



Indigo: Blues (Indigo B&B 1)

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Category: Romance, Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: Anxiety ridden Sarah finds more than she bargained for in a no-nonsense rancher and baby cow.

Taking her best friend's advice, Sarah travels to Indigo B&B to distract herself from her upcoming tour. Instead, she comes face-to-face with Indigo's ruggedly alluring owner, Eli. The vision of strength and confidence, Eli evokes Sarah's envy as well as an undeniable attraction. Sarah wonders if there is more beneath Eli's façade and how deep both their demons go.

Eli wants nothing more than to fit into her tiny hometown. When singer-songwriter Sadie Bade shows up for two weeks at her new B&B, Eli fights her attraction, playing it off as star struck. As the days wear on, and Eli learns more about the enigmatic Sarah, she finds it impossible to keep up the pretense. But when her ex-girlfriend hints at getting back together, Eli is left with an equally impossible choice...what will she give up for Sarah?

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Chapter 1

The door on the west side of the hardware store always stuck. Eli kicked her boot against the bottom corner as she held the screen door propped open with her fist. It opened with a loud screech, stopping just short of slamming into the wall. The edge of the shelf Miss Mae had insisted her husband build made a good doorstop.

When she glanced up, Miss Mae's daughter leaned over the counter with a wicked grin on her face. "Well, look who the wind brought in."

Eli shook her head as she straightened her back. "I come into town often enough, Cady."

Cady snorted. "Not enough at all."

"Whatever."

"What do you need today?"

Eli sighed. "I need a bunch of stuff. You know, you're right, maybe it has been way too long since I've been into town if I need this much shit."

Cady chuckled and came around to the other side of the counter so she could help Eli. The hardware store was the only one in town, not that there was much in town, but it was one of the largest buildings outside of the schools and churches. It had two full levels of stuff for Eli to peruse. However, she'd still have to stop by the lumber yard to get the rest of the supplies on her list.

“What are you fixing up?” Cady asked as she took the list from Eli’s fingers.

Cady had been a good friend to her throughout the years despite their age difference. That was Eli’s favorite part about living in small towns. Age didn’t matter. Some of her friends were decades older than her, some a decade younger, but everyone in town knew who she was and had something to say to her—most often, something nice.

Eli’s eyes lit up. “I’ve got a guest coming.”

“For your bed-and-breakfast?”

“Yup.”

“Is this your first guest?”

“No.” Eli bristled. “I’ve had plenty. But the bathroom upstairs isn’t working right, so I figured I would fix it up before doing an overhaul on it.”

“You want to overhaul the bathroom right in the middle of calving season?”

“No.” Eli’s eyes widened. “I don’t want to at all, but I may not have a choice. I need a functional building for my guests.”

Cady didn’t answer right away. Instead, she walked over to one of the pale-yellow painted shelves toward the back of the building to find the nails and caulk and washers on Eli’s list. Eli followed close behind her.

It might have been fully a hardware store at one point, but with business down because people didn’t mind the sixty-mile drive to get cheaper prices at the big box stores, they’d had to make some adjustments. Eli was sure Miss Mae was turning in

her grave over it.

The front of the store was a boutique of sorts. It held items from local crafters and whatnot. The back of the first floor was where the hardware part remained. The basement, at the bottom of a ramp that was so damn steep it surely wasn't up to code, was a thrift shop for locals.

Since Cady had opted to make the changes, the store had thrived. Eli grabbed a hand basket by the counter and let Cady plop items in it for her. That was the full service Cady always gave her, or really anyone. There was barely any traffic, and Eli always wondered how they managed to stay afloat and thrive, but they did.

"Who's this guest you got coming?" Cady asked.

Small towns were known for being nosy and not respecting privacy, but Eli took pride in not letting her business get out. If a guest wanted to be known, they'd likely be walking around and exploring town. A lot of her guests wanted to get away and hide from people, especially if they were coming in the dead of winter.

"I don't know. Her name is Sarah, that's all I know."

"It's not right just having strangers come and stay at your house." Cady didn't skip a beat as she pulled down another box of washers to check and make sure it was the size Eli needed.

Eli's jaw clenched, and her heart raced. She'd had that very same argument with her parents a couple dozen times, but ultimately they had left her the house when they'd moved, and everything on the land—ranch and vet hospital—was her property and her business. She'd hired locals who had gone to vet school to come in and run the clinic since that had never been her interest, and she had converted the giant house she'd inherited into a B&B to earn some income while she worked the ranch, which

was her true passion.

Not answering Cady's criticizing remark, Eli bent down and picked up a toilet plunger. She could probably use one of those too, so she slid it into the basket as she waited for Cady to finish figuring out exactly what was on her list.

Her B&B had blossomed since she'd started it. She had weddings booked up through the summer every year for the past three years. Winter was when it was slow, but she didn't mind. It was good to have the time off from the constant drama of weddings. She could tend to her ranch, make sure all her calves were born and cared for, and bring in her wheat when harvest was done.

Trying to harvest milo while also running her B&B was exhausting, and she'd honestly thought more than once about hiring a second or third hand throughout the summer. Perhaps she should put out feelers to see if any of the local kids wanted to help—though it might be easier to get them to join in the harvest than help run her B&B.

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“Here you are.” Cady straightened to stand as she handed over the washers.

Eli took them, examined them, and dropped them into the basket along with the toilet plunger. “You going to the dance this weekend?”

“Gosh no.” Cady chuckled. “That’s for kids.”

Eli wrinkled her brow. “I ain’t no kid.”

“Eli, you’re a drop in the bucket compared to me.”

Eli shook her head. “Nah, Cady, you aren’t that old. But I’ll let you get out of the dance this time. Next time, though, I’ll expect to see you there.”

Cady laughed as she moved to the next aisle to grab the rest of Eli’s list. They chatted amicably until it was time for Eli to check out. She put it on her account, which she made sure to pay up at the end of every month as soon as they sent her the bill. When she left, Cady gave her a sweet smile, and she headed out the door to her old truck.

She’d brought in the farm truck that day, knowing she was stopping at the lumber yard for some dog food, some feed, and some wood. If she was really going to renovate that bathroom, she was going to need the supplies and she didn’t want to ruin her nice new truck with everything she had to bring back.

It took her less time at the lumber yard than at the hardware store. Cady was a talker, and Eli knew she needed the conversation. As soon as she was back on the highway and bumbling down it, topping her speed at fifty so her old truck wouldn’t fall apart,

Eli sorted through her mental to-do list.

As she pulled off the highway and onto the dirt road that would eventually take her home, Eli relaxed. Her new guest coming in was a bit of a mystery. She wasn't lying when she said business routinely dried up in the winter. There were months sometimes when no one wanted to stay there, but then again, who would want to travel to the her side of Kansas in the middle of winter if they weren't hunters.

She had cabins for hunters on her property, and those were usually booked clear through. She'd thought about opening the house to them in the winter to increase her profit margin, but she worried about the damage they would do to the facility, which she had tried to make more of an upscale but western style B&B, a small sort of dude ranch.

Eli turned down the second dirt road, her back tires spinning out. She always had to watch that curve. She'd seen far too many cars end up rolling in the ditch—kids hurt, or worse, dead. It was the classic make-out-and-party spot, had been since well before she was born, a tradition passed down from generation to generation.

When she'd been a kid, she'd steered clear of it, not only because she didn't like boys and it was hard to find another girl who liked girls in her neck of the woods, but also because it was far too close to her house for her comfort. If she had been caught in that position with a girl or boy, she would have had her ears cuffed in no time.

It took her twenty-five minutes to get home from town. It was a long drive, but it was one she loved to make every time. She loved the solitude of living on her own out in the fields—no one to bother her when she didn't want them to, and the quiet and peaceful air every morning when she woke up.

The four years she'd done in the city to get her degree were plenty enough for her. She didn't need any more than that. She'd gone to get her vet degree so she could

eventually take over her parents' place when they decided to retire, but when the time had come, she'd balked. She couldn't do it. While she loved animals, she didn't want to run a business treating them.

Eli pulled up outside of the large house and smiled. Home sweet home. It was the perfect place for her, and she would have it no other way. Eli wasn't going to leave any time soon. As she shut the rickety door of the truck, the old dog on the front porch lifted his head in greeting, but he didn't budge. He wouldn't until she took the truck out to check the cattle in a few hours.

Unloading the supplies she'd gotten, Eli put everything in its place before she went inside to make herself a quick lunch. She had two whole days to get the bathroom in working order before Sarah arrived at the house, and she would do her best to get it done. She was glad she had learned over her time growing up there how to fix things because it made running her business that much easier.

She had ordered the toilet months before, making sure she had enough cash on hand to do the renovations first. Eli set her supplies inside as she made her lunch. As soon as she was done, she headed into the small, tiled room and sat on the floor. It was going to be a doozy of a job. She'd never installed a toilet before, but she did at least know enough to drain the tank of the old one first.

She read the directions she had pulled up on her laptop. If someone on the Internet could do it, certainly she could. She might not have a degree or certification in plumbing, but she wasn't trying to re-plumb her entire house, just replace the toilet that had always had a small leak in it with a better, more water efficient one.

Every time she had to stop to take a break and read more instructions, Eli felt as though she was in over her head. She should have done it over the Christmas break when her father was in town. It would have been far easier with his help than doing it on her own, but she'd insisted they relax while there rather than helping her fix stuff

she should have taken care of before they arrived.

Instead, since she'd barred him from any work in the house, her dad had taken to doing her morning chores for her. He truly missed his cows. She'd known that was going to happen the moment they'd told her they were retiring out of state to the city. Her father had always been a farmer, and it was impossible to take the farmer out of the man. But to make her mother happy, he had gone. She'd lived in Kansas for more than thirty years while raising their family and running their business. It was her turn to live where she wanted. At least that had been how he'd explained it away.

Still, Eli knew if she wanted a break, she could always call on him to join in and take over for a week while she left to go on vacation. And she had taken that week to sleep in until eight every morning, enjoying watching the sun rise from her bedroom rather than from the fields outside. Eli settled onto the floor, her legs surrounding either side of the toilet as she waited for the water to drain. The next step, after she undid all the bolts and disconnected the lines, was going to be the hard one to do. A second pair of hands, legs, and back would certainly come in handy. Too bad she was on her own with no one else in sight.

Eli stood up and brushed her palms on her dirty jeans. She stretched her back and stared down at the toilet. "Okay, you fool, I've got this. I can do this."

Grunting, Eli shuffled into place so her feet were planted on either side of the basin. She reached down and around the bowl. "I can do this."

With a heave, Eli pulled upward, using the leverage from her knees to give her a good go, but the toilet didn't budge. Grunting again, she stood up and then bent down to try one more time. When it didn't move again, Eli kicked at it with her shoe.

"Fucker."

The banging on her door surprised her. Cocking her head to the side, Eli left all her equipment on the floor as she left the room. The pounding started again. Eli frowned as she headed down the stairs and rounded the banister at the bottom to get to the front door. She pulled open the large wooden door her dad had handcrafted for weeks on end in the barn whenever he'd had a few minutes' spare time.

“Bill?”

Bill's balding head and scruffy face shown through the screen door at her. He gave her a stare and shook his head.

“Don't tell me they got into your field again,” Eli muttered.

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“They did.”

“What even? I just checked the fence two days ago.”

He shrugged. “You know where they always be getting in. You seen the damage they did to it the last time.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Eli closed her eyes. “I’ll be out in a minute to get them. Just let me grab a jacket. How many this time?”

“Just three.”

“Well, that’s something, I guess.”

Eli stepped behind the door to grab her heavy jacket and changed out of her tennis shoes into her muck boots before she headed out the door to join Bill. She didn’t bother locking it as she scratched her head and moved toward her truck.

“Hey, Bill, you know anything about toilets?”

“Why?”

“I need help lifting one. Or two. Just two. I can do the rest.”

He grinned at her as he leaned against the door of his nice new truck. “Renovating?”

“A bit. Getting rid of the leaky toilet my dad installed when I was two.”

Laughing, Bill slapped the side of his truck before he opened the door. “I’ll help you with the toilet if you fix me some dinner.”

“Deal!”

He jumped into his truck just as Eli hopped into hers. It was going to take her probably at least thirty minutes to round up the three cows, assuming they cooperated. If they didn’t cooperate, it could be the longest afternoon of her life and she wouldn’t make any progress on the toilet.

She headed down to the fence line where they always seemed to get out and parked her truck in the middle of the field. Eli slammed the door shut and glared at the cattle lowing around in the pasture on the right side of the land before she shifted her glare to the ones who were on her neighbor’s land, eating the wheat that was beginning to sprout.

“Bailey, Cassie, Donovan, get over here! Now!” she shouted, to no avail, because they were cattle and didn’t give a crap about what she said to them.

She trudged through the mud to the fence line and put her hands on her hips as she shouted at them again. She knew Bill would join up with her if it took her longer than an hour to get a handle on her own cattle, but the ridiculousness of the situation weighed on her. These three always got through the fence, no matter how many times she repaired it. She was going to have to completely rebuild that section and perhaps add in a few extra things to make it less enticing to jump.

Eli planted her hands on the wood and shouted. “Get your butts back over here!”

They didn’t move as they enjoyed the fresh greens of the winter wheat just poking its head through the soil.

“Bugger.” She lifted her body over the fence and let out a groan as she landed on both feet on the other side. Looking over her shoulder at her own truck and land, Eli moved swiftly and with a determined step. She was done waiting for them to come back on their own.

“Bailey, get your butt back here, right now!”

The cow glanced in her direction and went back to eating. Eli shook her head as she charged forward and clapped her hands. That got Bailey’s attention. She shoved at the cow and pushed her toward the fence line. Donovan wasn’t too far off, and as soon as Bailey started moving, he moved. She had the two of them over the fence in no time, but Cassie was going to be another issue.

She was the stubborn one of the three for sure. Eli gritted her teeth as she was determined to get her cattle over the fence and then repair it so it would at least keep them contained for the week until she could figure out a more permanent solution.

“Hey!” she shouted loudly at Cassie. “Cas! Get your butt home. Now!”

Bill pulled up on the other side of Cassie and stayed in his truck as he watched Eli work. She moved from side to side as she coaxed Cassie toward the fence. With loud clapping, she finally convinced Cassie to jump it and go into her field. Sighing, Eli headed for Bill’s truck as he rolled down the window to speak with her.

“Sorry, Bill.”

“I know you’ve tried to fix it, Eli, but you need to find a more permanent solution.”

She groaned. “I know. It’s now top of the list before the toilet.”

He chuckled. “I’ll help you do it after morning chores.”

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“Really?”

“Yes. Now keep them home.”

“Will do!” She gave him a mock salute before she jumped the fence and rummaged in the bed of her pickup.

It took her almost an hour to rig up a temporary fix, but when she stepped away and stared at it, she was pleased with her handiwork. It would do until she could come up with a better solution. She had her work cut out for her to keep everything running, but it was all worth it. She had never been happier than to be working for herself and making her own money.

Sliding into the cab of the truck, Eli shoved the vehicle into gear and headed for the house. She needed to figure out what the directions were on the toilet before Bill showed up in the morning to do it all for her. She loved him, had grown up living next to him, grew up with his kids—his daughter was her best friend—but she didn’t want him to think she was taking advantage of his kindness or his knowledge. She could easily do it all on her own if she needed to, and she wanted to prove it to him—and to herself for that matter.

Eli had grown up in this small western Kansas town, and even though she was an adult, she always felt like she had to prove she was twenty-eight and not eighteen, or even eight for that matter. Bill had been able to keep up with that for the most part, but then again, she’d gone to school with his daughter. The rest of the town still thought of her as the kid who hung out at the vet clinic one too many nights a week.

As soon as she was back at the house, she started the casseroles for the hunters and cleaned up what she needed to of the mess in the upstairs bathroom. Two days and she'd have to have it ready. Sarah was due to arrive, her only guest in months, and someone who was staying—oddly enough—for two whole weeks. She was curious about a woman who could take that much time off, but until they met and Eli got to know her and just what she was taking a break from, she was left to wonder.

With dinner cooking and her mess cleaned up, Eli plopped onto the couch in the common room and closed her eyes for a few brief minutes. She was about to head straight into a long busy season, and it was already taking a toll on her. Calving season was not for the faint of heart, and this year she was short-handed, meaning she'd be doing more of the middle-of-the-night checks than normal. She could do it, though. She'd have to. She didn't want there to be another option.

Chapter 2

The album had been finished months ago, but every time she heard the released single on the radio, she cringed. Sarah wanted to go into the studio and tweak it—the curse she had grown up with rearing its ugly head again. It turned her into an anxious perfectionist who strove to do the best and make everything perfect—which yes, she knew was unattainable.

Sarah paced in the tiny apartment she rented. She only spent half the year there at most. The rest of the time she was on tour or out recording or visiting family since she missed most everything that could be considered a special event. Her twin sister hadn't taken kindly to her missing their birthday or her nieces' birthdays every year. Unfortunately, there was little Sarah could do to change that situation.

She stopped at her window and put her hands on her hips. For some reason, she could not settle. She needed the break, and she knew she was about to get a full two weeks of nothing other than rest—well, as soon as she could manage to rest after she got

there—which was the point of the inordinately long break. She'd been planning a vacation of some sort for weeks, but she really should have taken it sooner after finishing recording.

Sighing, Sarah plopped onto her couch and threw her hand over her eyes. It was three in the damn morning, and she couldn't settle enough to sleep. Nothing had helped her in the past either. She was notorious for pulling all-nighters, especially when writing or on tour, but most people didn't know she also pulled them regularly when she was home by herself.

She grabbed her phone and twisted it between her fingers as she debated. Kara would likely be asleep, which irked her only because she needed something to do, otherwise she was going to go crazy. The bars in Dallas were shut down for the night, the streets had emptied out, but it wasn't like she could just go anywhere either. Sarah always preferred to have someone with her to help get her out of those awkward conversations of “Hey, are you Sadie Bade?”

Sighing, she bit her lip and gnawed on it, knowing the habit she had attempted to break for decades wasn't going away anytime soon. She was a forty-one-year-old country singer, still living on her own, with only a handful of true friends. Bouncing her heel up and down rapidly against the soft rug on her living room floor, she groaned. She was failing at being an adult in so many ways.

Sarah tossed her phone onto the couch cushion next to her and groaned again before folding herself onto the couch, plopping her face into the pillow, and half screaming. She didn't want to disturb her neighbors, but at the same time, she needed the release from all the pent-up tension. It was nearly becoming too much for her to handle, and the last time that happened—well, the last time that happened, it was bad.

Rolling onto her back and staring at her ceiling, Sarah fumbled around for the cellphone she had abandoned minutes before. She grabbed it and sent an SOS to

Kara, texting, “You awake?”

She rubbed the heels of her hands over her eyes and face and closed her eyes as the energy she was so desperate to get rid of filtered through her body and made her skin crawl with jitters like she’d drunk two pots of coffee in the span of ten minutes. It took ten minutes, but her phone buzzed a response.

“I am now.”

Grinning, Sarah gnawed on her lip some more as she typed out a response. “Can’t sleep.”

“No shit, asshole.”

Kara’s response made her laugh.

“Go on vacation already.”

Sarah paused and pursed her lips. Kara wasn’t wrong. That had been the entire point of the trip, the one Kara had insisted she take—the one Kara had practically planned everything for. The silence of the apartment echoed at her in a way she hadn’t expected. Normally Sarah was surrounded by noise, but it was in the quiet moments in the middle of the night that she found she could think most clearly.

Staring at the phone, she tried to come up with some sort of snarky reply, but words failed her. “I leave in the afternoon.”

“Leave now.”

“What?” Sarah said out loud before texting the same thing to Kara. She wasn’t going to sit in the airport for hours doing nothing while she waited for her stupid plane to

get there. No, that was just stupid.

“Leave. Now.”

Shaking her head in confusion, Sarah responded, “Like right now?”

“Yes. Leave now. I’m sure you’re packed already, and I don’t want to listen to you all night. I want actual sleep. You need this, so go. Drink an energy drink, call a ride, and leave now.”

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Stunned, Sarah stared at the phone in her hand. Could it really be that simple? Could she start her vacation a few hours earlier than she had intended? She checked to see if she could upgrade her flight to an earlier one, but that was impossible. There were literally two flights in and out of the airport each day, and she had no other options except to just sit in another airport for hours. Maybe it would be better that way because she would feel like she had gone somewhere.

Kara knew her well enough to know she was packed. She always was, to be fair. She never knew when she was going to be home for long, so her suitcase always sat packed but open in a corner. With her lip pulled tight between her teeth, she wondered if she really could just up and leave.

“Are you serious?”

She knew Kara was fed up with her insecurities, but truthfully, Kara was the only one she felt she could share them with. At one time it had been her sister, but the past few years had only put distance between them in ways Sarah couldn't explain.

“Yes, and if I get one more text that isn't 'okay I'm leaving,' I'm coming over there and taking you myself.”

“All right. All right. I'm leaving. I guess.”

“You guess?”

“I'm leaving.”

Chuckling, Sarah stared at her ceiling for another full minute before she rolled off her couch and planted her feet on the plush carpet below. She wiggled her toes through the strands before standing and running a hand through her shoulder length hair, tugging lightly at the knots before pulling out the always-present tangles.

“Okay, I’m leaving.” With a breath, Sarah moved to her bedroom and shut the lid on her suitcase, zipping it. She dragged socks onto her feet, shoved them into her boots, and then stared at herself in the mirror. She was a sight. No one would recognize her with the wild look in her eyes, but being careful, she pulled on a loose beanie and hooded jacket, putting her sunglasses in her pocket.

She put in a request for a ride before she grabbed her guitar. Her heart raced. She had no idea what she was doing. It would be nearing five in the morning before she arrived at the airport, and her flight wasn’t for another six hours, but Kara was right. She needed this. She needed it more than she’d realized. With a heavy sigh, Sarah went outside to wait for the car to arrive.

As soon as she was through security and had her printed boarding passes stashed in the back of her pocket, Sarah sat heavily at her gate, needing to be with people for a few hours before isolating for two weeks. The hot cup of tea was balanced on the chair next to her. She’d kept her guitar with her, never trusting anyone with it although she wasn’t going to have much of a choice once they boarded the plane.

It took her an hour to get up the courage and boredom, but Sarah eventually leaned down to her guitar, pulled it out, and strummed while she checked to make sure all her strings were tuned up. She hummed lightly to one of her favorite lullabies her mom had sung when they were kids. She had no idea who wrote it, what the name of it was even, or if her mom had just made it up out of nowhere. She’d never asked, too scared to ruin the magic.

People watched her carefully, eyeing her up and down, before moving on. She sat

with one leg crossed over the other, her guitar louder as her confidence grew and as she focused on the music, not her surroundings. Her songs changed from modern rock to pop to country to bluegrass, and everything in between. People stopped and stood by her for a while, took video of her, no doubt to post to their own social media pages. Her publicist would either eat it up or hate it. She didn't care. She was on vacation.

Closing her eyes, Sarah listened to the music in her body, the vibrations from the guitar against her chest, the feel of the strings against the tips of her calloused fingers, the edge of her thumb that had had so many blisters over the years from forgetting her pick or just refusing to use one.

Her voice got louder while her disregard for the unexpected quiet but enthusiastic audience surrounded her. Closing her eyes briefly, she opened them again to see the clock on the wall. It was about time for her to stop, but she wanted to finish her song. Her voice carried around the wide-open room, the acoustics awful since the building was designed to dampen sound, not amplify it.

When her voice rang out on the last note, a round of applause went up. Blushing, Sarah dipped her head in thanks and settled her guitar into its case. She knew people would want to come and talk to her, and she welcomed it. While she enjoyed the silence at night sometimes, most often she enjoyed the chatter of other people. She was surrounded by others so often that being alone scared the shit out of her. After signing autographs, she begged off and headed toward her gate. It wouldn't be long until her vacation really kicked off.

As she sat in her seat, Sarah closed her eyes, put on her headphones, set her phone to play random songs, and fell into the world of music she knew and loved so well. Oftentimes her escape was music more than anything else, but every time before a tour and after an album release, music felt more like a chore. She missed moments of bursting out in song when it didn't mean anything, when music flowed through her

heart to her fingers and through her lips into the world around her. She had to find that again.

* * *

The plane took longer than she had expected because of delays, and by the time her second flight landed, it was eleven at night and she was done with being awake and traveling. Sarah had been up for the better part of two days, and her eyes drooped. She'd thought she could get an energy drink or at the very least coffee at the airport, but she wasn't even sure she could call that an airport.

There was one terminal. Literally one. There were no restaurants inside the building, no vending machines functioning properly to give her sweet caffeinated elixir. She would know; she had tried all of them. Sarah gritted her teeth as she waited in line at the one single car rental place.

She stifled a yawn as they filled out the paperwork and gave her the keys to the car. She smiled down at them, hoping she could find someplace open in town that could at least give her enough caffeine to make it to the elusive bed-and-breakfast Kara had found for her. She'd been hesitant to try it. It was a fairly new one, but it was out in the middle of nowhere, over an hour's drive from the airport. It offered seclusion, which was exactly what she had been wanting. She needed to think, and to think, she needed the quiet, not just the quiet of the few hours in the middle of the night, but quiet for days on end.

She threw her suitcase into the trunk of the car and settled her guitar in carefully next to it. "I've got this."

Her phone buzzed, and she grinned when she saw Kara's name light it up. "You've got this."

Snorting, Sarah texted back quickly and slipped behind the wheel. She knew she was going to look out of place wherever she was going. In the city she might be able to fit in a bit, but out in the country? She would stand out like a sore thumb—another reason why she wanted the seclusion of a bed-and-breakfast that had nothing around it.

Indigo Ranch and B&B told Sarah absolutely nothing. Its website had been nice but vague. There was a listing of things to do in the neighboring towns, most of it not interesting to Sarah in the least. There was a larger list of what she could do in the countryside, a lake nearby or a weird rock formation. She wasn't sure. She'd only skimmed the literature.

She'd seen the availability of six rooms and the max occupancy for said six rooms. She'd checked religiously over the weeks after she booked it to make sure no one else stayed there while she did and had even debated renting the other rooms herself to guarantee she would be alone. Sarah stepped on the gas pedal and pulled away from the airport. It was an hour drive. She could do this.

She found the highway readily enough. After thirty minutes of driving on it, she turned onto a second, less kept highway. The asphalt clearly hadn't been done up or patched in years. Her tiny little sedan hit each pothole like it was a crater in the moon telling her to go home. Her heart raced as nerves ignited in her belly. This was a bad idea. She couldn't do two weeks on her own in a strange place. Kara had refused to come with her the multiple times she had begged, and she didn't really have anyone else she could ask.

Sarah shook her head. She was stronger than this shit. Biting her lip, Sarah pushed the gas pedal a little harder and sped up until she hit the next pothole, and then she slowed down again. She muttered, "That was stupid."

Taking it slower and more carefully, she cringed when the first bolt of lightning

flashed across the sky. They had flown through that. That had been what had slowed them down, and it seemed as though the nasty storm she'd already weathered once had caught up with her again. Sarah gripped the steering wheel a little tighter.

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It had been years since she had driven a car, and it had been even longer since she'd driven a vehicle during a rainstorm, but that lightning bolt had been close. One loud, hard thump in her chest told her she was going to have to start some deep breathing exercises to make it through.

Another bolt of lightning jolted down to the ground, this time a whole lot closer than before. Sarah strained her eyes to see the road in front of her, but it was pitch black outside, so dark she wasn't sure she'd ever been someplace quite so blanketed in black. With her heart in her throat, tightening her airway, she tensed her fingers on the steering wheel, stiffened her back and shoulders, and focused on what she could see of the thin yellow line in the center of the road because there was no white line on the outside.

"I've got this. I've got this," she muttered to herself repeatedly as a chant, forgetting the words as soon as they slipped from her lips.

The car jolted as she hit something. She couldn't be sure if it was another pothole or a small animal. Her mind was elsewhere and couldn't decipher whether the car had gone up or down when it hit the bump. Her stomach twisted hard, causing a sharp pain in her side, a pain Sarah was eerily familiar with.

Glancing at her phone, she checked to see how much longer she had to go, and she noticed her battery was nearly dead. Her charger was buried in the suitcase in the trunk of her car, and she was not pulling over on the side of the road in an unknown area of the country with a storm literally on top of her.

"Deep breaths."

Drawing in on a ten count and blowing out on a ten count, Sarah readjusted her hands on the steering wheel and tried again to calm her racing heart. It was worse than if she'd had a whole case of energy drinks in one day.

Her phone slowed its tracking of her vehicle, and she cursed under her breath. The feeling in the pit of her stomach that had grown throughout the day of traveling took over, and she knew something bad was going to happen. She had no doubt of it. Her phone blinked twice before it cut out. Grabbing it sharply, Sarah tried to turn it back on, but it was dead as a doorknob.

“Fuck me.”

Then she laughed. If Kara had been there, which she should have been, she would have said “gladly,” and then they would have avoided the awkward friends-don’t-have-sex tension before Sarah skipped out of the conversation as fast as she could.

Sarah tried to remember the directions she had attempted to memorize before leaving the airport. She slowed down as she waited for the next county road to pass her by so she could read the sign, but it seemed like it was never going to show up.

She bounced her left foot up and down on the floor of the car as her nerves kicked into overdrive. She was lost. She knew she was. It wasn’t going to matter if she spent the next hour driving or the next twenty-four, she was never going to find Indigo, and the entire trip was a disaster and a mistake.

She drove another thirty minutes before she turned down a road she hoped was the right one, but she couldn’t be sure. She didn’t see a town or anything, and the directions on Indigo’s website had said she’d have to drive through a town before getting to the right street, but she’d been driving forever already and must have passed it without knowing. There was nothing out in this part of the country anyway.

Rain came down in buckets, the windshield wipers furiously flinging back and forth just trying to keep up as the water poured. The lightning was so close that every time it smacked against the ground, Sarah jolted with a scare. Her nerves were done.

She moved slowly because the wet dirt road was a struggle to drive through. The back of her car fishtailed so many times she lost count. Breathing became harder as she inched forward through the mud. The ground was soaked, no doubt. Flashes of lightning were the only thing giving her vision into what lay ahead, and she finally saw lights on a house. She was so close. Relief flooded through her. There was Indigo. She could do this, only a little bit farther.

Chapter 3

It wasn't until an hour after the expected arrival time of her guest that Eli started to get a little worried. The storm had come in, fully unexpected and out of nowhere, and it was a doozy. She really wasn't looking forward to doing her nighttime calving checks in the middle of that.

Eli stared out the front bay window of her house turned B&B and let out a long sigh. She hoped her guest wasn't a no-show—that would not make her day any better. It'd already been a rough start losing one of her calves and finishing with the toilet project that seemed to come from the depths of hell just to annoy her.

She'd finally managed to finish it up, with Bill's expert-level help. She knew he'd be calling her dad to tell him all about it in their regular Friday chat. Eli groaned. There was no doing anything in her hometown without her parents finding out about it. She'd learned that the hard way when she was a teenager and had gone drinking—multiple times, because she never was a quick learner.

Lightning struck again, close enough to shake the house. Her guest was now two hours later than expected. She was either seriously lost, which was the most likely

scenario, or she was abandoning ship and not coming.

Taking a chance, Eli stole into her office hidden in the back corner of the house. It was her hideaway from everything. Anytime her guests got to be too much, or she needed a moment of calm, she went there, locked the door, and closed her eyes to the outside world. Tonight, however, was different, and she was on a mission.

She turned on her computer, hoping the lightning didn't hit close enough to kill it, and searched through her files until she found her guest's name and contact number. Lifting the landline phone she kept in her office for times like these, she dialed. She hoped the number she was calling was a cellphone, but she also hoped Sarah was in a part of her drive that had actual cellphone coverage, because that was about as rare as could be up in their neck of the woods.

When it went straight to voicemail, Eli grimaced and cursed inwardly. She wrote down the number on a scrap piece of paper so she could try again in twenty minutes, hoping Sarah had moved into a service area. Turning off her computer, Eli went to the living area to stare out the large window.

She'd brought what animals she needed to into the barn, but any babies born that night would have to stick it out unless they needed serious medical attention or were abandoned. It happened. Sometimes her cows didn't want to be mama cows and had nothing to do with their young after they were born.

Eli rubbed the edge of her thumb over her lower lip and let out a hiss of breath. No matter what happened, it was going to be a long night. Hell, it was a long few months of calving, where she thrived on coffee, coffee, and more coffee.

She called the number one more time, and again it went straight to voicemail. Eli didn't wait much longer. She left a message with her cell phone number and jumped in her truck. She would do her midnight rounds before she headed out to look for her

guest. They usually took three turns too soon because it looked so similar to her own turnoff, so she'd check there. But first, her cows.

The old farm truck rattled over the uneven the ground, but she drove slowly and shone her lights through her fields. It took about an hour to drive through them and get back to the house.

There was still no sign of Sarah. Eli had left a note on the door just in case, like she always did when she was out and guests were supposed to arrive. Max, the old springer who hung out on her porch day in and day out, still laid calmly on the wooden planks, barely moving as the thunder raged.

That told Eli the storm wasn't as bad as it looked. Max was always good for a weather forecast. Eli spun through her living area and into the kitchen. She grabbed a cold bottle of water and switched out her keys.

Slipping into the newer truck she reserved for going to town, she shoved it into gear and headed for the main road. It wasn't the highway—that was another three miles down—but the main road was where most of her guests got lost on their attempt to get to Indigo.

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She took a sharp left, having memorized everything about the road to her house. She knew where to veer to the north when the rains swept up like this and when to gun it in the winter with the ice and the snow. Today, she gunned it and veered to the north. She had no patience for anything—if Sarah was in trouble, Eli wanted to make sure she was okay.

One of the most interesting parts about owning and running Indigo was the people who would come stay. She enjoyed getting to know them for the short time they visited with her. She was a natural born extrovert who loved chatting with new faces, but she was stuck in a town with faces she saw every day, and while she longed for the newness, she certainly enjoyed the mundane and routine more than adventures to big cities.

Sarah had been nearly a last-minute booking, made only a few weeks before. Winter was her off-season, so she'd been surprised to see the two-week booking, but whoever it was must have needed the vacation. Sarah reserved just for herself, which was also rare for Eli to see. Mostly it was newlywed couples or couples in desperate need of a break from the norm. Most were from within a few hours away, but occasionally she'd get people from farther out.

Eli had worked hard to build up her reputation in the last two years, and she knew word was finally getting around about her. She rubbed her hand against her forehead as she pulled up to the intersection at the main road. No one was there. No lights shining in the pitch black, nothing to indicate anyone who was lost.

Eli turned onto the next dirt road and moved toward the highway. She would go there and then to town if she had to, but she didn't want to be gone too long. At least her

house phone would forward to her cell if Sarah called, asking for directions or to tell her she wasn't coming—which wouldn't surprise Eli. She'd had her fair share of cancellations for this and that.

It took her twenty minutes to get to the highway, and the thunder and lightning storm wasn't letting up. Her windshield wipers flew back and forth and barely kept up with the rain as it pounded around her. At least the fields would get a good soaking to help with the crops. She had taken a risk and planted some winter wheat this year to test out if she wanted to farm as well as ranch. Her father had called it a joke, but she was determined to prove him wrong.

Bill, however, defended her in one of their calls. When she'd found out about that from her mom, she was beyond happy. Bill had been over more and more, checking in on things and helping in ways he hadn't ever done before. It was nice to see him and to have the silent support he offered. She was pretty sure it was also because he was missing his daughter, but hey, she'd take what she could get.

When she reached the highway, there were only a few cars here and there. She stopped and pulled up to the main paved road, waiting and watching. Every vehicle that passed she either recognized or looked like they knew where they were going. With a sigh, Eli pulled out onto the asphalt and turned toward town. She hadn't wanted to make the drive that day, but it looked like it was going to happen one way or another.

* * *

Sarah's heart hadn't stopped pounding in near an hour. If anything, she could count this as her exercise for the week. Laughing at her stupid joke, she drove toward the lights on the house that she hoped was Indigo. She could barely see them in the dark, but she knew they were there.

The back wheels of her car slid in the mud, and she had to hope she didn't go off the edge of the road, but there was nothing to tell her where to go and where not to. No lines, no railing. Nothing.

She was farther down the road than she had expected, and it took her twice the amount of time to get there because she was driving at a snail's pace. She turned into the driveway, glad to see there was an open gate with wooden poles over each side. She'd been told they would be there, which meant she must be in the right place.

Sarah relaxed. She was finally at the house. Her nerves—already completely frayed—pulled together slightly, enough that she hoped she'd make sense when she showed up. She pulled up along the front of the long porch. The house was gorgeous, it was white and old, and stood out from the dark because of the lights shining on it.

Narrowing her eyes as she reached forward to turn her car off, Sarah groaned. It wasn't the right house. This house looked nothing like the one in the pictures on the website she had stared at for hours. Her anxiety picked up again. She was completely lost, and she wasn't ever going to find where she needed to be, and she was going to end up sleeping the entire night in her car before she gave up and just took a plane home.

Clenching and unclenching her fists, Sarah shook her head. No. She would go up to the door, pray someone was home without a shotgun in hand, and ask if they knew where Indigo was. She just had to get the courage up to walk to the house and knock on the door and not think she would die in the process. That was it. Nothing else.

With the car turned off, she wrapped her fingers around the door handle and shoved it open. Her heart skittered as she jumped from the vehicle and raced toward the covered porch. By the time she got to it, she was already drenched from head to her shoulders. Shaking off the excess water she could, which Sarah knew was useless, she marched toward the front door of the house. She looked way more confident than

she was.

Sarah searched for a doorbell, but she didn't find one. Instead, she formed a fist and knocked hard, hoping she was heard over the raging storm outside. There were lights on in the windows, so she at least knew someone was up. When the door opened, a middle-aged man with a blue plaid shirt, a belly that would rival a nine-month pregnant woman, and a shotgun in his hand stood before her.

"Sorry," Sarah said, her voice trembling. "I'm a little lost, and I was hoping you could help."

"It's two in the morning," he replied.

"I know. My flight was delayed, and then the storm." She pointed over her shoulder at it. "And then my phone died. It's just...it's been a mess. But I'm just trying to find my way to Indigo B&B."

"There isn't a place around here called that."

"What?" Sarah's eyes widened, and she turned to look out into the night. From the brightly lit porch, she couldn't see anything except the barely-there reflection of the light off her white car.

"Who is it, Dwaine?" A woman with a robe wrapped around her, long gray hair braided, and sleep in her eyes walked up next to him. Sarah was about to speak when she was interrupted. "Come in! Get out of the rain, sweetie."

Sarah's lips parted. She wasn't sure she wanted to walk into a stranger's house with no one knowing where the hell she was, but did she really have an option? With every hair on her neck standing straight, she stepped between Dwaine and the doorframe. He had barely moved enough to let her in.

“You said you were looking for Indigo B&B?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Sarah suddenly remembered all those manners she’d been taught growing up in the south.

Dwaine stood staunchly by the door as the woman led Sarah into the kitchen and sat her at the table. Sarah gnawed on her lip, her stomach twisting more than she thought it could, and she was pretty sure if it didn’t ease up soon, she was going to lose the last of the pretzels she’d had on the plane.

“My name is Ginger. That’s my husband, Dwaine. He was just going out to check on the calves.” Ginger gave Dwaine a pointed look, and he hesitated before he turned to put his gun down and grabbed his jacket.

“Calves?”

“It’s calving season, sweetie. You’re not from around here, are you?”

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“Dallas,” Sarah answered, not sure why she was answering. “I’m Sarah. Do you know where I’m supposed to be going?”

