to see Lindsay's silhouette, her bare back illuminated by the soft morning light seeping through the curtains. She's sitting on the edge of the bed, reaching for something on the floor.

In one swift motion, I reach out and wrap an arm around her waist, pulling her back against my chest. "And just where do you think you're going?"

She lets out a surprised little yelp. "Jace! I was just...um..." Her voice trails off and I can practically hear the gears turning in that pretty head of hers, trying to come up with an excuse.

I nuzzle into the crook of her neck, breathing in her sweet scent. "Mmhmm. Trying to sneak out on me, were you?" I tease, tightening my hold on her.

No way am I letting this girl slip away, not when I finally have her right where I want her - naked and tangled up in my sheets.

"I wasn't sneaking! I just didn't want to wake you. I thought I'd head out early..."

"Well, sorry to disappoint, but you're not going anywhere, princess." I roll us over so I'm hovering above her, caging her in with my arms.

Her chestnut hair is splayed out on the pillow, her cheeks flushed, those captivating green eyes wide as she looks up at me.

Lindsay bites her lip, trying to suppress a smile. “Jace, I really should go...” But her hands are already skimming up my back, creating tingles on my bare skin.

I capture her mouth in a searing kiss before she can argue, swallowing any further protests. She melts into me instantly, her body molding to mine like it was made to be there.

After a long moment, I pull back to look at her, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Besides, you know you don’t really want to leave,” I tease with a wink. “Not when you could stay in this bed with me...” I flex my hips suggestively against hers.

Lindsay flushes even redder but grins up at me, looping her arms around my neck. “Okay, you win this round, Clayton.” Her eyes sparkle mischievously. “I suppose a little while longer won’t hurt.”

“That’s my girl,” I growl approvingly before swooping down to claim her lips again.

Lindsay’s fingers slide into my hair as our kiss deepens, desire crackling between us.

Fuck.

Kissing Lindsay is like coming home and getting lost all at once. Her soft lips move against mine, igniting a fire in my veins that’s only stoked higher by the little mewls of pleasure she makes. I could spend hours just like this, learning every hitch of her breath, every shiver and sigh.

My hands roam greedily over her curves, tracing the dips and hollows I’d spent all night mapping with my fingers and tongue. I palm her breast, relishing the perfect weight of it in my hand, the way her nipple tightens against my touch.

But then suddenly, she pulls back, worry clouding her expression. “Wait, Jace... what

about brunch?”

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I nip playfully at her jaw. “What about it?”

Lindsay shivers beneath me, but that little crease between her brows remains. “I thought getting invited to your family’s brunch was a big deal. Are you sure we’re ready for this?”

“Of course, I’m sure.” I cup her face in my hands and brush my thumbs over her cheekbones, holding her gaze steadily. “I want everyone on the planet to know that you’re mine.”

“I want that too,” she whispers, her fingers curling into the hair at the nape of my neck. “I’m just nervous. They’ve only ever seen me as your friend and employee. What if they think I’m not good enough for you? That I don’t belong?”

My heart clenches at the vulnerability in her eyes and the uncertainty in her voice. I lean down, resting my forehead against hers. “Baby, you belong with me, and that means you belong with my family too.”

Lindsay looks up at me, her eyes shimmering with emotion. “You really mean that?”

“With all my heart,” I vow, sealing it with a gentle kiss. “And I’ll make damn sure they all see it too.”

I reach over to grab my phone off the nightstand, keeping one arm securely around Lindsay’s waist. She snuggles into my side as I pull up the family group chat and type out a message with my thumb.

“Heads up, boys. Lindsay’s joining us for brunch. Be on your best behavior or else.”

Within seconds, my phone starts pinging with responses.

Luke: About damn time! We were starting to think you two would never figure it out.”

Brody chimes in next. “Fucking finally! Wait till Savannah hears, she’s going to flip her shit. In a good way.”

Wyatt’s reply pops up. “Well look at that, our baby brother is all grown up. Melody says it’s about damn time and she expects details later ;)”

I chuckle and tilt the screen so Lindsay can read the messages. Her eyes widen as she scans them, but slowly, a tentative smile spreads across her face. “They’re really okay with this? With...us?”