“I think that’s Elijah’s new place, isn’t it, Dwaine?”

“Who knows what that girl’s doing.”

“Girl?” Sarah asked, lost to the conversation.

“Elijah Wilson, sweetie.” Ginger patted Sarah’s hand gently. “Do you want some tea? Goodness, you’re drenched to the bone.”

“It’s raining pretty hard, ma’am.” For some reason, the tension in her stomach eased. Normally it would have been the opposite, but something about Ginger’s demeanor calmed her in ways she hadn’t felt since she’d met Kara. Jesus, she was going to have call Kara and tell her all of this as soon as her phone was charged enough to turn on. She’d laugh her ass off.

Ginger got up and poured Sarah a glass of iced tea, and when Sarah took a sip, she had to work hard not to grimace. It literally looked like dirty water, and it tasted like it, too. She set the cup on the table, hoping she didn’t have to drink the entire thing before they told her where she was going.

Dwaine stepped outside and came back in suddenly. “You drove here in that?”

“Yes?” Sarah asked.

“Surprised you made it past the creek.”

“The what?”

“If it wasn’t filled up when you drove here, I’m sure it’s filled up now.”

“You’ll need a truck to get out, sweetie.” Once again, Ginger’s hand was on hers.

“Oh.”

Ginger gave her a small smile. “I’ll call Elijah and see if she can come out here and round you up, all right?”

“Sure.”

Sarah felt helpless. Never in her life had she been the one to need rescuing—at least, she hoped she wasn’t. She hated being such a damsel in distress and had worked for years to avoid any image of that at all. As Ginger moved toward the phone nailed to the wall, Sarah gave herself a moment to look around the room.

The kitchen was quaint and small. Dwaine had finally left the house, and she was alone with Ginger, which put her way more at ease. As Ginger talked into the phone, Sarah gnawed on her lip and reached for the tea. Better to drink dirty water than to gnaw so much on her lip that it was raw by dawn.

She was halfway through the glass when Ginger sat down with her, a smile on her lips that Sarah couldn’t read. Reading people was not her strong suit, which was also a reason she pretty much stuck to home and what she knew when she could and why she kept the people around her very close.

“Elijah said she’ll be right over. She was already in town looking for you, I guess.”

“How far is town from here?”

“Ten minutes. We’re south. Her place is about twenty minutes northwest of town.”

“Oh, so I’m really not where I thought I was.”

Ginger chuckled and shook her head. “No, sweetie. Sorry to say you’re not. You’re lucky it’s calving season, otherwise we wouldn’t have been awake.”

“Lucky for me,” Sarah muttered as she twisted the glass between her fingers. She could only hope she wouldn’t have to wait too much longer for the elusive Elijah to show up. The tension that had eased from her belly didn’t build back up, but it also knew wasn’t easing any further. She’d just have to wait and see how the next two weeks went. She could always leave.

* * *

The call from the Hargraves had been a surprise, but Eli was glad she’d answered when it came in. She had been worried for a moment that something had happened to Dwaine and she’d have to help Mrs. Hargrave with the farm. She’d helped them out before when he’d been in the hospital for surgery once or twice, and while she didn’t mind doing it short term, she didn’t want to do it permanently.

Eli drove as fast as she felt was safe through the rain and down to the turnoff. The Hargraves lived ten minutes south of town, which was far beyond where she thought anyone would get lost. Their road only had their house on it, which meant it was easy to find in the pitch black.

The storm overhead was passing when she turned onto their dirt road. The rain eased up so it was a gentle fall, and as she turned east, she could see the lightning off in the distance rather than right on top of them. She’d have to be sure to check on all her

cattle, but at least it was a rainstorm instead of a snowstorm, although the temperatures outside were near freezing. If it dropped much lower, they'd be dealing with ice in the morning.

She hit the creek bed that ran through their property and gunned her truck through it. The water splashed up then disappeared into the pitch-black night. Exhaustion settled in on her shoulders, and she closed her eyes briefly, wishing she was in her bed and sleeping. Rather, she was going to grab her newest guest and take her to the house before immediately setting back out to check on her cows again. Calving season was a bitch.

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Pulling up to the house, Eli parked next to what she assumed was the rental car. It was a small white thing, and she knew instantly she was going to be driving the two of them home and returning for the rental later. No way was it going to make it to Indigo. Eli put her truck in neutral and left it running as she dashed up to the front door of the house.

She didn't bother knocking. Instead, Eli pushed open the door and called out, "Mrs. Hargrave?"

"Heavens, Elijah, call me Ginger."

Grinning, Eli moved into the kitchen where she'd heard Mrs. Hargrave. Giggling, she stepped inside and rubbed her hands on her jeans with a shake of her head and a squint of her eyes. "Not a chance, Mrs. Hargrave. I had you for too many years in school to break old habits. Besides, you still call me Elijah."

Mrs. Hargrave chuckled and opened her arms. Eli walked right into them and gave her a hug. She had completely ignored Sarah, one because she was frustrated with the entire situation but two because she was always enraptured by Mrs. Hargrave when they were in the same room. She had learned so much more from her than just what was taught in the schoolbooks.

Turning on her heel, Eli put her fist on her hip, popped it out slightly, and stared down at Sarah. Sarah had been glaring at her glass on the table, but as soon as she turned to look up at Eli, Eli's breath flew out of her lungs. She never would have guessed that one. Sadie Bade. Country singer, folk singer, indie singer, whatever genre someone wanted to put her in, was sitting in the middle of the kitchen with a pout on

her thin lips, and Mrs. Hargrave, bless her soul, had no idea who she was sipping tea with.

“I suppose you’re Sarah Bannock.” Eli gave her as much of a smile as she could muster and held out her hand. “I’m Elijah Wilson. Eli, please.”

Sarah put her hand out and shook. Warmth seeped into Eli’s fingers and up her arm. She jerked away before it hit her belly. She was simply star struck, that’s all it was. Nothing more.

“I’ll take you back to Indigo. I think you’re a bit farther off than you thought you’d be.”

“Yeah.” Sarah’s voice was barely above a whisper, and if Eli hadn’t been facing her, she wouldn’t have even thought she’d spoken.

“We’ll have to take my truck. You don’t mind, Mrs. Hargrave, if we leave her car here until tomorrow, do you?”

“Not at all. If you leave me the keys, Dwaine and I can meet you in town with it.”

“Sounds good.” Eli nodded toward Mrs. Hargrave as she stared down Sarah, realizing in an instant that she hadn’t been able to rip her gaze from Sarah’s sad brown eyes. Sarah reached into her pocket and pulled out the keys, setting them on the table, and Eli could tell she was hesitant. “Ready?”

“Elijah?” Mrs. Hargrave interrupted.

“Yes, ma’am?” Eli spun on her heel.

“Would you go check on Dwaine? I always worry about him being out here in this

kind of weather at this time of night.”

Eli furrowed her brow. “One of the boys isn’t doing the three o’clock checks?”

Mrs. Hargrave shook her head as she gripped the back of the chair. “No.”

Eli wanted to roll her eyes and say something sharp, but she held her tongue. It wouldn’t do any good to talk to them about it, but she could figure out a way to get word out to Robert’s and James’ wives and that would no doubt get the fire lit under them to help out their dad, because truthfully, Dwaine should not be out in the fields in the middle of the night.

“Yeah, I’ll check before I head back. If you don’t hear from me, he’s fine.”

“Thanks.” Mrs. Hargrave gave her a grin.

Eli turned to Sarah, who hadn’t budged from her seat but was still staring at her. “Ready?”

Sarah nodded. “I need to get my things.”

“We’ll throw them in the back.”

“Is it covered?”

“No?” Eli furrowed her brow and shook her head. “The backseat.”

“You have a backseat in your truck?”

Eli wasn’t quite sure what to say to that. Either Sarah had grown up and continued to live under a rock, or she was still too upset to think straight. “Yeah. Let’s go. Mrs.

Hargrave deserves to have her kitchen back.”

Sarah got up and ambled toward the front door. Eli turned and gave Mrs. Hargrave one last hug before she followed Sarah outside and into the chill air. She really hoped she could find her own balance again after realizing who her guest was, because every thought that went through her mind was thank God she had fixed the toilet before Sadie Bade showed up on her front step.

Chapter 4

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Eli headed straightout the front door toward the rental car. Sarah was slow to keep up, but Eli wanted to get done and get home. If she didn't work it right, she wasn't even going to get the precious three hours of sleep from four to seven in the morning before she had to get up and do her morning chores. In the mud. Which was her absolute favorite way to do morning chores, or any chores for that matter. Sarcasm intended.

She waited at the trunk of the car, but Sarah didn't move. Raising an eyebrow, Eli shoved her hands into the pockets of her jacket and took a good look at Sarah, at least what she could see of her in the light at her back. She must be a nervous wreck. Her hair was stringy from the rain that continued to fall, she shivered in the dimness of the night, and she refused to look Eli in the eye.

Drawing in a deep breath, Eli reprimanded herself. She needed to have a bit more compassion for this woman who was stranded in the middle of nowhere, where she knew no one, and in the country, where she clearly was not used to being. Her high-priced bomber jacket and boots told that to anyone within a mile.

Eli said nothing as she moved to the driver's door and opened it. She popped the trunk and then walked to the back. She gripped Sarah's small roller suitcase in one hand and her guitar in the other. As soon as she turned to step toward the truck, Sarah was right there, taking the guitar from her and holding it against her chest.

"O...kay..." Eli swallowed and pushed down the feeling that bubbled up in her throat because she wasn't sure she wanted to analyze it. She closed the trunk and then moved to her vehicle. Opening the back door, she shoved the suitcase in before holding her hand out for the guitar case. Sarah, clearly reluctant, handed it over.

Eli put it on the seat so it wouldn't move more than necessary and wouldn't get crushed by the suitcase. Then she opened the passenger door, holding her hand out for Sarah to climb in. Sarah let out a short breath before she gripped the door and seat, then stepped onto the runner board.

Eli wasn't happy about bringing her nice new truck out into the fields, but she would never deny a request from Mrs. Hargrave. She had to check on Dwaine, who they all knew shouldn't be out there anyway. She just hoped nothing was awry and he had no calves being born that couldn't handle themselves, because she really didn't want any more drama that night.

With the door shut, Eli straightened her shoulders. She had to get a better grip on herself because she knew she was making an awful first impression on her guest, someone who could easily make or break her little bed-and-breakfast. One comment from Sadie Bade and her business could boom or bust.

Swinging behind the wheel, Eli shoved the truck into reverse and started to back out when Sarah spoke. "Stop."

"What?"

"Shouldn't we...I mean, should we make sure Mrs. Hargrave locks the car?"

Eli chuckled. "Ain't nobody around to get into your car. What'd you leave in it that you want?"

"Uh...nothing." Sarah seemed to close in on herself.

Narrowing her gaze, Eli took a risk and reached over, brushing her fingers against Sarah's forearm. It was a long day for both of them, she had to keep reminding herself. "We shouldn't be too long. Their pastures are pretty close to the house,

luckily.”

“What?”

“To check on Dwaine.”

“Oh. Right.”

“I’m sorry to drag you out like this, but I can’t say no to her.”

“You two seem to have history.”

Laughing, Eli pulled out of the driveway and onto the dirt road. She was going to have to go back to the highway, turn on it, and then take the next exit south of the house, which was even farther from her own home.

“She was my math teacher in high school.”

“Oh.”

“She’s the only math teacher for high school, so I had her for all four years.”

Sarah didn’t answer. Eli pressed her boot down onto the gas as she came up to the creek. She splashed through it, and Sarah drew in a deep breath, pressing her hand to the center seat between them. Eli grabbed her fingers and squeezed hard before she pulled up on the other side of the creek.

“Relax, Sarah. I know these roads like the back of my hand.”

She nodded. “Is it always like this?”

“The storms?”

“Yeah.”

“When we have them. This one is a bit early. Normally they start in March and go through to June. Typically, if we have a storm this time of year it’s snow, because we always get snow during calving season.”

“Ginger said that, too.”

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“That we get snow?” Eli glanced over at Sarah, her pale skin reflecting in the night sky.

“No. Calving season.”

“Yeah, it starts as early as January for some, and goes as late as April for others. Depends on when we inseminate.”

“I’m sorry?” Sarah turned with wide eyes as Eli came to a stop at the highway.

Narrowing her gaze, Eli’s gaze slowly roved over Sarah’s confused and surprised expression. It took her a minute to realize Sarah had no clue what she was talking about. “Ranching.”

“Huh?”

Eli bolstered herself to teach. “We’re ranchers. I run a B&B, yes, but I also ranch, and I am trying my hand at farming this year, too. I have cattle, and this time of year is when the babies are born. We call it calving season.”

“They’re all born at the same time?”

Snorting, Eli nodded. “Yeah. We give them hormones so their cycles are all the same and then inseminate at the same time. That way, they’re born at the same time, I’m not staying up at all hours of the night all year long, they’re ready for auction at the same time so I’m not making multiple trips out to auction, and I don’t have to pay the artificial inseminator more than once a year.”

“Oh.”

Eli didn't wait another second as she pulled onto the highway. She sped up and then slowed down. She could see Dwaine's truck lights off in the distance, so luckily, she wouldn't have to take her trusty truck too far into the fields. She followed the barely-there tracks, inching her way through the mud to him.

When she pulled up, she lowered her window. “Hey.”

“Eli.”

She grinned. “Mrs. Hargrave wanted me to check on you.”

“I'm fine, as you can see.”

“I can see. Any calves yet?”

“No.”

“Let's hope it stays that way until morning.”

“Yup.”

“See you tomorrow.”

“Evening.”

Shaking her head, Eli rolled up the window and drove around his vehicle before following her tracks back out to the highway. That had been how just about every conversation with him had always gone. He was not the conversationalist. Mrs. Hargrave was, and they made an interesting pair for sure.

“You’re just going to leave him out there?”

“Yeah.” Eli looked down both ways of the highway before she pulled onto the pavement. It was going to be a long drive home. Checking the time, she knew she was going to be late for her three o’clock check, which meant she was going to get less than three hours of sleep that night. She’d have to remember to set the coffee maker to go automatically when she got back before she left again. Her front door seemed to be revolving.

She didn’t really speak again until they got to the turn off for her road. “Should only be another ten minutes.”

“Another ten?” Sarah’s wide and dark eyes turned on her.

Eli’s stomach flipped. Something in the way Sarah was acting was doing something to her stomach, and she couldn’t help wanting to reach over and touch her again to comfort her, but she resisted the urge. Clearly Sarah was there for a reason, and she did not want to risk messing up that or her future in any way.

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t realize it was so far out.”

“Yeah,” Eli answered, her voice softer. “It’s gorgeous with the sunrise though. Well worth it.”

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Sarah stared out the window, and Eli focused on the road. With the rain down to a drizzle, she felt more comfortable picking up her speed. What she really wanted was a warm bed, lots of covers, and maybe even a fire to keep her warm, but she knew that was impossible tonight.

They pulled up to the house, and Eli parked as close as she could to the front door. Her house was much like the Hargraves in that people parked wherever in front of the large, covered deck—except hers wrapped around the entire house. She got out of the truck and pocketed her keys. She grabbed Sarah's guitar, handing it over to waiting hands before she grabbed the suitcase and carried it inside.

Sarah followed dutifully. Eli took her straight up to the room she'd booked and set the suitcase down. She didn't always give the helping hand, but she felt Sarah first had been through enough that night, and second deserved it for some odd reason. Eli moved to the door as Sarah looked around the room.

"The kitchen is open, and you are free to use and eat whatever is there. Breakfast is at seven-thirty sharp. Is there anything you don't like to eat?"

"I'll eat anything."

"Good." Eli's shoulder pressed into the wood, but she was finding it hard to push off the door frame and leave the room.

"And the bathroom?"

Eli stood up straight, looking at Sarah probably for the first time that night. She

seemed much smaller in person than she did on video and far less confident. Her lower lip was pulled between her teeth, and Eli could see where it was a bad habit, no doubt. Her hair, rather than its usual light brown, had been dyed blonder, and cut to hang at her shoulders rather than down her back. It was new and different and did odd things to Eli's insides.

"Right across the hall."

"Thank you."

Nodding, Eli still didn't move. She wasn't sure why. She'd analyze it when she was out in the fields later, maybe, if she had enough brain power to think it through. Sarah reached up and pulled her beanie off, wringing it between her hands.

"Was there something else?" Sarah asked.

Eli cleared her throat. "Uh, no. I'm headed out for my heifer check, but I'll be back in about an hour."

"Okay."

"So the house is yours."

Sarah nodded and tossed her beanie onto the bed. When she faced Eli, she had a thin smile on her lips. "Thanks, uh...for coming to get me."

"Any time."

Eli slipped from the room, not looking over her shoulder, as much as she wanted to. She didn't want Sarah to think she knew who she was or like she was being some strange fan who ogled more than she should. Eli grabbed another cold water from the

fridge, switched out her keys and headed to check on her babies.

* * *

Sarah plopped onto the edge of the bed, relief flooding her. At least it seemed like Elijah, sorry, Eli, hadn't recognized her. That meant at least the house would be a safe place, but she wasn't sure it was going to be exactly relaxing. Eli, while she had been willing to answer questions, had been quite short with her.

Though, she supposed, she'd be decently short if she was staying up late and if she needed to still go out and check heifers—whatever that meant. She flopped onto her back and stared at the ceiling. At least the bed was comfy. That was something to make her day better, even though she was pretty sure she wasn't going to be sleeping in it any time soon. Her adrenaline and nerves were still running like crazy, and she had no real way to calm them down. Except...

Turning, Sarah eyed her guitar case. If she was the only one in the house, she could play easily enough. Flicking the locks, she brushed her fingers over the wood and then the strings. She pulled it out and sat on the edge of the bed again. With the guitar on her thigh, she strummed until it was in tune.

But she had nothing to play. No song came to mind. For the first time in years, she couldn't think of anything she wanted to play. Eli came to mind, the way Eli had looked at her, the way her smile hadn't quite reached her eyes except for that first moment in the Hargraves' kitchen. That had been interesting.

Rubbing her lips together, Sarah flopped onto the bed again, her guitar next to her. The room was beautifully done up. Tasteful, modern, yet not cookie cutter. The dark wood on the sleigh bed was a perfect match for the obviously refinished dresser and vanity. They weren't new, they didn't completely match, but they went together to complete the room in a way she would never have thought of.

Eli was an interesting person, at least intriguing if not stand-offish. Sarah wished they had met under different circumstances, when she was less anxious, because she hoped she would have been able to focus better on Eli herself rather than the mess Sarah had found herself in.

Eli had been almost as she had envisioned she would be, minus about thirty years and a different sex. Sarah had wrongly assumed she was staying with an older couple who were trying something new. She had no idea how old Eli was, but elderly was not it. She had a soft rounded face, brown eyes that kept flipping from cold and aloof to depths of emotions flashing so quickly no one could read them.

Not that she was good at reading people, anyway. Kara always teased her about that. So did her sister, for that matter. Sarah was the most socially inept of all her friends and family. She largely kept to herself, focused on her music and her passions—which really was just her music for the last five years rather than anything she had done before.

Sighing, she closed her eyes, but her mind was a whirl of thoughts and feelings, and she couldn't figure out a way to tamp down and quiet them. She faced her guitar and ran her fingers over the strings. She remembered every painful moment of learning to play, the blisters, stretching her fingers so they could reach when they shouldn't because the guitar she'd been handed down was way too big for her tiny body.

With a huff she moved back to staring at the ceiling. What the hell was she supposed to do in the country for two weeks? She didn't want anyone to know who she was, so that meant no playing music when other people were around. She might be able to get away with just playing guitar and not singing, but Sarah knew as soon as she started singing, that was going to be the end of it all. Her cover would be blown.

Lightning flashed in the distance, and she barely heard the rumble of thunder as it echoed. At least the storm was off in the distance. Pushing herself to stand, she

moved to the bathroom to check it out. She always wanted a hot shower after a long day of traveling. Maybe that would ease and relax her mind, because not sleeping for two full days was about to knock her on her ass.

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She turned on the water in the shower in the claw foot tub and pulled the curtain on the metal hangers around it. She locked the door and slowly undressed, dropping all her clothes onto the floor in one pile. Some days she felt barely there and others she felt so alive that she couldn't contain it.

The hot water seeped into her tired muscles. Sarah reached up to her shoulders and rubbed them hard, easing as much tension as she could. She didn't realize just how tight she had been the entire night. It had certainly eased when she'd met Ginger, but a new kind of tension had risen when she'd seen Eli walk into the kitchen and completely ignore her.

If she was the owner of a bed-and-breakfast, she should pay first and foremost special care and attention to her guests before anyone else. And then Eli had been so gruff with her the rest of the night. She couldn't put her finger on why. Surely she hadn't done anything to set Eli off. But what else could she say? What else could she do?

Maybe she wouldn't stay the entire time. She'd need to text Kara and work it out. Her heart stopped, and she bit her lip, closing her eyes and cursing as she kicked up some of the water on the bottom of the tub. Her phone. The damn device she normally couldn't get out of her hand on a good day was still sitting in the cup holder in her rental car a thirty minute drive from where she was at, and she had no idea when she'd get it back if ever.

"Fuck me."

The front door opened and closed, and she stiffened. Sarah listened carefully as footsteps echoed downstairs and then up the stairs. Nothing was said. There was no

knock. Sighing out her relief, Sarah closed her eyes and focused on the water and her weary muscles. She needed this break. That had been the entire point of taking two weeks before she went on tour. She needed to relax and rest her mind and body before she spent the next six months running herself ragged.

She could do this. She could stay here for two weeks, she could figure out how to relax—something she had never fully accomplished—and she could work her best at figuring out what she needed to do to prepare for the tour. She wasn't a famous singer by any means. There were plenty of people in the world who didn't know her. There were more who knew her songs, but she had wanted anonymity for just once. She wanted not to deal with work related things, and she wanted to connect with herself for the briefest of times before she had to put on the mask again of Sadie Bade, mid-list indie-folk singer with a flair for rock.

With her music flowing back into her mind, Sarah turned off the water and dried her body. She wrapped the robe that had been placed on the back of the door around her shoulders and tied it tight around her waist. As she was just about to leave the bathroom, she heard footsteps again. Pressing her ear to the door, she took a risk.

Sarah opened the door and stepped out of the steamy bathroom right when the footsteps were close enough that they would run into each other. She cocked her head at Eli, her face remaining lax, and raised an eyebrow at her. Eli stopped short in her tracks and shook her head suddenly.

“Everything okay? Need something?”

“No,” Sarah answered, her voice on a whisper and nearly breaking. “Just cleaning off the grime from travel.”

Eli smiled, genuinely. It reached her eyes, turning those light brown orbs into something else entirely. “I get that. I always shower first thing, too. Lot of my guests

do in fact.”

“You have many guests?”

“In the summer, yes. I’m sorry to cut this short, but it’s nearing five, and I need to get some sleep before morning chores.”

“Chores? Aren’t you a bit old for chores?” Sarah teased, finally feeling slightly more like herself. Her heart hammered, but it wasn’t because she was nervous or anxious. Well, she was, but it was mostly because she was excited. Excited for what, she had no idea, but she was glad to grasp onto that emotion and ride it.

Mimicking Eli’s stance from earlier, Sarah pressed her shoulder into the door frame and crossed one ankle over the other. She wondered briefly if Eli gawked at all her guests like she was currently doing, or if Eli even realized what she was doing. She was so young, so innocent in some ways.

“How old are you?” Sarah asked, her voice clear and concise.

“Excuse me?” Eli stated, shock ringing through both words as her gaze flicked straight back to Sarah’s eyes.

“You just seem so young to own all of this.”

“Ah, well, I don’t own much of it. My parents still do.”

Sarah nodded. “Inheritance.”

“Maybe, if I can prove I can get it running enough to earn a decent income. Look, I’m sorry to cut this short, but I’m beat, and I’ve got to get up in a few hours.”

Sarah's tongue dashed out against her bottom lip as her gaze skimmed up and down Eli's body. The warmth from her shower was vanishing quickly, and she wanted to jump under the blankets as fast as she could. "Good night then."

"Night."

Eli walked off, and Sarah watched her go, her gaze not moving from Eli's ass. Humming in pleasure to herself, she chuckled before heading to her room.

Chapter 5

Dawn cracked over the eastern plains as Eli parked her old farm truck near the barn. Her boots were so covered in mud that she couldn't imagine how long it would take to get it off if she let them dry that way.

Heading to the back of the barn, Eli took the hose and turned the water on, spraying it forcefully against the bottom of her boots. Her cows were fine. Two more babies born that night, both had done well and were nursing on their mothers. She'd have to catch them later at some point and tag them, but she'd do that in one big roundup in the next month or so when the babies were done being born.

It took her probably ten minutes to get most of the mud off her work boots, but it would be worth it when she had to go out again. Trudging through the grass over to her back deck by the kitchen door, she slipped her boots off and walked through to the coffee pot in her socks. She'd forgotten to start it. Groaning, she hit the button to get it percolating and she grabbed what she needed to make breakfast that morning.

She'd asked Sarah if she didn't like anything, but she was left helpless on that front with no answer, so she just made what she wanted and figured Sarah would eat what she got. The cast iron skillet was her favorite, so Eli pulled it out and set it on top of the gas burner before washing her hands. Cooking had never been her strongest suit,

but she was decent at it. She could make a mean few recipes here and there, but outside of that, she avoided cooking. It had been her biggest hesitation in starting the bed-and-breakfast...the breakfast part.

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She dropped a dollop of butter onto the skillet and let it melt while she pulled out the fresh eggs she got from Susan five miles north. She whisked the eggs with salt, pepper, and a dash of milk and cheese. Omelets it was. her brain was working slower than it had in ages, and she knew she was going to have to catch a nap soon otherwise she wouldn't be able to function to head back out into the pastures. Thankfully, she was only in charge of breakfast, the one meal of the day she felt confident she wouldn't burn or completely ruin.

With the eggs sufficiently whisked, Eli dumped them into the skillet and listened as it sizzled. She chopped onions efficiently, along with tomatoes, dumping them on top of the wet egg. She added more cheese, some strips of ham and then waited for it to finish cooking before folding it half.

It was exactly what she wanted. Eli made a second one, which turned out much better than her first since she'd already chopped everything to go, set it on a plate, and put it in the oven to keep warm. There was no sign of Sarah. In fact, she hadn't even heard Sarah move since she'd been in the kitchen. The house was old, but Sarah's room was right over the kitchen, so Eli had no doubt she'd hear her rummaging around if she was awake.

With a cup of coffee in front of her, Eli sat and waited another five minutes before giving in and eating her own breakfast. She left her coffee alone, even though she had poured herself a hefty cup. She wanted to sleep and to sleep well. She was through her omelet with no sign that Sarah was going to emerge.

Huffing in frustration, Eli washed her dish quickly and cleaned up from cooking. She grabbed a notepad and wrote that Sarah's plate was in the oven if she wanted it. Then

she stalked toward the back stairs near the door she'd come in and trudged downstairs to the basement.

The house was huge and had been for her and her family growing up. There were so many rooms upstairs that the basement hadn't been necessary, but her father had insisted on having it. She enjoyed it now though, as it was her personal sanctuary when her house was overrun with guests. They weren't allowed down there. She had her own living room, with satellite television she barely watched, and a large expansive bathroom her father had also insisted be down there. She hadn't understood why when she was a kid and he was paying for the renovations, but she understood now. It was perfect to take away the stress and wash off the grime of a long day of work.

Eli pulled off her button up shirt and threw it into the hamper by her closet then stripped her jeans. She laid on her back on her bed, her stomach full and warm from the breakfast she had made. It was after eight in the morning, which was later than she had anticipated falling back asleep, but it would have to do. She didn't have any other choice.

Her mind was pulled to Sarah—Sadie Bade—and Eli wondered just what she was doing in the middle of nowhere, in the high plains, with very few people around. With a grunt, Eli turned on her side and shut her eyes. She needed to stop thinking about Sarah. She couldn't let her heart get tangled up in a mess that would only leave in a couple weeks and never return. She'd tried that once before and failed miserably. It had left her with a broken heart and a new rule. Never hook up with guests.

Sadie Bade, while she led a decently quiet life, was not quiet about her sexuality. Eli, on the other hand, was. Living in a small town where everyone talked about everyone meant she did not want to be the center of attention or the center of all the gossip. She wanted to just fly by in life as much as she could without causing a whole lot of fuss.

Eli pressed her face into her pillow. She shouldn't even be having those thoughts. There was no reason to have them, but it certainly explained her gut reaction when she'd seen Sarah for the first time sitting in Mrs. Hargrave's kitchen. She hadn't been star struck, but if anyone asked—which they wouldn't—that was the answer she was going to give.

Still, she did have to find a way to be a whole lot nicer to Sarah. She knew she'd been short with her. Most of that had been Eli's exhaustion speaking, and her annoyance at having to stay up far later than she'd intended, but if Sarah did give Indigo a good review, then it could mean a consistent paycheck for the foreseeable future, which would change her life.

Finding Sarah in the bathrobe in the middle of the night—that had almost been too much for her. Shivering, Eli tried to push the image from her mind, but she couldn't. Pink skin, eyes wide awake with a hint of mischief in them. She'd seen that look before on Sarah's face in some of the videos of her new releases. It had been quite a surprise to have that look aimed directly at her.

Eli's heart picked up its pace just at the thought of what might have been going through Sarah's mind, but again, she chided herself. Sarah was way out of her league, like, Eli's league wasn't even on the roster for Sarah's race. There was no doubt Eli would never even step near Sarah in that manner, but still, she could dream. Couldn't she?

With a hand thrown over her head as she turned onto her back, Eli groaned. She needed to sleep, not daydream about a guest, especially a guest who led a completely different, extraordinary life. The mundane pursuits of her life would never match up to tours, parties, and late-night jam sessions. She wasn't even the least bit musical. Sure, she'd passed band in junior high, but she was pretty sure it was only because Mrs. Schmalzried felt horribly for her inability to play any instrument put in her hands. It didn't mean she didn't appreciate music to its fullest, she just couldn't do a

damn thing on any instrument.

With her energy picking back up, Eli drew in three deep and slow breaths. She couldn't get a second wind—or was it a sixth or seventh at that point? She needed to sleep. Her bed called to her, and as soon as she rolled over onto her side and closed her eyes, she was out for the count.

* * *

When Sarah woke up, the sun shone brightly through the sheer curtains into her room. In all the drama from the night, she had forgotten to draw the thick curtains to let her sleep longer. She reached for her phone, only to remember she didn't have it, and cursed again. With a hand to her side, she pushed up to lean against the headboard and let out a long sigh.

Her first night there had been a disaster. There was no way around that. It might make for a good song down the line when she was a bit further out from it, but for now, it was just annoying. Sarah had to squint at the analog clock on the nightstand for a full minute before she could process what it said.

It was well after noon. In fact, it was nearing one in the afternoon, which meant she had slept almost eight hours, which was the most she had slept straight in months. She shook her head. “What the hell?”

If the bed did that, then she would try to stay here every night she could. She needed that sleep. While she habitually ran on adrenaline, she knew good consistent sleep helped her creative process more than anything. Sarah turned her head to stare out the window, noting the large blue sky with clouds hanging overhead. Clearly the storm was gone. That was a bonus.

Her guitar had apparently spent the night on the bed with her, almost unmoved, which

meant she had been in a deep sleep. Sarah shivered as she pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. Two weeks. She could do this. With renewed hope, she reached for her guitar and settled it into her lap. She strummed lightly, glad she had already tuned it the night before. Humming along with whatever melody came to mind, she closed her eyes and let the music flow from her chest, to her fingers, and through her lips.

She wasn't sure how long she sat there, playing around with different melodies, harmonies, letting the music relax her. She never forgot how the simple timbre of a guitar and voice would calm her down when she most needed it. She ended on a sigh and settled the instrument next to her.

As much as Sarah would love to stay put and continue to play her music, she needed two things: caffeine and food. Eli had said something about breakfast, but she knew she was way past time for that, and hopefully she hadn't pissed Eli off too much by missing it. She'd never stayed at a bed-and-breakfast before, and they were a bit of a foreign concept. Breakfast at a certain time instead of come-and-go was new. Unlike in hotels, where she just went with the flow and did what she needed to do to survive, she felt as though she owed it to Eli to show up when she was supposed to, and she had missed the moment.

Guilt swam into her chest, but she had to push it aside. If she didn't get caffeine in her system soon, she was going to start in with a migraine, and that would be the end of her. She walked immediately to the window and pulled open the curtain, squinting at the bright sunlight as it shone on her face. It was a beautiful day. She couldn't tell if it was cold or not, but it looked gorgeous. The earth had clearly soaked up most of the rain but remained a deep moist, dark color.

Sarah imagined everything would be green in June when the rainy season Eli had been talking about ended—a dark lush green that was a full of life. With her lips pressed together, she flicked a glance back to her guitar and opted to try it out later

when she had caffeine running through her veins.

Pulling on a loose pair of red-and-green plaid pajama bottoms over her boxer briefs, and a thin white tank top over her bare chest, Sarah unlocked the door to her room, pushed it open, and walked barefoot down the hall. Eli hadn't given her a grand tour of the house the night before, not that she could be blamed. It was certainly late enough, but it meant Sarah had to find her own way around.

Everything in the house was still and quiet. The floorboards creaked on the stairs as she went down, her weight making them move slightly as she stepped on them. Curious as to what the rest of the house looked like in the daylight, Sarah kept her eyes wide open as she moved through the house. She landed herself in a den of sorts. There was a large stone fireplace on the far wall, a piano stationed next to it, and no television in sight. There were couches and chairs facing different directions depending on what someone may want to focus on.

It was stunning. The piano was another beast Sarah was tempted to tame. Sarah tiptoed over to it and ran her fingers along the cold wood. An upright, not a super expensive one, but a beautiful one. The wood was stained a dark brown color with hints of red. It had been ages since she'd played an upright. Normally she was on a grand piano or a keyboard.

Sarah opened the lid. She found middle C and pressed the edge of her thumb against it. The sound rang through the room with a clear tone. Sarah closed her eyes and brought her free fist up to her forehead. She'd come back shortly.

With one thing on her mind, she searched for the kitchen. The scent of coffee hit her, but it was muted and burned. Wrinkling her nose, Sarah followed it and stepped into a very modern kitchen that she was not expecting in a house that boasted such history. The stove had eight burners, all gas, there were two ovens under it. Everything was stainless steel and spotless.

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Sarah moved first to the refrigerator to see if there was any type of energy drink in it, though she had her doubts there would be. She'd need to head to town and buy some at some point, maybe when they got her car. She would have done it the night before, but she'd just wanted to get here. She found nothing but bottled water and food.

Leaning against the counter on the island, she stared at the coffee pot that was still on and the no doubt sludge in the bottom of it. She had no other choice. She cleaned it all out, found the filters and coffee grounds and set it to run a new pot. Sarah stared out the window as she waited for the coffee to brew so she could take the first sip. It wasn't going to be good, but it would do in a pinch.

The house felt empty. If there was anything Sarah knew, it was what it felt like to be alone. She spent most of her free time alone, really any time she could get. She was an introvert to the core, and she needed that time to recharge. Eli was nowhere in sight, even though her truck was still parked out front.

When the coffee was finished, Sarah took a mug and poured herself a cup with a heavy dose of milk and sugar in it. She took two sips before she went back to her room and found the boots that she'd thrown against the wall the night before. She dragged them on, pulled on her light jacket and her beanie over her mess of hair from sleeping with it wet.

With her coffee in hand, she went back downstairs and out the front door. She breathed in the fresh scent of clean air, the bite of cold drawing into her lungs and nearly making her cough. It was far colder outside than she had thought it would be. Wrapping her hands more tightly around the mug, Sarah settled on the porch swing, which was covered with a light dose of frost. She ignored it as she stared out at the

fields in front of her.

The area was gorgeous, just like Eli had told her it would be. The sun was already high in the sky, and she was surprised there was still frost on the ground with it being so late, so she figured the storm clouds mustn't have left until midday. The hills rolled in every direction she could see. Forested trees stood starkly in contrast to the plains on one side of the house. Sarah had no idea if it was north or south or what. Jagged cliffs and rocks—the ground seemed to jut into the sky and block the world from view.

The house was nestled against them, but the fields were in front of her. Wooden fences with barbed wire stretched between, getting so small she lost sight of them. Another sip of coffee settled in the front of her head, and she knew the caffeine was working in her system to wake her up and make her function properly. She finished her cup before she dragged herself inside for a second one.

Sarah made a second trip outside to check out the rest of the grounds. As she stepped off the deck, she knew she wasn't in Texas anymore. She felt like she was in a mix of the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains, and she supposed she was close in both regards, situated somewhere between where one ended and the other began.

With her breath nearly gone from the beauty, Sarah walked around the corner of the house and was stunned again. She could still see for miles. Miles and miles, so many she now knew why this region was considered big sky country.

“Wow.”

She finished her coffee as she walked around the house, spying a freshly painted red barn off to the side and down a hill with an old truck or two parked outside and a couple of tractors. She had no idea what the tractors were for, but they didn't look like normal ones at all, and one of the trucks had something odd on the back.

Turning, Sarah went back to the house and got herself a third cup of coffee. She'd no doubt need to start a second pot soon enough to keep herself going. As soon as her third coffee cup was filled and thoroughly sipped, she turned toward the fireplace in the den.

There was no flame flickering in it, and she wasn't sure how to turn it on, so Sarah avoided it as she dragged out the bench for the piano. The legs scraped against the floor, and she cringed. She wanted to be quiet, which she realized was stupid if she was going to play. She set the coffee mug on the top of the piano before she stood up and opened the bench to see if there was any music in it.

Sarah had songs memorized, and she could play just about anything by ear, but a classical piece here and there did her heart well. There were a few books of music in the seat, and Sarah pulled out one of them and set it on the piano. She put her hands on the keyboard, the keys cold under her fingertips.

It didn't take long for the music to flow from her. She played through random songs in the book before she gave up and just went with whatever came into her head. Some of it was melodies she had learned and loved as a kid, and some were from the classics. She lost herself in the music, letting it be the distraction she needed so much.

Chapter 6

Music floated through her mind, and Eli turned onto her belly in bed. She brushed a hand against her cheek and then her eyes before she turned onto her back again. She had to blink through multiple layers of sleep before she was able to see clearly. Eli reached over and grabbed her phone to check the time. Her alarm was set to go off in the next ten minutes, which was a blessing and curse. She really could have used more sleep.

The music she'd thought she'd been dreaming continued to echo through her ears,

and it wasn't until Eli stood in the center of her bedroom still in her underwear and socks that she realized it was coming from the den upstairs. Smiling to herself, she pulled on a clean shirt, snapping the buttons as she went.

In her bathroom, she ran the toothbrush through her mouth and then redid the two braids down each side of her head. It was enough to make her feel decently girly but also kept it out of the way when she was wrangling cattle and machinery. The last thing she needed was to get her hair caught in something when she was the only one around.

Flicking the braids behind her back, she splashed cold water onto her face to try and wake herself up a bit more. She'd need some coffee before she grabbed her water and headed out to the pasture for her afternoon check of the cattle. In her white socks that pulled up to mid-calf, Eli walked through the carpeted basement and up the stairs to the main floor of the house.

The music got louder as she got closer to the den. Even she could tell the piano was slightly out of tune. The last time she'd had someone there to mess with it had been summer when her older sister had come through for the week—insisting on taking up two of the rooms in the house so Eli hadn't been able to rent them out to guests and it cost her money, but that was an argument for another day, one she'd had several times.