“More than okay, baby. They’re thrilled. I told you, you have nothing to worry about.” I press a kiss to her temple.

Relief floods her features and she turns in my arms to face me fully, looping her arms around my neck. “I don’t know what I did to deserve you, Jace Clayton.”

“Funny, I was just thinking the same thing about you,” I murmur, ducking down to capture her lips in a slow, deep kiss that has us both breathless.

When we finally surface for air, I bump my nose playfully against hers. “Now, about that shower...” I give her a heated look, my hands flexing on her hips.

Lindsay bites her lip, her eyes darkening with desire. “Lead the way, cowboy.”

I grin and scoop her up, tossing her over my shoulder caveman style as she squeals.

We don't leave my room for another forty-five minutes.

Fortunately for us, it seems like all of my brothers got a late start this morning too. By the time Lindsay and I finally make it downstairs, freshly showered and unable to keep the satisfied grins off our faces, the rest of the family is just sitting down to eat in the dining room.

All eyes turn to us and for a split second, I feel Lindsay tense beside me. But then Jasmyn is out of her seat like a shot, pulling Lindsay into a warm hug.

"I'm so happy for you two!" she gushes, and just like that, the momentary tension dissipates.

Melody is next, wrapping Lindsay in an equally enthusiastic embrace. "Welcome to the family, officially!"

Lindsay laughs, her eyes a little misty as she returns their hugs. I feel a swell of pride and affection watching my family welcome her so openly.

"Alright, alright, let the poor girl breathe," I tease, guiding Lindsay to her seat beside me with a hand on her lower back. "There'll be plenty of time for you hens to cluck over her later."

"Hens?! Careful little brother, or no bacon for you," Savannah threatens from across the table, but she's grinning ear to ear.

As soon as we sit down, Wyatt raises his coffee mug in a toast. "To Jace and Lindsay, for finally getting their shit together and realizing what the rest of us have known for years - that they're perfect for each other."

A chorus of “hear, hear!” and the clinking of mugs fills the room. I lace my fingers with Lindsay’s on top of the table and she leans into me, her smile brighter than the morning sun streaming through the windows.

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Brody leans forward, a devilish glint in his eye. “So, Linds, I gotta ask - what made you finally take pity on this poor schmuck and agree to date him? Did he bribe you? Wear you down with his endless pestering?”

“Hey now!” I protest, but Lindsay just laughs and squeezes my hand.

“Oh, he definitely wore me down,” she banters back easily. “You know how persistent he can be. I figured I might as well give in before he resorts to something drastic like skywriting or a flash mob.”

The whole table erupts with laughter and I shake my head in amused exasperation. “Wow, thanks for that, babe.”

Lindsay turns to me, her expression softening. “But in all seriousness, it was inevitable, I think. He’s my best friend. My person. Falling for him was the easiest thing in the world.”

My throat tightens with emotion and I have to swallow hard before I can respond. “Falling for you was pretty damn easy too, sweetheart.” I raise our joined hands and press a kiss to her knuckles.

A chorus of “awwws” circles the table and I roll my eyes good-naturedly. “Alright, alright, show’s over. Pass the damn bacon already, would ya?”

As food starts getting dished out, the conversation flows easily, everyone catching up and laughing and ribbing each other like always. But through it all, Lindsay and I stay connected, our hands linked, her thigh pressed against mine.

At one point, Melody asks how the shop is doing, and Lindsay animatedly fills her in on some of their new projects. I watch her, captivated by her passion, her quick wit as she jokes with Luke, and the way she includes Maisey in the conversation.

She just fits. Here, with my family. With me. Like a missing piece I didn't even know I was searching for until I found her.

"So Lindsay," Savannah pipes up as she passes the dish of Melody's famous cinnamon rolls, "I hear you're bringing a special guest to the New Year's Eve party tonight?"

I feel Lindsay stiffen beside me, and my stomach drops. Fuck.

I told my brothers about Lindsay's dad being released, but I swore them to secrecy, not wanting to put any pressure on her. I just didn't want things to be awkward whenever Lindsay decided to tell them herself.

But I didn't think Savannah would bring it up this morning, putting Lindsay on the spot like this.