Eli got to the top step and smiled. Sarah had to be playing. She was the only other person in the house, and Eli knew it wasn't a recording. She rounded the corner, walked through the kitchen, and moved toward the den but stopped. There was a barely-there pot of coffee, enough for maybe three-quarters of a cup. Seizing the opportunity, Eli pulled down a mug and dumped the rest of the coffee into it before turning the machine off. She'd clean it out later.

With the sweet elixir in her fingertips, she moved toward the den and the music.

Sarah played, her eyes closed as her hands and fingers moved back and forth on the keys, hitting them in what seemed to Eli to be random timing and places. She knew the notes, of course. She'd been taught them at one point when her mother had insisted she take lessons from Mrs. Parris in town, but that had only lasted a couple years before they had both thrown in the towel.

Eli slid into the den and sat on one of the oversized chairs. Sarah hadn't noticed her yet, and she wasn't about to interrupt whatever was going on. She missed the days when her sister would play and practice for hours after school. Their mother had been a gifted pianist as well, but neither of them could compare to this.

Her coffee was close to finished when Sarah stopped playing abruptly and turned to Eli with a hand over her heart. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean...I'm sorry."

"What on earth for?" Eli said, cocking her head to the side and grinning. "For playing the piano?"

"I didn't know anyone was here."

Eli chuckled. "I've been in and out all night and finally caught a few hours of sleep. Did you sleep well?"

Sarah nodded and closed the lid on the piano.

Nodding her head at the instrument, Eli raised an eyebrow. "Don't stop if you don't want to. It's here for a reason, and I can't play for anything, much to my mother's disappointment and two years of lessons."

“Not at all?”

“Chopsticks, and maybe Mary Had a Little Lamb.”

“Seriously?” Sarah’s eyes were wide with surprise.

Eli shrugged. “Music is not my talent, much as everyone wanted it to be. But please, play. It’s not played often enough.”

“I can tell.”

Tensed muscles greeted Eli unexpectedly. The tone of Sarah’s voice didn’t tell her if she was upset or annoyed, but either way, that comment had been unexpected. She’d thought she’d been making progress with not being as short in response to anything Sarah did, but perhaps she was wrong or perhaps Sarah just expected her to be a jerk the entire time she was there.

“Well, I have to go back out and check on my cattle.”

“You do that a lot.”

Eli shrugged. “It’s calving season, so yes, I check on them frequently. I also don’t have any hired help right now, so that leaves it up to me.”

“Why not?”

“Why not what?” Eli said, exasperation leaving her lips even though she didn’t want

it to. She wasn't about to apologize for it or rein it in either. Something about Sarah pulled out her annoyance in ways she hadn't expected, though she did suspect it wasn't Sarah she was annoyed with but rather her own dang self.

Sarah didn't move from the piano bench. She stared with wide eyes at Eli, and Eli suspected she had hurt her somehow. Eli really should apologize, but she was too tired to think of the words.

“Why don't you have anyone hired to help?”

“First, hiring people costs money and takes out of my profit. Second, finding good help, help that shows up, is not as easy as you think. The pay is low, the work is hard, the days are long. I'll hire seasonally around harvest to get my wheat and milo in, but I prefer to take care of my cattle myself.”

Sarah put her hands up in the air like she was under arrest. “I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked.”

Sighing, Eli rubbed the bridge of her nose and set her coffee on the end table next to her. “No, I'm sorry. I'm short with you. I'm tired, that's all.”

Standing up, she bent down and grabbed her coffee. When she stood back up, Sarah stood within inches of her, and Eli's breath caught in her throat, her heart moving its way up and making it impossible for her to speak.

“When do you think we'll be able to get my car?”

“Tomorrow afternoon is when Mrs. Hargrave will have time. She called early this morning.”

“Oh.” Disappointment flittered over Sarah's face, and Eli had to resist the urge to

reach out and grab her fingers. If there had been one thing she'd made clear to herself, Sarah was off-limits. There should be no touching, no helping, no flirting, nothing.

"Was there something you left in it?"

"My phone. I wanted to tell my friend I got here safe."

"Oh!" Eli nodded. "Did you have a computer? You could email her. Or my cellphone."

Sarah shook her head. "I don't know her number."

"Want to use my computer, then?"

"If I could." Sarah gave her a sweet smile, her chin knocking up an inch. "I don't want her thinking I fell off the end of the world or something."

Chuckling, Eli shook her head slowly. "Well, you are close to the end of the world here."

"But it's beautiful, just like you said it was." Sarah's eyes locked on Eli's, and her stomach flopped as she felt drawn into Sarah.

Sarah reached out, a hand on Eli's forearm. "Where's the computer?"

"Uh...my office." Eli cleared her throat. "I'll show you before I leave."

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Eli didn't wait another second to break the physical contact and move down the hall toward her tiny office in the back of the house. She opened the door and led Sarah inside. The desktop was littered with papers, and suddenly she was very aware of how messy it was. She tried to keep it neat and clean, but it was the one place in the house she felt she could let up on cleanliness—well, that and her own space in the basement.

“It's right here.”

“Thanks.” Sarah sat down in the rolling chair as Eli leaned over the desk and turned the desktop on and typed in her password.

“Do whatever you need.”

“Shouldn't take me too long.”

“All right. Well, I'll be back in a few hours. You're free to have whatever you find in the kitchen, but you're on your own for dinner unless you'll eat what the hunters get.”

“Dinner?”

“Yeah.” Eli gave her a quick smile as she reached the door to her office. “It's a bed-and-breakfast, we don't make you lunch or dinner unless there is a special request, in which case, I typically hire out, because those are not my forte. Hunters don't complain much so long as it's hot and filling.”

“Ah.”

Eli left her office and made her way to the den, grabbing her mug as she moved to the kitchen. She washed out the coffee pot, filter, and her mug, and then saw the note she'd left for Sarah earlier. With a quick check, she saw the untouched omelet still in the oven. Pulling it out, she dumped it in her compost bucket out the back door before washing the dishes, a slight annoyance in each move she made.

Why had she even bothered to make Sarah breakfast if she wasn't going to eat it? Pursing her lips, she turned off the water and dried her hands on the towel wrapped around the handle to the fridge. She headed out the back door, shoving her feet in her work boots after checking for critters, and then stomped around when they were too freaking cold to be wearing. The cold front that had followed the storm was just as unexpected, and it was supposed to last through the rest of the week. She hoped briefly that Sarah had packed for colder weather, but then she shook the thought. That was Sarah's business, not hers.

Eli stepped off the deck and glanced at the house. Sarah stood at the window in her office with her arms by her sides, staring right at Eli. A shiver ran down her spine as she stopped short at the edge of the trail leading down the hill to the barn and her work truck. They stared at each other for what felt like minutes. Eventually, Eli made the first move and headed to the barn. She had to get to work.

* * *

Sarah watched Eli walk down to the barn. She disappeared briefly while she was still too close to the hill but reappeared as soon as she was near the barn itself. Sarah hadn't noticed the trail when she'd been on the deck before, but it must have been how Eli walked to and from the barn every day. It hadn't even occurred to her to wonder how to get to the barn from the house.

Eli hopped into a truck that looked like it was a hundred years old, backed out from the driveway, and went down the road. Sarah had to force herself to move away from

the window. She'd emailed Kara and expected a response whenever Kara got around to it. Their conversations were often intermittent, so it wasn't uncommon to wait days for responses, but that was how their friendship worked.

With a sigh, Sarah moved out of the office after shutting the computer down and went up to her room, skirting around the piano. Eli had scared the living daylights out of her when she'd been sitting there listening. She'd been about to switch to a new song she'd been working on for months to see if it sounded better with some slight modifications to it, and she'd glanced back and saw Eli sitting there, like she owned the place. Well, she did own it.

Grunting, Sarah hid away in her room and shut the door. She had no idea what to do with herself. She wasn't used to the quiet, to being so disconnected from the world. Even when she was alone at home, she wasn't alone. Someone was always only a text message or a phone call or a tweet away. But with no phone, and only dial up Internet, she wasn't about to spend much time waiting for her social media to get pulled up or for emails to come in.

Flinging herself onto the bed, Sarah knew she had to waste a few hours until Eli came back for some entertainment, because if she was left to her own devices, it could get bad. She should have brought a book, or two or three. Wondering briefly if Eli had any around the house, Sarah left the safety of her room and rummaged around the den and living room. She found two bookshelves filled with novels—some classics, some newer ones, mostly romances, but a few mysteries.

She flipped through some of them and grabbed one she decided wouldn't be too horrible, though reading was not typically her thing. She was not the greatest reader in the world, and it took her forever to get through a book, so she often just read the CliffsNotes version of it if she could, to make it seem like she had read the book itself. When she got back to her room, she propped up the pillows behind her back and opened the book.

* * *

Sarah must have fallen asleep because the sun was setting in the sky, casting a pink and orange hue through her room. Brushing her hair out of her face, Sarah moved to the window to see if Eli was back from whatever she did out in the fields. She was kind of curious what she did out there, but she wasn't brave enough to ask if she could go out with her, and she wasn't sure she was courageous enough to find out in general.

She'd read the reviews on Indigo and had seen that Eli had willingly taken people out to teach them about ranching and even on something called trail rides. Sarah wasn't quite sure what those were exactly, but it intrigued her nonetheless. She'd never been on a horse before, though, which scared her more than she was willing to admit to anyone.

Her growling stomach told her she needed to eat something and that she had failed to scrounge up food since she'd been in the airport in Denver. With bare feet, she walked through the hall and down the stairs to the kitchen. The fridge was full of food, and it was overwhelming. If part of the deal was no dinner, she'd have to cook for herself, in which case, she might as well cook for Eli as well, assuming she was coming home in time to eat.

Home. That word sounded odd to her ears. Sarah pulled out some chicken, spinach, ham, and cheese that she saw right in the front of the fridge. Rummaging around the pantry, she found potatoes in abundance along with onions. It didn't take her long until she had a plan formulated. It took her a bit longer to find the dishware, and she hoped Eli wouldn't be too offended by her taking everything out and making them a meal that should last a night or two.

She'd just put everything into the oven when Eli pulled up outside with her truck in tow. Sarah's heart rapped in her chest, reminding her she wasn't quite over her nerves

from the previous night. She sipped a glass of water as she set the timer on the oven, twice, because she messed it up the first time. Turning to face the walkway, she waited for Eli to head inside.

Instead of coming in the front door, like Sarah had assumed she would, Eli walked around the deck toward the back, which led straight into the kitchen. Sarah watched as Eli passed each window completely unaware that she was being observed. Sarah drew in slow deep breaths, her stomach twisting in new and unexpected ways. She was intrigued by Elijah Wilson, proprietor, and semi-owner of what seemed to be multiple businesses. Eli certainly seemed to have her head on straight.

Eli opened the door and stopped sharply when she glanced up to see Sarah staring straight at her. “Uh...hi?”

“Hey. I made dinner. Figured if I was cooking you could eat, too.”

“Oh. Thanks.” Eli’s lips thinned, and her eyes squinted.

Sarah couldn’t decide if it was a good sign or not. “It’s just something I make for myself all the time and then freeze to eat it over the week. I don’t cook as often as it may come off.”

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“All right.” Eli straightened her shoulders. “What is it then?”

“Stuffed chicken and scalloped potatoes.”

“From scratch?”

Sarah nodded.

“Dang, you’ve got talent.” Eli laughed. “You can cook any time. I don’t even care if you burn it. Anyone who knows how to do that without a recipe can cook anything any time they want in my kitchen.”

“You have a nice kitchen.”

Eli did give a full grin at that as she walked over to the wide double sink and turned the water on to wash her hands. “Thanks.”

“Do you have to go out again?”

“Not until middle of the night to check on the heifers.”

Sarah gnawed on her lower lip again as her head bobbed up and down. She couldn’t tear her gaze away from Eli. No matter how much she tried to tell herself to do it, she couldn’t. She was such an enigma. Her hair was in long braids down her back, and Sarah had to resist the urge to reach up and pull on one. Eli’s blue cotton button up hid everything underneath it well enough, but her jeans were tight and high on her hips with a dark black belt holding them in place.

When Eli turned around to grab the towel and dry her hands, Sarah turned her face to the ground as she knew a blush worked its way into her cheeks. She had just about been caught red handed ogling Eli, much like she'd caught Eli doing it the night before. She was better than this. She had to be.

Eli planted a hand on her hip and popped it out to the side as she stared Sarah down in the same look Sarah had received the night before. "I'm going to shower this nasty off me, but I'll be back up in a bit for dinner. It sounds delicious."

"I'm not guaranteeing anything."

Laughing, Eli stepped toward the back door and opened a second door Sarah hadn't noticed before. "It'll be wonderful if only because I didn't cook it, but I'm betting it's good beyond that."

She disappeared, and Sarah was left on her own, only this time, it didn't seem quite as lonely.

True to her word, Eli came up the stairs about thirty minutes later. Her wet hair was strung down her back as she sported a clean shirt and baggy sweatpants. Eli's shoulders were broad, her hips wider than Sarah had originally thought, but her dark eyes were right there, pulling her in.

"Should be ready in another twenty minutes."

Eli nodded. "Good. We can go get your car tomorrow."

"You said that."

"Did I? Sorry. Lack of sleep."

“Is there a store in town?” Sarah stayed in place at the counter in the center island.

Eli moved to the fridge and grabbed a glass bottle of beer, popping the top. She held it out to Sarah. Sarah took it, staring down at the label to see if she’d like it before shrugging and knocking back a good sip. Whatever it was, it was excellent. Eli grabbed another one after Sarah muttered her thanks.

“There is, but it’s small. You’re not going to find a whole lot there if you’re looking for something specific.”

“Caffeine.”

Eli chuckled. “Coffee not your thing?”

“No. I’ll drink it in a pinch, but I much prefer something a bit stronger.”

“They have some of that, but options will be limited.”

“I’m not picky.”

“So you said.” Eli leaned against the fridge, the beer bottle to her lips as she stared directly at Sarah, her gaze slipping up and down Sarah’s body. If Sarah didn’t expect otherwise, she’d say Eli was checking her out—again.

Repressing the shudder that wanted to move up and down her spine, Sarah took another sip of the beer. “Sorry I missed breakfast. I’m not much of a morning person.”

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“Well, since it is just you, I can either not make breakfast and you can be on your own, or I could change the time.”

Sarah nodded. “I’ll rephrase. I don’t typically eat breakfast. Ever.”

“All right then. No breakfast it is. Makes my job easier.” Eli turned to the oven and bent down, trying to see what was inside and giving Sarah an excellent view of her ass.

“You still never answered me.”

“What?” Eli stood up straight.

“You never answered my question.”

“What question was that?” Curiosity and confusion echoed on Eli’s face.

Sarah’s lips thinned. “How old are you?”

“What does it matter?”

“Curious.”

Eli set her bottle on the counter and stood right across from Sarah before she shook her head. “How old are you?”

“Forty-one.”

“Wouldn’t have guessed that.”

“Hmmm. You?”

“Twenty-eight.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. Why would I lie about that?”

Taken off-guard, Sarah’s spine stiffened. “I didn’t think you would. I just...I thought you were older than that.”

“Most people do when they meet me.” Eli grabbed her beer and took a long swig of it. “I thought you were a lot closer to my age.”

Sarah shrugged as she stared at the tiled floor in the kitchen. She waited for the timer to go off, willing it to end the conversation much faster. “Is there anything to do in town?”

“Uh...there’s a sausage supper thing at one of the churches tomorrow night.”

“What’s that?”

“Fundraiser of sorts.”

“Is it good?”

“It’s not bad, for a small town. It’s nothing fancy.”

Sarah rubbed her lips together before she pulled her lower one between her teeth.

“Are you going?”

“Hadn’t decided yet. Depends on what happens here.”

“I mean, if we’re going to be in town to get my car...”

“Are you asking to go?” Eli put her bottle down again, turning to face Sarah fully.

When Sarah finally got brave enough to move her gaze from Eli’s bare feet up to her hips, over her chest, and then up to her face, she gulped. “I guess I am.”

“Then yes, we can go.”

“Okay.”

The timer sounded through the kitchen, drawing Sarah’s attention back to the oven. It was just the distraction she needed in that moment. It was going to be a long few weeks if she couldn’t figure out Eli. One minute Eli was sweet and the next she was sharp and brusque. It was confusing as hell, and unfortunately, as much as she had wanted to be the only one here, she really wished she had someone else with her to distract and buffer the two of them.

Chapter 7

Dinner had been pleasant enough, the conversation quiet but the food was excellent. Every time Eli thought she was making progress in pulling out the strands of who Sarah was, Sarah would pull back into herself. She wasn’t surprised. Someone of her position, even if she wasn’t the most popular and well-known musician in the world had to be careful, but Eli had hoped being at the house would help in some ways to ease that tension.

It probably didn’t help that she herself kept sending mixed signals. Eli had to keep reminding herself to rein herself in, to pull away from the flirtatious and inappropriate, and back toward being a good hostess. She’d called Mrs. Hargrave after dinner to ask if they could meet later in the day, which wasn’t a problem since they were also planning on attending the sausage supper.

The alarm had gone off way too early for her liking, but three in the morning was a

necessary evil that time of year. Instead of rain that night, it had started snowing. It was light enough she could at least still see a good distance if she kept the lights off on her truck, and she could see the barn from the house. However, it also made it that much more dangerous for her cows to be giving birth and for the calves who were born.

She made her way out to the pasture, picking a new place to stake out for a few minutes as she followed the movements of her cattle from a distance. They were used to her, knew her truck, and often when they heard the vehicle, they would come running. Betsy was the first one to see her and come forward. She was the old maid of the group, and Eli had chosen not to inseminate her for the past few years, knowing Betsy's time was coming to an end.

Eli had kept some of her calves, sold others—mostly the bulls. She needed to keep the cows so she could breed them in the future. It was a system she had continued from her father when he'd been the main rancher there for years, though his operation had been much smaller since he'd also been the town vet and didn't earn most of his income off the cattle.

Betsy shoved her face into the window of the truck, and Eli laughed. She partly rolled down the window to rub against Betsy's neck, cooing at her. "What are you doing, girl? I don't have any hay for you tonight."

Betsy snorted.

"Oh, get off your high horse. You're not the most important one around here."

Laughing, Eli shoved Betsy's face out the window and cranked the handle to raise it and keep the snow and cold out. Sure enough, one of her cattle down the way was giving birth. She paced back and forth and looked agitated. Other cows surrounded her in the cold.

Eli put her truck in first gear and stepped on the gas while releasing the clutch. She moved slowly through the field until she could get a closer look. Snow fell around them, sticking to the fields below, but most of her cattle continued to eat and mosey around.

“Carmen, is that you?” Eli squinted to try and make out the different markings on the cow as she paced. “You rascal, you would give birth today, wouldn’t you?”

It took Carmen another ten minutes before she finally laid down on her side, her legs stiff and her breathing heavy. Eli held her breath as she watched. The other cattle backed away, giving Carmen space, but didn’t go that far off. Eli was on the edge of her seat as she watched.

This was one of her favorite parts of ranching. Even if it was tedious. Watching her cattle do what they were supposed to do, and then seeing the fun little runs run around. They were so energetic and playful when they were young. Smart. But they certainly got stupider as they got older, and fast.

Carmen’s breathing picked up, and Eli witnessed her pushing the calf out. All in all, it took less than five minutes for the calf to be born. Carmen, however, didn’t move like she was supposed to. She got up and then stood over the calf. She didn’t bend down and check on it, didn’t start to clean the babe off or anything.

“Come on, Carmen, don’t do this.”

Eli checked the seat next to her to make sure she had everything she needed. With the temperatures dropping, she wasn’t going to wait too long to see if Carmen was going to do what she needed to. Maybe one of the others would come by and teach Carmen what to do next. It was her first year calving, but if this was how it went, Eli was going to have to reconsider inseminating her next year.

Another minute ticked by. Eli grabbed the bag next to her as she jumped out of her truck. If she didn't get the sack off the calf quick, it could die. She walked rapidly the rest of the way to where Carmen still stood, probably in shock from what had just happened. Eli patted Carmen's neck and tried to lead her down to the calf on the ground, but she didn't budge.

"Come on, cow. This isn't the time for this."

Kneeling down, Eli pulled at the sack with her bare fingers to move it from the calf's face and nose. Then she rubbed the calf's chest to make sure it woke up. When its tiny hooves rustled against the grass, Eli focused on Carmen. Standing up, Eli stalked over to her cow and patted her back and then shoved her hand with the blood from the sack in front of Carmen's nose to get her to smell.

"Carmen, deal with your calf already. You made it; you take care of it. That's the deal, remember?"

Carmen didn't really move or even acknowledge anything Eli said, not that she expected her to—she was a cow after all. "Come on, girl. Just check the baby out."

The cow made no move. Eli tried for another few minutes before she bent over the calf and pulled the rest of the sack off. She tried again and again to get Carmen to pay attention, but the cow wanted nothing to do with her offspring. Giving up, Eli draped a blanket over the calf's body and rubbed him until he started to move. It took longer than she'd hoped it would, but eventually the calf stood up on its wobbly feet.

"Well, what am I supposed to do with you now?" Eli curled her hands under the calf's body and heaved as she lifted. Shoving him into the passenger side of her truck, Eli let out a grunt as she shut the door. The heat would help the baby out. Until then, she was going to remain annoyed with Carmen.

With the heat in the truck on full blast, Eli drove to her lower pasture to check on the cattle there. With nothing amiss and no other cows giving birth that she could see, she headed to the barn. The small calf next to her, much smaller than she'd expected from Carmen, nudged his nose into her face.

"Stop it," Eli muttered and pushed at him. She was going to have to figure out a name, assuming it lived through the next few nights. Carmen had looked fine, but she would have to make sure to check on her the next day and maybe bring her up to the barn and see if she'd like to reclaim her offspring when she was a bit more rested. If not, her nightly duties were now also going to include bottle feeding a newborn.

She made it to the barn and wrapped her arms around the calf, bringing him inside. She settled it into one of the stalls and removed the blanket after rubbing the calf's body some more to finish getting some of the blood off. She'd have to clean him up better assuming Carmen still wanted nothing to do with him in the next few days. Until then, she needed the calf to smell like his mother.

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Eli headed for the side of the barn where she kept a lot of her supplies. Mixing up a bottle, she shook it as she walked toward the stall.

“Here, calfy calfy calfy,” she called.

Inside stood her tiny little calf, already working his way into her heart. Eli stepped inside and settled against the wall. She squeezed a little bit of the formula onto the end of the nipple so the calf could smell it. It didn’t take too much longer for the calf to latch on and give a good suck.

“Perfect,” Eli muttered in praise. She held onto the bottle hard, knowing that as the calf figured out what was coming out, the sucks would become more and more powerful. She patted the calf’s head and praised him even more as the minutes ticked by. Going out in the night had been worth it for sure.

* * *

Sarah had seen the headlights in the distance come back from the fields and stop at the barn. Her throat constricted with nerves as she watched Eli grab something and bring it inside. Curious, Sarah squinted to try and see what was going on, but she couldn’t make it out.

She stared at the door to her room before making a rash decision. She hadn’t left the house all day, and she needed to get out. The snow was beautiful and didn’t look to be falling too heavily, and she knew the path to the barn, thanks to Eli walking that way earlier. It would be a perfect excuse.

Grabbing her jacket, Sarah flung it over her shoulders while she dipped her bare toes into her boots. She turned the lights on in the house as she went through it to the main floor then out the back door by the kitchen. She smiled as the snowflakes kissed her cheeks and her eyelashes. It was almost a perfect night.

She made her way to where she'd seen Eli disappear earlier that day. One part of her wanted to turn around and go back to hiding in her room while the other part told her to keep trudging forward. She listened to the quieter but more adventurous side of her brain.

She was stepping as well as she could, but it was hard to make out where she was going, especially considering she hadn't walked that way before. She slipped on one particularly steep part of the incline and landed on her ass and her hand. Cursing, Sarah groaned and looked from the barn to the house. She was about halfway there. She could do this.

Gnawing on her lip, Sarah pushed herself up, her toes curling in her leather boots as she took the next step, being far more careful now. She reached the bottom of the hill and felt much better being on even and flat ground. As she reached the partially open door to the barn, she pushed her way inside and immediately covered her nose. It smelled like something else inside, a mix of sweat and shit, literal shit.

Fluorescent lights hung from the ceiling, which helped her to see. She searched around for Eli but didn't find her anywhere. With her lip planted firmly between her teeth, she regretted taking the risk to come down there. A dark black horse snorted at her as she walked by, and Sarah grabbed the edges of her jacket and pulled them tighter around her as she stepped around the horse.

“What are you doing down here?”

Eli's voice made her jump, the accusation in her tone running deep. Sarah spun to her

side and stared into Eli's angry eyes. Her lips parted in surprise, and she wasn't sure what to say or do. All she knew was she wanted to run the opposite direction.

"I...I'm sorry. I'll go."

"No." Eli reached out but didn't touch Sarah before she jerked her hand back. "No, I'm sorry. You just scared the crap out of me."

"I scared you?" Sarah's voice wobbled, because truthfully, Eli had scared her more than anything even though she'd been the one to show up unannounced.

"Yes. I don't usually have people coming into my barn in the middle of the night unless they're up to no good."

"D-does that happen often?"

"Only when the mischief-makers in town get the wrong idea, but this place is usually far enough out they don't bother me much. Was there something you needed?" Eli sighed.

Sarah shook her head. "No. I uh...I saw you bring something in and was curious what you were doing."

"You saw from the house?"

Sarah nodded.

Eli eyed her suspiciously. "I brought a calf in. Mom rejected it."

"What?" Sarah's eyes widened.

“It happens, especially with first time moms. I’ll try to reunite them tomorrow and the next day, but if that doesn’t work, then I’ll end up keeping it here and bottle feeding it.”

Sarah turned to look around the large barn. She’d never been in one before. She’d seen videos and whatnot, but she’d never actually stepped into a real working barn before. “C-can I see it?”

“Sure. Tomorrow, if you want and Carmen still rejects it, you can feed it too. It’ll give me a break.”

“Like with a bottle?”

Eli snorted. “Well, I don’t expect you to whip out your boob to nurse it.”

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The look Eli gave her was definitely a look of lust. Sarah swallowed, her stomach dropping and sending tingles even lower. Her breathing picked up as she stared into Eli's eyes, trying to figure out what the hell to say in response. Nothing could hide the fact that Eli's look was beyond one of friendship or of patronship. That was pure desire.

"Who's Carmen?" Sarah asked, trying to break up the moment.

"What?" Eli had confusion flash across her face. "Oh! Carmen's the mom. My cow."

"You name your cows?" Sarah let out a giggle.

Eli raised a single bushy eyebrow in Sarah's direction. "Of course I do. Don't you name your animals?"

"Yeah, but mine are pets."

"You think I don't love my cattle?"

Sarah lifted one shoulder then dropped it. "Guess I never thought about it. I'm used to just cow farms."

"Feed lots."

"Yeah, those."

Eli clenched her jaw. "They're a pro and a con. But I like my cattle. I don't want to

wish them harm.”

“Okay.” Sarah let out a breath. “So what are you naming the calf?”

“Not a clue. Don’t know him yet.”

“Can I see him?”

“Sure.” Eli moved around Sarah, giving her a wide berth, before she stepped down the long row of stalls. Sarah followed, her boots on the dirt inside making a scuffing sound as she went.

When they reached the low wood of the calf’s stall, her heart melted. She leaned against it and grinned broadly at the small creature inside. He was so much smaller than Sarah thought he’d be.

“It’s a bull,” Eli commented as she hung her elbows over the edge of the wood and stared down at the black calf.

“Oh.” Sarah swallowed and bit her lip again as her gaze was locked on Eli’s thick forearms and biceps, which were stretching the fabric of her shirt. She couldn’t quite figure Eli out, if she was butch or femme or what. Her own chest rose and fell, and she skittered her gaze back to the calf when Eli turned to look at her. “So it’s a he.”

“Yes. I’ll keep him until he’s weaned and then take him to auction.”

“You don’t keep them?”

“I keep a couple, but usually I auction the males off.”

“Why?”

Eli raised a brow at her again, and Sarah's heart gave a patter of excitement. "It's how I make my money."

"What do you do with the cows?"

"Breed them for bulls."

"Oh."

"Yeah." Eli swallowed, and Sarah had to erase the thought of wanting to lick up the line of Eli's neck. But it didn't work. "Carmen is one of my first-year cows. I thought she'd do better than this. I might try her again next year, but if she does the same, I won't breed her again."

"Why?"

"Because I can't be wasting my time taking care of her calves if she's not going to do it. I don't breed to take care of them. I breed to sell. If all my time is spent here bottle feeding her calves every year, I lose out elsewhere and potentially miss other babies with complications."

"I...I didn't realize how complicated farming is."

“Ranching.”

“Right. Ranching.”

Eli rocked on her heels as she leaned over the wood wall and put her hand down, clicking her tongue to get the calf’s attention. Immediately, the calf came over and tried to suck on Eli’s fingers. Eli jerked her hand away, scolded the calf, and then put her hand back in, brushing her fingers over its nose.

“I’d offer to let you scratch his head, but he’s a bit nasty right now. Might want to wait a few days until either mom cleans him up or I end up doing it.”

“I don’t mind.”

“Really?”

Sarah nodded and set her jaw. She didn’t mind. She wanted to see how soft his hair was, or if it was wiry like it looked.

Eli let out a heave. “Careful of your fingers. He’ll try to suck them off.”

“All right.” Sarah reached down and rubbed the tips of her fingers over his head, surprised to find him sticky. But she was correct in her assumption. The hair on his face was wiry and stiff against her bare fingers. She laughed and then turned to look at Eli as she continued to pet the calf.

“You should name him Buddy.”

“Buddy? Really?”

Sarah shrugged. “Why not? He’s cute, and if you only have him for a year, then why not name him something you don’t necessarily like.”

“Fine. Buddy it is.”

“He’s so cute.”

Eli laughed and slapped the edge of the wood as Sarah continued to keep her hands over the edge of the stall. “You pet him all you want. I’m going to finish up before heading in for a shower.”

“Umm...will you let me know when you go back?”

“Why? Scared to walk on your own?”

Sarah shook her head. “Not scared, no. I slipped on my way down. I’d rather not fall on my way up.”

Eli grinned broadly, her eyes dancing with humor. “The streak of mud on your ass is a dead giveaway.”

Sarah’s cheeks flushed hot under Eli’s stare, and she had no quick comeback for it. But she didn’t even have a chance to say anything as Eli turned and walked back to where Sarah had originally found her. She turned to Buddy and gnawed on her lip as she scratched behind his ears.

“What do you make of that? I have no idea either.”

She couldn’t believe for one minute she was talking to a cow, but there she was,

standing in a barn at four in the morning, talking to a cow, a cow she had named nonetheless. Kara would never believe it.

Sarah pushed away from the stall and moved to the barn door. Eli was already waiting for her, and they walked together in silence up to the house. As soon as they were inside and Eli pulled the door shut, Sarah stopped in the kitchen. Eli's lips parted in surprise before she nodded at Sarah, said nothing, and headed down the stairs to where Sarah assumed Eli lived.

Her belly tightened with tension as she moved to the kitchen sink and washed the mud from her fall and the grime from Buddy off of her hands. She still couldn't figure Eli out. One minute it was all heated looks and the next it was sharp and annoyed retorts. Not to mention, Sarah couldn't decide which she preferred.

Ultimately, she'd prefer the heated looks to being made feel like she was an inconvenience, but the back and forth took her by surprise every time. Still, getting out of the house and seeing a new side to Eli had given her a warm feeling in her belly. At the very least, she hoped to have a new friend by the end of her two weeks. If she was going to be stuck in the house alone with Eli for that time, they'd have to figure out how to communicate and get along. Sarah was pretty sure the dinner she had made that night had gone a long way to bridging that gap.

As she went up the stairs after taking her boots off by the door like she'd seen Eli do, she felt her ass and grimaced. Sure enough, it was covered in a thick layer of mud. She'd have to beg Eli to let her use the washer when she got a chance because muddy clothes were not something she wanted to wear again.

With a smile on her lips, Sarah threw all her clothes into a pile on the floor where she kept her dirty clothes thus far and crawled into her bed naked. She closed her eyes, leaving the curtains open so she could see the snow continue to fall outside. It had been a nearly perfect night, and it was exactly what she needed. Something new.

Something different. Something to break up the monotony of her life in Dallas. A rest, a break, something that gave her new things to learn and new things to think about.

A farm—no, a ranch—had been the right decision. Thank God for Kara making the reservation even though Sarah had been so hesitant to begin with. With the covers pulled over her legs and chest, Sarah drifted off into sleep with a smile on her lips, and no ache in her stomach for the first time since she'd stepped off the plane and gotten into her rental car.

Chapter 8

Sarah had spent half the day walking around the property and enjoying the fresh air after sleeping for nearly eight hours straight. She'd even gone in to check on Buddy twice, which Eli had told her she could do. When Eli got home from her morning chores, she slipped into the barn with Sarah.

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“Hey there,” Eli called as she moved toward the front.

Sarah stepped around the stall and walked down the long barn until she reached Eli.

“Hey. Cows okay?”

Eli snorted. “Right as rain. Carmen didn’t want nothing to do with him this morning. I’ll try again tomorrow.”

“Poor Buddy.”

The grin on Eli’s lips took Sarah off-guard and warmed her belly again. Sarah nodded toward the bottle. “Is that for him?”

“Yup. Here.” Eli handed it over. “Mix this with that and then shake it up.”

“Okay.” Hesitating, Sarah dumped the water and then the formula into the bottle as Eli watched her carefully. With a little more direction on when to stop with the formula, she closed the lid, put her finger over the top of the nipple, and shook.

Eli was doing something with papers, writing something down. When Sarah leaned over to see what she was writing, she noticed the time and amount written onto the chart.

“Keeping track?”

“Got to. Otherwise I forget.”

“How much does he get a day?”

“A lot.”

Sarah sighed as she continued to shake the bottle. Eli put her hand out, covering Sarah’s to stop the shaking and sending shots of delight through Sarah’s arm and up into chest.

“Let’s see.” Taking the bottle from Sarah, Eli studied it before handing it back. “You get to feed him.”

“W-what?”

“You named him. He’s yours now.”

“I...what?”

Laughing, Eli grabbed Sarah’s free hand and dragged her down the barn and back toward the stall where she’d already been a couple times that day. “Come on, you get to feed him today.”

Sarah’s insides were in knots until they reached the door and Eli let go. Eli slipped inside and beckoned Sarah forward with a wave of her hand. Sarah followed carefully, not quite sure where to step or what to do, but Buddy knew, clearly. He saw the bottle and came right up to her.

Her shoulders tensed as he got right up in her business. Eli chuckled again and stood next to Sarah, grasping the bottle with both of her hands. When Sarah glanced over at Eli, there was a grin on her lips, one side pulling up higher than the other as her eyes danced with delight.

“Hold on tight. Both hands.”

Eli’s much larger hands covered hers, holding them firmly to the bottle as Buddy mouthed the nipple. The first tug caught Sarah by surprise, and her arms jerked forward from the strength of the calf.

“Sarah, tight.”

“I got it,” Sarah muttered.

“Good.” Eli’s voice was gruff and sharp, but her breath was warm on Sarah’s cheek as they held onto the bottle together, their shoulders brushing.

Sarah had to swallow hard when she looked from Buddy to Eli, their gazes catching. Turning back to Buddy, she focused on him and clenched her jaw when he gave a particularly hard suckle on the bottle. Eli eventually let go and let Sarah finish feeding him on her own, no doubt once she felt Sarah wasn’t going to mess it up any.

Buddy sucked the bottle dry, and when Sarah straightened her shoulders she was surprised when he tried to find some more. Laughing and grinning she turned to Eli but was stunned into tense silence by the look she received. Eli’s face was withdrawn, her brows furrowed together, and her jaw clenched tight.

“Did I do everything right?”

“What?” Eli was shaken from whatever she was thinking. “Yeah, yeah. He’s just selfish and wants more.”

“He’s not selfish. He’s a growing boy.”

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Snorting, Eli rolled her eyes. “Yeah, sure. Growing.”

Eli took the bottle and stepped out of the stall. She held open the door just enough for Sarah to slip out and shut it right when Buddy tried to follow her. “He likes me.”

“You feed him, so he likes you. Kind of goes hand in hand,” Eli grumbled.

Sarah narrowed her eyes at Eli, trying to figure out what she’d done to offend her. Giving up, she followed Eli to front of the barn where she cleaned up the work area. “You ready?”

“For what?” Sarah asked.

“Head to town. Get your car. Then you can drive around freely without me.”

Sarah couldn’t figure out why that thought made her stomach churn and sadness pull at her insides. She’d enjoyed the little bit of time they’d had together, however little it had been. Helping out with Buddy would no doubt be the highlight of her weeks spent there, and she looked forward to feeding him again the next day.

“I guess,” Sarah answered. But she wasn’t sure she wanted less time with Eli. Eli was such a conundrum to her. On the one hand, she lived in a very conservative part of the country, and while she seemed to fit in from the outset, Sarah got the impression that she didn’t at the same time.

“Elijah.”

Sarah jumped at the male voice as it boomed through the barn. Eli turned with wide eyes and grinned. “How’s it going, Bill?”

“Good. Cassie.”

“You’re kidding. I was just out there.”

He lifted his hand and shook his head. “She’s smart.”

“I’m going to kill that cow, murder her in her Goddamned sleep,” Eli muttered. “I’ll go get her.”

“You going to town later?”

“We were just about to leave.”

“We?” He raised his eyebrow at Sarah.

“This is my guest, Sarah. I thought I’d bring her in for the sausage supper, give her a good first impression of our tiny little town.”

Bill laughed. Sarah’s gaze bounced back and forth between the two of them, confused as to who this person was. “It’ll be good.”

“Sure will. Tell me. Same spot?”

“You know it.”

“For crying out loud!” Eli clenched her fists.

“You going to fix the fence?”

“It’s on the list for next week.”

“Get to it,” he grumbled. “See you in town.”

“Yep. See you.” Eli let out a sigh as Bill left.

Sarah twisted toward Eli, her eyes wide. “What was that?”

“Cassie, one of my cows. She’s stubborn as stubborn can be. We’ll have to go get her before we go into town if you don’t mind.”

“Sure. Where is she?”

“Bill’s wheat. She thinks the grass is always greener on the other side.”

“What?”

Eli laughed. “Just come on.”

“Now?”

“Good a time as any. Why?”

“I’m not really dressed to go wrangle a cow.”

Eli’s laugh echoed in the barn. Sarah’s cheeks heated as Eli continued to laugh at her expense. When Eli brushed tears from her cheeks, Sarah crossed her arms over her chest and glared.

“You are not wrangling the cow. Not this cow.”

“Why not? Don’t think I can do it?”

Eli’s gaze moved slowly up and down Sarah’s body, and Sarah’s skin heated under her keen look. Swallowing hard, Sarah regretted asking the question. “Maybe you could, but not in that, and not this cow. She’s mean when she’s mad.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Bites.”

Eli took Sarah’s hand again and led her toward the truck. She opened the passenger

door for Sarah and waited for her to get inside. Sarah slipped into the seat and bit her lip. Eli shook her head, laughing again and muttering, “Wrangle a cow. Ha!”

The old truck was still warm from when Eli had been out earlier, but it rattled in a worrisome way. It didn’t seem quite ready to make it to the field and back, or perhaps it had done it too many times. She worried the wheels would fall off, but sure enough, they made it out to the pasture.

Eli uttered “stay here” before she got out and jumped the fence line. It took Sarah a minute to see the cow, but there she was, eating the wheat.

Eli clapped her hands and shouted as she moved Cassie toward the fence. Sarah strained her neck to see Eli in action. Cassie scraped at the ground and lowered her head. Sarah worried Eli was about to get headbutted over the fence line, but instead, Eli stood up straight and put her hand out, yelling at Cassie. She couldn’t make out what Eli said, just her tone of voice.

Cassie changed her tune quick and started walking toward the fence line. Eli followed her and then started running at her, clapping her hands again. Cassie sped up before she jumped through the small break in the fence. Eli shook her head as she herself jumped back over, then messed with the fence while Cassie meandered off in the other direction.

When Eli swung into the truck, she let out a heavy sigh. “Cow is going to be the death of me someday.”

Sarah gave her a small smile.

“Don’t suppose you know how to fix fences.”

“No,” Sarah answered.

“Didn’t think so.” Shoving the truck into reverse, Eli drove toward the house. “We’ll switch out trucks and then head to town, all right?”

“Yeah.”

“She’ll be fine for a day or two. I promise.”

“Okay.” Sarah glanced out the window at the fields surrounding her. She had no idea what just happened, but they’d gone from flirting back to cold again. The ping-ponging was exhausting, but she wasn’t sure how to put an end to it. Keeping her mouth shut, Sarah watched the different fields pass as Eli drove her to town to get her car, and thankfully, her phone. She was going to have to call Kara as soon as she got a chance and fill her in on all her adventures since she’d arrived.

* * *

They got to town as dusk hit. Eli was glad Sarah was going to have to follow her back to the house. That way she could guarantee she wouldn’t get lost this time. Her day had been interesting. Unlike with any other guest, she felt Sarah was trying to learn something new, not just experience something once and leave with it that way. Sarah also showed a genuine care for her cattle and herself.

Eli pulled into town. They were meeting the Hargraves at the sausage supper and would grab the keys and the car there. Eli drove around until she found the rental car and parked nearby.

She knew without a doubt that Sarah was going to stick out like a sore thumb, but she’d wanted to go in the first place. Eli could have skipped it for all she cared. It was a place for gossip to happen, which she didn’t really enjoy, but she did like seeing everyone and catching up with them. She knew there would be a lot of talk about the calves already born.

Eli prepared herself for the mass of people who were going to be inside. She only hoped her ex wasn't there. That would be an adventure, since they hadn't figured out how to be in the same room together since they broke up, like two years before. Since then, they'd just avoided each other when they could.

She was nervous in a way she hadn't been before. Something about bringing Sarah to a town-wide event where she had no doubt her ex was going to be was nerve-racking. She stayed right where she was but jerked suddenly when Sarah's hand found hers.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. It’s fine.”

“We don’t have to go in if you don’t want to. We can eat leftovers.”

Eli shook her head. “No. We can go.”

Sarah looked out the front windshield then at Eli. “You’re not moving.”

“Right.” Eli turned the truck off and pocketed her keys into her thick jacket. “Let’s go.”

“Really, Eli. We don’t have to go. I’m not exactly thrilled about it being in a church.”

Eli snorted. “There’s only one other building in town big enough for this crowd.”

“Really?”

“Really really. Come on. It’s decent grub.” Eli shoved the door to her truck open and drew in a cleansing breath. She could do this. They would sit with the Hargraves and ignore her ex if she was there.

Eli held the door to the church open so Sarah could step inside first. When she moved in behind Sarah, she shucked her jacket and hung it up. Sarah stayed put, her body tense and her hands wringing in front of her. Her lip was back between her teeth again. Eli winced and wondered if her lip had a callous on it from all the gnawing or

if it was soft as silk from being constantly moistened.

Pushing that thought to the back of her mind, Eli stepped next to Sarah and nodded her head toward the second door. “Coming?”

“Yeah.”

Leading the way, Eli stopped by the table where a little old lady sat with a basket in front of her. She reached into her pocket and pulled out her wallet, gripping a twenty and dropping it in. “How are you doing, Kitty?”

“Fifty-fifty, Elijah. Yourself?”

“Good as ever if I can get Cassie to behave.”

“Oh, she still hopping that fence?”

“Seems to be every other day lately.”

Kitty chuckled. “You’ll figure it out soon enough.”

“I’m going to build a brand-new fence if she keeps it up.”

“Aww, Elijah, she just wants to be free like the rest of them.”

“Don’t start, Kitty. She needs to learn like the rest of them that Bill’s wheat isn’t any better than my wheat, but don’t tell him I said that because I’m sure he’ll deny it.”

“That he will. Say, how much rain did you get the other night?”

“Fifty hundredths.”

“Really?”

“It hit hard up north.”

“Harder south. We saw an inch.”

“Really? Hadn’t heard!” Eli shot Sarah a look and rolled her eyes. “I’ll see you around, Kitty.”

“See you, Elijah.”

As soon as they got to the line, Eli leaned over to Sarah and whispered in her ear. “It’s always a competition to see who got the most rain each time it does rain. She didn’t get an inch, trust me, but she was trying to one-up me.”

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The grin on Sarah's lips set Eli's stomach tumbling. She locked her gaze onto Sarah's and smiled as she grabbed a tray, silverware, and a drink. They stepped up into the line. Eli went first, told them she wanted two patties and two biscuits along with the green beans. She saw the Hargraves and headed in their direction, knowing Sarah followed closely. She stopped short when she saw the lanky woman in a Sheriff's uniform sitting next to Mrs. Hargrave.

Cursing, Eli set her tray down with a heavy sigh as she nodded at her ex, who gave her a curt nod in return. "Bridget."

"Elijah."

Eli's stomach plummeted. The one thing she had wanted to avoid, and now she was stuck sitting next to her. There was no way around it because they had to meet up with the Hargraves to get the keys. With a sigh, she pulled over the bowl of gravy and doused her food with it. She was going to duck her head, focus on eating, and get out of there as soon as she could.

"How were your first few nights here, sweetie?" Mrs. Hargrave focused on Sarah.

Sarah nodded. "It's been wonderful, thank you. But I'm happy to get to town and see everything that's going on here."

Eli kept her mouth shut and focused on the next bite of food she shoveled into her mouth. If she wasn't careful, she was going to finish it too soon and have nothing to distract her from the situation. She wasn't paying attention, and Sarah's hand on her arm surprised her. Glancing up, she looked at Sarah with curiosity.

“Huh?”

“How much rain did we get?” Sarah asked.

“Oh! Fifty hundredths.” Eli shoved another bite of food between her lips as she risked a glance toward Bridget, who stared directly at her and flicked her gaze to Sarah. Eli knew what she was thinking—that she was with Sarah as a date—but she also knew Bridget wouldn’t dare bring it up in a room packed with people. They had a stare down until Sarah broke her gaze again with a hand on her forearm. “What?”

“Nothing,” Sarah responded on a whisper.

“Food good?” Eli asked, trying to find a way back to a normal conversation, but knowing she was doing a crap job at it.

“Yeah. It’s fine.”

Eli shifted in the uncomfortable metal folding chair and stared over at Mrs. Hargrave who had a keen eye glued to Eli’s face. Eli wished she could crawl in a hole and hide, but she wasn’t sure she could get away with that anytime soon. Sarah didn’t touch her again through the rest of the meal, and Bridget excused herself as quickly as she possibly could when she was done eating.

As soon as they got outside the church, Eli released the tension in her shoulders and closed her eyes. The fresh air was welcome compared to the overheated fellowship hall of the church. As she opened her eyes, Sarah reached her small hand out and grabbed her arm again, she saw Bridget drive by in her cruiser, gunning the engine as she went, and glaring the whole while.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Sarah asked, her voice full of concern.

“I’m fine,” Eli answered, swallowing down her hurt and anger, which wasn’t directed at Sarah even though she was bearing the brunt of it. “I’m sorry. I know I...well, I’ve been coming off like an ass tonight, and I’m sorry about that.”

Sarah shook her head. “I don’t mean to pry, but...I’m not even sure how to ask this...”

“Yes, she and I dated.”

“And I take it that it didn’t end well.”

“No.” Eli grunted.

“Who ended up with the broken heart?”

Eli blinked back tears as she stared into Sarah’s worried gaze. Sniffling, Eli ground her molars before she answered. “Honestly? Probably both of us.”

“I’m so sorry. How long ago was it?”

“Too long for it to still be this much of an issue.”

“Months?”

“Closer to two years at this point.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.” Eli shoved her hands in her pockets and stared at her work boots. She didn’t want to be having this conversation with a near stranger, even if she did know said stranger was batting for the same team she did. It was still too much personal information to be sharing with a guest. She needed to pull herself together.

Sarah scooted in a bit closer to Eli, and Eli's stomach dropped. She glanced around to see if anyone was there to see what was happening, but when she saw that there was no one in sight, she turned to stare at Sarah, trying to make an easy escape.

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“Exes come and go, you know. And sometimes, the ones you loved the hardest will always hurt, no matter how much time passes.”

Eli drew in a deep, shuddering breath. The sincerity in Sarah’s tone, the seriousness in her face, the truth of her words—they hit her all at once. She repeated exactly what she’d said moments before, barely getting the word out. “Yeah.”

“So, take it one day at a time, and maybe in twenty years you’ll be able to be in the same room as her.”

“Yeah.” Eli cursed. Couldn’t she say anything else? Definitely not with Sarah standing this close to her in the cold night air. The sun had set when they’d come to town hours before, and she was sorely tempted to lean in and press her lips to Sarah’s thin ones. Her gaze kept dropping down to Sarah’s mouth then back to her eyes. Shaking herself from the moment, Eli cleared her throat and sniffed again. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“I have my fair share of exes, Eli. Some are great to talk to. Others I haven’t spoken to since the day we broke up. Luckily, I have only a few who run in the same circles I do, and we get along decently well.”

“Good for you.” Eli clenched her jaw.

She’d gone from thinking they’d had a connection to wanting out of the conversation as fast as possible. She did not want to listen to Sarah talk about her exes or compare problems. Of course, that was the norm anytime someone brought up a problem, but she didn’t want to listen to it that night. She wanted to jump in her truck and head on back to her little oasis in the basement before she had to go out and do her nightly

checks of the cattle.

Sarah must have gotten the hint because she stepped away and raised her chin up. “Thank you for bringing me here tonight. It was an experience I’m not likely to forget.”

Eli snorted. “Because I mucked it up.”

“No, actually.” Sarah grinned. “Because it was fun to see how a small town works. I’ve heard stuff, but since I’ve really never been to one, or lived in one, or been shown around by an insider, it was all very interesting.”

“How so?”

“Well, you know everyone, and everyone knows you.”

“Yeah?” Eli wasn’t quite sure she understood.

Sarah grinned. “It’s like the conversation never ends or starts. You all just pick up where you left off and leave off where you’ll pick up.”

Eli thought back to everything that had happened that night, and she supposed Sarah was right. “Huh. Never thought of it like that.”

“See? Interesting.”

“I guess.” She shrugged. “You ready to head home?”

“Yes! I need to check on Buddy.”

Laughing, Eli shook her head. “You and that calf.”

“What? I like him.”

“You’re going to spoil him so much he’s going to reject his mama when I try to stick him back with her tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Sarah stared down at her shoes.

Eli reached down to lift Sarah’s chin to look in her eyes. “I was joking.”

“Oh!”

“Want to come with me in the morning to see if they like each other yet?”

“Sure. When?”

Eli’s eyes crinkled as she grinned. “Bright and early. Six.”

“Ugh.”

“You asked.”

“Maybe I’ll skip.”

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“Well, if they take to each other, you’ll miss out on Buddy since he won’t be in the barn.”

“Hmm.” Sarah stared out at the street and passing cars. “I guess I’ll go.”

“Good. He’ll have to sit in your lap.”

“What?” Sarah’s eyes were wide.

Eli laughed again. “Joking, but he is going to fit in the cab of the truck with us.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Sarah scrunched her nose. “Not in the back?”

“No. He’ll fall out.”

“Fine.”

Eli knocked her shoulder into Sarah’s. “Come on, let’s get out of here. Follow me back.”

“Absolutely. I do not want to get lost again.”

“Yes, let’s try to avoid that.”

With a new smile on her lips, Eli headed toward her truck. She got in and waited until she was sure Sarah had her car started up. Pulling out into the street, she waited until Sarah was behind her before taking off toward home. Tomorrow would be interesting for sure. Maybe she could turn Sarah into a country girl.

Chapter 9

Sarah lay on her bed that night, staring at the ceiling, her precious phone charging next to her as it blinked to life. Dinner had been far more entertaining than she had anticipated. She hadn't expected Eli to also be gay, or lesbian, or whatever—she didn't expect Eli to be interested in women at all.

Something about coming to the middle of nowhere out in the country, she hadn't expected anyone to sway her direction, and it intrigued her. She turned on her side and stared out the window—she'd kept the drapes open every night since she'd been there.

She hadn't expected to do that. In Dallas, she was fastidious about closing the curtains and keeping her room as dark as possible, but out here she loved to turn over in the middle of the night and gaze at the stars until she fell back asleep. Sarah checked the time on her phone before she stood up and moved to the window to look outside. If she was lucky, maybe she would see Eli walking out to the barn to get into her truck for those three-in-the-morning checks she was always going on about.

Eli was such an enigma. She wasn't what Sarah would call outwardly sexy, she had a feminine feel to her but also a masculine one—and she owned both sides of herself—but Sarah had honestly thought Eli was about to break down outside that church building. She'd hesitated even driving back to Indigo in a separate vehicle, wanting to stay as close to Eli as possible and make sure she was okay.

But she hadn't felt comfortable asking, or implying that she should stay with Eli. Her

heart went out to Eli for sure. Breakups were a nasty thing to handle, and she was curious as to why they had broken up, especially considering Eli had said they were both still hurt by it.

Holding the curtain, Sarah stared out into the dark sky around her. It was nearly pitch black save for the moon and stars, and the lights Eli had around the house and the barn—which in the grand scheme of things was not a whole lot. Sure enough, like clockwork, Eli stepped off the covered deck and moved toward the trail that would bring her down to the barn.

Sarah's breath caught in her throat. If only she was the type of person who could handle a quick fling, but she wasn't. Even though most of her relationships had been short compared to others like Kara, Sarah was not someone who dabbled in one-night stands very often. And with her career, she had become far more picky and careful than before. The higher her records climbed on the charts, the more closed off she became. Perhaps it was her age, too, if she really admitted it. She was tired of the drama.

Sarah watched as from a distance Eli jumped into her farm truck, backed out of the drive, and headed down the dirt road. Sarah kept her eyes locked on the taillights for as long as she could, then turned back and grabbed her guitar. The wee hours of the night were the prime time for some music.

The first strum of the strings made her heart sing. She played around, making different chords, letting the sound echo loudly in the room since she knew she was alone. Her voice rang out as she vocalized however it pleased her. It didn't take long for a new melody to start to show its face in her playing. Sarah pressed on with it, trying new things here and there, letting some fail and fall to the wayside. Eventually, she gave up and set the guitar down as she moved back to the window.

She wanted to see Eli return. Perhaps she could go out and feed Buddy since she

knew that would be Eli's last stop before coming in for the night. Then Eli wouldn't haven't to do it. But she wasn't quite sure either of them trusted her enough yet to feed the calf on her own.

Sarah stood by the window, her hand planted on the glass as the cold seeped into her fingers and her bones. Sure enough, Eli's truck bumbled its way toward the barn. Sarah's breath caught in her throat again. Eli was stunning, in her own way, and Sarah was pretty sure the younger woman had no clue just how stunning she really was, how she outshined Bridget day and night.

A week and a half were left until she was back to reality and nose deep in a six-month tour that would take her all over the country. She would be consumed by it, not just by the music and the performing, but all that went with it. The budget, the finance, the analytics of which stops were worth it and if they would go there again the next time—because yes, there would be a next time.

She'd dreamed of a life on the road when she was younger. The few times she'd gotten to travel as a kid had been a dream, and she'd loved every moment of it. Her sister, on the other hand, was a staunch supporter of stay-at-home-and-never-move, which was why she still lived ten feet from their parents, in the house next door.

Eli left the barn. Sarah pulled her lip between her teeth and stared carefully as Eli walked up the trail she'd obviously memorized. She disappeared right at the hill and popped up a minute later at the top. Instead of walking straight for the house, she stopped, her gaze reaching up to Sarah in the window.

Sarah's heart clenched, and her breathing quickened. She'd forgotten about the light on the bedside table. Eli, no doubt, could see her standing there. Sarah didn't move, trapped between not wanting to be caught and wanting to walk downstairs and greet Eli in person. The breath she held in her lungs burned until she forced her body to release it with a hiss.

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Eli didn't wave. She stayed rooted to the ground for another minute before she hunched her shoulders and moved inside. When Sarah couldn't see her any longer, she pressed her forehead to the glass and closed her eyes with a sigh. She wondered what would happen next. They skirted around each other every minute they were together, but she still could not figure Eli out.

One moment they shared like this, a heated exchange of looks and sometimes innocent touches, and the next, Eli's tone changed sharply and became harsh. Not that Sarah hadn't done her fair share of pulling away either. Shoving off the window, Sarah moved to her bed and sat on the edge of it, curling her fingers into the blanket and squeezing hard.

Who was she kidding? What was she even playing at? It was stupid and reckless was what it was. Biting her lip hard, Sarah flopped onto her back and stared at the ceiling, attempting to fall asleep for the first time that night. She had to wake up bright and early to help Eli out with Buddy, and if she didn't get some sleep she would be completely useless, especially since she'd forgotten to find the store and its precious energy drinks. She would have to take a special trip to town tomorrow for them.

Sarah's phone buzzed, surprising her. Turning over, she reached for it and grinned, answering right away. "Kara, love."

"Where have you been?" Kara's voice screeched through the line. "I haven't heard anything from you in days."

"You would not believe it if I told you." Sarah rolled her eyes knowing that wasn't true. Kara would eat up every word of the story and embellish everything when she

told someone else.

Kara chuckled. “Try me. I can’t sleep because I thought you were dead in a ditch somewhere.”

“That’s not a pretty image.” Sarah lowered her voice as she drew in a shuddering breath. “The basics are I got lost after a very delayed flight and a nasty thunderstorm. I had to be rescued by the owner of this establishment, well, not owner. I guess her parents own it?”

“Her?”

“Yeah, Eli. I guess she has some weird agreement with them that she’ll own it eventually. I don’t know. Anyway, she came to rescue me and brought me back in her truck since my little rental car wouldn’t drive through the creek without getting stuck.”

“Creek? What?”

Laughing, Sarah settled in. “Yes, it apparently only fills up with a good hard rain, which we got that night.”

“What’d you do?”

“Got in the truck. What else would I do?”

“And you just left your car?”

Sarah nodded even though Kara couldn’t see her. “I did, and accidentally left my dead-as-a-doorknob phone in my car.”

“You didn’t.”

“I did,” Sarah confessed. “And I didn’t get it back until tonight, and after the sausage supper, I didn’t get to charge it until a few hours ago.”

“I’m sorry, the what?”

“Sausage supper. It’s exactly what it sounds like. Just a local dinner with a bunch of sausage patties for a meal.”

“Crazy, but wait—go back to this owner.”

Sarah’s heart skittered. She wasn’t quite sure what to say. “What about Eli?”

“Eli, such an interesting name.”

“It’s short for Elijah.”

“Huh.” Sarah could hear the smile in Kara’s voice. “And have you and Eli been spending time together?”

“I mean, yeah, I am the only one here, and she had to bring me to town to get my car.”

“And rescue you.”

Sarah clenched her hand. “Yeah, I guess she did.”

“So...is she cute?”

Sarah mulled the question over in her head. “Cute is not the word I would use.”

Handsome, talented, kind-hearted, hot, and cold were some for starters.

“So no interest there?”

“Uh no. She’s probably a super conservative country bumpkin who is not into the andro-lesbis with hot shot careers.”

Kara hissed. “Don’t knock it until you try it.”

“Really, Kara, nothing going on here.”

“Well, I do hope you’re relaxing and playing music at least. Maybe writing a new song?”

Sarah snorted and glanced out the window. “I’ve been playing some, relaxing some. Actually, you’ll get a kick out of this. I think I’ve adopted a cow.”

“You what?”

“Yeah. He’s two days old, and I’ve been bottle feeding him. Eli’s going to take me out in the morning so we can try to reunite him with his mama, but I don’t think she’s very hopeful it’s going to work.”

“What’s going to work?”

“That the mama will take him back.”

“Wow, I can’t imagine you taking care of a cow.”

Laughing, Sarah checked the time on her watch. “To be fair, Eli does most of it. I just go down there occasionally to give him a bottle. I named him Buddy.”

“Buddy the cow?”

“Yeah.”

Kara laughed, her voice ringing through the phone. Sarah wasn’t quite sure she wanted to hang up, but she did know she only had about two more hours before she needed to be awake if she was going to go with Eli to attempt reunification of her calf.

“Kara, I’ve got to go.”

“Go?”

“Yeah. I need to sleep a few hours if I’m going to try and bring Buddy back to his mom.”

“When are you doing that?”

“At six.”

“In the morning?” Kara squeaked with surprise.

Sarah chuckled. “Yes, so I need sleep.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Love you, too.” Sarah didn’t wait any longer as she hung up and settled into her bed. She plugged the phone back in to finish charging and turned off the light to get at

least an hour of sleep before she had to be up and going.

* * *

Morning came far too quickly. When Sarah managed to get down to the kitchen, there was already coffee in the pot and Eli was leaning against the counter with a cup to her lips and a smirk in her eyes.

“Didn’t think you’d wake up.”

Sarah brushed a hand through her messy hair and shook her head as she searched for a large mug. Finding none, she settled on a normal sized one and poured herself a cup. “I said I’d come.”

“Yeah, but you were up all night.”

“Not abnormal,” Sarah muttered into her cup as she took a sip, realizing instantly she’d forgotten milk and sugar. Wrinkling her nose, she smiled as Eli handed over creamer and sugar. “Thanks.”

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“Any time. So you’re normally up all night?”

“Yes.” Sarah didn’t elaborate because if she did, it would be a dead giveaway as to who she was and what she did for a living. Even though concerts ended either a little before or right around midnight, the adrenaline rush often kept her up past dawn the next day, especially if they had to break down and move overnight.

Eli shrugged when Sarah didn’t expand, and she ignored it, sipping her coffee again. Eli turned and made them each another coffee in a travel mug she must have kept hidden somewhere special that Sarah had yet to find.

“Finish that up and we can go.”

“Okay. Is he really sitting in my lap?”

“It’s that or you have to scoot close to me.”

Sarah’s heart gave one loud, hard thump in her chest. She eyed Eli up and down as she set about making their coffees and closing the lids. She was clearly in her uniform for work—thick jeans, button down shirt shoved into her waistband, and her long golden hair in two braids down her back. Sarah wondered briefly if Eli had gone to sleep after she’d come back or if she just woke up looking that good.

The thought scared her, and she clenched her jaw to keep from saying anything stupid. When Eli straightened and stared directly at Sarah, she nearly dropped her mug. She couldn’t read her. It was either desire or annoyance. Either way, Sarah wanted nothing to do with it.

“You ready?”

“Uh...yeah,” Sarah whispered.

“Got a warmer jacket or better boots?”

Sarah shook her head.

“Hold on.”

Eli disappeared down into the basement and came back with a pair of boots and a thick jacket.

Sarah stared at her as she held the items out. “You want me to wear that?”

“You’re going to freeze otherwise. It’s nearing thirty outside.”

Sighing, Sarah sat on a stool and undid the ties on her own boots. She took the ones offered and shoved them onto her feet, noting they fit decently well. When she stood up and removed her jacket, Eli held out the second one for her to slip into. Eli’s hands were on her shoulders, smoothing out the material as she stood at Sarah’s back. She was so close.

Sarah dashed her tongue out to wet her lips, and when she turned around, she was pretty sure Eli was just as surprised as Sarah had been herself. They stared at each other, caught at a crossroads of what to do. Go or stay. Kiss or pull away. Sarah’s chest rose and fell rapidly as she side-stepped Eli, making it clear what she did not want, and grabbed her mug of coffee to finish the rest of it before they headed outside.

Eli took hold of the travel mugs and waited for Sarah silently at the back door. They

walked down the path to the barn in silence. Eli moved to the truck, starting the engine and setting the coffee inside while Sarah stepped into the barn to find Buddy.

She got to his stall and was relieved. Whatever had happened in that kitchen was too much for her to figure out in the short walk down to the barn. Sarah reached in and scratched under Buddy's chin as he immediately came up to her looking for attention.

Eli gripped the edge of the stall, startling Sarah out of her reverie. "If they don't take to each other, we'll feed him."

"Did you feed him when you got back?"

"No. He needs to be hungry for this, and she needs to see that."

"Oh."

Eli moved into the stall and kneeled. Buddy came right up to her. "Grab the doors for me, would you?"

"Sure." Sarah stood at the door to the stall and waited while Eli wrapped her arms around all four of Buddy's legs. He tried to kick out at first, but then he melted into her as she drew him close to her chest.

Impressed, Sarah watched as Eli pushed off the ground, groaning as she went and holding Buddy in her arms tightly. "He's gained weight."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Eli grunted. "Probably eighty pounds now."

"Oh my gosh." Sarah immediately opened the gate to the stall and stepped aside to let

Eli move in front of her. They walked together to the front of the barn where Sarah opened the door. She hesitated at the passenger side of the truck, but Eli nodded.

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Eli slid Buddy inside and shut the door behind him. She leaned against the door with a grin on her face. Sarah wasn't sure why Eli was smiling, but she let it drop, still on edge from whatever had happened in the kitchen. Eli grabbed her hand and dragged her around to the driver's side.

“Get in this way.”

Sarah slid inside and scooted as far over as she dared. She supposed it wasn't too bad, much like sitting next to a large dog in the vehicle. When Eli got into the driver's seat, their thighs brushed together, and Sarah had to maneuver her legs over to the passenger side so Eli could use the gear shift to put the truck into reverse.

It took them ten minutes to get out to the pasture. Sarah hadn't been out to the fields this way before. The path they took was a lot rougher than the road they had taken before. She was jostled to and fro, Buddy eventually laying down and putting his head in her lap. Each time Sarah bumped into Eli, a jolt of electricity went through her body and straight between her legs. She was going to have to watch that for sure.

When they got to the field, Eli got out of the truck without a word. Sarah followed, not quite sure what she was supposed to be doing. Following Eli around the truck, she shut the door after Eli grabbed Buddy, set him on the ground, and walked toward a bunch of cows. Sarah couldn't decide if she wanted to stay by the truck or stick it close to Eli.

The cows were much bigger than she had thought they'd be, and close enough to her height that it scared her to think of them being up in her face. Eli turned and glanced over her shoulder, that cocky half-grin on her lips.

“You coming?”

“Yeah,” Sarah breathed out. She took the first step, the heavy boots having an unfamiliar feel on her feet as she walked on the uneven ground.

They walked together side by side down into the field while Buddy ran out, calling to his mom. They stayed a bit of a distance away, watching. Sarah shivered in the chill, but she was glad when Eli didn’t move any closer to her. Buddy ran around, bucking up and down, having energy like she hadn’t seen before.

Eli leaned in close and pointed toward the edge of the group of cows. “That one there, the one kind of standing out on her own, that’s his mama.”

“Carmen.”

“Yeah.” Eli gave her another grin, and Sarah’s stomach clenched. “She’s been acting funny since the other night.”

“How so?”

“Doesn’t want much to do with any of the other cows, which is odd for her. She’s usually in the thick of things.”

“Interesting. I guess I never really thought about cows having their own personalities.”

“Oh, they do. Cassie...well, she’s ten personalities all by herself.”

“I noticed.” Sarah giggled. “Thanks for bringing me out here.”

“Not a problem. The help is good.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m more of a burden than a help.”

“Not at all.” Eli straightened her shoulders. “Truthfully.”

Sarah let it drop, her stomach twisting with anxiety. Whatever was happening between the two of them was far stronger than she thought it should be for having only known each other for three days, and she wasn’t willing to take the step to find out what might happen between them—not if she was leaving in two weeks and wasn’t planning on returning.

She lost track of how long they stood there, watching Buddy run from cow to cow, calling. Her heart broke each time he did it, not finding his mom and her not responding. Sarah was about to take a step toward, but Eli gripped her wrist and held her back. “Wait a second. She’s moving.”

“What?”

Sarah glanced over toward Carmen and, sure enough, the large cow swiveled her head toward the outcry from the calf. She snorted out twice before she answered the call. Buddy found his way to Carmen, who sniffed him and then licked his head before he dove between her legs and started suckling her udders.

Sarah reached out and grabbed Eli’s hand, excitement bubbling in her chest. She bounced in her boots, grinning, and when she turned to say something to Eli, their gazes caught again.

“Did it work?”

“It did,” Eli whispered back. “Want to get out of here?”

“Yeah.”

They were silent as they drove to the barn. When they pulled up and Eli turned the engine off, Sarah pressed her head into the seat, still smiling. “Thanks for taking me out there this morning.”

“Like I said, anytime. I appreciate the company. It gets quiet here sometimes.”

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“I can imagine. That’s partly why I came, for the quiet.”

“Yeah? Well, you’ve got it in abundance, I’m sure.”

Eli’s tone had turned harsh toward the end of the comment, and Sarah wasn’t quite sure what to do with it. Eli was at it again—one minute sweet and talking freely, and then next it was like she was putting up walls. Sighing, Sarah reached for the door handle and exited the vehicle.

Eli went into the barn, silence reverberating around Sarah like a large, overhanging cloud. Sarah nodded her head. “All right then.”

She went back to the house, holding the coffee she hadn’t drunk. She tugged off the boots, leaving them outside the back door, and tugged off the jacket as soon as she got inside. Sarah dumped her coffee down the sink and went upstairs to fall back asleep if she could, but she knew she would probably end up awake for the rest of the day. Perhaps if Eli stayed away from the house, she’d have time to work on that new melody and maybe even some lyrics to go with it.

Chapter 10

Eli stayed out in the fields as much as she could that day. Her morning with Sarah had left a bad taste in her mouth. She would not continue down that road. She may have wanted to, but she was in no position for it, and she had to put a stop to it. She’d tried while they’d still been together, but she was pretty sure she was just giving off a very odd impression. In hindsight, Eli was kind of okay with that. If Sarah thought she was weird or mean, then she would have to worry less about the star-struck crush she still

couldn't get rid of.

With Sarah's first week almost halfway over, she knew she could make it through the rest of the two weeks fine. She'd keep her distance, and everything would be perfect. Without Buddy around, she'd likely be seeing a whole lot less of the curious Sarah anyway.

When her stomach rumbled in the early afternoon, she knew she had to go into the house and get something to fill it. Not to mention exhaustion had seeped into her bones, and food would no doubt help. Eli still had to fix the darned fence Cassie kept breaking through, and this time she had to really fix it. But to do that, she was going to need two people.

Sighing, she rubbed the headache building in the back of her skull. Sarah would be the obvious choice since she was around and not really doing anything, not to mention she did seem interested in what it meant to be a rancher. Most people who stayed with her didn't. They wanted the grand tour, to do the fun stuff, and didn't really want to do the stuff that sucked, like mucking out stalls, or having to put an animal down she desperately liked and didn't want to see gone. Cassie was going to be one of those cows when her time came. As much as she irked Eli with her antics, she'd been around for years, and Eli loved her quirky personality.

She parked her truck, moved through the barn to get everything ready for fixing the fence, and to check on the horse she had stalled since he was having some eating issues. His grain seemed to be gone, so she let him be after a few pets. She'd have to take him for a ride sooner or later. She missed riding, but she had been so busy lately there wasn't a chance.

Eli left the barn door open as she trudged her way to the house. It had warmed up since early that morning, but the air still had a chill to it. It was certainly not the time of year when she'd want to be fixing the fence line, but it had to be done. She sat on

the chair outside the back door and untied her muddy boots so she could leave them there.

Her old and cantankerous dog meandered toward her. She petted his head with a chuckle as he set it on her thigh, and she closed her eyes. Sarah was playing. If she hadn't known who Sarah was before then, she would have known after. It was her most recent number one hit, but it was just her and the guitar.

Sarah's voice was firm, loud, and confident as it echoed through the house and out to where Eli sat. As much as she wanted to go inside, she didn't want to disturb music in the making, and the last time she had snuck in on Sarah, she'd stopped playing immediately and had looked utterly embarrassed and closed off, which had seemed odd for someone whose literal career it was to perform.

Eli relaxed as Sarah's voice filled her head. Her voice was clear, firm in each note she sang, the emotion from the song no doubt leading her. That had been why Eli had been attracted to her music in the first place. Sarah hit the pinnacle of the song and lingered on one of the high notes. Eli drew in a shuddering breath, opening her eyes and staring at the door.

She had to go inside. As Sarah began singing again, and knowing there was only a fraction of the song left, Eli turned the handle on the doorknob and slipped inside as quietly as possible. She shucked her jacket in the kitchen, hanging it on the hook by the back door, and padded in her socks through the kitchen, down the hall, and toward the den.

Sarah sat facing the window and away from her. Eli leaned on the wall, holding herself up. Sarah didn't budge as she moved right from one song into the next. Eli's heart pounded, a voyeur in her own home, witness to something that was by far one of the most intimate things she had ever walked in on.

With her head bent over the strings, Sarah strummed. This time much quieter than before. She hummed through the melody first, then repeated herself. Eli held her breath tightly in her chest and watched in awe as she was pretty sure music was being created right in front of her. Eli's stomach tightened. She was intruding, but she couldn't stop listening.

The third time through, Sarah's tender voice made words, humming some of the places where she obviously hadn't figured out what to say yet.

"It's a playful kind of love..."

Eli swallowed. She should leave, but she couldn't make herself turn around and go, couldn't make herself move. Sarah's fingers slid back and forth on the neck of the guitar as she played different chords repeating and alternating.

"Hush little baby doesn't seem right, this is a playful kind of love."

With no idea who Sarah was singing about, Eli sighed. It was beautiful to watch her like this, so focused, so narrowed in on what she was doing. Eli wondered briefly how long Sarah had been singing and playing that day. The piano was also uncovered and the bench askew, so she'd obviously worked on the piano as well as the guitar.

Taking a huge risk, Eli stepped closer and down the two steps into the den. She kept her feet as quiet as possible as she inched forward. She came to a stop at the long couch that faced the window where Sarah sat, continuing to play. Eli rocked up on her toes, her gaze skimming up and down Sarah's lithe body.

She was smaller, but she wasn't small by any means. Sarah had height on her rivaling Eli's, but when she sat like this, half-covered by the guitar, she looked much smaller. Her hair moved to obscure her face, and Eli imagined her eyes were closed as she focused on what she was doing next. Her heart pounded in her chest as Sarah

strummed a chord multiple times in a row as she listened and then changed it.

Sarah licked her lips and tilted her head back as she hummed again, the melody echoing in the quiet of the house. Eli didn't want to disturb her, didn't want to mess up the beauty Sarah was creating right in front of her, but it seemed she wasn't going to get much of a choice. Her stomach grumbled, rather loudly, and Sarah jerked with a start.

She twisted around, and Eli stood up straight, her hands out to her sides with her palms facing out. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to disturb you."

Sarah didn't answer.

"Whatever you were creating is beautiful."

Sarah's cheeks paled, her thin lips thinned even more, and she gave Eli a blank, hard stare. Eli wasn't sure what she'd done to piss her off, but she hoped she'd be able to make it right in some way.

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“I uh...I just came in from the fields and was getting lunch and heard you playing.”

Again Sarah didn't answer.

Eli, thoroughly confused, pointed over her shoulder with her thumb toward the kitchen. “Uh...I'm just going to get food, I guess. I'm sorry, really. I didn't mean to intrude. I'm so sorry.”

Backing away until she reached the stairs, Eli then turned on the balls of her feet and booked it for the kitchen. As soon as she was away from Sarah, she pressed both her hands to the cold granite counter tops. Whatever she had done had been the wrong thing. She should not have eavesdropped that way.

Yelling at herself internally, Eli grabbed a plate and the makings for a sandwich. She was halfway through when she felt Sarah in the room. Eli wondered if everything was going to unravel in that moment, if she'd have to confess her star-struck crush or if she'd get away with hiding it for longer, but she was pretty sure her entire heart was about to be laid bare.

“I...I don't normally play in front of other people when I'm writing something.”

Eli's shoulders tensed as she slid the knife along the flat side of the bread, spreading out the mayonnaise. She had no idea what to say.

“You just took me by surprise is all.”

Glancing over her shoulder, Eli nodded. “Like I said, I'm sorry. I came home to get a

late lunch before I go out to fix the fence. I didn't mean to disturb you. You can go back to playing if you want."

"I don't." Sarah's voice had an air of resignation to it.

Eli skimmed her gaze up and down Sarah's form. Her shoulders were drawn in, and her eyes cast down toward the floor. Her hair was a mess, like she hadn't brushed it in days, and all Eli wanted to do was walk toward her, tangle her fingers in Sarah's mess of hair and kiss her senseless. Swallowing down the feeling, she focused on her sandwich.

"You eat yet?"

"No," Sarah's voice was quiet.

"Want one?"

"Sure."

Eli set out a double helping of what she was making. When she turned around with Sarah's food on a plate, she set it down in front of her. Sarah slid onto the stool and took a tentative first bite. Eli went to the fridge and grabbed some waters before she stood across from Sarah, not daring to get any closer to her. Her crush was only growing instead of dissipating like she had hoped earlier when out in the fields. She was going to have to watch that.

They ate mostly in silence, and just as Eli was finishing up and about to wash her plate, Sarah's voice distracted her.

"You said you were fixing the fence?"

“Uh...yeah. I can’t keep having Cassie getting out and eating Bill’s wheat.”

Sarah nodded, her dark eyes locked on Eli’s face. “Can I help you?”

Stunned, Eli wasn’t quite sure what to say. “You don’t have to work for your room and board, you know.”

“I know.” Sarah shrugged. “Thought it’d be nice to get outside for a bit instead of staying cooped up.”

“You don’t want to...you know...” Eli waved her hand toward the den “...finish writing whatever that was.”

Sarah’s lips quirked into a half-smile. “It’ll take weeks if not months to get the full song out. I need a break from it. Breaks are good.”

“Oh. Okay. I mean, I guess you can come. Have you ever dug a post hole before?”

“No.”

“Ah.” Eli leaned against the sink, facing Sarah. “Got gloves?”

“Work gloves? No.”

“Didn’t think so. I’ve got some. You’ll need them, especially if you want to play guitar tomorrow. Don’t need blisters on those pretty hands of yours.”

“Pretty?”

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Shock ran through Eli's chest. She hadn't just said that, had she? She had no idea how to backtrack out of that one, so she turned around and started the water to wash dishes before they left. "You'll need that jacket I lent you."

"Anything else?"

"The boots."

Sarah brought her plate over to the sink, their shoulders brushing as Eli moved to rub soap over her plate. Embarrassment still echoed through her chest at her stupid comment. When Sarah settled her plate in the bottom of the sink and turned, she gripped Eli's elbow and squeezed.

"I'll just be a minute."

"Take your time."

Sarah grinned and turned slowly away before heading through the house upstairs. Eli relaxed when she was gone and out of sight. She finished the plates and dried them, setting them back into the cabinet where she'd gotten them. She cleaned up the rest of the mess and was finishing just as Sarah came back down. It was going to be a tediously long afternoon. She only hoped she didn't say anything else stupid.

* * *

They walked quietly down to the barn, but instead of going inside, Eli veered toward the opposite side where her shed was. With a glance over her shoulder, she knew

Sarah was confused, but she didn't explain anything. They were there to fix the fence. Surely Sarah could figure out they needed supplies to do it.