Under the table, I give Lindsay's hand a reassuring squeeze even as I shoot Savannah a warning look.

But to my surprise, Lindsay takes a deep breath and meets Savannah's gaze head-on. "Um, yes, actually... I invited my dad."

A hush falls over the table and I see surprise and concern flit across my siblings' faces. But to my relief, there's no judgement, only compassion.

Jasmyn is the first to speak, reaching across the table to touch Lindsay's arm. "That's wonderful, Linds. I'm sure it means a lot to him, and to you."

“It really does,” Lindsay says softly, leaning into me a little. “I know our relationship is still a work in progress, but it feels like a step in the right direction, you know?”

“Absolutely,” Wyatt agrees, his usually teasing expression serious and sincere. “Family is everything. Good on you for being brave enough to give him a second chance.”

Emotion clogs my throat as I look around at these people who have been my whole world for so long. And now here’s Lindsay, fitting in seamlessly, opening her heart to them just like she did to me. I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life - this woman is my future.

Under the table, I give her hand a firm squeeze. She squeezes back and when her eyes meet mine, I see my own feelings reflected there.

By the time we’re clearing the dishes, I feel like I could vibrate out of my skin with happiness.

This. This is what I want every weekend to look like. Lindsay by my side, surrounded by my family’s love and chaos.

“You’re awfully smiley there, baby brother,” Brody remarks as we carry the plates into the kitchen. “Good brunch?”

I glance over my shoulder to where Lindsay is laughing with Melody and Jasmyn as they put away the leftovers, looking completely at home. A surge of possessiveness and certainty washes over me.

“The best,” I reply, unable to contain my grin. “She’s the one.”

Brody claps me on the shoulder, his own smile wide and knowing. “No shit. I’m

surprised you haven't already put a ring on it."

My mind flashes to the small velvet box tucked in my sock drawer upstairs, the one that's been sitting there since the day me and Lindsay got back from Antler Creek.

I clap Brody on the shoulder and give him a knowing grin. "All in good time, brother. All in good time."

Chapter Eight

LINDSAY

"That's the fifth time you've checked your watch in the last minute." Jace appears at my side, pressing a glass of red wine into my trembling hands. "He'll be here, baby."

"I'm that obvious, huh?" I try to smile, smoothing my free hand down the silver sequined dress that had been hanging in my closet for months.

"Only to someone who knows you as well as I do." He leans against the windowsill beside me, close enough that our shoulders touch.

The New Year's Eve party is in full swing around us – couples dancing, champagne flowing, and the steady tick of the clock moving us closer to midnight.

"Want to talk about it?" Jace asks.

The crystal catches the light from the strings of fairy lights woven through pine garlands, throwing prisms across his black dress shirt that fits him perfectly, highlighting the broad shoulders I've become intimately familiar with these last few days. His dark hair is styled just enough to look effortlessly tousled, and the shadow of stubble along his jaw makes him look like he just stepped out of a magazine.

I take a sip of wine, gathering my thoughts. "What do you even say to someone after ten years? 'Hey Dad, how was prison? I graduated college, got a job, and oh yeah, I'm dating my best friend now?'"

"Well, when you put it that way..." Jace's gentle teasing draws a genuine laugh from me. "But seriously, sweetheart. You don't have to have it all figured out. Just start with hello."

"Easy for you to say, Mr. Emotional Intelligence."

"Hey, I earned that emotional intelligence the hard way – primarily by spending years trying to figure out how to tell my best friend I was in love with her without ruining everything."

I turn to face him fully, my heart doing that familiar flip it does whenever he talks about us. "And how's that working out for you?"

"Still waiting to hear if I've ruined everything." His eyes crinkle at the corners when he smiles, and I resist the urge to trace the laugh lines with my finger.

"Not even close," I whisper, and his expression softens.

Before Jace can respond, headlights sweep across the driveway, and my breath catches. The familiar outline of Dad's old Ford pickup comes into view.

"That's him." My fingers tighten around my wine glass. "Jace, I–"

"Go." He kisses my temple. "I'll be right here if you need me."

My legs feel like lead as I make my way to the front door.

Ten years of memories flood through me – birthdays and graduations he missed, letters I couldn't bring myself to read for years, the slow process of forgiveness that brought us to this moment. I was fourteen when they took him away, still wearing braces and learning who I was. Now I'm twenty-four, and sometimes I catch glimpses

of that girl in the mirror, wondering if he'll recognize me at all.

When I open the door, time seems to stop.

My dad stands there, one hand raised to knock. His hair is more gray than brown now, swept neatly to the side in a way that suggests he made an effort for tonight.

He's wearing a pressed blue button-down shirt and khakis that hang a little loose on his frame – prison having stripped away the broad-shouldered build I remember from childhood. Deep lines map his face, especially around his eyes, but those eyes – my eyes – are exactly the same warm brown they've always been.

"Hi, Dad." My voice barely carries over the muffled sound of music and laughter from inside.

"Lindsay." He clears his throat, his hand dropping awkwardly to his side. "Thanks for having me tonight. I wasn't sure if–"

"I'm really glad you came." The words tumble out before he can finish, and I mean them with my whole heart.

We stand there for a moment, the weight of ten years stretching between us. Then, before I can overthink it, I step forward and wrap my arms around him.

He stiffens for a split second before hugging me back, and suddenly I'm surrounded by that familiar scent of pine and motor oil that somehow hasn't changed. Tears prick at my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall.

"You look beautiful," he says as we pull apart, his voice rough. "Just like your mom."

The comparison catches me off guard – no one's compared me to Mom in years.

"You think so?"

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"Same smile. Same way of holding yourself." He gestures at the house, where the sounds of the party drift out. "This place is something else. Your letters didn't do it justice."

"You got my letters?" Something warm blooms in my chest.

"Every single one." His smile is tentative but real. "They meant... they meant everything, sweet pea."

"Come inside?" I step back, holding the door wider. "There are some people I'd really like you to meet."

My dad nods, following me into the warmth of the party. I spot Jace immediately – he's been watching the door, trying to look casual about it and failing completely. He makes his way over to us, and my heart swells at how naturally he slides his hand into mine.

"Mr. Turner," Jace says, extending his free hand. "I'm Jace Clayton. It's really good to finally meet you."

"You're the one who owns this beautiful ranch?" Dad asks, shaking Jace's hand.

"Family ranch," Jace corrects with a smile. "My brothers and I run it together. Can I get you a drink? We've got quite the bar set up."

Before Dad can answer, a familiar whirlwind in emerald silk descends upon us.

"Lindsay!" Rachel exclaims, then catches herself, lowering her volume slightly. "Sorry, sorry, I just couldn't wait anymore." She turns to my father with her warmest teacher smile. "Mr. Turner, I'm Rachel, Lindsay's best friend and occasional voice of reason."

"When have you ever been the voice of reason?" I tease, grateful for how she's diffusing the tension.

"I'll have you know I am extremely reasonable," Rachel sniffs. "I simply choose not to be boring about it."

Dad actually laughs at that, and something tight in my chest begins to unwind. As Rachel draws him into a conversation about his drive up, I lean into Jace's side.

"You okay?" he murmurs against my hair.

"Yeah," I whisper back. "I really am."

The next few hours pass in a blur of introductions and conversations.

Dad gradually relaxes as the Clayton family welcomes him with their usual warmth. I catch glimpses of him throughout the night – discussing classic cars with Wyatt, getting drink recommendations from Brody, even laughing at one of Luke's terrible jokes.

Each sight feels like a gift, like pieces of a life I never thought I'd get to see.

There's still so much to work through, so many conversations we need to have, but tonight I can see the possibility of a future where my father is part of my life again. Not in the same way as before – we've both changed too much for that – but in a new way that might be just as meaningful.

As midnight approaches, the energy in the room shifts like a current through water.

Someone dims the lights, and I watch as couples gravitate toward each other, drawn by the magnetic pull of almost-midnight on New Year's Eve. Rachel, ever the director of moments, is herding people into position, her voice carrying over the music as she organizes the countdown.

My heart is already racing when I feel Jace's fingers brush the small of my back, his touch sending electricity through the thin fabric of my dress. "Come with me?"