Ducking into the shed, Eli pulled out the post hole digger and shoved it at Sarah who took it with some hesitation. Eli pulled out two fence posts, some two-by-fours, nails, hammers, a shovel, and a whole lot of attitude. She was going to bar that part of the fence so much that Cassie wouldn't know what to do with herself when she tried to get out.

Grunting, Eli lifted the two-by-fours onto her shoulder and started toward the truck. She ditched everything in the bed and turned to see Sarah staring at her from the shed. Confused, Eli narrowed her gaze and put her hand on her hip. "I thought you said you'd help."

"Oh!" Sarah lifted the post hole digger and started for the truck.

Eli didn't wait until she got there. She headed back for the pile of crap she was going to need. She was going to bridge the gap with two more fence posts and some two-by-fours at an angle, along with the wire—barbed since Cassie was so insistent on getting out.

Once they had everything loaded, she jumped into the driver's seat and started the engine, giving the truck a little gas to try and get it going good so Sarah wouldn't freak out that it wasn't going to start. She really had to fix that at some point. Sarah slipped in next to her, and when she turned to Eli, she had a grin on her lips.

"You're not taking any chances this time, are you?"

"Not one," Eli muttered. "I'm tired of chasing her down."

"How old is she?"

“Five.” Eli clenched her jaw and threw the truck into reverse, putting her hand over the back seat as she turned to see where she was going. Sarah’s shoulder was so close to her hand that she could reach out and touch it if she wanted, tangle her fingers in Sarah’s messy blonde hair. Curling her hand into a fist, she resisted the urge and stepped on the gas a little harder than intended. “My dad got her for me as a birthday gift. He regretted it from day one, I think.”

“You got a cow for your birthday?”

Eli snorted. “Best gift ever, minus the annoying exploits.”

“You wanted a cow?”

“I did.” Eli grinned as she stopped and turned the wheel, shoving the shifter into first so they could go forward.

“I can’t imagine getting a cow for my birthday.”

Eli dared herself to ask. “What’s the best gift you’ve been given?”

“My guitar.”

“The one you brought with you?”

“Yeah.” Sarah sighed. “I learned how to play on it. It’s so beat up, but I can’t give it up. It’s just...it’s that special to me.”

Eli chuckled. “How old were you when you got it?”

Sarah turned in her seat to stare directly at Eli. “I got it on our fourteenth birthday.”

“Our?” Eli raised a brow.

“My sister. Twins.”

“No shit.”

Sarah chuckled. “Unlike what you see in the news, my sister and I don’t do everything together and are vastly different. We are not Drew and Jonathan.”

Eli laughed. “She your only sibling?”

“Yes. You?”

“One of each, no twins in our family.”

“Lucky,” Sarah sighed wistfully. “I always wondered what it’d be like to have a brother.”

Eli grumbled. “It’s not as great as it seems.”

Sarah didn’t answer that. A few more seconds of silence passed while Eli got to the fence line and parked before Sarah asked, “Your parents, what do they do?”

“They’re retired.”

“Yeah, but what did they do before?”

“They were the local vets.” Eli sighed and opened her door. She didn’t really want to play twenty questions. When Sarah got to the back of the truck, Eli took pity on her.

“Being the daughter of the local vets means I know everyone in this county and most everyone in the next three counties. It also meant we were the flaming liberals in the area, even though my parents—well, my dad—isn’t that liberal. He is in some ways, in others not so much.”

“What?” Sarah’s eyes were wide.

Eli grunted as she pulled down the gate and dragged out the supplies. “My parents are both fine with folk like me. Others around here? Not so much. Just one of the ways people thought they were odd, but since Dad was from here they accepted us, especially since we’re the only vet clinic in a fifty mile radius.”

“Well, that’s one way to corner the market.”

Snorting, Eli dropped the post hole digger in front of Sarah and handed her gloves. “You’ll want these. You ever used one before?”

“Uh...can’t say I have.”

“Joy.” Eli moved over to the fence and waited for Sarah to join her. Once Sarah was there, Eli showed her with the tip of her boot where to dig the post. “Pretty much, you lift it up, slam it down, and then push out. Pull out the dirt, stack it on my land please, and then we’ll stop when it’s deep enough.”

“How deep is deep enough?”

Eli shrugged. “We’ll measure.”

She watched as Sarah lifted the digger about half as high as she would and dropped it, not very forcefully onto the ground. Smirking, she stalked back to the truck.

“Do it like you mean it, Sarah.”

It didn't take Eli telling her twice. Sarah dug halfway down the first hole while Eli set everything else up. Then it was her turn. She took the wooden digger from Sarah and went to town on the hole, making sure it was done quickly and efficiently. She did not want to be out there any later than necessary, and she wanted the job done before nightfall because no one wanted to be tracking down Cassie in the middle of the night. Since she no doubt knew they were messing with the fence—she'd followed the truck over there—she would surely check it out when they were finished.

Breathing heavily, Eli shoved the post into the ground to measure its depth. Deciding it was good enough, she left it and started on the next one while Sarah watched her, leaning against the bed of the truck. “So why do you stay?”

“What?” Eli stopped, sucking in a deep breath of cool air.

“Why do you stay if you're the token flaming liberal in town?”

Resting on the post hole digger, Eli stared Sarah up and down before she shook her head. “This is home.”

“Home could be elsewhere.”

“Yeah, but it's not. I like it here. I like the job, and this is home.” Eli slammed the digger down before Sarah's voice stopped her again.

“Would you ever move?”

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Sarah's question was so quiet, Eli wasn't quite sure she'd heard her correctly, but when she looked up, she knew she had. "No."

Silence remained, aside from the breeze and the cattle in the distance. Eli walked to her truck and grabbed the quick-set cement she had brought. Slicing the top open with her knife, she dumped it down into the post hole until it was sufficiently filled.

"Grab the water, would you?"

"Uh...yeah." Sarah turned to the bed of the truck and brought over two gallons of water.

Once everything was done, Eli leaned against the back of the truck and sucked down a bottle of water. The sun was setting along the western horizon, and luckily, there were plenty of clouds in the sky that night to make it a gorgeous sunset.

She was about to comment on it when Sarah sighed. "It's so beautiful out here. We don't get sunsets like this in Dallas."

"Too many buildings, I suppose."

"Yeah, maybe, or just not enough sky left since everyone seems to take it up."

Eli clenched her jaw and tried to loosen her stance. "I went to school in Kansas City. Finished my four years, and that was good enough for me. No desire to go back to crowds like that."

“No? Not even to visit?”

“Not often.”

“I don’t mind big cities. Easier to not be seen in them.”

Eli froze at that. She was putting up the gate on the truck when she finished doing it slowly and gave Sarah a hard stare. “Why would you not want to be seen?”

“Escapism, really.”

“Life can’t be that hard that you need to escape.”

Sarah played with the gloves still in her hands. “Only some days.”

Eli’s heart went out to Sarah. She couldn’t imagine what it would be like to walk down the sidewalk in a major city and be recognized, but to be fair, she probably did understand it. Everyone in town knew who she was—there was no escaping. They were all up in her business both in ways she didn’t want and in ways she did.

Reaching out, Eli ran a hand up and down Sarah’s arm, then patted her shoulder as she stepped in closer. “Sometimes it’s good to be seen.”

When Sarah’s gaze finally moved up to Eli’s eyes, she had tears brimming in them. “Sometimes. Most of the time, I’d rather not be so seen.”

“Sounds like you work to maintain that.”

Sarah snorted. “As much as I can. Are we done here?”

Eli took the change in topic for what it was. She turned to call Cassie over, her voice

echoing through the field. Cassie came immediately, and she waited until there was very little space between them. Moving up next to the cow, Eli patted her neck and scratched her nose.

“Now, Cas, I fixed the fence. Don’t go breaking it.”

Cassie snorted and moved to the fence line. Eli caught Sarah tensing out of the corner of her eye and sidled up next to her to calm her down. They watched for a few minutes as Cassie checked out the job they’d done and then keened before sauntering off.

Eli shook her head. “I give it two weeks before she finds a new way out.”

“She’s that smart?”

“I’m not sure smart is what I’d call it. Determined and stubborn perhaps. And bored. She gets bored here. The grass is always greener on the other side, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Eli wasn’t quite sure why Sarah’s tone had suddenly changed from conversational to not, but she didn’t want to pry since Sarah was quite obviously a private person.

“Come on, it’s dinner time.”

“I can cook something, if you want.”

“Yeah?”

“Sure, why not. It’s the least I can do.”

Eli smiled. “Any time a woman says she’ll cook for me, I’m not gonna tell her no.”

The resulting blush that crept into Sarah’s cheeks had been unintentional, but it was welcome nonetheless. It added a nice tone to her normally pale skin. Eli got into the truck and waited as Sarah followed. They’d at least found some sort of rhythm that afternoon, even if it had some awkward moments here and there.

As soon as Sarah had her door shut, Eli licked her lips. “Know how to drive a stick?”

“No.”

“Want to learn?”

“Yes!” Sarah’s eyes lit up with excitement.

“Then scoot over. You can drive us back to the house.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.” Eli jumped out of the truck and rounded the hood. When Sarah hadn’t budged, she made a scooting motion with her hands. “Come on, you’ll never learn if you don’t get behind the wheel.”

With hesitation, Sarah slipped over to the side Eli had just vacated. It may have taken them three times as long to get back to the house, but the lighthearted laughter every time Sarah stalled the engine was well worth it.

Chapter 11

It was mid-afternoon when Sarah glanced out the front window and saw Eli doing something with two horses by the front deck. Excitement and fear entwined together in her belly, her anxiety reaching full force when Eli looked up and caught Sarah's gaze, grinning.

When she came in the front door she'd left her boots on, which Sarah slowly realized was odd. But Eli stopped short just inside the door. When she didn't come closer, Sarah stepped toward her, her blunt nails digging into the palms of her hands before she made them relax, and wiped the sweat on her worn jeans.

"I thought maybe I could take you on a trail ride today."

"A what?" Sarah's eyebrow rose in curiosity.

"A trail ride. We take the horses, go out into the fields and such, ride around. It's really rather simple."

"You want me to ride a horse?"

"I do." Eli grinned, the dimple that ran deep in her cheek coming on full force.

Sarah's stomach twisted every time she saw it. "Okay."

"That's it? Just okay?"

“Yeah. I mean...yeah. I’ve ridden a horse before.”

“Have you really?” Eli shook her head. “And here I thought I was giving you the full round of new experiences.”

Sarah smirked. She wasn’t about to tell Eli that the horse she rode was at the circus when she was a small child and was probably actually a pony and not a horse. She’d leave that to Eli’s imagination.

After she got her boots and a light jacket on, Sarah met Eli on the deck. The horses looked far larger than what she remembered, so she was pretty sure the horse she had ridden as a kid was a pony in disguise. She swallowed as she stared the horses down.

Eli grabbed her hand and placed a small brown thing in it. “Keep your hand flat.”

Taking Sarah’s hand, she offered it to one of the horses, who nibbled the treat off her palm and snorted in delight. Sarah grinned.

“This one will be yours. She’s better behaved. Her name is Mercy. She’s a well-broken mare, trust me.”

“I do,” Sarah answered on a whisper, suddenly realizing how true that was.

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Eli scratched her own horse's large snout. "Know how to get on?"

"It can't be that hard, can it?"

Eli came around to the side of the horse and patted its back before sending Sarah a serious look. "Come along."

Sarah followed her and gripped the saddle where Eli had put her hands. With Eli's fingers digging into her waist, she pulled herself up, Eli steadying her as she went. Once she was seated with the massive beast between her legs, Sarah felt a little steadier. Eli pulled the reins from the deck railing and handed them to her.

"Don't go anywhere."

"Not planning on it," Sarah whispered down to Eli, who still had a hand on her thigh.

Eli got up on her own horse. It wasn't long until they were slowly walking toward the field, the same route they had taken with the truck days before to fix the fence line, but this time at a much slower and smoother pace.

"You said you went to school in Kansas City," Sarah started. "What'd you go to school for?"

"Biology."

"Not Ag?"

Eli snorted. “No. I think I know enough about Ag to teach those classes.”

Sarah clenched her jaw nervously. “I never went to school.”

“It’s not for everyone. It wasn’t really for me, but I went to satisfy my parents.”

Sarah’s heart hammered. “Yeah, I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to go my own way. My parents were pretty supportive so long as I was working and making money and could pay my own bills.”

“Sounds like you’ve got good ones.”

“I do.” Sarah smiled. “Your parents didn’t want any of you to take over the clinic?”

“They did, I think, in some form or fashion, but they didn’t expect it of us, which was nice. I do not have a head for school. I barely graduated with my bachelor’s degree. My brother is crazy smart. He’s a lawyer down in the city. My sister couldn’t care less about school. All she wanted was babies. And that’s what she got. She lives about six hours from here.”

“You see her much?” Sarah’s voice carried in the wind as they moved down a small hill.

Eli shook her head. “Not every day or even every week, if that’s what you’re meaning. She’s got four kids.”

“Four? Crap.”

“Yeah.” Eli chuckled. “The oldest just started kinder this year. She’s pretty consumed by them right now.”

“I bet your parents are excited about being grandparents.”

“Sure they are. Who wouldn’t be?” Eli clicked her tongue and turned her horse.

Mercy followed in line. Thus far, everything had been smooth sailing. Eli took them through the fields, walking along the grass and around the cattle. Sarah felt on much more even footing with the cattle who were milling around.

The babies played with each other, chasing one another around the cows, through their legs even. Sarah bit her lip and dared herself to ask Eli the question that was burning in her mind. “Is Buddy around here?”

“Nah, Carmen sticks to the lower field mainly. She likes it there for some reason. We can go down if you want.”

“Can we?” Excitement bubbled in Sarah’s chest. “I haven’t seen him since that morning.”

Eli chuckled. “Sure, we can.”

They moved through the fields, Sarah becoming more comfortable on her horse as time went on. They stopped at some point, and Eli helped Sarah off Mercy. They let the horses graze while Eli checked on the fence line they had fixed. Thus far, according to Eli, Cassie had not found a way through it yet.

As they got on the horses, Sarah noticed for the first time how relaxed she had been the entire time. None of the regular anxiety that plagued her had been there—well, as soon as she’d gotten comfortable on Mercy’s back and used to the rocking motion.

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It was mid-afternoon when they got to the lower field, and Sarah immediately saw Buddy. He was running circles around another cow, one she wasn't quite sure was Carmen. Eli pulled them to a stop, and they sat a good distance off watching them. Sarah chuckled when Buddy tripped and nearly fell head-over-hoofs but caught himself.

"Babies of just about any kind are always fun to watch," Sarah commented a bit to her own surprise.

"Yes, they are." Eli responded. "There's bingo in town tonight. Did you want to go?"

"Bingo?"

"Yeah. It's a big town-wide to-do. Anybody who is anybody and even those who aren't will be there."

"Sure. Not like I have any other plans."

Eli smirked. "I'm sure I could find something to occupy your time."

Sarah snorted. "Like make dinner."

"Hey, everything you've cooked so far has been amazing. Hands down, no contest. I'll eat your food any day of the week."

"Well, that's good to know." Sarah's cheeks warmed at the compliment. "I don't get much time to cook in general, but I do love it. Always have."

“Why don’t you get to cook much?”

Panic welled in Sarah’s chest. She almost let it spill what she did for a living, but reining herself in, she found a way to avoid it. “Uh...my job doesn’t allow it much.”

“Makes sense. I usually cook up one big thing and eat leftovers all week unless I have a guest at the house or family in town.”

Sarah nodded, glad she had side-stepped that one. It was getting harder and harder to have deep conversations with Eli and not spill what it was she did. While she was proud of her music and her career, which had not been easy to build up, she sometimes wanted to play the role of someone other than Sadie Bade, singer-songwriter. Sometimes it was nice to just play music for fun and hang out with people who didn’t know who she was.

“When is bingo?”

“Six.”

“It’s nearly five.”

“Yup,” Eli answered. “So we’ve got to get these horses cleaned up and head out. We’re trotting back to the barn.”

“We’re what?” Fear lanced through Sarah’s body.

“Trotting. Come on.” Eli dug her heels into her horse’s haunches. Mercy didn’t hesitate as she quickened her pace to keep up. Sarah gripped the reins tightly, holding on for dear life until they came to a stop at the barn.

It took longer than she expected to get the saddles and everything off, but Eli turned

the horses out into the field after giving them a good drink of water. Then she focused on Sarah with a sly smile. “Might want to change before we head to town. Horses are stinky buggers.”

Sarah paused at the heated look Eli was giving her. Those looks never got old, but she was still just as confused by them as she was the first time she’d noticed them. Giving as good as she got, Sarah raised her eyebrows and stared into Eli’s light brown eyes, wishing she had a window into everything Eli was thinking and feeling. It would make conversing with her that much easier, not to mention, she was damn curious what was going on behind the mask Eli seemed to wear every day.

“You changing?”

“Yes.” Eli’s answer was short and clipped. “You’ve got ten minutes.”

“Shit.” Sarah chuckled. “That’s not a whole lot of time.”

“You wanted to see Buddy.”

“Oh, so this is my fault now?” Her tone was slightly accusatory, but Sarah knew the smile on her face made her comment come off as a tease.

“Always,” Eli answered, a breath in her word. “Now get. I’ve got to finish putting this stuff up.”

Sarah gave Eli another once-over before she slowly made her way out of the barn, secretly hoping Eli would catch up to her before she made it to the house. She was curious what Eli would wear to town for a night out or if her standard uniform of a cotton button up, jeans, and boots with two braids would be it.

* * *

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Sarah was pressed into the passenger seat of Eli's nice new truck, staring out at the expanse of land before them, which wasn't hard to do. Eli kept stealing glances in her direction, wondering what was going on in Sarah's head. Eli pulled out onto the highway as she turned down the radio so they could barely hear it.

"Penny for your thoughts."

"What?" Sarah spun, her eyes wide.

Eli grimaced. "What are you thinking? You seem miles away."

"Oh." Sarah shifted her shoulders, rolling them, and settled into the seat again. "I was mostly just thinking about how I've done more things I've never done before in the last week than I ever thought I'd do."

"Like what?" Eli asked, but she pretty much already knew the answer. Sarah was a city-slicker, and she was pretty sure anything Eli did or asked Sarah to join in with was brand new.

"I have never fed a baby cow before."

"They're charming, until they're not."

Sarah chuckled. "I miss Buddy."

"There will be more Buddy's." When Eli risked a glance at Sarah, she had a wistful and dreamy look in her eyes, those dark eyes that she was finding so much harder to

stay away from as the days went on. Since their stint fixing the fence, Eli had found she was enjoying Sarah's company far more than she had thought she should.

Sarah's voice was clear when she asked. "Will there?"

"Every year." Thin lips bowed into a smile, and Eli couldn't help the reciprocating grin she gave. "What about bingo? Have you played bingo before?"

"Probably not like this, but yes, I have actually played bingo before in a competition setting."

"Have you now?"

Sarah chuckled. "My gran used to take me with her to play at the senior center, or really, she took me more so she could cheat."

"How do you cheat at bingo?"

"Oh, those ladies there are very serious about their bingo."

Eli cocked her head to the side. "Seriously, though, how do you cheat at bingo?"

"Switching out cards, throwing in extra number balls, distracting the other little old ladies so they aren't paying attention when their number is called."

"Devilish, weren't you?"

"Still am in some ways." Sarah laughed, her quiet voice echoing in the cab of the truck.

Eli's heart danced around and sent her stomach into a spin of nerves. She had no idea

why she was nervous, but there had been a definite shift in how she and Sarah interacted in the last day. They seemed almost like friends.

“My parents used to drag me to play with them, which was fine when I was young and could just run around outside with the rest of the kids. I stopped going when I was in high school but started up again recently.”

“Why go?”

“I’m a business owner in town, and the money goes to support our schools’ athletic teams. It’s important people in town think I’m generous. Usually it’s just a gossip pit, though.”

“Oh. You...you don’t think they’ll talk about us, do you?”

Eli furrowed her brow. “What do you mean talk about us?”

“Just...that I’m still here. You took me to the sausage supper. I don’t know. I was just—”

“You’re a guest at Indigo. I often bring guests to town events. It’s part of the package deal. They won’t think anything of it.” Eli’s stomach clenched. She hadn’t realized Sarah spending time with her in public was going to be such an issue in terms of Sarah’s public view of the world. Apparently, that was all Sarah was concerned about.

The rest of the ride to town was in awkward silence, but as soon as they got to the 4H building out on the fairgrounds, the tension in Eli’s chest eased. She shut the door to her truck and waited for Sarah to get around to the other side before she walked in.

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As soon as they were inside, it was a bustle of people and noise. They made their way to the table on the far wall where they purchased their cards. Eli got four, two for her and two for Sarah. They were stopped several times before they found a place to sit down, but Eli had planned it so they arrived just minutes before everything was supposed to start.

There was a single microphone up front, and Judy Carsen took center stage with it. She always seemed to be in charge of events like this. Clenching her jaw, Eli set her cards out in front of her so she could see them. Judy went through the standard list of thank yous, what they were there for, and then finally the rules.

Eli leaned over at one point and whispered into Sarah's ear, "That woman likes to hear herself talk more than anyone else in this room does. Trust me."

Sarah erupted into giggles and had to work hard to contain them, her shoulders shaking. A flush reached Eli's cheeks at the sight of the crinkles at the corner of Sarah's eyes and her lips as she elicited a similar response in Eli herself. When Sarah turned to make a comment, they were almost mouth to mouth. Eli jerked in surprise and turned in her seat to face forward.

Cady slipped into the seat on the opposite side of Eli and nudged her with her shoulder. "Hey there, girl."

"Hey. Cady, this is one of the guests at my house, Sarah. Sarah, this is Cady. She owns the hardware store in town."

"Nice to meet you." Sarah reached across Eli and offered her hand.

Once numbers were called, Eli was focused on Judy and only Judy. She pressed her stamp onto the cards one after the other, cursing silently when bingo was called on the other side of the room. They all swept up their cards. Eli put a hand on Sarah's shoulder. "I'm going to get us a couple more."

When she got back to the table, Cady and Sarah were deep in conversation and Sarah had taken over Eli's chair. She took Sarah's still-warm seat. Shifting in it, she set out their cards in front of them just before the call went out for the second round to start.

As numbers started to be called, Sarah leaned closer to Eli and whispered, "So if all the proceeds go to the school, what does the winner get?"

"Bragging rights," Eli muttered, her stomach twisting with how close Sarah was.

"Makes sense I guess."

Eli risked turning her head, finding Sarah even closer than she'd originally thought. Luckily, Judy called the next number, and Eli had to find it on both her cards, and Sarah's since Sarah wasn't paying attention. She marked Sarah's one card that had it and leaned back in her chair. A different kind of smile played on Sarah's lips, and Eli wasn't sure what it meant, but it sent a thrill through her stomach and up and down her spine.

Judy called the next number, and Eli had to blink and work hard to focus on what was said. Hunching over her card, she skimmed her gaze over it until she gave up searching. Whatever number Judy had said, she'd forgotten it already.

"Here," Sarah whispered as she moved her stamp close to Eli's and pressed it to the card on the left. "You missed it."

"Thanks," Eli muttered.

Managing to keep her distance until the next round, Eli replaced their cards, but as she went to sit down, she was surprised to see Bridget standing by the door of the building, staring directly at her. With her breath tight in her lungs, Eli stared back, curious as to what Bridget would do and what she wanted. With a jerk of her head, Bridget indicated she wanted to talk outside.

Eli leaned in close to Sarah, a hand on her shoulder with a tender squeeze. “I’ll be right back. Play my card until then, would you?”

“Sure.”

Sarah gave her a confused look, but Eli said nothing else as she stalked toward the back door. Bridget had already slipped outside. She had a feeling she knew what this was about and that she wasn’t going to like the conversation.

As soon as the door was shut and the sounds of the building muted, Eli knew she’d made a mistake coming out there. Bridget’s dark hair was pulled into a loose bun at the back of her head, her shirt was tight over her breasts, and her dark jeans were the ones that made Eli take a second look every time.

“What’s wrong, Bridget?”

“I...I wanted to talk.”

“What about?” Eli clenched her jaw and crossed her arms over her chest. “Because we haven’t talked in two years.”

“We’ve talked.”

“Not about what I’m sure this conversation is going to be about.”

Bridget bit her lip and lowered her lashes, having the decency to look a little sheepish. While Sarah clearly did it out of a bad nervous habit, Bridget was trying to be coy—and failing, because Eli had been down that road several times, and she was tired of it.

“I just...don’t you ever wonder what if?”

“No.” Eli’s voice was firm.

Bridget ignored her. “What if we were still together? What if it had worked out?”

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Scoffing, Eli dug her toe into the ground and dragged Bridget farther down the outside wall of the building and away from prying eyes. “We have been through this. We know why it ended.”

“Yeah.” Bridget moved to stare directly up at Eli. “But what if it didn’t?”

“Where is this even coming from? Two years is a long time to just suddenly up and change your mind.”

“My mind?” Bridget’s voice rose.

Eli shushed her. “Yes, your mind. My mind’s been made up for quite some time.”

Bridget rubbed her lips together, and then suddenly, she stepped forward, her hands coming out to grasp Eli’s, twining their fingers together. “I still love you.”

Eli’s heart stuttered. Did she still love Bridget? Yes. Would she always? Probably. But that didn’t mean they should be together or that it was in any way a good idea for them to start back where they left off. They left off for good reasons.

“I’m not doing this.”

“Because you have someone new?” Anger laced Bridget’s voice.

“Excuse me? Is that what this is all about? You’re jealous? Let me remind you, Bridget, you broke up with me. You refused me, and you did it in a spectacular fashion, so don’t come here thinking that I have moved on with my life just to try to

get you back. I don't want you anymore."

"They why do you still look at me like that?"

"Like what?" Exasperation filled Eli's chest. This was what she had hated about dating her. The twisted words and comments, the assumptions. They'd grown up together, and Eli should have been smart enough to remember elementary school. Bridget hadn't changed at all.

"Like you want to kiss me."

"Holy shit. I do not, under any circumstances, want to kiss you."

"You sure about that?" Bridget stepped closer, and Eli realized all too late their hands were still entwined. She tried to move away, but her foot caught on something. She looked down to see what it was, and when her gaze moved back up, Bridget was there, their lips mashed together, a hand sliding behind Eli's neck and holding her still.

"Eli?" Sarah's voice was a welcome relief.

Eli pulled as far away from Bridget as she could get, and when Eli turned fully to face Sarah, all she felt was complete calm and ease. Sarah raised an eyebrow in their direction.

"That round's over."

"Already?" Eli asked as she stepped away from Bridget and down the sidewalk toward Sarah.

"Yeah."

Eli wanted to reach her hand out to grasp Sarah's, to take it and have some kind of human contact that wasn't manipulative, that wasn't dangerous, but was calm and soothing and would center her. She'd have to figure out why she thought of Sarah that way later, but for now, being closer to Sarah would have to do. Sarah, instead of opening the door and going inside, stopped when Eli reached her.

"You ready to go?" Sarah asked.

"Yes." Eli let out a sigh, all the tension in her shoulders vanishing. "Let's go."

When they got into the truck, Eli turned the lights on and sighed, closing her eyes and pinching the bridge of her nose. She wasn't quite sure what to say to Sarah, if anything, for the rescue. When Sarah remained quiet, Eli pulled out of the makeshift grass parking lot with a curt "Thanks" on her lips before heading toward the highway. The rest of the drive was made in silence.

Chapter 12

Sarah hadn't talked Eli since they'd gotten back from the bingo game last night, and surprisingly, Eli had remained utterly silent for the entire drive to the house. Eli wasn't always the biggest talker, but it was rare they were in complete silence. She usually shared a story or two about the houses and farms they passed.

Eli had gone out early that morning with the sunrise, and Sarah hadn't seen her since. She also hadn't slept much since then. The image of Bridget pressed up against Eli—who was obviously uncomfortable stuck between the woman she'd been avoiding and the building itself—would not escape her mind.

She had seen how tense Eli had become within an instant of seeing Bridget, felt how she'd morphed almost entirely into someone else. When Bridget had beckoned Eli over and Eli hadn't even hesitated at the silent communication, the pit of Sarah's

stomach had done something funny. It wasn't anxiety she had felt, per se. It had been an intense need to protect—which was odd, considering she barely knew Eli.

Sarah sipped a cup of hot tea and stared out the large bay window in the den to the fields below. Her chest had tightened like she'd expected it to, but it wasn't for any reason concerning herself. Her entire being had been focused on Eli and Eli's needs.

Sarah hadn't taken long before she'd abandoned her bingo cards on the table and went to find Eli, and she'd been glad she had. Again, the image of Eli struggling to get free—her tense shoulders, her set face, her fingers clenched at her sides—plagued her. The thought of Eli with Bridget made her chest hurt to the point that she rubbed the spot in the center with the heel of her hand and closed her eyes.

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No matter what, she couldn't say she wasn't at least fond of Eli. They'd come to a quiet understanding about each other, it seemed, and Sarah didn't want that to go away because of an ex-girlfriend who clearly didn't understand the "ex" part of that statement.

She still wasn't quite sure what had happened between the two of them to break them up in the first place and certainly didn't understand what had happened last night, but Eli's quiet utterance of thanks as they'd pulled away from the 4H building had been enough to tell Sarah she had done the right thing.

Scooping Eli into a hug and running her fingers through her hair in a soothing manner had been a very pervasive thought in her mind. Sarah shook her head as she sighed. She had one week left at Indigo, and she couldn't go dreaming up fantasies with cowgirls she'd never see again, although it certainly was fun to dream, something she had been doing quite often since she'd arrived.

It was near one o'clock when she'd finished a small lunch and headed upstairs for her guitar. She needed to do something with her hands, and as much as she wanted to go out into the fields and find Eli, she was pretty sure Eli wanted the time to herself.

With her guitar in hand, her notebook of chicken scratches next to her on the couch cushion, and her hair pulled back into a haphazard pony that barely held it anymore without strands falling out, she went to work on finishing her song.

Sarah lost herself in her music, like she did most anytime she was creating something. When she hit the last chord on her guitar and her voice echoed through the den, a tear dripped down her cheek. She knew she'd hit it perfectly. Everything about the song

was on point, at least for now.

Wiping her hand across her cheeks and pressing her fingers on the bridge of her nose, Sarah let out a shuddering breath. It would be perfect when they could add in everything else—piano, perhaps some stringed instruments. She'd work on writing that music later. Until then, she was satisfied with what she had.

Taking the risk, Sarah reached for her phone and called Kara. She knew Kara had a flexible work schedule, which often meant she was available to take calls at random times of the day, but she also never knew when Kara would be with a client. Luckily, Kara picked up on the first ring.

“You’ve been quiet.”

Sarah snorted. “Not a whole lot to do out here, you know. Not to mention, there isn’t very good cell phone service either.”

“So it was a good choice then.”

“Yes, yes, I think it was.”

Kara paused. “You seem lost.”

Nodding, Sarah curled her feet up under her on the couch as she leaned into the arm and stared out the window, wishing she would see Eli’s old farm truck coming up the road. “A bit, yes. It’s been a busy few days.”

“Tell me all about it.”

“You’ve got time?”

“For you? Always.”

That made Sarah smile. Kara was always there for her, no matter what. Rubbing her hand along her thigh, her fingertips brushing over the skinny jeans she loved to wear, Sarah wasn't quite sure where to start. Once again, the image of Eli and Bridget entered her mind unbidden, but she pushed it away, knowing if she did share about that, Kara would think something else was going on.

“I learned to drive a stick shift.”

“You're kidding.”

“No, I'm not. By the way, I have no desire to ever own one. That is way too complicated.”

“Yeah, but you're one step closer to riding bikes with us now that you at least understand the concept of a clutch.”

Sarah smiled. “Maybe someday I will let you teach me how to ride a motorcycle.”

“Not someday, Sarah. When you get back. Come on, it'll be fun.”

“I'm leaving almost immediately after I return.”

“Then we'll make the time.”

“Yeah.” The faraway tone was back in her voice, she knew. Her derailing of the conversation had only taken her so far because no matter what she did or how she tried to distract herself, she could not get Eli off her mind, and she wondered briefly what she was doing out in the fields that day.

“Have you done any writing?”

“Oh, a bit. I wrote a song about a cow.”

“About Buddy?”

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“Yeah.” Sarah grinned. “Want to hear it? I doubt it’ll ever be on an album.”

“Yes!” Kara’s response was enthusiastic.

“I’ll warn you, it’s still pretty rough.”

“Shut up and sing, woman.”

Chuckling, Sarah shifted in her seat and picked up the guitar. She put her phone on speaker and settled it by her notebook so she could look over and read the lyrics she’d jotted down.

It didn’t take her long to get through it because she hadn’t worked out if she wanted to add a bridge or how many times she wanted to repeat the chorus at the end. When the last note on her guitar faded, she was perplexed by the silence on the other end of the line.

Furrowing her brow, Sarah picked up her phone and brought it to her ear. “You still there, Kara?”

“Yeah.” Kara cleared her throat. “Yeah, I’m here.”

“Well, what’d you think?”

“You think that song is about a cow?”

Sarah’s shoulders tensed. She found her gaze going out the window. “Yeah. It’s about

Buddy.”

Again, the pause was drawn out. “I don’t think that’s a song about a cow, Sarah.”

“It is. What else would it be about?”

“Have you even listened to your own song?” The accusation took her by surprise.

Sarah pushed the guitar off her legs and stood up, moving to the window to stare out at the fields surrounding the house. If she squinted, she could see the main road that came off the highway, but she loved how isolated it was out there.

“Sarah.”

“What?” she asked.

“Did you hear me?”

“Yeah, I heard you, and yes, I listened to my own song. I wrote the damn thing.”

“Just making sure, but it’s not about a cow.”

“It is.”

“It’s not.”

“It is.” Frustration built in her chest, and for the first time ever, she regretted calling her best friend—if only because Kara said what she had been thinking in the first place but absolutely did not want to admit. Unfortunately, she didn’t really have an excuse to get off the call either, and she could only hope one of Kara’s clients popped up and needed something.

Kara sighed. “I miss you.”

“I miss you, too.” Sarah’s comment was genuine. She did miss Kara, and she missed being home and with her friends and in the routine of life, but Kara had been right. The break before the tour had been a welcome respite. She hadn’t once thought of what needed to get done before she left, what loose ends she needed to wrap up. She’d practiced her music, of course, but that was about it. Everyone had seemed to take her request for what it was and leave her alone the past week. But she had her doubts that would last into the next week as time got shorter.

“Call me tonight, all right?”

“If I can, yeah. I didn’t sleep, so I’m going to try and crash for a few hours.”

“Why didn’t you sleep?”

Sarah knew why, the image unbidden in her mind, but she wasn’t about to share that with Kara, not after the comment about the song. “You know me.”

“Yeah.” Kara sighed. “Maybe tonight you’ll sleep.”

“Maybe.”

“I’ll talk to you soon, okay?”

“Yeah.” The ball of nerves in Sarah’s stomach grew. “I’ll talk to you soon. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

When she’d finished the call, Sarah dropped the phone onto the couch and let out a long sigh. Crossing her arms over her chest, she lost herself in thoughts of Eli. Letting Eli consume her mind for another week wouldn’t harm anything, right? It wasn’t like they were going to go any further in a relationship, not with what Sarah had seen the night before or what she’d seen of Eli before then, but she could at least take the friendship Eli did offer for what it was, couldn’t she?

That was what she’d do. She’d relax and take advantage of what she was offered, which was good hospitality, a warm bed, and a whole lot of learning. She enjoyed getting out of her comfort zone even though it set her nerves into overdrive, but for some reason, she’d been far calmer and more relaxed since she had been at Indigo.

Grabbing her guitar and cleaning up, Sarah went to do exactly what she told Kara she wanted. Nap. She dragged all her stuff up to her room and left it haphazardly up there. Collapsing onto the bed, she tried to push Eli and Bridget from her mind so she could get some restful sleep, but it was almost impossible. Eventually, she did fall into slumber’s tender care.

* * *

The annoying alarm was shocking. Sarah brushed her fingers over her eyes as she turned onto her side and tried to push the sound out of her ears. It didn't work. The harder she tried to ignore it, the more obnoxious it became. Grunting, Sarah sat up in bed and pushed a hand through her messy hair.

The window was pitch black, and a glance at the clock on the nightstand told her it was the middle of the night. She had slept far longer than she'd anticipated. But that alarm. It wasn't quite as loud as she'd originally thought it was.

Sighing, Sarah pushed to her feet, her bare toes cold on the hardwood floor. She followed the sound down the stairs and into the front living room. It got louder as she went, and more obnoxious as well. She wasn't sure how anyone could ignore such a sound. She found the phone first and turned the alarm off. It was on the kitchen counter. In the week she had been there, she'd never seen Eli leave her phone anywhere, not to mention leave the kitchen a mess, which it never was.

Eli had clearly come in while Sarah had been asleep, rummaged for dinner, and then what? Because there were dishes in the sink and a casserole dish of leftovers on the counter. Sighing, Sarah brushed her hand against the glass to see if it was still cold, covered it, and shoved it into the fridge. She put the rest of the dishes in the sink before gnawing on her lip and heading through the living room to the den.

It was nearing four in the morning, so Eli was no doubt back out on her rounds to check on the cattle. Sometimes Sarah wondered if Eli was obsessed with them, but she could certainly see why. She loved them and loved spending time with them. She very obviously loved her farm and put everything she had—her energy, her brain—into it.

When Sarah rounded the corner and took the three steps down into the den, she

stopped short. Eli was on the couch. Sarah tentatively kneeled down to look over Eli's sleeping form. She wasn't quite sure what to do—wake her up or let her get the sleep she obviously needed.

Gnawing on her lower lip, Sarah put her hand on Eli's arm, but Eli didn't move. She really hated to wake her, but she was pretty sure Eli would be madder if she didn't. Sarah let out a breath. "Eli."

Eli didn't budge.

"Eli. Wake up. You're late."

A soft moan escaped Eli's lips as she rustled her head against the pillow, her legs moving slightly, but she settled down. Sarah cupped Eli's cheek, brushing her thumb just under her eye. This time, she spoke firmly.

"Elijah Wilson. Get up. Now!"

Eli sat bolt upright, her eyes wide as she stared down at Sarah still squatting next to her. "What time is it?"

"Well after three."

"What?" Eli started patting the couch then her pockets.

"Your phone is in the kitchen."

"Shit. Did it wake you up? I'm sorry."

Sarah shrugged. "It's close to four."

“Crap.”

Eli looked adorable tousled and confused. Her cheeks were red from sleep, her eyes puffy, her hair still technically in braids, but no longer neatly plaited. Sarah bit her lip to keep herself from saying or doing something they would both regret later.

Sarah moved to sit next to Eli on the couch. “I’ll go with you to keep you awake, because it looks like you’re still struggling to wake up.”

Eli nodded. “Thanks.”

“Did you sleep at all last night?”

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Shrugging, Eli shook her head and put her hand on her forehead. “Not really.”

Sarah mulled that thought over in her mind before she patted Eli’s leg. “I’m going to put the coffee on while you wake up some.”

“Sure.”

While Sarah made coffee, she heard Eli rustling around in the den before she showed up, still half-asleep in the kitchen. Eli grabbed a bottle of water and chugged it before she grabbed two more, offering one bottle to Sarah. Taking it, Sarah twisted the cap and sipped slowly. “Why were you up all night?”

Eli drew in a sharp breath as she paused mid-drink. “Couldn’t stop thinking.”

“About Bridget?”

“Amongst other things.”