He holds out his hand – those familiar calluses, the small scar on his thumb from fixing fences last summer, the gentle strength I've come to rely on. I slip my fingers into his without hesitation, letting him lead me through the French doors onto the back deck. The winter air hits my bare shoulders, crisp and clean and full of possibility. Behind us, the party sounds become muffled, like we're in our own bubble of time and space.

"TEN! NINE!"

Jace turns to face me, and my heart stumbles over itself at the way the light from inside catches his profile. He draws me closer, one hand settling on my waist while the other releases mine to reach into his pocket. The wool of his dress shirt is rough under my fingers as I steady myself against his chest.

"Remember the first time we met?" His voice is soft with memory. "You were sitting under that big oak tree by the lake, lost in your book. I was showing off on my bike like an idiot?—"

"EIGHT! SEVEN!"

"—and you looked up just in time to see me completely wipe out." A laugh bubbles

up in my chest at the memory, though my eyes are stinging with unexpected tears.

"You mean when you interrupted my perfectly peaceful afternoon by bleeding all over my favorite book?" I reach out and poke him in the ribs. "I still have that copy of *Pride and Prejudice*, you know. Complete with the bloodstains on page ninety-four."

His free hand trembles slightly as he pulls something small from his pocket, and I fight back a shiver that has nothing to do with the cold. "You kept it?"

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"SIX! FIVE! FOUR!"

"Of course I kept it." I watch as his expression shifts, something vulnerable and determined crossing his face. "I kept everything about that day."

"Lindsay." His voice is rough with emotion as he takes both my hands in his. "You've been my best friend for so long that I can't remember what life was like before you. You're the first person I want to talk to every morning and the last person I think about every night."

My heart thunders in my chest. After all these years of wondering, of hoping, of trying to convince myself that friendship was enough...

"You make me laugh harder than anyone else," he continues, "challenge me to be better, and understand me in ways no one else ever has." He takes a shaky breath. "I've been in love with you for years – probably since that first day when you rolled your eyes at me and then helped patch up my knee anyway."

"Jace." My voice breaks on his name as tears blur my vision. "I love you too. I think I always have."

The smile that breaks across his face is brighter than any I've ever seen. His hands tremble slightly as he releases mine, reaching into his pocket to pull out a small velvet box. My breath catches in my throat as he sinks to one knee.

He opens the box, revealing a delicate vintage ring that catches the soft glow from inside. "Even with a scraped knee and a bruised ego, I knew you were something

special. Something once-in-a-lifetime. Lindsay, will you?—"

"THREE! TWO!"

The world narrows to this moment – the solid warmth of him before me, the soft light reflecting in his eyes, the way his hand trembles slightly as he holds the ring. All the years of friendship, of unspoken feelings, of moments just like this one where we almost, almost...

"Marry me?" he whispers, the words both monumental and as natural as breathing. "Because I love you so much that sometimes I don't know what to do with it all."

"ONE! HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

"Yes," I breathe, pulling him to his feet. "Yes, yes, yes."

When Jace kisses me, it's like every romance novel I've ever read got it wrong. There are no fireworks, no symphonies – just this bone-deep feeling of coming home.

His lips are soft against mine, one hand tangling in my hair while the other still clutches the ring box between us. I taste mint and possibility and the slight sweetness of the champagne from earlier.

When we finally break apart, I realize it's started to snow – delicate flakes catching in Jace's dark hair like stars. His eyes are wide and wondering as he looks at me, like he can't quite believe this is real. With trembling fingers, he slides the ring onto my hand.

I know exactly how he feels.

Through the window, I catch a glimpse of my father watching us, his expression soft with something that looks like understanding.

Rachel and Jasmyn are pressed against the glass, both of them crying and grinning like they've been waiting for this moment even longer than I have. Luke and Wyatt are whooping and hollering, their excitement spilling out onto the deck, while Brody just stands there with that knowing smile of his, like he's had this planned in the family betting pool all along.

For the first time in more years than I can count, everything in my world feels perfectly, wonderfully right.

Jace taught me that cowboys know how to wait for the good things. He waited years, loving me quietly as my best friend. And tonight, under a Wyoming sky, I finally understand why – because some loves, especially those involving cowboys with patient hearts, were always meant to be.

The End