They stood in silence together as the coffee percolated. Sarah wasn’t quite sure where to go with this conversation. She was beyond curious as to why Bridget would keep Eli up and what those other things were, but she did not feel it was her place to ask. She didn’t want to pry.

When their coffee was ready, Eli pulled down two travel mugs and filled them. “Come on.”

They walked together after donning jackets and boots, down the trail to the barn

where they slipped into the cab of the truck. Eli took a long sip of her coffee, hissing as it burned her tongue, and then pulled out to head toward the fields.

Turning to face Eli as they came to a stop, moonlight the only light to see by, Sarah reached over and grabbed Eli's hand, feeling the rough skin on her palm and her fingers as she gave a gentle squeeze. "You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to, Eli, but just know, if you want someone to talk to, I am here, and I will listen."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. Really."

Sarah smiled softly and turned to face the front of the cab when Eli gasped and then cursed. "What is it?"

"We've got a calf stuck. It's breech."

Eli inched the truck forward, turning the headlights onto the cow off to the left of where they'd parked. Sure enough, she stood there, her calf partway out as she tried endlessly to push the calf the rest of the way.

"I'm probably going to need your help."

"My help?" Sarah's voice rose. "What do you think I'm going to do? Hold the light?"

Eli raised a brow at her. "Pull."

"Fuck that."

Grimacing, Eli got out of the truck and left the door open as she moved toward the cow. Sarah followed a few steps behind, wondering just what was going to happen. When they got to the cow, Eli put her hand on the cow's neck and cooed to her softly,

calming her down. Even Sarah could see it worked.

Her heart raced as Eli moved down the cow's body to her back end and checked out the calf. Her hands moved to break the sack as she gripped the feet and pulled. Sarah stood in shock as she watched, wondering what the hell she was supposed to be doing other than staring in awe at this woman before her. She was so calm and collected, so cool and wide awake after being asleep just moments before.

"Sarah. Come help."

"What do you want me to do?"

Eli let out a breath. "I need your muscles. Grip here and here. Pull on three."

Sarah stepped next to Eli so they were shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip.

"Just so you know, we're going to get dirty."

"Dirty?"

"Yup. One. Two. Three. Pull."

Together they leaned back, digging their boots into the soft ground and pulling on the calf's hooves with everything they had. It took two more times for them to catch a good contraction with the mama cow and for all three of them to work together.

The calf slid to the ground below and immediately Eli moved over it, clearing its nose of the sack and blood and whatever else there might be. Sarah didn't really want to think about it. She hovered over Eli while the cow tried to get her nose in there to sniff and lick.

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Sarah bit her lip hard. “Shouldn’t it be moving?”

“Yes,” Eli hissed. She took a fist and rubbed it along the underside of the calf hard with her knuckles. When that didn’t work, she pressed the palm of her hand to the chest and her other hand to the nose.

Seconds seemed to last minutes as Sarah waited for one sign from Eli that something was happening, something that should be happening. When Eli finally sat on her ass, her forearms propped on her knees, and her head hung down, Sarah knew what had happened. They were too late.

She didn’t hesitate. Sarah stepped behind Eli, pressing against Eli’s back and wrapped her arms around her in a hug. Her cheek rested on Eli’s hair as they both held still. Sarah tightened her grip and touched her lips to Eli’s soft hair, though she didn’t dare kiss her as much as she wanted to. She remained still, stoic, giving Eli all the comfort and peace she had in that moment.

Eli eventually wiped her face against her shoulder and stood up. Sarah stepped back, away from the mess that was before them. Eli checked over the cow while Sarah watched, amazed at all she’d done and all that had happened in the few short minutes since they’d been in the fields. When Eli was satisfied with the cow, she bent down over the calf and lifted it into her arms.

“Get the tailgate, would you?”

“Yeah,” Sarah whispered.

She walked just ahead of Eli, pulling down the tailgate in time for Eli to slip the calf into the bed of the truck. She closed it with a click. Eli bent over the side of the truck and kicked the tire hard with the toe of her boot.

“There was nothing you could have done,” Sarah started.

“I could have been here, but instead I was late.”

“Eli.” Sarah waited until Eli’s dark and tortured gaze turned up to her. “You can’t be everywhere at once.”

“I know. It’s just...I know.” Eli sighed. “I hate it.”

Nodding her understanding, Sarah brushed her hand over Eli’s arm and gave her elbow a squeeze before she rounded the truck. “Should we finish the rounds?”

“Yes.”

Sarah sat closer to Eli for the rest of the morning while they drove around the fields and even until they went back to the barn. She looked on as Eli took the tractor and dug a hole out back of the barn, and gnawed on her lip as Eli gently placed the calf in it. They stared over the covered hole until Sarah turned toward the house.

“I’m going to make some breakfast. Why don’t you clean up?”

Eli gave her an odd look, one she definitely couldn’t read. Sarah expected a rebuttal, expected Eli to say something about being ordered around on her own land, that she knew more than Sarah herself did. But she didn’t. Eli remained silent as she swallowed, as her gaze dragged slowly down and then back up Sarah’s body, sending chills up and down Sarah’s spine followed by an intense heat.

“I’ll do that. Then we can get started on morning chores.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” They didn’t move. Eli continued to stare at her, her dark gaze shocking in the rising sunlight. Once again, Sarah found herself entranced and caught in a singular look.

Eli raised an eyebrow, and her look of defiance turned to a moment of pity. “Go on up. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Sarah’s breath picked up as Eli reached out and brushed her dirty and sure fingers over her upper arm. She turned down to face the touch, and their eyes locked again. “Yeah. I’ll put on some more coffee.”

It took everything Sarah had to force her legs to move. As soon as she reached the top of the hill, she turned around to see Eli still standing over the makeshift grave. Her morning had been full already, and she knew the day would be long and morose. She could only hope that Eli would allow her to offer as much comfort as possible, and she knew without a doubt, she wasn’t going to let Eli waste her day alone.

Chapter 13

As soon as afternoon rolled around, Sarah could tell Eli was losing ground in her battle against sleep. She was doing everything at a snail’s pace, and she had to try several times just to get each thing going or finished, no matter what she tried to do.

Sarah had taken particular care to make sure Eli was staying on track and not struggling. They hadn’t talked about the calf since Eli had come back to the house for breakfast, and Sarah was loath to bring the subject up if she could avoid it. As soon as she had sandwiches made for lunch, she made Eli sit down and eat with her.

Eli hunched over the counter as she sat on the stool and took the world’s slowest

bites. Sarah finished her drink and settled in to make sure Eli ate. No matter what she thought, she knew Eli was running herself ragged.

“Is there much more to do today?”

“No, thank God,” Eli said around another bite. “I think I’m going to sleep for the next week.”

Sarah smirked, the smile barely making it to her eyes. “I think that might be a good idea.”

Eli didn’t really answer as she moved her sandwich around her plate. Sarah had a hunch her thoughts had either turned to the calf or to Bridget. Which one it was, she wasn’t sure, but she wanted to somehow wipe the sad look from Eli’s face, make her frown turn back up into a smile, have her become the animated person she had meet just a week before.

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“Did you see Buddy playing this morning?”

Eli snorted. “You and that cow. I should have named him Sarah just so I’d remember who he actually belongs to.”

A flush rose to Sarah’s cheeks. “I like him.”

“And he likes you.” Eli stretched her back, cocking her head to the side. “I’m not sure I’ve ever had a guest so taken to one particular cow—or horse for that matter.”

“Really?”

“Really really.” Eli gave her a hard stare. “Maybe I should keep him just for the simple fact that he made such an impact.”

“Oh, that’s right, you sell the boys.”

Eli shrugged. “It’s all part of the business.”

“Could you keep him local?”

Eli scrunched her nose as she pushed her plate toward the center of the counter. She hadn’t eaten more than half of it. Sarah was about to mention it when she snapped her jaw shut. Who was she to comment on that anyway? She was nothing to Eli except a guest, one she knew hardly anything about.

“No,” Eli answered. “That kind of defeats the purpose of the business.”

Sarah drew in a deep breath. “Could you keep him?”

“I’d have to see. He’s well bred, so he’d fetch a pretty sum at auction.”

“Yeah? How much?”

“Maybe four to five grand depending on how big he gets.”

“That’s a lot!” Sarah’s eyes widened.

Eli sighed. “Yeah, it can be.”

Reaching over, Sarah brushed her fingers over the back of Eli’s hand. She’d found herself doing that more and more lately, unable to resist since that morning. Eli looked so young, so vulnerable since everything had happened that morning but, at the same time, insanely strong. Eli moved her hand away and grabbed her plate. Sarah didn’t take offense to it, but she did miss the warmth.

Instead of heading downstairs after clearing her plate like Sarah had expected, Eli moved to the den and plopped onto the couch Sarah had woken her from hours before. Sarah sat next to Eli, their shoulders brushing, but this time Eli didn’t move.

“How many do you lose a year?”

“Just a couple between calves and cows.” Sighing, Eli tossed her head back onto the couch as she pulled at the braids she hadn’t fixed up from that morning even though she’d showered. She untwined the strands and ran her fingers through them. “Would you do something for me?”

“Anything.” Sarah nearly whispered, but it was true. If Eli asked her to anything in that moment, she would do it immediately.

“Play something.”

“What?”

“On the piano. I just...I need a few minutes to think. Please.”

“Sure.” Sarah’s stomach rolled with nerves. She grabbed the second piece of sheet music from the piano bench that she’d found, something she hadn’t played since she’d been there. As she sat, she didn’t dare glance over her shoulder, much as she wanted to.

The keys felt firm under her hands as she pressed them, following the notes on the page. It wasn’t the most perfect rendition, but it was enough for what had been requested. Sarah played for at least thirty minutes, moving from the sheet music in front of her to other pieces she had memorized, to whatever came to mind as her creativity got flowing.

When she finally stopped and twisted on her chair, she was struck by the sight of Eli, resting on the couch, her head tossed onto the back of it, her hair over her shoulders and covering her chest, her eyes closed gently, and the relaxed calm of her body. Sarah wasn’t sure what to say. She wasn’t even sure Eli was awake until Eli slowly slid her gaze to Sarah.

“Thank you. That was beautiful.”

Sarah’s lips parted in surprise, at a loss for words.

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“I always wished I had learned to play well.”

“There’s still time,” Sarah murmured. “You’re not dead yet.”

Eli snorted as she moved to sit up fully. “Not dead, no, but I certainly don’t have the time for piano lessons.”

“If you don’t make the time, it’ll never happen.”

Eli gave her a hard look. “True. But not now. Thank you again. I truly enjoyed that. I miss having music in here during the winter months. They can get long.”

“I imagine.” Sarah closed the lid on the keys and moved over to sit next to Eli on the couch. She curled one leg under her body, her socked foot hanging over the edge of the cushion as she leaned back into the arm, facing Eli fully. “Maybe you’ll be so busy with the B&B that someday you won’t know what to do with yourself and you’ll beg for these quiet moments.”

Laughing, Eli shook her head. “Doubtful. We’re not exactly a desirable destination.”

“I don’t know, I came here on a whim, and I’ve enjoyed all of my time here so far.”

“Truly?”

“Truly what?” Sarah’s eyes widened. “Enjoyed it?”

Eli nodded, innocence spilling over her face.

“Yes, I have. Maybe not the first night with the storm, but everything since then.”

“I feel like a poor host.”

“What would make you say that?” Sarah reached out, her hand finding Eli’s and giving a squeeze. “You’ve been exemplary.”

“You are not a typical guest.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I think you’ve cooked me more meals than I’ve cooked for you.”

“I enjoy cooking. It helps relax me sometimes.”

“Yes, but you are on vacation.”

The curl on Sarah’s lips was unexpected. “Vacation doesn’t mean I sit on my ass day and night, trust me.”

“Oh, I’m aware.” Eli drew in a sharp breath. “I can’t even remember the last time I took a vacation.”

“What do you mean?”

“Farmers don’t typically leave the farm.”

“Like ever?”

“Rarely.”

Sarah's brow furrowed. "Why's that?"

"Who would take care of my cows? This is a full-time job. Finding someone else to do it for me, even for a short time, is hard enough."

"I guess I hadn't really thought of that." Sarah brushed her thumb along the backside of Eli's hand, not wanting to lose that contact. With every day that passed, she felt more drawn to Eli and the urge to be close to her got harder to resist, but still, she didn't want to give in to it.

She was still a mid-list singer and songwriter who had connections and money, whether she wanted to admit it or not. She kept her life largely low-key, but that didn't mean her life wouldn't interest others in ways she didn't want them to be interested. Sarah licked her lips, curious what it would be like to have Eli lick them instead of her.

Heat boiled in her stomach, moving lower, and she slid her gaze from their connected hands up Eli's arm to her chest, where she paused briefly, before staring straight at her lips. The kiss between Bridget and Eli came back into her mind, only this time she was curious about it. What would it feel like to have Eli press against her, push her into the wall, Eli's body covering hers, hands roaming?

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Eli cleared her throat, and Sarah's eyes shot straight into the light brown orbs in front of her. Heat tinged her cheeks as embarrassment caught up with her. They were both exhausted, Eli more so than Sarah, and she had to stop going down that rabbit hole.

Sarah's breath hitched when Eli flipped her hand over, folding their fingers together and giving a tight squeeze. Sarah didn't stop the tender touch. Instead she moved it to the skin at Eli's palm, marveling at how her strong hands and arms could be so soft at the same time.

She was completely and utterly entranced, under a spell she was pretty sure Eli didn't even know she'd cast. One week in, and she was lost to the wonder and curiosity that was Eli, the conundrum that was this woman who seemed so strong on the outside but so warm and gentle on the inside.

Leaning in, Sarah followed the pull of her body as she scooted even closer. Eli's hand rested on her curled up leg, their hands still melded together. Perhaps a quick fling wouldn't be the end of the world. Perhaps it would do her some good in the scheme of life, give her something happy to think about as she spent the next six months locked on a bus with her crew.

She let out a shuddering breath, about to test the waters, when Eli's head jerked up with a start, her eyes wide, and Sarah was pretty sure riddled with fear, but she was so uncertain in her ability to read people. Eli stood up sharply, the distance between them a stark difference to what had been just moments before.

Sarah's lips parted in surprise as Eli backed away from the couch and from her. "I'm...going to take a long nap. I'm beat."

“Yeah.” The word left Sarah’s lips on a breath, her heart racing, just trying to keep up with everything in the moment.

“I’ll uh...see you later.” Eli turned on her toes and left the den.

Sarah didn’t have time for a response as she heard the basement door open and shut and Eli go downstairs until all was quiet. Sitting back on the couch, Sarah turned to stare out the bay window and gnawed on her lip. She had no idea what had just happened, but she was pretty sure it had all been her fault.

Her nerves worked into her stomach, twisting and tightening with every second she allowed them to take over. She’d thought she was reading the mood right, but perhaps she had been entirely wrong. Eli had gone from warm and open to closed off faster than Sarah could snap her fingers.

Confusion was the least of her concerns, though. Sarah was pretty sure she had offended Eli beyond repair with her unwanted advances, a moment she had behaved recklessly and thought only of herself, not of Eli. Berating herself silently, she wondered if she’d ever be able to make it up. When she got nowhere with that line of thought, she gave up and climbed the stairs to her own room, hiding until she thought it might be safe to come out again.

* * *

Eli knew she’d gone to bed abruptly, that she’d left Sarah confused about what had happened, but frankly, Eli was just as confused, if not more confused, than Sarah herself. She wasn’t quite sure, because they still hadn’t talked about it, which Eli was perfectly fine with. She’d gotten up and done her middle-of-the-night check and had promptly come back and fallen asleep, but waking up for her morning chores afforded her no more understanding or peace of mind than she’d had when she’d left the afternoon before.

Sarah had been scarce from the main areas of the house, not that Eli had lingered either. And as she had snuck around the kitchen for coffee and morning snacks, since she wasn't about to cook a meal if neither of them were going to eat it, Eli hadn't come to any further resolution.

She'd been pretty sure if she'd stayed where she was the day before, Sarah would have kissed her. Eli had panicked. Her heart had been in her throat, and every muscle in her body had been tense with fear and confusion. In that moment, she hadn't been sure if she'd wanted to kiss Sarah or not.

Was she even attracted to Sarah or was it simply a fangirl crush?

Stumped, Eli moved to the bed of her truck and hooked up the water for her cattle. They heard her coming a mile away and all congregated around the trough. She patted Carmen's head and scratched behind Buddy's ears. Eli checked on the other cows while she filled the giant steel trough.

As soon as she had a moment to stand and wait, her thoughts went right back to Sarah. Whatever had happened between the two of them yesterday was something else. They'd only known each other a week, and yet it felt like so much longer. She'd learned more about Sarah and shared more about her life than she had with anyone in years. Probably because everyone in town already knew everything about her—well, almost everything.

She'd thought at one point Bridget could be that person. Sighing, Eli pulled herself up on the tailgate and sat to wait while the trough continued to fill. She and Bridget had been friends first, the only two who were semi-out in school growing up, more so Eli than Bridget. They'd gone away to college and come back like nothing had ever changed between them.

But whatever was with her and Sarah, it felt radically different. Whereas Eli always

felt Bridget was there, no matter what, Sarah wouldn't be, but the pull to her was stronger than anything she had ever felt. Eli stared up at the house as she sat on the back of the truck. She could, in theory, walk into that house and see if Sarah felt that same pull—if she wanted to.

After yesterday, she was pretty sure Sarah felt something, but she had no idea what that was. Swallowing hard, Eli got off her truck and stopped the flow of water. The cattle drank while she moved to the next trough in her lower fields. The question remained, did she even like Sarah?

Well, she liked her, but liked her beyond a guest, beyond a potential friendship they had tentatively begun to make, beyond her musical abilities? Eli flicked one of her braids over her shoulder as she hooked everything up to fill the empty tank.

On the one hand, Eli was curious as to what might happen if she were to take that risk with Sarah, and on the other hand, she knew exactly what would happen. They would hook up for the rest of the week Sarah was there, and then she would never see her again, and if it ended poorly, there was always the risk Sarah could ruin Indigo by giving it a bad word—though, after getting to know Sarah, she didn't think that would be likely.

As much as Sadie Bade had been a mystery to her, Sarah was not. Eli clenched her jaw and shook her head. Could she do it? A week wasn't long, and it would certainly satisfy her curiosity. They could have a quick fling perhaps, neither of them expecting it to last beyond Sarah's initial time spent at Indigo.

Eli wasn't sure she could do it. She really wasn't built for quick relationships. That had been her doom in every relationship thus far, except with Bridget. She'd thought it was going to last longer, that it was going to have a potential for a future. Some of the women she'd been with had obviously thought the opposite. Bridget—well, she was Bridget.

Back in her truck, Eli drove toward the barn. Everything in her life was damn near perfect. She didn't need someone in it to complete her. She had what she wanted—her farm, her cows, her businesses she ran on the side. She made her life what she wanted and what she needed. Eli didn't need anything beyond what she already had, but that nagging feeling in the pit of her stomach told her she was still missing something.

It wasn't that she had given up on love. Finding someone to share her life with just wasn't a priority anymore, not like when she'd first moved back to town. That had been her first mistake with Bridget. They'd both brought so many expectations in to the relationship, there was no way it was going to succeed from the outset.

Relaxing in the seat of her ancient truck that probably shouldn't even be running, Eli let out a long sigh. She wouldn't do it. It wouldn't be good for either of them, she was sure, but particularly her. She would fall too hard too fast, and she wouldn't want to give Sarah up. But she'd have to. No, Eli would stick to her life, living it as she best knew how.

She could maintain distance. She could be the best hostess and still keep a wall up between them. She'd been short with Sarah the day before, and she'd have to apologize for that, but she wasn't planning on explaining everything. As she got back to the barn, Eli parked the truck and headed inside. She'd promised Bill she would help him check out one of his calves. While there was a vet in town, he said he trusted her even though she didn't have the degree. Eli had just rolled her eyes but had agreed to check his calf over.

She knew it was most likely a way to get her to the house so his wife could check in on her, and he could report back to her father everything she was up to. She'd have to watch out on that one—definitely the biggest disadvantage to living in the same small town she'd grown up in. There was no hiding anything, including the fact that Bridget was obviously not done with their relationship, as much as she had been.

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Loading up in her new truck, she took it toward the highway and to the fork in the road. Instead of turning toward the highway, she turned sharply north and headed toward Bill's house. If she was going to help him out, she'd watch her tongue, she'd make nice, and she'd see if she could find out as much from him as he was going to try to find out from her. It was their norm for sure, but at least he couldn't complain about Cassie this go around.

Snickering at the genius of how they'd fixed the fence, her stomach pulled when she remembered it was Sarah who had helped her. It was going to be a long week, but Eli knew she could make it through. It'd be tough but not impossible. Stepping harder on the gas, Eli drove and shoved all the thoughts of Sarah she could out of her mind and focused on the task at hand.

Chapter 14

Sarah hadn't seen Eli in over twenty-four hours, and since they were technically living in the same house that week, it was odd. She had a feeling Eli was avoiding her—that, or she was really busy with the farm—but she wasn't sure what else Eli could be doing. She'd seen traces that Eli had come and gone from the house, food rearranged in the fridge, the biggest tell being the ever-changing amount of coffee in the pot and how many times it was set to run throughout the day.

She had to distract herself, but she wasn't quite willing to take her car and drive to town by herself. Sarah's sense of direction was nil and she knew finding her way back to the farm was going to be harder than it should be, so she didn't even want to attempt it. Grabbing the music she'd written, Sarah sat at the piano and started in on the accompaniment.

But the music didn't flow. She sat at the keyboard for hours, pecking at keys, trying to make it sound good, but nothing worked. Sarah grew more frustrated with every passing hour, and by the time it was nearing dinner, she was done trying to make it work. If it was her piano, she would have slammed the lid shut, but since it wasn't, she stood up and growled, spinning on her toes as she turned to face the large window.

A storm brewed, darkening the sky. Sarah gnawed on her lip, wondering if it was going to be as bad as the one the day she'd arrived. She wondered briefly if there was any sort of backup generator at the farm, so they wouldn't be completely left in the dark should a storm take out the power. Immediately, Sarah shook the thought from her head. Eli would no doubt have a backup plan for that, if only Eli showed her face.

Her heart picked up enough that she could feel the hard thumps against the inside of her ribcage. It didn't hurt, but Sarah also knew she wouldn't be able to sustain that level of anxiety for long before it took its toll on her body and mind and she'd have to find a release somehow.

The sound of the door slamming surprised her. Sarah spun around, her hand against her throat as she stared at Eli, her work jacket on her shoulders, stray strands of hair pulled out from her braids and stuck to her face. Her skin was damp. Sarah could see it even from across the house as Eli stood just inside the front door in the main living area.

"Did it start raining already?" Sarah chided herself for the stupid question. Of course, it was raining. She could see it outside, but she'd been at a complete loss for words at the beauty of the woman who stood before her.

"It's going to come down good."

"Like the other night?"

Eli cocked her head to the side. “Yeah, if not more.”

“All night?”

“That’s what the forecasters say, but I rarely trust them.”

Neither of them had moved, and Sarah was confused as to why. She couldn’t bring her feet to step toward Eli, and Eli had stood frozen and rooted just inside the door.

“You can start a fire,” Eli stated bluntly.

“I...uh...” Sarah glanced over her shoulder at the fireplace. “Is it gas?”

“Hell no.” Eli stared her down before pulling off her gloves and shoving them into her pocket. She walked in her socks toward Sarah, and Sarah’s heart skipped a beat. Sarah was going to have to figure out how to put a stop to the reactions her body had anytime Eli was near her lately. Every muscle in her tensed when Eli rounded her, making sure not to touch her.

Eli knelt in front of the fireplace, shoving logs and some paper into it before she lit it. Sarah watched with rapt attention, although she wasn’t sure why. Everything Eli did she wanted to know about. Gnawing on her lip, Sarah stared at the lines of Eli’s back, the way her arms moved as she piled another log on top, the curve of her ass as she shifted to reach for something. She gasped when Eli turned suddenly and glanced up at her, a flush rising to her cheek.

Eli stood up and pulled the zipper open on her jacket, shucking it and hanging it over her arm. Sarah couldn’t tear her gaze away from every move Eli made. Her voice caught in her throat again, and she wasn’t sure what to say. Eli’s hair was still damp from the rain, but her skin was far dryer than it had been before.

“I’m going to get some tea. Do you want some?” Eli asked.

“Yeah.” Sarah let out a breath. “That’d be lovely.”

She followed Eli into the kitchen, where Eli dropped her jacket onto a stool and grabbed the kettle on the stove to fill it with water. She leaned against the counter while it heated, their eyes locking.

“We’re supposed to get hail, so I’ll have to go check on the cattle again once it’s stopped.”

“How bad?”

“Large hail.” Eli raised her eyebrows. “Can be dangerous.”

“I imagine.”

The tea kettle shouted its temperature, and Eli took it off the burner, pouring it immediately into two mugs she’d brought over. She grabbed a wooden box and set it in front of Sarah. “Take your pick.”

Sarah moved through the different flavors of tea, choosing her favorite when she saw it was in there.

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Eli took the box after checking on her selection and grinned. “That one is my favorite.”

“Mine too,” Sarah whispered.

“Come on, I’m sure the fire’s going good by now. It’s going to be a long night.”

They walked together through the kitchen and around the corner to the den. Sarah settled on the couch as Eli checked the flames before sitting next to her. The tea was still too hot to drink and not quite steeped enough, but as the heat from the mug seeped into her fingers, Sarah relaxed into the moment.

“Did you see Buddy today?”

Eli snorted. “Yes, I saw your cow.”

Sarah grinned. “And how is he?”

“Spritely.”

“Spritely?” Giggling, Sarah shook her head.

“Your cow is fine.” Eli sighed. “I promise.”

“Shouldn’t he be in the barn or something if it’s supposed to hail?”

Eli shot Sarah a glare. “No. I can’t possibly fit all my cattle in the barn.”

“I know, but the babies.”

“Sarah.”

“What?”

“No.”

“I just...never mind.”

“No, say what you were thinking.”

Sarah drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly as she curled her legs under her, which moved her body closer to Eli. “I just worry about him.”

“Oh God.” Eli chuckled. “One calf and you’re in love.”

Sarah blushed. “So what if I am? He’s adorable.”

Rolling her eyes in an over-exaggerated movement, Eli put her cup of tea on the side table. “What would you even do with a cow?”

“I don’t know, but I’d find something. He’s so cute and small.”

“For now! They grow to be beasts pretty dang quick.”

Letting out a small giggle, Sarah nodded. “I know, but still, a girl can dream, right?”

“Sure, she can. For a day or two.”

“Will you take me to see him tomorrow?”

“If you want, but I have to go to town tomorrow for some lumber, and I’m not sure how long you’d get to spend with him. The next day might be better.”

“I’ll take it.” Reaching out, she covered Eli’s hand with her own and squeezed. “If I only get one more week with him, I’m going to take every minute I have.”

She may have made it off like she was talking about the calf, but Sarah knew in her heart she was really talking about Eli. She couldn’t deny the attraction. She’d tried, but she was done avoiding it. She liked touching Eli’s hand, liked being up close to her on the couch in front of the fire, liked spending time with her out on the farm.

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Eli turned her hand over and shoved it back into her lap, her shoulder pulling away from Sarah. Confused, Sarah bit her lip and tried to get Eli's attention. She was so confused. Everything had been going so well, but she couldn't figure Eli out. Anger burst in her chest, which surprised her, but the anxiety was at least at a minimum for the time being.

"Why do you keep doing that?" Her voice rang out in the quiet den.

Eli's jaw clenched before she slowly moved to stare Sarah in the eye. "Doing what?"

"Pulling away."

"You're leaving in a week." Eli stood up and stalked over to the window, checked the fireplace, and was about to leave the den, when Sarah raced and grabbed her hand again.

"I'm confused."

"You're a guest in my house, Sarah. Nothing more."

Sarah's lips parted in surprise. "Is this about Bridget?"

"God no. Nothing is about Bridget. You are leaving in a week."

"I don't get it."

Eli bounced on her toes. "Just leave it alone."

“No. I want to know. I’ve been here eight days now, and I suck at reading people, so tell me what is going on.”

Sighing, Eli shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans and rolled up onto her toes and back onto her heels. Sarah waited impatiently for an answer, any kind of answer that she could get. Eli waved her hand around. “You leave in a week, Sarah. That’s just it, nothing more. You’re my guest, and I want to make you comfortable here.”

Narrowing her eyes, Sarah realized she wasn’t going to get much more of an answer no matter how many times she asked or how much she begged. Sighing, she crossed her arms and turned toward the fire with a burning desire to ask more questions and to know more, but she withheld. Something in Eli’s stance told her it would better not to.

When she twisted back around, Eli was surprisingly still there. Sarah gave in to Eli’s silent request to drop the subject. “Sit down.”

“What?”

“Sit down. Relax. You’ve been out all day. Let me make dinner, you drink your tea by the fire, read a book, whatever it is you want to do, and let me do what I can for you. I’m not going anywhere in this weather as it is.”

“You really don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.” Sarah raised one eyebrow, daring Eli to object again, but she didn’t.

Taking a risk, Sarah walked around Eli and gripped her hand as she went. She gave a squeeze, brushing her fingers over Eli’s firm bicep. She resisted the urge to lean into Eli’s strong body as she took the next step toward the kitchen. She had to make amends, had to make everything right again from all that she had messed up. She

would distract herself well enough with food and perhaps when she was done and they were eating, Eli would be more amenable to having a conversation.

* * *

Eli stayed put on the couch, trying to figure out what she was doing. She'd thought she had a plan for dealing with Sarah, but every time they were in the same room together that plan went right out the window. And that question? What was she supposed to do with that?

Eli rubbed her hands over her face and tried to hide as much as she could. She was at a loss. Each time she was in the room with Sarah something changed. She wanted to stand back, to be firm in her resolution not to do anything, but then there was Sarah, standing by the window in the den staring at her like the world rested on her shoulders and everything depended on the next move she made.

And the touching. God, the touching. It wasn't anything big, nothing that was over the bounds, just a slide of hands here and there, a squeeze of fingers, and Eli was done for, melted. She would do anything Sarah told her to do. She hadn't known what else to say to her, but Eli could tell Sarah hadn't understood what she meant when she'd said Sarah was leaving in a week.

She needed to explain it better, but again, every time she and Sarah were in the room together, she either had no words or all the wrong words. The hand on her shoulder startled her. Eli jumped until the second hand joined the first on her other shoulder and Sarah's voice flitted over her ears, her breath on Eli's skin.

"Dinner is ready."

"That was fast." Eli twisted and looked up at Sarah, who stood behind the couch, leaning down. A serene smile slid across Sarah's lips before it vanished.

“I didn’t want to get too fancy.” Her voice sounded far away, and Eli realized she had probably hurt her in her failed attempt to explain everything jumbled in her brain in one freaking line.

Immediately, Eli stood up and rounded the couch. Just like she knew would happen, she couldn’t stop herself from grabbing Sarah’s hands and squeezing as they faced each other. She had to make it right, had to explain better, but once more, words failed her. She said the only thing that came to mind. “Want a drink?”

“What?”

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“Uh...do you want a beer or something with dinner? We can eat in here by the fire.”

“Sure.” Hesitation was full force in that single word.

Eli released Sarah’s hands but moved her palm to Sarah’s back, guiding her toward the kitchen. As soon as they got to the hallway, Eli could smell dinner. She must have been so wrapped up in her thoughts that she hadn’t even noticed it before. “It smells amazing.”

“It’s just a simple pasta bake.”

“Well, it sounds delicious. Do you have a preference on beer?”

“Just whatever you’re having.”

Each of them did their own thing. Eli got the drinks while Sarah plated their meals. Then together, they walked to the den and folded themselves onto the couch. As soon as the spaghetti hit her tongue, Eli knew she was in heaven. She didn’t care if it was jarred sauce or not, whatever Sarah had done to it was amazing.

“You should cook for a living.”

Sarah snorted. “No, thanks. But I do cook as often as I can. Eating out gets old so fast.”

“I imagine. I rarely eat out.” Eli took a swig of her beer before setting it on the table next to the couch. “What’s your favorite dish to cook?”

“I like to try new things out.”

“Adventurous.”

“Some days.” Sarah smirked and ate her own food. “Do you not like to cook?”

“It’s not that I don’t like it, it’s that I’m not very good at it. Mom did all the cooking growing up, and I was more interested in learning from Dad about stuff on the farm than I was about staying inside and cooking. I wanted to be out there.”

“Makes sense,” Sarah muttered.

Eli could tell she was going to have to work harder to put their relationship, whatever that was, back on the track they had been on. Sarah still seemed to be resisting any type of regular conversation, and an awkward tension had both of them walking on eggshells.

Taking the risk, Eli slid her free hand onto Sarah’s warm thigh, the softness of her worn jeans hitting the palm of her hand and her fingers all at once and sending a jolt of something up her arm and into her chest. “Well, thank you for cooking so much for me. I do appreciate it.”

Sarah’s eyes moved to where they were connected then traveled the line up to Eli’s eyes. She nodded in the slightest, and that pull was back for Eli to lean forward and press their mouths together, but she refused to give in to it.

“I think my sister would like it here,” Sarah’s voice echoed, her tone tense.

“Oh yeah? You should bring her next time.” Eli moved away and shoved forkfuls of food into her mouth.

“I probably should. Maybe I’ll bring my whole family up some day. I feel bad, sometimes. I need to spend more time with my sister and her kids. I feel like I miss everything.”

Eli hummed agreement. “Kids grow up fast. So long as they know you’re there for the important stuff, I’m not sure the rest of it matters.”

“It matters to Kendal.”

“How old are her kids?” Eli finished her plate and shoved it onto the table while grabbing her beer.

“She’s got twin girls. They will be ten next month.”

“They’re about to get fun.”

Sarah gave her a funny look, her brows furrowed and confusion littering her face.

Eli snorted. “I prefer kids who can think for themselves, so teenagers. Little kids are just...so much work.”

Sarah cocked her head to the side as she thought. “They’re each time-sucks in different ways, I think.”

“Do you want kids?”

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Tensing, Sarah's shoulders squared. She stiffly and awkwardly put her empty plate down as she grabbed her own beer and pulled at the corners of the label. "I do. I don't know if it'll happen, but I do want kids."

Eli kept her mouth shut, not quite sure what she'd say if Sarah asked her the question back, which she only assumed would be the normal response. Lightning flashed outside, illuminating the entire window. Eli held her breath as she waited for the thunder to sound next. Sarah had jumped at it, and while she'd wanted to say something calming, she didn't. Eli raised a brow as soon as the room was still and quiet again and knocked her beer bottle toward the fire.

"You know, it's pretty romantic up here, too. You could always bring a partner with you. I'm not exactly going to be judgmental of who you bring."

Sarah's lips parted in surprise, and Eli couldn't quite tell, but she thought or maybe felt there might be a rebuttal on the tip of her tongue. Eventually, Sarah shook her head and smiled. "I'm not dating anyone, and it's not exactly easy to be in a relationship with the hours at my job."

Eli shrugged, but she couldn't take her eyes off Sarah. Heat pooled in her stomach again, burning her up from the inside out as hope flared in her chest. No matter how much she wanted it to go away, it wouldn't. "Their loss."

Grinning, Sarah shook her head. "Who says I'm a good girlfriend?"

"You cook amazing meals. That's about all I need to know."

Sarah laughed, the trill sending shivers up Eli's arms and spine. "I think it takes more than one's ability to cook or not cook—" Sarah gave her a pointed look "—to determine if one is a good partner."

"It's a good start." Eli set her empty bottle down and relaxed into the couch, staring at the flames as they licked the logs. She had successfully broken down the barrier Sarah had put up earlier.

"I could teach you, you know."

"Teach me what?" Eli's head swiveled from the fire to Sarah.

Sarah curled her legs under her after setting her bottle on the floor and leaned in so she was closer to Eli, a hand on her upper arm so soft and gentle that Eli wanted to close her eyes and revel in the feel, but she didn't. She resisted.

"Teach you to cook."

"Oh! Yeah. Maybe tomorrow."

"I'll teach you one dynamite meal to make that will impress any future girlfriends for you."

Eli's cheeks heated, and then she paled when she realized she hadn't thought about a future partner, not since she'd been with Bridget, not since before she'd moved home to take over the family business. She inched her way closer to Sarah so they were only a breath apart when she answered. "I'd like that."

If anything, maybe Eli's flirting with Sarah would get her back on track to being open to a relationship eventually. Bridget had hurt her so much, far more deeply than she had fully realized, but being in the same room and flirting with Sarah was so easy.

“Good.” Sarah grinned as another flash of lightning lit up the sky. “Do you get a lot of storms like this?”

Sarah’s gaze didn’t move from Eli’s, and Eli was hesitant to break the moment. “Only really in winter and spring, more in spring.”

“I could learn to like storms. They’re so different here than in Dallas.”

“You can see them coming for miles out here.” Eli’s voice was almost a whisper, and her gaze kept moving down to Sarah’s thin lips before popping back to her dark brown eyes, eyes that swirled with temptation.

“Maybe that’s it.” Sarah’s voice was soft, barely loud enough to hear against the thunder as it roared.

Eli had to back up, had to move away, because she was pretty sure if they stayed sitting the way they were, she knew exactly what was going to happen. Slipping away, she grabbed her beer bottle and stood up. “Want another?”

“Sure.” Sarah reached down and chugged the last of her drink before handing it to Eli’s proffered hand.

When Eli reached the kitchen, she seriously thought about splashing ice-cold water on her face. She dropped the bottles into the bin and grabbed new ones before heading into the den. This time when she sat down, Sarah was immediately against her, head on her shoulder, hand on her thigh.

Eli swallowed and clenched her jaw. She had to stick to her plan as much as she could. She wouldn’t allow herself to have a fling for one week. That wasn’t what she wanted. But the question floated through her mind, whatdidshe want from Sarah?

Sarah's lips surrounded the bottle as she took a long sip. Eli inwardly groaned and closed her eyes. She was done for. If Sarah asked, she knew she would jump, but Sarah hadn't asked—she hadn't said anything, pushed anything, or made a move even. Either something was holding her back on that front or she really didn't want Eli in that way and was only searching for companionable friendship while she was there. She had offered to teach Eli to cook for a future date, so Eli figured it was most likely Sarah wanted nothing more than friendship. Settling into that thought, Eli relaxed and tried to enjoy the rest of the night as the rain and hail started down.

Chapter 15

Eli backed into the lumber yard carefully and parked where she knew her load was going to be ready for pick up. Sarah stayed plastered to the front seat, surely lost on what she should be doing, but Eli didn't care. The company to town had been nice, and Sarah had wanted to see town again before she left, and to be fair, she'd only seen it in the dark not in broad daylight.

Pulling down the tailgate, Eli moved to Sarah's door and tapped her knuckle against the window. "I'll just be a minute."

“Okay.”

Inside, Eli grinned as Cady popped up behind the register. “Eli!”

“Cady.” Eli grinned. “I’m here for that lumber I ordered.”

“I got it. I’ll have to get the boys to load it on the lift.”

“Sounds good. It’s ready for it.” Eli tapped her hand against the counter as she waited.

Cady headed to the back room and yelled loudly that Miss Wilson needed her wood. Had Cady not been a middle-aged woman who had no idea what innuendo she’d just made, Eli would have erupted in giggles. When Cady came back, Eli waited patiently.

“You still got that pretty young woman up there?”

“Who?”

“The one you brought to bingo night.”

“Oh! Sarah, yes, she’s still staying at the house.”

Cady nodded and stared Eli directly in the eye. “I saw Bridget after you left that night.”

Eli's heart thumped. It hadn't been loud around town that she and Bridget had been together. Honestly nothing could be a secret in a town their size, but she hadn't expected anyone to come right out and say it.

"What happened?"

"Nothing," Eli muttered as she stared at her boots, suddenly finding the pattern of mud on them more interesting than anything.

"No, what happened? Talk to me, Eli. You know I'm here for you."

Sighing, Eli tried not to cry as she stared up into Cady's older and wiser face. She shrugged. "It's been a while since we broke up."

"Yeah, I think we all know that. What happened the other night?"

Eli groaned. She did not want to go into this. "I have no idea."

"Yes, you do."

"No. I don't."

"Elijah Wilson."

Eli hated when Cady used that tone with her. Pursing her lips, she bounced on her toes, mumbling.

"I didn't catch that."

"She kissed me, all right? I don't know why. I don't know what she was thinking. It wasn't welcome, but there it is." Eli planted both her palms on the counter as she

caught sight of the boys outside raising the forklift up for the two-by-fours.

Cady pointed one decisive finger at Eli, nearing Eli's nose as she squinted her eyes.
"She's jealous."

"I...what?" Eli shook her head, completely confused.

"She's jealous."

"Of what? I'm not seeing anyone."

Cady raised one bushy eyebrow at her. "You sure about that?"

"Yeah, pretty damn sure." Eli's eyes were wide and serious.

“She’s not.”

“Where do you get off thinking she’s jealous?”

Cady knocked her head toward the truck. “You brought her to the sausage supper. I know you live out of town, Eli, but you have to know it was the talk of the town. Still is. Then you brought her to bingo.”

“I’m showing my guest around town. I’ve done it with lots of guests before.”

“Lots of guests haven’t been beautiful young single women.”

“How do you even know she’s single? She might not be.” Eli’s tone rose, but Cady just gave her a pointed look in response. “Fine, she’s single, but still, we are not in a relationship or doing anything. She’s a guest at the B&B, and all I was doing for her was anything I’d do for anyone else.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yes.”

“Positive?”

“Cady,” Eli’s voice was low with warning. “There is nothing going on.”

“Bridget seems to think otherwise.”

If Eli could, she'd slam her forehead against the counter, but she figured Cady wouldn't like that much. "Put the wood on my tab. I'll pay it at the start of the month."

Turning to leave, Eli stopped at the sound of Cady's tender tone. "Be careful."

"With what, exactly?"

"Everything."

Not replying, Eli turned and walked out the side door and into the parking lot of the lumber yard. Her head spun, but she was more shocked to find Sarah out of the truck and helping the boys move the lumber from the forklift to the bed of her truck. She was laughing and joking with them, too. Eli reached into her truck and grabbed a pair of gloves, tossing them at Sarah before she could hurt herself.

Sarah didn't say anything as she slipped them onto her hands. Eli moved in to help, and it wasn't more than ten minutes before they had everything loaded. She moved around to the cab and jumped in, waiting for Sarah to get the hint and join her. It wasn't much longer until they were sitting next to each other and Eli was pulling out of the parking lot.

She had to get out of town, wanted so badly to leave and get home and forget everything about her conversation with Cady, but she couldn't. It kept repeating in her head. Why would Bridget be jealous of anything? She wasn't doing anything, and the town just needed to stop talking for one night because she seriously wasn't ever going to come to town again if they kept up like that. Overwhelmed, Eli focused on the road and turned the radio up to drown out the thoughts in her head.

* * *

Sarah had seen the difference in Eli the moment she'd come back out, but she hadn't commented on it. She listened to the music on the radio, trying to give Eli the space she needed, but then it happened, and as much as she wanted to leave it alone, she couldn't.

The song filtered through the speakers, and the moment the first three notes hit, Sarah knew what song it was. Hers. The current number one hit on radio stations for the last ten weeks. She'd somehow managed to avoid listening to it thus far in the presence of Eli, but there was no stopping it now. What if Eli figured it out? It would change absolutely everything. It would put even more distance between them, and she'd been so sure they'd made some progress in mending fences the night before.

Sarah ground her molars together, clenched her fingers against her knees before she reached up on impulse and hit the button to turn the radio off. Eli turned to her suddenly and slapped it back on, a touch of anger in her tone when Eli asked, "What'd you do that for?"

Not sure how to answer, Sarah turned the radio off again. "I don't like that song."

"Seriously?" Eli's brow furrowed.

Anxiety and nerves bulldozed their way through her, and when Sarah finally had the courage to look up, there was humor lighting up Eli's face. Sarah shook her head, hoping she didn't have to answer the inevitable.

"What don't you like about it?"

"They play it all the time," Sarah responded, a tinge of whine to her tone.

Laughing, Eli shook her head as she turned the radio back on. "Yeah, they tend to do that with big hits."

Sarah leaned in one more time and turned it off again. “I just don’t like it. Please.”

“How can you not like your own damn song?”

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She froze. Her heart stumbled. If she had been standing or walking, she was sure she would have fallen flat on her face. Slowly, having to dare herself to do it, Sarah turned with parted lips, wide eyes, and stared at Eli. “What did you say?”

“How do you not like your own song? You should be proud it’s a number one hit. Like seriously, Sarah, that’s not something everyone can do or will do or has done, and you’ve done it several times at this point.”

She was speechless. Sarah had no words. Wetting her lips, she tried again, but no words could form. She tried again. “Pull over.”

“What?”

“Pull the fucking truck over.”

Eli didn’t wait as she stepped on the brake and pulled off into the grass, the truck leaning as they were halfway down the ditch. Sarah’s chest rose and fell as she drew in short rapid breaths. When Eli turned the engine off, Sarah asked the only thing she could think of.

“How long?”

“How long what? Have I been listening to your music? Since well before just today if that’s what you mean.”

Sarah shook her head. “How long has it been since you figured out who I was?”

The grin on Eli's lips was not comforting, the twinkle in her eye set Sarah's nerve endings on fire, but every muscle in her body was still taut with fear. Eli unbuckled her seat belt and twisted to face Sarah more fully, lifting her chin with the crook of her finger.

"Sarah, I have known who you were since the moment I turned around and saw you sitting in Mrs. Hargrave's kitchen. You're not exactly someone who blends in."

Heat seared through her chest as their eyes locked. If Eli had known the entire time who she was, that changed everything. There hadn't been any hiding. Eli had treated her just like everyone else, taught her things, took her to do things, made fun of her when she messed up, complimented her. The humor in Eli's face turned to worry when Sarah said nothing in immediate response. Her feelings were all over the place, and she was struggling to keep up with them.

"I don't hate my own song," she whispered.

"Then why have me turn it off?"

Their faces were so close. It was so hard to think with Eli right there, in her space, right next to her, wanting to know everything. Her tongue dashed against her lower lip again, and her toes curled in her boots.

"Look, Sarah, I like your music. I have for a couple years now. You coming here was a surprise for me as much as this seems to be for you, but I'm not stupid. I know you're more than just your music. I know you're more than just Sadie Bade."

That was it. That was Sarah's breaking point. Reaching up, she curled her hand against Eli's neck, cupping her jaw. She moved her thumb against her skin, then against her lips. Eli's breath hitched. Sarah's gaze moved from Eli's lips to her eyes. This was their moment. It was now or never.

“I want to kiss you,” Sarah whispered.

Eli swallowed, her lips parting. The heat of her breath against Sarah’s thumb moved straight down her body, pooling between her legs.

“Eli.”

Eli’s tongue moved to Sarah’s thumb, wetting it.

“Eli, do you want me to kiss you?”

Eli’s gaze shot straight to Sarah’s face, and Sarah was struck by how handsome and beautiful she was in one tightly compact body. God, she wanted to touch, everything, everywhere. She wanted to explore, to learn every spot that would make Eli sigh, scream, cry out in pleasure. When she reined in her fantasies, she realized Eli still hadn’t answered her.

Bringing her hand down to Eli’s neck, she leaned forward so they were nearly touching nose to nose. “Eli, do you want me to kiss you?”

“Y-yes.”

Sarah grinned. Every last pull of anxiety in her body flung out the window as she shifted in closer. Their lips barely touched, just a brush, but Eli’s gasp of breath encouraged her as did the heat continuing to build between her legs.

Eli reached down and pushed the button on the seatbelt, freeing Sarah from the confines in an instant. Sarah didn’t wait again. Once she was close enough, she pressed their mouths together, sliding her hand against the back of Eli’s head to hold her close, to try and plaster their bodies against each other.

With her free hand, she grasped hold of Eli's back and tugged her impossibly closer. She couldn't breathe. Everything she had in that moment, her whole world, nothing else mattered. The feel of Eli against her was everything she had hoped and dreamed of.

Pulling back, Sarah grinned. Her cheeks were hot, her body sparking with so much energy she wasn't sure she'd ever get it to stop. Her thumb was on Eli's lips again, but she knew she was smiling. No way could Sarah deny how happy she was.

"That was nice," Eli whispered.

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“Yeah.” Sarah pulled her lower lip between her teeth. “It was fucking amazing.”

Eli snorted. “It was. I think we should do it again.”

“Thank God.”

This time Eli moved forward, pressing their mouths together and dashing her tongue out for a taste. Sarah shivered. God, she wanted so much more of everything. Eli’s hands were in her hair, sliding through her tangled locks, pulling when they found knots but then diving right back in and holding her still. Sarah let a gentle moan escape as she parted them, hoping Eli would recognize the invitation for what it was.

Sarah didn’t want to overstep. She didn’t want to cajole Eli into anything she didn’t want, but when Eli’s tongue slid against hers, she knew she was done for. Her entire being was tuned into Eli.

“I want to touch you all over,” Sarah murmured.

Eli whimpered, and it sent a shock of pleasure through Sarah’s chest. Shifting in the seat, Sarah pulled up on one knee and leaned so she towered over Eli, keeping their lips locked together as she moved. Eli tilted back, just like Sarah had hoped she would.

“Do you want me to touch you?”

Drawing in a sharp breath, Eli broke the kiss quick enough to answer. “Yes.”

With their mouths together, Sarah wasn't sure what she wanted to do first. Eli's hands moved down her back and onto her ass, pulling her in tighter. With each kiss Sarah placed on Eli's lips and jaw and down her neck, her mind ran a million miles a second.

"Tell me what to do," Sarah whispered, swirling the tip of her tongue just under Eli's left ear.

"I don't know." Eli worked her hand up the back of Sarah's shirt, fingering her spine.

Sarah moved back to Eli's lips. Her hips rocked into Eli's as she laid fully on top of her. Eli's hand guided her head down, holding Sarah to her. They became lost in each other. Every thought Sarah had was of Eli. Every move she made was solely for Eli's pleasure. She didn't want to move or to get up. It was perfect. The pounding on the window made her jerk, fear ratcheting up in her chest.

* * *

Eli pushed Sarah off her as she spun around to stare out the driver's side window. Her heart thumped so hard she was pretty sure it would jump out of her chest and run away. She would have loved to follow it, because looking back into Bridget's concerned and angry and hurt face was too much.

Sarah shifted behind her, the seat crunching as she moved, but Eli didn't dare tear her gaze away from Bridget. It took her far too long to have enough brain power to roll down the window until Bridget could look in and raise a brow. Sarah might not have seen it, but Eli did. The tears in Bridget's eyes barely held in.

"I was just checking, since you're pulled over on the side of the highway, that you were okay."

Eli swallowed, her lips parting to respond, but Bridget held her hand up.

“I can see you are.”

Bridget stalked off in a huff, and when Eli turned to look out the back window, she saw the cruiser behind her for the first time. Cursing under her breath, she turned to Sarah. “Give me a minute.”

“Whatever you need.” Sarah gave her a sweet smile and an encouraging nod.

Eli jumped out of the truck and stormed after Bridget. Wind whipped her braids as she grabbed Bridget’s arm and spun her around so they were facing each other. “What is your problem?”

Bridget shook her head and stepped back.

“No, seriously. What is your problem?”

“I love you.”

Eli straightened her shoulders. “No, you don’t.”

“I do. I do, Eli. Don’t tell me what I do and don’t feel.”

Shaking her head, Eli glanced at the truck and the silhouette of Sarah still sitting in the passenger seat. “No, you don’t love me like that, not anymore. You never did. You loved the thought of me, the secret of me, but you never loved me truly and fully. I gave you everything, Bridget. It’s been two years, and you just suddenly deem now as the time to confess all this? No, this isn’t love. This is jealousy, this is you not working through your crap, this is you not following through—yet again—with anything that doesn’t serve your own purpose.”

Bridget's lips parted.

“Don't speak. I'm tired of living with this tension. We used to be best friends. For years. For life, really. We grew up together. I'm tired of feeling like I can't go to stuff in town because you'll be there or because I don't want to cause a commotion with you or cause you any more hurt, but you know what? It's got to stop. Two years is enough. We've got to learn how to live in this town together. We may never be best friends again, but the very least we can do is be civil and friendly.”

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Eli stared directly into Bridget's eyes, hoping against hope there was something in Bridget that this would all ring true for. When Bridget shook her head and took another step away, Eli was sure she was lost.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"Too late," Bridget said.

Eli resisted letting out a snort. This was how it went every time. She would share and inevitably, whatever it was, Bridget would take it to heart. "Then I'm sorry, but I'm not going to hide any longer."

"You don't even know her," Bridget spat.

"No, I don't know her well. But at least she's willing to get to know me better, at least she's willing to take a risk. And you know what, Bridget? I want to be with her. I really do. I want to see where it goes."

Tears streamed down Bridget's cheeks. "I don't want you to be with her."

"Or anyone, I assume." Eli's voice calmed. She stepped forward, grasping Bridget's hands. "But here's the thing, Bridget, I am not with you. I haven't been with you in two years, and like I said two years ago, I am not going to wait around for you to decide when you want to be with me. I've moved on. You need to move on, too, for your own well-being."

Silence filled the gap between them, Bridget not making eye contact for quite some

time. The mood shifted, and Eli knew she had made her point. “Yeah. Yeah, you’re right.”

Relief washed over Eli. Bridget sniffled, and then she rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“You’re right.”

“I know I’m right.”

“Shut up.” Bridget smirked then she stepped closer and wrapped her arms around Eli’s shoulders. “I’m sorry about the other night.”

“Thank you for apologizing, really.” Eli mimicked Bridget’s stance, hugging her tightly and rubbing a hand over her shoulders to give as much comfort as she could.

“Eli?”

“Yeah?” Eli moved away so she could look Bridget in the eye again.

Bridget brushed her fingers over her cheeks. “I know it’s awkward, but seriously, don’t pull over on the side of the road to have a make out session, especially without your flashers on.”

Eli did laugh then, embarrassment whipping through her. If only Bridget had known the full story, or if only she wasn’t chiding Eli about stuff they used to do all the time. Nodding, Eli chuckled. “Yeah, I won’t do that again. Promise. Scout’s honor.”

“Good. Now go on. I’ve got real police work to do.”

“Sure, you do. Taking down the next high-speed runner?”

“You know it.” Bridget grinned as she strutted toward her cruiser.

Eli didn’t wait. They’d see each other again, no doubt, but hopefully the boiling over point was done and they would truly be able to make progress toward being friends once again. She wouldn’t have to lose a lifelong friend because of decisions they had both made.

When she got back to the truck, she stepped on the gas and the clutch, roaring the engine to life. She paused and watched Bridget pull out onto the highway and turn her cruiser toward town. Eli slapped the radio on and faced Sarah, who gave her a curious look with a single raised eyebrow.

“Don’t ask.”

“Wasn’t planning on it, but is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I think it is. For the first time in a long time.”

“Good.” Sarah’s lip was back between her teeth again.

Unable to resist, Eli leaned over the middle seat and grabbed Sarah’s face between both her hands and pulled her in for a quick, hard kiss. When she moved away, Sarah tugged her back, making the kiss last longer than she had originally anticipated. Sarah slid away by pressing soft kisses to Eli’s lips and then grinning.

“So what are we doing now?” Sarah whispered.

“We’re going to the house.”

“And?”

Eli raised an eyebrow, giving Sarah the most serious look she could muster. “You haven’t figured that out yet?”

“Well, I didn’t want to assume.”

“Assume away, Sarah.”

“Good.” Sarah pulled her in, their lips moving against each other, tongues dancing and enticing.

Eli drew in a sharp breath as Sarah sidled up closer to her. Eli relaxed into the embrace, so glad the final barrier had been broken down. She wasn’t sure how much longer they stayed there, but when Sarah finally relented, Eli knew they had to leave then and there, otherwise they wouldn’t ever get to the house—at least not any time soon.

She turned in her seat and shoved the truck into first gear. It was going to be one of the longest drives back to the house ever, but she was so thankful that Sarah remained sitting right next to her rather than sliding into the passenger seat. A small consolation as they both anticipated what was to come.

Chapter 16

When they got back to the house, Eli didn’t wait. She undid her seat belt and dragged Sarah toward her. With their mouths locked, Eli gave over everything she had been

holding inside—all the pent-up tension, the sadness, the hurt, the anger, the blossoming hope, the attraction.

Dipping her hands into Sarah's hair, Eli held her still. She closed her eyes, her lips moving against Sarah's, her breathing coming in shorter rasps. She reached the hemline of Sarah's loose t-shirt and was met with warm skin. Eli groaned as she splayed her fingers against the underside of Sarah's belly.

Sarah gasped, her lips parting as her eyes popped open, and she stared directly into Eli's gaze. Sarah's eyes were so dark, so hard to see where the brown ended and the black of her irises began. Eli curled her fingers, her nails scraping in a teasing manner. Sarah pulled her lip between her teeth, but she still had a vague smile on her lips. It encouraged Eli to continue.

Gliding her hand around Sarah's side, Eli slid her hand, feeling the dip at her waist as her body curved naturally. Sarah's mouth moved to Eli's jaw, and Eli dug her nails in. She wanted everything. She wanted to see and touch every part of Sarah's body if she'd allow. Her hand moved up higher, finding the edge of Sarah's bra strap against her skin and sliding two fingers under it, moving back and forth in a gentle pattern.

Sarah nipped at the tender skin of her neck, and Eli grunted in response before asking, "Are we doing this here?"

"I'm not sure we'll make it inside."

Eli grinned. "I'm not sure I've had car sex since high school."

"Rebel," Sarah muttered, her lips against Eli's skin again. "Quickie."

"What?"

“Let’s make it quick, get a little out of our systems, then to the house.”

“Yes.” The last consonant dragged out as Sarah’s tongue swirled against Eli’s pulse point. “Tell me...tell me what you want.”

“Straddle me,” Sarah whispered, her hands already at Eli’s belt as she pulled the leather through the buckle. “I’m going to do everything I can imagine doing to you today. You’re not going to know what hit you.”

Eli whimpered. She shuffled around the cab, suddenly thankful she had splurged for the bigger truck. She finally got up on her knees, Sarah between her legs, already with the button of her jeans undone.

Sarah’s chest rose and fell rapidly as her fingers fumbled with the zipper. Eli gripped Sarah’s cheeks between both her palms and lifted Sarah’s face so they were looking at each other. “I want this.”

Sarah nodded.

“Really, really, Sarah. I want this. Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Take a breath.”

Sarah drew air into her lungs then slowly let it out.

“I want you to touch me.”

A groan passed Sarah’s lips as she stilled completely.

“I want to feel you inside me. I want you to make me come over and over again. I want you to taste me, to bring me so high I won’t know what’s happening. I want to be exhausted and sore when I wake up.”

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She moved her thumb to Sarah's lips, sliding it along the moist skin. Then she pressed the palm of her hand against Sarah's racing heart.

"You ready?"

"Absolutely." Sarah didn't fumble this time as she pulled down the zipper on Eli's pants and shoved her hand inside. She explored, finding all the folds and recesses. Eli held as still as she possibly could while Sarah found what she was looking for, while she did exactly what she wanted.

With thumb and fingers moving in tandem, Sarah thrust. Eli gasped. It had been far too long since anyone had taken her like this. She pressed closer to Sarah as she tried to find her own balance. Sarah eased up slightly, but she didn't stop. Eli rocked her hips back and forth against Sarah's hand, finding her own rhythm. Sarah's free hand gripped her ass, pulling her in tighter.

Eli closed her eyes. She gripped the back of the seat so she wouldn't crush Sarah underneath her. Moving her mouth to Sarah's ear, she breathed hard, nipping at Sarah's ear lobe. "Please don't stop."

"I won't."

Undulating her hips, Eli was surprised when Sarah's other hand gripped her hip and pushed down alongside Eli's natural movements, increasing the force of the thrust and the depth of the fingers inside her. She wasn't quite sure how, but she was already nearing the precipice of her first orgasm.

“Sarah—”

“I’m not stopping.”

“Don’t stop.”

“Eli, hold on, another few seconds.”

Scrunching her eyes shut, Eli pulled into herself, focusing on holding everything off. She clenched her jaw, slowed her hips as best she could, but she knew she wasn’t going to be able to last much longer.

Sarah pulled back so their mouths met in a slow embrace. It was such a contrast to the speed Sarah’s hand moved. Eli lost all track of everything. When Sarah’s word finally reached her ears, she wasn’t sure how many times she’d said it.

“Now.”

Letting go, Eli jerked her hips as pleasure swarmed through her entire body. Her chest was hot and constricted, her back sweaty and sticky, her mind was slow as molasses, barely functioning. Sarah didn’t stop her hand immediately. She continued to pull everything Eli had to give. When Eli finally felt a deep breath of air enter her lips, she forced her eyes open to find Sarah grinning at her.

“That was beautiful.”

“Not sure that’s the word I’d use,” Eli answered. “But yeah, same sentiment.”

“House?”

“God, yes. Just...give me a second to get my legs back under me.”

“Anything.” Sarah pressed gentle kisses all over Eli’s face, down her neck, over the top of her chest still covered with her cotton button-up shirt. When Sarah moved her hand, Eli felt empty and fulfilled at the same time.

Leaning in, she pressed their mouths together. Sarah’s hands wrapped around her back as Eli took the embrace from heated to slow and sensual. She couldn’t stop kissing her. It was like she had been waiting to do it her entire life and now that she’d been granted permission she was never going to let up. She could kiss Sarah forever. Eli’s heart clenched. She couldn’t have those thoughts.

Sarah was going to leave soon, and she wasn’t coming back. There was no forever in their future. Moving so their mouths were no longer touching, Eli shifted off Sarah and onto the seat next to her. Sarah waited patiently while Eli adjusted herself before putting her hand on the door.

“Ready?”

“Yeah.” But even Eli could hear the faraway tone in her voice, the sadness ebbing its way in as much as she didn’t want it to be there. With a sigh, she leaned in and kissed Sarah’s cheek. “Yeah, let’s go inside.”

Sarah gave her a long look before opening the door, and only at a nod and a raised brow from Eli did she move. Eli followed her out, slamming the door shut behind her. She had to find a way to distract Sarah from her own mistake. She shouldn’t be thinking about more than what Sarah could commit to. They hadn’t talked about future, and honestly, Eli wasn’t sure she wanted to.

As soon as they were inside, Sarah was on her again, pressing her into the wall next to the door. Their mouths were locked together in a kiss while Sarah’s fingers tugged at her braids. Eli had no idea what she was doing until Sarah let out a satisfied grunt and dug her entire hand into the long locks at the back of Eli’s head.

“What do you want now?” Sarah breathed.

“Let me do for you.”

“Not yet,” Sarah retorted. “I’m not done with you yet.”

“All right.” Eli moved her hands to her shirt and started in on the buttons. The fabric felt so confining, she wasn’t sure she could take it much longer. Sarah went to help, getting the last of the buttons and then shoving the shirt over Eli’s shoulders and onto the floor below. Eli reached behind her, flicked her bra strap, and added that to the growing pile of clothes. Eli tugged at Sarah’s shirt, pulling it up.

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Sarah demanded, “Take this off. I want to feel you against me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Snorting, Eli giggled as Sarah dragged her shirt over her head.

“Turn around,” Sarah issued another direction.

“What?”

“Trust me. Turn around.”

Eli faced the wall, pressing the palms of her hands against it. Sarah’s fingers flitted over the back, her shoulders, down to her waist and then around to her belly. Her hands were followed by lips and by a dash here and there of Sarah’s tongue. Eli put her cheek against the cold wall and drew in a sharp breath as her eyelids fluttered shut.

Sarah pulled Eli’s hips back so her butt pressed against Sarah’s front. Then Sarah’s hands moved down against the line of Eli’s jeans—still unbuttoned and unzipped from the truck. Sarah moved her pants down, nipping at the skin on Eli’s shoulder as she went. “This time, Eli, don’t hold back. There’s no one here. Nothing to fear. If you want me to do something, tell me. If you want me to stop something, tell me. You are calling all the shots.”

Eli didn’t answer. She wasn’t quite sure what to say. She’d had sex before, plenty of times, with a handful of women, but whatever Sarah was doing, with her words—not even her hands or her body—was undoing her more than anyone had ever managed to accomplish before.

“I’m going to touch you like before.”

Eli whimpered.

“I’m going to touch your breasts.”

Eli’s nipples hardened at just the thought, at the wash of breath against her shoulder. When Sarah’s lips touched just behind her ear, she pulled her lip between her teeth to stop the groan.

Sarah nipped her earlobe. “I told you, don’t hold back, Elijah.”

That was it. Her body was strung as tight as it could go. Eli’s voice echoed in the room as she groaned in an overwhelm of pleasure and anticipation. Eli rocked back, grinding her hips into Sarah’s, feeling the press of Sarah’s breasts against her back.

“Touch me,” Eli whispered.

“Where? Tell me where.”

Licking her lips, Eli tried to find her voice, tried to figure out where she wanted to be touched first because she was pretty sure the answer of “everywhere” wasn’t going to get her anything. With a hitch in her breath, she finally formed words. “Nipples.”

“What do you want me to do to them?”

Eli groaned in frustration as Sarah still wasn’t touching her aside from pressing against her back. “Pull them.”

“Like this?” Sarah’s hand grazed Eli’s skin from her hip to her waist to the side of her breast before she cupped it. Eli’s entire body focused on the one singular move. Sarah

pinched Eli's nipple between her fingers and gently tugged.

A rush of air escaped Eli's lungs. "Yes. Harder."

Sarah obliged. Eli bucked her hips back into Sarah and then groaned.

"Sarah."

"Yes, love."

"Take me already. Hard and fast like before."

"Anything you want." Sarah moved her other hand between Eli's parted legs, and it was just as before. The rhythm, the buildup, the rocking and undulating of her hips. Eli was lost to every sensation, every nerve ending firing at once as she crested over a second orgasm.

When she finally had the fog cleared from her brain, Sarah wrapped her arms around her and turned so they faced each other again. They kissed, gently, slowly. Eli touched Sarah's shoulder, moving her hand down Sarah's arm to entwine their fingers, Sarah's still slightly sticky and moist.

"Will you let me now?"

Sarah's gaze turned up at Eli's words, her lips parted. "Yes."

"How?"

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“D-don’t touch my breasts. Anything else is fair game.”

Eli nodded. She moved her hand along Sarah’s side to the skinny jeans she’d worn multiple times since she’d been there. “May I use my mouth.”

“I would welcome it.” Sarah grinned. She reached down to her pants and pulled the button and zipper. She moved to one of the large chairs Eli had furnished the living area with and pulled off her boots while Eli did the same. Soon enough they were both naked. Eli’s heart raced in anticipation. She took a second to watch as Sarah spread her legs as she sat in the chair and played with herself before she knelt between Sarah’s knees.

Moving her rough hands up and down Sarah’s silky thighs was more of a contrast than she had anticipated. Eli started with one knee, pressing kisses here and there before moving to the other. Every minute she’d inch her way up. Sarah took all of Eli’s hair into a pony and twisted it around her fist, tugging lightly to try and get Eli to move faster, but Eli was determined about taking her time. The noises coming from between Sarah’s lips spurred her on. As soon as she got where they both wanted her to be, Sarah let out a sigh of relief.

“Remember, Elijah, everything is fair game.”

Eli closed her eyes and pulled Sarah’s hips closer to the edge of the chair. She didn’t hold back any longer. At some point, Sarah moved one foot against Eli’s shoulder, pushing against her as Eli changed pattern or moved her fingers in a new and different way. When Sarah’s body clenched hard against her fingers, she reveled in the sweet pull against her. It was nearly perfect, wonderful. Tears hit the back of her

eyes at the thought that this week would be it. Whatever they had was going to end very shortly.

Eli wasn't sure she wanted to give it up, to give her up. Instead of lingering on those thoughts, Eli pushed through the emotions and brought Sarah up again, but this time, when she finished, Sarah tapped her hand, in an indication she wanted Eli to stop. Sitting back on her haunches, Eli stared up at Sarah's rosy cheeks, tousled hair, and heavy-lidded eyes as she wiped her fingers around her mouth.

"Come here." Sarah's voice was deep, rough edged with passion still.

Eli did as she was told, rising on her knees so their mouths could touch, so their tongues could dance in a slow tango of soothing embraces. Sarah's hands were in her hair again, but this time it was calm and gentle. Eli's entire body eased from the tension it had been holding.

When Sarah pulled back, she had a smile on her face. "When do you have to go do something?"

"Three in the morning."

"You're free until then?"

"Yeah."

"Good. I want a nap, and then I want to do this all over again."

Eli chuckled. "Your bed or mine?"

"Yours."

Standing up, Eli took Sarah by the hand and led her to the basement. They walked through her small living room before pushing their way into her messy bedroom. Sarah was right behind her. Eli pulled her onto the bed, curling up on her side as Sarah did the same. They faced each other for a while, kissing here and there in between gentle words of conversation, but eventually, Eli turned over and Sarah moved against her back, curling around her. They fell asleep that way, knowing their time wasn't up yet.

* * *

Sarah lay naked in the bed, her body sore from a week spent with Eli. As slow as the first week had been, the second had gone so fast she felt like she never caught up. She'd spent as much time with Eli as she possibly could, sometimes out in the fields and often in a bed or on a couch or anywhere in between when they couldn't keep their hands off of each other.

She smiled at the memory. She'd certainly never forget her time at Indigo, but she couldn't figure out why she was so sad to leave. She'd been on the phone on and off the previous few days, talking with agents and publicists as they broke the silence they had promised her in order to make arrangements for her tour.

It was going to be a long six months. It was the longest tour she had ever been on, but everyone assured her it would be worth it in the end. She still wasn't convinced, and neither was Kara, and Kara was usually a pretty good judge of Sarah's life—whether Sarah wanted her to be or not.

Gnawing on her lip again, Sarah got up and dressed. She opened her small rollaboard suitcase on her bed and started to roll her clothes up to fit everything inside. It had taken her years to figure out the best way to pack as much as she could in very little space, but she had become an expert at it by now.

She'd felt Eli get out of the bed early that morning to go check on the cattle, but she hadn't seen her since, which wasn't completely abnormal, but the way she had gone had left an empty feeling in the pit of Sarah's belly. As she finished packing, she dragged her stuff out to her rental car, the car that had just sat there for the two weeks she'd been at the house. It had almost been pointless to rent it, and it certainly would have done her better to have Eli come pick her up at the airport. Then she wouldn't have gotten lost on the way up.

Shoving the thought aside, Sarah closed the trunk of the car and turned around to face the fields. Eli was still nowhere in sight. They had talked about when she'd have to leave that morning, late enough that Eli said she could come back to see her off but not before afternoon chores had to begin. Sarah gnawed on her lip again as she leaned against the trunk of her vehicle and checked the time on her phone.

She didn't have much time to wait around. She walked back up to the deck, circling the house as she scanned the horizon for the old farm truck Eli normally took out. She couldn't see her anywhere. Sarah went back inside and sat at the kitchen counter, calling Eli's cell phone but knowing her even being in cellphone range would be a stroke of luck. When it went straight to voicemail, Sarah set her phone down and sighed.

Waiting as long as she could, and even ten minutes past when she should, Sarah gave up. She grabbed a piece of paper and a pen, scribbling a quick note to Eli, thanking her for the hospitality and for letting her stay there, thanking Eli for trusting her with so much. When all was said and done, she signed it and left it right on the counter where she knew Eli would find it.

Once she was behind the wheel of the car, she headed toward the highway. She kept looking for Eli's truck anywhere, but she couldn't find it. A nagging feeling that something wasn't quite right tugged at the back of her mind, but she ignored it. They had talked about her leaving, and they both knew it had to happen, that there was no

getting around it.

Her drive to the airport was uneventful. Her flight was the same. When she landed in Dallas, she took a rideshare to her apartment. Everything was in the same place as it was when she'd left two weeks before with so much hope for a break from everything. She'd had a break for sure, but something still felt unsettled.

Sarah stood in front of the large window in her high rise, staring out at the darkening sky and the horizon. She hadn't lied to Eli when she said the sky seemed so much bigger there than in Dallas. Tears stung her eyes as she forced herself to turn around and start in on her next preparations. She had two weeks left until her tour started. They had final rehearsals, final checks on their reservations for everything. She hadn't meant to smash so much into the next two weeks, but the break had been just what she needed to get through to the next little bit.

Dumping her clothes into the wash, she sighed as the scent hit her. Everything she had brought home with her smelled like Eli, that half-cow-shit, half-soap scent. A tear grazed down her cheek, and she wiped it away with more force than she intended. She hadn't gotten a text or a phone call from Eli. Nothing. No checking about how her flight had been or if she'd made it back safely.

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Pursing her lips as she set her washer to run, Sarah debated whether or not to take that step herself. She held the phone in her hand, wondering what Eli was doing at that moment, wondering where she was, what she was thinking. She rubbed her fingers across her lips, remembering the last time Eli had kissed her. Everything felt uneven and distorted. The bubble they had created in those two short weeks had burst.

Anxious pain lanced in her belly, but Sarah ignored it. She opened her phone and sent a quick text to let Eli know she was home, that she had enjoyed her time there, and that she hoped and wanted to see her again. After she hit send, she threw her phone onto her couch and went to stare out the window of her apartment. If she wasn't careful, she was going to need a break from her break.

When her phone rang, she jerked suddenly. She ran to it, picking it up, but it wasn't Eli. It was her agent. Disappointment chilled her bones as she answered, ready to get down to the business of what still needed to be taken care of. Maybe the tour was exactly what she needed then, to distract herself from the whirlwind that was Elijah Wilson.

Chapter 17

It had been the longest two weeks of her life. Eli had avoided the house as much as she could, putting every ounce of extra energy she had into her cattle and her wheat and her house and building the stupid wedding arch she had thought would be a good idea but was starting to regret. She'd crawl into her bed at night, lonely and so exhausted that her body had no hope but to crash hard until she had to wake up and do it all over again.

One week had not been enough time for them to explore everything they could have been together, but then again, two weeks probably wouldn't have been enough time for that either. And they both knew it was temporary. It had to be. Eli wasn't built for traveling like Sarah was. She'd made that very clear from the outset, and she in no way expected Sarah to give up any of her life either.

They were two very different people who happened to share one very nice and very short week together. It was nothing more beyond that. They'd both known it going in, but Eli couldn't for the life of her figure out why she still struggled with it.

She slammed the truck door shut and went out into the fields. Bill would already be there, she was sure. She needed an extra hand that day, and he was always willing to give her some help if she needed it. Sure enough, as Eli pulled out into the lower pasture, she saw his truck with him sitting inside of it.

Eli parked next to him and grabbed the stuff she needed. When she got out, so did Bill, and he met her at the back of her truck where she pulled over a bucket with tags, iodine, and the tagger she'd used for years. She cleaned it off good to make sure everything would work right and checked it out, not saying anything to Bill.

"Elijah..."

"What?" she muttered.

"I have let it slide until now, but you're going to have to tell me what's going on. You and Bridget have a fight again?"

She shot him a dirty look. "No, and really, doesn't anyone in town mind their own business?"

His lips quirked to the side at the comment, and she knew he was thinking exactly

what she was thinking. The answer was never. He pulled up to sit on the bed of the truck and stared at her as she continued to fiddle with the tagging equipment far more than she needed to.

“You know, when you were about eight years old—”

“Really, Bill? We’re going with this?” Eli grabbed the bucket and set her shoulders, ready to leave or do anything other than what she knew was coming. A lecture. From the only person she had gotten so many lectures from, it rivaled her own parents.

He gave her a firm look, and Eli dropped the bucket on the ground and glared at him. He started over again.

“When you were about eight years old, you asked me if it was okay to marry Ava.”

Eli paled. She didn’t remember that at all. Remembered nothing of that conversation. Bill rubbed his lips together as he stared at her.

“I wasn’t quite sure what to say to you because I didn’t know why you were asking, and after a few more follow up questions, I realized you weren’t asking if you could marry Ava, but if you could marry someone like Ava, a girl. So yes, Eli, I knew you were gay probably before you ever did.”

Clenching her jaw, Eli wrapped her arms over her chest wishing the conversation would be done and over with already.

“Now I realized you weren’t interested in Ava pretty early on, not to mention, she was not interested in you.”

“When hell freezes over is the phrase that comes to mind.”

“Yes.” He pointed his finger at her. “But nonetheless, I was not afraid to let you be friends with my daughter. I was not afraid of who you would become because I knew you would become someone great, that you were more than who you liked or didn’t like. Everyone is, really, but that’s neither here nor there.”

“What’s your point, Bill? You’re getting long-winded.”

One more pointed look shut her right up. “Bridget did not have the same freedom you did in that regard. You know as well as I do what it was like to grow up in her house and the shame she still has from that.”

“Bridget and I broke up two years ago. Get with the program. We did not have a fight because there are no more fights to have.”

“I know.” He raised his hands in the air. “Hear me out.”

“Can I hear you out while we walk down and catch cows?”

“No. This is important.”

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“Fine.” Eli had been put in her place. Had her own father been there, he would have either joined in the conversation with Bill or he would have laughed at Bill’s attempts to lecture before telling Eli to shut up and listen. She leaned against the tailgate but refused to sit on it like him, wanting to make sure he knew she still needed to get the tagging done that day.

Bill pulled out a can of chew from his back pocket and slipped some tobacco under his lower lip. No other sound greeted her but the brush of the wind and occasionally the keening of a cow far off in the pasture. When he was done, he pressed a hand to hers and then patted the top of it before letting go.

“You and Bridget had a couple fights the other week.”

“So.”

“So the whole town is talking after the last one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Meaning, Bridget called in she was pulled over to check the truck because of certain activity before she got out to see who was in the truck. Also meaning Kitty drove by while you two were standing outside arguing.”

“Damn it.”

“Yep. So the two of you had an argument last week, and you know, it took me longer than I would like to admit to figure out why Bridget and you would be fighting again

after two years of being off.”

Eli pressed her lips tightly together. She wasn’t going to admit it if she didn’t have to, but she was pretty sure everything was about to come tumbling out.

“You haven’t been to town in two weeks, Eli.”

“What’s your point?” Eli dug the toe of her boot into the hard topsoil while she clenched her jaw and stared out at the horizon.

Bill spit at the ground and let the silence sit a moment. “You know you can talk to me, kid, right? You’ve never had a problem talking to me before. Remember when you and Ava went out and got drunk at the bonfire and came home sick beyond words?”

“Yeah, I remember that.” Once again Eli was lost on where he was going with the story, but that was often how Bill talked. Winding his way through different stories to prove his point.

He knocked his shoulder into hers. “I never told your dad.”

“Ever? How did he find out then?”

“Eli, you were three sheets to the wind. He’s not stupid. Even sober you’re a bad liar.”

Rolling her eyes, Eli waited for him to continue.

“You can trust me. You can talk to me, and God knows, sometimes you need to talk to someone other than Cassie.”

Laughing, Eli rolled her shoulders and pulled herself up to sit next to him. Neither said anything for quite some time, and when she put her head on his shoulder, he wrapped his arm around her in a side hug, and Eli melted. She'd almost forgotten how much like a second father he was to her.

"We did fight, Bridget and me. At bingo the other week, she kissed me—very unwanted. Anyway, I thought that was the end of it, but it wasn't, and when she pulled up on me that day, I realized how bad it was. So yeah, we fought, but I think we worked it out. Finally. Nothing like two years too late, huh?"

"It's never too late. Was she right?"

"Right about what?"

"What she saw between you and that girl."

Eli rubbed her hand over her forehead as she focused in on Sarah, who would probably take offense to being called a girl by a guy who was no more than ten or fifteen years older than her, but that was neither here nor there. She wasn't sure how she wanted to answer him. She wouldn't lie, of course, but she hadn't fully sorted through everything herself. She'd mostly just avoided it. When she turned to him, he stared directly into her eyes, his balding head reflecting the sun from the middle of the day.

"Shouldn't you be wearing a hat? Your bald spot is shiny. Don't need cancer."

"Eli."

"Sorry, yes, Bridget was right."

He nodded. "I thought as much when I saw you at the sausage supper. What are you

going to do about it?”

“Nothing.” Eli shoved off the truck and stepped away from him, grabbing her bucket of tagging tools and lifting it up. “I’m gonna go tag me some cows. You coming?”

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He groaned as he got off the truck, the vehicle moving when his weight was no longer pushing it down. When he stepped toward her, she thought the conversation was over, that she'd managed to end it, but the sad look in his eyes told her it was far from over.

“You should call her.”

“What’s the point? Our lives aren’t compatible. There’s no way it would work.”

“You don’t know that if you don’t give it a try.”

“I refuse to do to her what Dad did to Mom.” Eli turned then, leaving him behind her as she walked toward her cattle. They had at least a dozen calves to catch and tag that day, and the longer Bill stood there and talked, the longer it was going to take, and Eli wasn’t sure she had the energy to run circles around him anymore—or the will.

When they got down the hill, Bill put a hand on her arm to stop her. “You should ask your mom if the decision was worth it or if she feels it was a mistake.”

Eli didn’t answer him. Instead, she set her bucket down, prepared a tag, and grabbed her notebook to record everything. She handed them over to Bill as she went on to catch one of the calves. Buddy was the easiest, since he already liked her from her feeding him when he was first born.

She wrapped her arms around his middle and sat him on his butt, while she swung a leg over his hind quarters to keep him in place. Bill came over without a word and pierced the tag through Buddy’s ear. After checking to make sure it was properly in

place, Eli let Buddy go, patted his bum, and sent him on his way. It took them the better part of the afternoon to catch the calves that had been born the last month and tag them all, but eventually they were done. She'd have to do another round of it when her cows were done with calving, but she'd rather do them in small batches than all at once.

Luckily, Bill didn't bring Sarah up again—or Bridget for that matter. By the time she got back to the house, her muscles ached from wrestling calves. Stripping down, Eli jumped into the hottest shower she could stand and pressed her forehead to the cold tile. Bill was right, as much as she didn't like to admit it. Sometimes she really hated the fact that he knew her so well. That still didn't tell her what she was going to do about it all, though. Collapsing into bed after scrounging up some food, Eli tried to shut her mind off so when her alarm went off at three in the morning she'd have a chance of being able to focus.

* * *

Sarah was late. She hated being late. By the time she pulled up to the Flying Saucer in Garland, she knew Kara was going to be annoyed with her. When she sat down at the small table outside—near enough to the lake that they felt like they were almost on the water.

"I'm so sorry. 620 was backed up."

"It's always backed up."

"I know." Sarah clenched her jaw. In all honestly, she'd left her apartment late because she hadn't been quite sure she wanted to go, but then the thought of ditching Kara had guilted her into going anyway. But she wasn't sure she wanted to explain that whole ordeal to her.

It was likely going to be their last time seeing each other in person for the next six or seven months, and she didn't want to leave her best friend without saying goodbye—not that they wouldn't talk during that time almost constantly, but it was far more difficult to keep in touch on tour than when she was in the same city.

“How's everything going?” Kara asked as the waitress came over to take Sarah's order.

“It's going.”

“You've been quiet.”

“Have I?” Sarah honestly hadn't noticed. She'd been so caught up in finalizing all the details and overtime practice runs of their sets that she wasn't even sure what day it was most of the time, or what time of night it was.

Kara nodded. “I don't think you've texted in days.”

“I'm sorry.” But she wasn't. She honestly hadn't even noticed she'd kind of dropped off the face of the planet. When her beer arrived, she drank at least half of it before she popped a handful of the dill popcorn into her mouth. Kara eyed her curiously before she set her own drink down and stared out at the water. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing,” Kara sighed. “You know, I was thinking of maybe moving home.”

“What? Why?”

Kara shrugged. “Easier. Don't have to deal with broken hearts all over the place.”

Sarah froze. Her gaze moved straight from the wooden bowl of popcorn to Kara's expressive eyes, and it wasn't fear or worry or anxiety or sadness Kara looked at her

with. It was anger. She was had. “I’m not running.”

“You are.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“I’m not.”

“Sarah, I have known you for years. Trust me, you are running.”

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“I’m going on tour, which has been in the works for years. I can’t be running when all I’m doing is going to work.”

Kara smirked, then straightened her back and leaned over the table like she had a huge secret to share. “You don’t have to be getting physically farther away to be running.”

“Fuck that.”

Kara raised an eyebrow at Sarah, and Sarah muttered an apology before Kara started again. “Did you or did you not sleep with the handsome, talented, hot and cold B&B owner?”

“She doesn’t own it yet.”

“Semantics. Sarah, quit avoiding. I’m serious.”

Sarah narrowed her gaze with a glare. She drew in a deep breath, spinning the glass in front of her in circles. “I’m not avoiding, really. What is there to run from? It was a week.”

“Two weeks.”

“A week, not even a week. But whatever.”

“You were there for two weeks.”

“Yeah, but we didn’t...it was less than a week.”

“Sarah, I know you really well by this point. Trust me when I say the attraction started well before you two were boinking.”

“Boinking? What are we? Twelve?”

“You’re not because you’re old. I, however, am a spirited, young, barely twenty-something.”

“Shut up.” Sarah finished her beer, wishing she could have another already at the table waiting for her. She’d been thinking non-stop about Eli whenever she wasn’t thinking about her music or her tour, but then she’d sing the song that started it all, the song that was on the radio when she’d figured out Eli knew who she was the entire flipping time.

When the waitress came back, Sarah ordered food and another beer while Kara just ordered food. She rubbed her fingers together and bounced her foot as she waited impatiently for the waitress to return, but Kara’s hand on hers stopped her in her tracks.

“What happened?”

“What do you mean? We hooked up. I had to come back to Dallas, and that was the end of it. It’s not like there were any promises of forever or proposals in the mix. I was gone for two freakin’ weeks, Kara, I’m not that fast. I am not a U-Haul lesbian.”

The quirk on Kara’s lips brought a moment of satisfaction, but it was quickly dashed when Kara asked the one question she hadn’t thought of.

“Did you want that?”

She knew she'd gone pale. She stumbled and hesitated and pulled back on her answer. Had she wanted that? Had she wanted more? Ideally, she had always wanted more. She was not the kind of woman who could readily move from one relationship to the next. She liked stability. As much as her career didn't afford that, her personal life did. Rubbing her lips, Sarah nodded. "Yeah, maybe I did."

"Maybe?"

"I don't know. I need to think about that one." Sarah let out a sigh of relief when the waitress showed up with her second beer. She needed it to calm the nerves Kara was suddenly finding so interesting to touch and play with.

"Is she young?"

Sarah narrowed her eyes. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Because, Sarah, a lot of young people aren't looking for the same things you old folks are looking for. So...is she young?"

"She's younger than me, yes."

"How much?"

"What is this? Twenty questions?"

"Because you haven't told me anything about her." Kara's voice had risen with an accusatory tone to it.

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Sarah was taken aback. “I have. Of course, I have.”

“You haven’t. You’ve been curiously devoid of information about her—whereas all your other dates are the complete opposite. You can’t wait to tell me every little detail, and I mean, every detail, Sarah. But this time...I don’t know. It’s so different. You’re different.”

“I’m different? What do you mean?”

Their food was set in front of them before Kara continued. “Like I said before. Normally you share everything, but this time you haven’t. This time you’re moping like you went through the world’s worst break up, yet you sit here and tell me you weren’t even dating. And that song.”

“What song?”

“You know what song.” Kara’s gaze narrowed. “That song is not about a cow. You can try to believe that all you want, but it is not about a cow.”

Sarah tensed. She had no idea what to say to Kara. She loved her friend dearly, but she’d never been so blunt in calling her out before.

“You need to call her.”

“I’m sorry. What?”

“Call her, Sarah. You’re miserable, and I’m tired of seeing you this miserable. Just

give her a call and see where it goes from there.”

“She lives states away.”

“Yeah, and you travel all the time. How would this be any different?” Kara took a bite of her sandwich.

She did have a point, as much as Sarah didn’t necessarily want to admit it. But what would it be like to add in one more travel stop—more often than she came home for sure, because if she set it up only as often as she came home, it was never going to work. Sarah finally grabbed hold of the spoon for her soup and started in on her lunch, still mulling over everything Kara had said. Kara might have been young, but she was wise, which had been one of the reasons Sarah loved hanging out with her.

Drawing in a deep breath, Sarah let it out and tried to think of something to change subject to. Luckily, Kara must have sensed her need for something else because the conversation turned to Kara’s own photography business. That had been how they’d met, surprisingly. Kara had worked on the photos for one of Sarah’s albums before she’d gone off and started her own business, which had taken awhile to flourish but it was finally doing well. They’d known each other for years at this point, and even if she was being blunt, Sarah did appreciate Kara’s advice.

As they were getting ready to leave and Sarah’s rideshare was coming, Kara grabbed her elbow to get her attention. Sarah turned and stared down at her much shorter friend.

“I want to say this, and I want to be clear when I say it.”

“Okay?” Curious, Sarah turned to face her completely and raised an eyebrow, indicating Kara had her full attention.

“Good. Now um...don’t take this the wrong way, Sarah, because I love you, and I want to see you as much as I can, and I’m really going to hate myself for this, but first I think you need to call Eli. You two need to talk and figure out whatever this is between you because I have a sinking suspicion it’s not one-sided.”

Sarah was about to reject the notion when Kara held her hand up to stop her.

“I’m not finished. If when you do call her, she is interested in something beyond whatever the other week was, I need you to do something for me.”

“What’s that?”

“I need you to not fuck it up. Don’t pull the shit you normally do. Don’t run away. You give her every moment—all the time and effort you can—to make it work.”

“I don’t fuck up relationships, Kara.” One glare shut her up again. “Fine, I do mess some of them up.”

“Right, so don’t do that to this one.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m pretty sure this one is different, and I don’t want you falling back into old ways that are just going to mess everything up. And this is hard, because if this really is how it’s going to be, I know I’m not going to see you as much.”

Sarah dropped her gaze to the ground. “Yeah, and my family already complains about not seeing me. Imagine if I lived across the country from them.”

The look in Kara’s eyes had Sarah’s heart thumping.

“I’m not moving.”

“You just—”

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“I’m not moving, Kara. Drop it. Oh look, here’s my ride.” Sarah bent down and pressed a kiss to Kara’s cheek. “I’ll call and text.”

“Me or Eli?”

Sarah didn’t answer. She got into the car that would take her home for the last time in months. She caught sight of Kara still standing by the door to the Sauceras she left, and she knew, as stupid as it sounded, that Kara was right. But she wasn’t going to call Eli. There was no way Sarah had enough gumption to do that. Her life was good the way it was, and she would like to keep it that way. Eli had just been a fling, nothing more.

Chapter 18

Sarah grinned broadly as she walked off stage. She was buzzing. Her body was full of adrenaline, moving would be the only way to get rid of it, and she would easily be up well into the wee hours of the morning. As her crew started packing everything up, Sarah grabbed a bottle of water and downed it as she fell into the soft plush couch in one of the backrooms.

Everyone moved around her and did everything they were supposed to do. But what was she supposed to do? She knew the rhythm of tour. This wasn’t the first one she had been on. She knew she always felt lost after a concert was over and done with, but this time felt so different. She wasn’t just lost from the concert, she was lost. She had no center, no balance, and no way to find it again either.

Kara had been right. Sarah glanced at the clock on the wall. It was midnight for her

and past two in the morning for Eli. She couldn't call, could she? Surely, she was done being up in the middle of the night for the cows by then. A month had passed with no contact.

"Sadie!"

Sarah swiveled her head toward the door.

"Great job tonight."

"You too, kid." Sarah swallowed. As soon as she was alone again, she wondered if she could call. If it had been a month and she hadn't been able to get Eli out of her mind, maybe she did just need to call and see what all of it was about, perhaps find out if Eli felt the same or even anywhere near.

Sarah set an alarm on her phone for one hour later. She hoped she wasn't wrong in assuming Eli was still getting up in the middle of the night. She had mentioned calving season could last for a while, and Sarah certainly didn't want to wake her up if she was resting. God knew Eli needed all the rest she could get.

With the decision made, Sarah went to help where she could. She might have been the star, the name that drew everyone there, but she wasn't above the grunt work, and she always made sure to help every time. She packed up instruments and coiled cables until they were neatly packed away in tubs.

Before she knew it, the alarm on her phone was going off and she'd almost forgotten why she set it. Staring down at the device, she begged off the project she'd been working on and slipped into the back room with the phone pressed to her ear as Eli's phone rang and rang.

A sleepy hello greeted her, and instantly, Sarah's lips curled into a smile. "Did I wake

you?”

“Who is this?”

Laughing to herself, Sarah swallowed. “It’s Sarah.”

“Why on earth are you calling me at...three in the morning?” Eli sounded slightly more awake by that point.

“Uh...” Sarah rubbed a hand against the back of her head as she stared at the organized chaos around her. “I’m not exactly sure, truthfully.”

Eli grunted. “Sarah. It’s three in the morning.”

“Don’t you have to get up anyway?”

“What?”

“For the cows.”

Eli chuckled. “No. The last calf was born last week. I’m done with that. I can get actual sleep now—well, unless you call. Why are you calling again?”

“I don’t know.” Nerves sparked to life in her belly, something she had been missing all evening. “I’m sorry. I’ll let you go back to sleep.”

“No, don’t hang up. I’m awake now, so you better talk to me.”

Sarah’s lips parted in surprise. “About what?”

“Sarah, you called me. Didn’t you have something to say?”

She was at a complete loss for words. Sarah had no idea what to do or say or where to steer the conversation from there. She didn't know what she'd been thinking when she'd made the call. To be fair, she probably wasn't thinking. Her post-concert brain was always a bit muddled no matter how clear she thought it was. God, Kara was going to get a kick out of this.

“Sarah?”

“I’m still here, yeah.”

“Where are you?”

“California.”

“So it’s what...one there?”

“Yeah. We’re just finishing packing up.”

“You’re helping?”

“Always do.”

“Don’t you have fans waiting outside or something?”

Sarah pursed her lips. “Probably.”

“Shouldn’t you go make nice?”

“Do you want me to hang up?” Taken slightly off-guard, Sarah pressed her lips together. “Because just two seconds ago it sounded like you didn’t want me to hang up.”

Eli groaned and rustled around on the other end of the phone. “No, no, don’t hang up. I’m just...you woke me up. Give my brain a bit to catch up with everything. How was the concert?”

“It was good.”

“Just good?”

Sarah grinned. “No, it was really good. Probably one of the best I’ve done in a long time.”

“How many have you done since you started?”

Disappointment edged its way into Sarah’s chest, and she rubbed at it with her fist. For some reason, she had hoped Eli might have cared, might have looked it up to see where she was at or even where her tour would take her. She didn’t expect Eli to have it memorized, but some indication she had cared would have been nice. “Umm...we’re two weeks in, so...six events, I think?”

“You think?”

“I lose count after a while between concerts and press stuff.”

“Press stuff?”

“Yeah. Like in a few hours I need to go down to some news studio and do an interview and sing a song or two.” Sarah had already decided what songs she was going to do. The hit from her current album, but also the song she had written when she’d been with Eli. She would do that one alone, just her and the guitar because she hadn’t had time to write the rest of the music yet or have her team learn it.

“What station? Maybe I’ll watch.”

“I honestly don’t remember, Eli. I let the big important people handle all that. I just go where they tell me to.”

Eli sighed. “I don’t believe for a second that you’re as hands-off as that.”

“You’re right, but this was a last-minute addition, so I really don’t know where I’m going, but press is press, right? Any of it is good.”

“If you’re trying to build a bigger audience and sell more.”

They fell into a quiet silence, Sarah realizing quite clearly that of all the conversations she imagined having with Eli over the past few months, talking about the logistics of her tour and how things were planned was not one of them. She’d wanted to ask about Buddy, maybe try and convince Eli to send her a picture of him, but at the same time, she was scared to ask.

“How’s everything there? Bridget behaving?”

Eli snorted. “Yeah, she’s behaving if you want to call it that.”

“Oh no, what happened?”

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“Nothing at all, truthfully. But it’s only been a few weeks. She plays a long game.”

“I hope she’s changed.” Sarah’s voice got quiet.

“Me too. But I think I’ll always have my doubts about that, especially after the last time.”

“I don’t blame you.” Sarah caught sight of someone beckoning her through the door. She held up a finger, telling them she wanted more time. “Eli, what would you say if I came out for a visit again?”

“You know how to reserve a booking, Sarah. I don’t know why you’re asking me.”

And that was her answer. Tears stung at Sarah’s eyes as she hung her head down. “No, Eli, the room I want isn’t available on your website.”

“Hmmm...you sure that’s the room you want?”

Sarah narrowed her eyes. She couldn’t tell for sure, but she thought there might be a tone of teasing in Eli’s voice. She certainly hoped there was, but she didn’t want to read into it if it wasn’t there.

“You going to cook your own meals while you’re here, too?”

“I’ll cook you anything, Eli, you know that.”

The sigh echoed through the line. Sarah closed her eyes, wishing Eli would just

answer already, give her some sort of hint as to what she wanted because Sarah really didn't want to have to work out the words to ask her bluntly—although she knew Kara would yell at her for not just doing that first.

“Sarah...”

That tone was back again. Sarah wanted to run and hide from it, completely afraid of what it meant and where the conversation was going. She cut the conversation off before it could go anywhere. “Yeah, never mind, that was stupid. I’m on a six-month tour and barely two weeks in. I won’t be able to set up another vacation until next year at this rate. I’ll see you around, Eli.”

“Sarah—”

But Sarah didn’t answer as she hung up and stared at the small device in her hand. She rubbed her temple and the back of her neck. She had taken the risk, taken the chance on calling, and she had no idea what had just happened in that conversation. They really should have talked before she’d left, she should have just delayed her flight and gone to find Eli—wherever she had been—and forced her to have a conversation about what they wanted, what they needed. Instead, they had both willingly thrust themselves into this awkward tension.

Sarah finished everything she needed to do and grabbed her jacket and her guitar as she headed out the back way. Sure enough, for some strange reason, there were still a couple fans out back waiting for her. She signed autographs, took pictures, made nice, but as soon as she got into the bus, she was exhausted. Maybe she was getting too old to be out on tour for so long. Two weeks in and she was already complaining about how tired she was—that didn’t bode well for the rest of it. Putting her feet up, she closed her eyes and drifted off until morning.

* * *

Morning came way too early. She would have to talk to them about scheduling her an early morning show right after a big concert. She spent an hour warming up her voice and getting it ready to sing after such a late night.

When she got to the studio, she was ushered in with her guitar, learning last minute she'd be doing both songs all by herself—which wasn't a problem, it was just unexpected. Sarah sat down in the plush chair and smiled at the daytime show host. They'd done up her hair and makeup, as much as she begged them not to because whenever they did, she barely recognized herself.

"Today we are here with rising country music star, Sadie Bade. She's at the start of a tour for her newest album release, and you've probably heard her number one hit, which I believe, she'll be singing for us later."

"Thanks, Carrie. Yes, I will be singing it for you in a minute, along with another song I wrote just this past winter." Sarah gave a beaming grin like she was supposed to.

"Now, you write songs that are kind of out of the box. I hesitate to even call them country songs because you cross over multiple genres of music."

Sarah's heart thumped, her stomach a twisting ball of nerves. She'd gladly sing a concert any day instead of sitting there while being interviewed. Talking to people was not her strong suit, and with the conversation with Eli still fresh in her mind, it was a struggle to focus on anything.

"I do, I do. I really try to go where the music takes me, and I love all kinds of music, so that plays out when I write songs."

"That's right, because you write all of your own songs, don't you?"

"I do." Sarah grinned again, a flush rising to her cheeks.

“So what inspired you to write Now’s the Time?”

“I wrote this song probably a decade ago but trust me when I say it is not what it was then. It’s much different now. But it started that long ago for me when I was really struggling with finding a balance of life and family and friends. And to be honest, I still don’t have that balance down.”

“Who does?” Carrie giggled.

Sarah’s stomach pulled tighter. “For sure. Anyway, this song was a representation of those struggles that many of us face. I think that’s why so many people can relate to it. It’s not easy to live life, but we’ve still got to do it.”

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“A lot of your songs are visceral. They paint a picture of life in a very realistic kind of way which, in my opinion, isn’t often found in other music.”

“Right, right. I try to stay as true to the reality of the world as I see it as I can, and that includes the good, the bad, the muddled, the weird, and the random. Life is just kind of a mixed bag of jellybeans and you never know what flavor you’re going to get next.”

“Well, I do look forward to hearing this new song of yours, but before we get to that one, will you sing Now’s the Time?”

“Absolutely.”

Sarah stood up from the small red chair and moved over to the guitar stand and microphone. She wiped her sweaty palms on her jeans and closed her eyes, counting to herself. This was where she could excel. While interviews were not her passion, here she would be amazing. She could do this. Letting out the breath, Sarah strummed the guitar. Music and words flowed from her, rising to a high before going to a low and then back up again. She was hyper-focused on the music, ignoring the audience, ignoring the cameras, thinking only about her guitar and the notes she was singing.

When she finished, she set the guitar down. They went to a commercial break, and she sat back down across from Carrie. They chatted briefly before they were called back to the camera and went live again.

“That was a beautiful song. I don’t know how many times I’ve listened to it, but

every time I'm reminded of how fragile life is and how we're all walking on this journey together."

Sarah nodded. "Yeah, I had hoped when we decided to record it for this album that was the impact it would make."

"You're on tour right now."

"We just started our new tour. Our first concert was outside of Seattle and then Portland, and we've been down here the last two nights."

"Where do you go next?"

"Uh...I think Phoenix next. Arizona, I'm coming for you."

"I can't imagine how hard it is to balance life and everything when you're on tour. Does this song really help you deal with that in any way?"

Sarah's lips parted and she closed them sharply. Her initial response probably wouldn't have been the best answer, but she could weave in variants of it if she wanted. "It is hard. Like I said before, I think it's hard for anyone, but having a job that takes me away from home for months at a time is really hard. I miss things like my nieces' birthdays, best friends' weddings, all that stuff. My family are really understanding, though. They are truly beyond supportive of me and my career. It's amazing what they've done for me over the years. I couldn't have done it without them."

"It sounds like you have a wonderful family."

"Yeah, I do." Sarah wrinkled her nose. "My twin sister still gets annoyed when I miss our birthday, but she'll live. We shared them all growing up and she hated it, you'd

think she'd be happy to have her own day since she begged for it the first twenty years of our life."

Carrie laughed appropriately. "I didn't know you had a twin sister."

"But not identical, promise. So don't try looking for my doppelganger anywhere."

Smiling again, Carrie glanced at her notes. "You told me earlier that you were going to sing a new song for us."

"I wrote this song just a couple months ago, actually, but I performed it last night for the first time and thought I'd share it here as well."

"Well, let's hear it then."

Once more Sarah stood up and walked across the stage to the guitar and microphone. She wiped her palms on her jeans and let out a slow breath. She bobbed her head to the beat no one else could hear as the song she had written at Eli's came to life for everyone watching.

When she finished the song, her nerves worked overtime, and she couldn't quite figure out why. As they cut for commercial, Sarah took some deep breaths. Her handler came over with water and made her drink half of it before he led her to the chair and sat her back down. Eli wiped the palms of her hands against her jeans, surprised they were still sweaty. She only had a few more seconds to get a handle on herself, and she managed to pull the strings together enough to be presentable.

"That song, wow. Sadie, that song was amazing."

"Thank you." Heat rushed to her cheeks. "Really, thank you. I find it so hard to sing some songs for other people until I've done them about three million times."

“Why is that?”

“They’re so emotional for me. Every song is important, every lyric has so much meaning behind it. And until I work through my own life around that song, it’s very hard to sing it for other people, so thank you for being the guinea pig on this one.”

“No, thank you. It was amazing. What inspired it?”

Sarah paused. She was about to talk about Buddy. She had planned her speech about him, figured out exactly what she was going to say, how she’d fed him and taken care of him, but she stopped. Her voice left her. Her face felt clammy again, but she pushed through it, and gave a small smile.

“When I first wrote this song, I thought it was about a cow.”

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“A cow?”

“Yeah. I took a vacation to this small B&B called Indigo, and it’s amazing, really, if anyone gets a chance to go there, they need to go. But I went to this B&B, which is also on a working ranch, and I was there in the middle of calving season. Long story short, there was a calf who was born and needed to be bottle fed, and gosh, I fell head over heels in love with him. I named him Buddy.”

“Are you serious?”

“Dead serious.” Sarah laughed. “I know it sounds like a joke. I promise you, it’s not. When I started writing this song, I thought it was about this cow, but really, it’s not. It is about finding love in odd and strange places, usually when we least expect it. How love is playful, fun, but also a little scary.”

Carrie’s lips parted, and she had a sweet smile. “I...I in some ways hesitate to ask this, but is there more to that story?”

“Probably.” Sarah blushed. “There is more to the story, but I think you’ll have to wait for it to finish being written before I share it.”

“No doubt.” Carrie grinned. “And there you have it, folks, what I assume will be one of Sadie Bade’s newest hits come her next album.”

Sarah tuned out the rest of what Carrie said as she finished up explaining where to find out more on the tour and where to get Sarah’s music. As soon as they were off air, Sarah leaned forward and took Carrie’s hand. “Thank you again for having me

here today.”

“Any time. It’s an honor to meet you finally. I’ve watched your career for years.”

“Have you now?”

“Yes, and I really hope this story gets written how you want it to.”

“Me too.” Sarah gave her a quick smile before standing to collect her guitar. She had basically just outed Eli on national television along with their relationship, and she really hoped Eli wouldn’t be offended or upset.

When she got to the green room, she grabbed her phone and checked her messages. Her stomach sunk when she saw a text from Eli. Taking a breather, she opened it up, laughing when she saw a picture of Buddy with his tongue right up his nose. The message that followed stole the breath from her lungs.

“Beautiful song. Should probably finish it. You know where the key to the house is.”

Tears welled up into Sarah’s eyes, and she fell into the chair at a loss for words. She wanted to call Eli immediately, wanted to make the plans, change dates, run away to the middle of nowhere once again, but she couldn’t. She had responsibilities, she had a life, a career she had to think about. She wasn’t even sure how to respond.

Letting out a sigh, she typed the only word that came to mind. “Soon.”

“When?”

“Not soon enough.” Sarah jumped off the chair, ready to figure out when she could see Eli next.

Chapter 19

The plane seriously could not have gone any slower. Sarah knew it was stupid, but she could not stop bouncing from all the energy flowing through her body. She needed to be there already. It took her far too long to get the rental car, but at least this time, she didn't get lost on the drive up.

When Sarah pulled up to the house, she was thankful to see both of Eli's trucks parked at the house or the barn. The last text she'd gotten from her had told her what she needed to know. She'd be welcome any time, and as she'd struggled to find time to make it happen, she'd seen the golden opportunity of forty-eight hours and grabbed it. If only there were more options of flights into the tiny airport an hour and a half from Eli's house.

She'd left her guitar. It had been a cruel decision to make, but music was not her main goal. Grabbing her small carry-on bag, Sarah shut the door to the car and stalked straight up to the front door of the house. Walking right in, she drew in a deep breath and glanced around, hoping to catch sight of Eli nearby but knowing she was most likely either downstairs or in the barn.

"Eli!" Sarah called.

She started toward the kitchen and stopped short when she saw a rustling movement in the den. Furrowing her brow, she changed direction and walked that way. She stopped short at the middle-aged couple who stared back at her, somewhat frightened. The teenager who looked desperately bored on the chair with a phone in her hand glanced up and her face lit up.

"Oh my God!"

"Shit," Sarah muttered. Louder so they could hear her, she said, "Is Eli around?"

“Are you Sadie Bade?”

She really didn't want to answer that question. She only had thirty-four hours before she had to be back on the road to the airport, and she wanted all thirty-four hours to be spent with Eli even though she knew that was unlikely. “Yes. Is Eli around?”

“No freakin' way!”

“Sar...Sadie?” Eli's voice was a welcome interruption.

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Sarah spun around, a wide smile on her face as her gaze locked on Eli's shocked expression. "Sorry to just barge in."

"Can I get your autograph?"

Sarah turned over her shoulder. "Kid, I will give you whatever you want. Just give me an hour. Trust me, I'm not going anywhere anytime soon unless Eli has something to say about that."

"I...I don't."

"Good."

Sarah grabbed Eli's hand and dragged her toward the kitchen and down into the basement, making sure to shut and lock the door upstairs. She didn't wait, pressing Eli against the wall in the living area as soon as they were downstairs. Eli was just as feverish as she was. She had her hand in Eli's shirt, fingers against her breast as she trailed kisses up and down her neck.

Eli's voice broke through her silence. "W-when did you get here?"

"Just now." Sarah nipped at Eli's chin. "What do you want me to do?"

Whimpering, Eli drew in a sharp breath. "God, anything."

Sarah didn't hesitate. She pushed aside the two halves of Eli's shirt and feasted on the exposed skin, sucking the soft skin between her lips and scraping with her teeth to

leave marks. She wanted everything Eli was willing to give her, and she wanted to give everything in return.

“What are you doing here?”

Stopping, Sarah pulled back a little. “You said I could come.”

“I did, I know, but I just didn’t expect you.”

“I have thirty-four hours. Then I have to go back.”

“That’s it?”

“Got a concert.” Sarah’s chest heaved, and she wanted to know when she was going to be plastered against Eli again. She couldn’t get enough of her. “I’ll go make nice to your guests in a minute.”

“Forget about them.”

Sarah laughed. “Bedroom?”

“Yes.” Eli led the way, stripping her clothes as she went. Taking the hint, Sarah followed suit and by the time they got to Eli’s bed, they were nearly naked. They dropped everything, Sarah climbing over Eli’s body as she once again feasted on her skin, on her moans, on every move she made.

Sarah’s hand moved first, sliding against Eli in what she knew was the best pattern for the quickest release. She swirled the tip of her tongue against her nipple before drawing it all the way into her mouth. Eli gripped her hips tightly, holding on as her body shook with pleasure. Sarah’s chest pulled tight as she moved her mouth back toward Eli’s neck.

“Please tell me, love, that you touched yourself while thinking about me.”

Eli’s breath hitched. “Yes.”

Sarah rewarded her with a gentle kiss to her lips. “I thought of you, too. Two months is far too long.”

A cry ripped from Eli’s lips, and Sarah swallowed it up as she continued to bring her higher and higher. Finally, Eli tightened around her. Sarah eased up on the amount of pressure, on the speed of the sweep of her thumb. When Eli had her brains back together, she grinned up at Sarah and let out a laugh, the sound echoing in the tiny bedroom.

“Jesus, Sarah. You’re ridiculous.”

“Sorry?”

“You show up in my house and fuck me senseless in two seconds flat.”

Sarah smirked. “Did you just say fuck?”

“Yeah. You must be rubbing off on me.”

“Rubbing on you is more like it. Come on, up.” Sarah patted Eli’s leg. Once Eli had obliged, Sarah positioned herself perfectly so they would move against each other. She wasn’t going to need much, and she hoped Eli wouldn’t either because she really wanted to fall over that edge together or at least decently close.

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Eli couldn't form an answer as Sarah immediately rutted her hips, starting slow then picking up speed as her own pleasure coursed through her. She grunted, holding herself up by her fists into the mattress, trying her hardest to keep upright and hold off her own orgasm until Eli came again. Crashing their mouths together, Sarah palmed Eli's breast, squeezing and rolling a nipple between her fingertips.

Eli went first, and as soon as Sarah felt her tighten, she relaxed to let her body tumble over the edge. Breathing heavily, Sarah fell to her side and laughed as she pressed up into Eli's warm body. "I think we should do that more often."

"Definitely."

Sarah kissed Eli's cheek and turned her head slowly to kiss her lips. "I missed you."

Eli closed her eyes and pressed their foreheads together. "I wish you had told me you were coming. I could have warned you about the people staying here."

"It's not a problem."

"But it is. You don't want to be known."

"Eli, it's not a problem. You have a business to run. I'm not going to monopolize your time and have you lose business. I mean, I want to take all the time you have for the next thirty-three hours, but I'll take what I can get." Sarah skimmed a hand down Eli's side, finally resting it on her hip.

"I wish you'd told me you were coming."

“Eli, you said I knew where the keys to the house were. You don’t have keys to the house.” She propped her head up on her hand, elbow planted firmly in the mattress. “If you don’t want me here, tell me and I’ll leave. Trust me, I can go right back, but I’d much rather be here.”

“No, don’t go.”

Sarah flopped onto her back. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong.” Eli twisted, sliding her leg over Sarah’s. “Nothing at all. I just wish I’d known you were coming, so I could rearrange some things and take some time off, have someone else do some of my chores.”

“I want to make something very clear.” Sarah stared at the ceiling, knowing she had to say it, but not quite sure what words to use. In some ways, she wished she could sing it to Eli, but songs and lyrics weren’t always the best way to communicate.

Eli rested her head on Sarah’s shoulder and traced random designs on her belly. “What is it?”

“I’m not here for a quickie. I want more from this. I want you.”

“You have me.”

“No, I mean, I want a relationship.”

Eli tensed. Sarah had known, somewhere in the back of her mind, that this was not going to be an easy conversation, that the struggle of Sarah being gone well over half the time was going to be a big stumbling block. Hell, it had been in every relationship she’d had in the past fifteen years, but she had never wanted to be near someone like she did Eli. She’d never wanted to sacrifice to be with someone like she did with Eli.

“Please don’t—don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Eli’s tone had a bite to it.

Gnawing on her lip, Sarah sat up on the bed and rubbed her hands together. She should have called Kara first and asked her what the hell she was supposed to say so she wasn’t at such a loss for words. “Don’t turn away from me.”

She wrapped her arms around her knees and rested her chin on them. Eli stared at her from the bed, her braids still nearly perfect and flung out to each side of her. Any time they’d had sex before, Sarah had taken them out, but she hadn’t even thought about it this time. All she could do was get her hands on Eli, let her know how much she was wanted.

“I want a relationship. I will come here more often. I promise. It might be quick trips like this, which is going to be incredibly hard, but I want to make this work, Eli.” Tears swam in the corners of her eyes as fear and nerves reared their ugly heads in her stomach and in her chest. She didn’t know what she would do if Eli said no. She didn’t know what would happen if she was turned away.

Sarah held her breath as she waited for an answer, or any kind of response. When she got none, she shoved off the bed and grabbed the clothes she had in the room before stalking out to the living area to collect the rest of them. She had her pants on and was tugging her shirt over her head, her bra somewhere she couldn’t find when Eli emerged from the room, a throw blanket wrapped around her.

“I don’t see how it would work,” her voice was so soft.

Sarah let out a painful grunt as she scrounged around. “So what were all that texting and calls then? We’ve been talking for weeks now. I haven’t seen you in months, and you tell me to come here. You tell me to show up and that I’ll be welcome.”

“And you are always welcome here, Sarah.”

“As what?” Sarah’s voice rose, and she knew Eli was going to be embarrassed if the family upstairs heard their argument, but she couldn’t stop it, couldn’t hold back.

“What am I to you, Eli? Because you have never really shared that.”

Eli’s face remained blank, not that Sarah could read it anyway. Sarah shoved her bare feet into her boots and grabbed her jacket from the floor. Anger was the only emotion she could focus on because if she thought about the hurt, she would shatter into a million little pieces.

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“I need a walk.” She started up the stairs when Eli’s voice stopped her.

“Don’t go too far. We’re supposed to get a storm.”

“Wonderful.” Sarah stomped out of the basement and out of the house. As soon as the cold breeze hit her face and she was off the deck and down by the barn, she let the tears fall from her eyes. If this didn’t work, she didn’t know what would.

* * *

Eli wouldn’t say she hadn’t expected Sarah to bring up a more serious relationship, but she had hoped they could have an entire visit without it. She didn’t have an answer. She’d wanted more time to figure everything out, to find the balance neither of them had.

They were both consumed by work, her by the ranch and the farm, Sarah by music and touring and whatever she did with albums. Eli wasn’t even sure why they still called them that anymore. Defeat swarmed her. She sat down heavily on her bed, still naked with the blanket wrapped around her, still warm from Sarah’s body against her. Closing her eyes, Eli could still feel Sarah moving in her.

She wanted so much to have a relationship with her, to be with her, to live the dream they both seemed to have, but every time the moment came, she chickened out. The running assumption from her and from Bill—because who else was she going to talk to—was Bridget. But that really wasn’t why she was hesitating. Bridget was Bridget, and she’d figure that out no matter what happened, but Eli wasn’t holding off because of her.

No, she was holding off because she could not fathom how any of it would work. Sarah lived in Dallas. Her life and her world, everything was in Dallas. Eli had no idea how much time it took to record an album, but she suspected it was a lot. It wasn't just the tours and the concerts that would keep Sarah away from Indigo, it was her life, her career, everything that was her.

And everything that was Eli was at Indigo.

She didn't like to travel, she didn't want to go to far off places and see new things, she didn't want to lose her businesses, her cattle, her farm.

This was stupid. Eli sprung to her feet and shucked the blanket. She grabbed her clothes, dressing as quickly as she could. If she wasn't going to take a chance and see how it would work, then she was as bad as Bridget had been. She wouldn't lose out on having Sarah in her life because she was too stupid to take a risk.

By the time she reached the deck, the storm was far closer than she'd thought it'd be. Searching the grounds nearby for Sarah, she saw nothing. Eli stepped off the deck and into the brutal wind. Hunching against it, she took the winding path down to the barn.

The animals inside were restless, but that wasn't unusual with a storm brewing. Eli called out into the dark barn. "Sarah, you in here?"

When she didn't get an answer, Eli turned to head back out the door. She stopped short when Sarah stood directly in front of her. With a hand against her racing heart, Eli let out a breath.

"You scared the crap out of me."

"Sorry," Sarah answered. "I didn't mean to. I didn't want to get caught in the storm."

“We should head up to the house so we don’t.”

“Probably.”

Neither of them moved. Sarah looked tired, good and truly tired in a way she hadn’t seen since the night they’d first met. Building her gumption, Eli prepared herself to speak, but Sarah put a hand out to stop her.

“Don’t say it if you don’t mean it, Eli. I don’t want platitudes.”

“Would you shut up?”

Sarah raised a singular eyebrow.

“Thank you. You can’t just show up on my doorstep unannounced, fuck me senseless in two seconds flat, and expect my brain to keep up for this kind of conversation. Unlike you, Sarah, I don’t move at the speed of light. I take a much longer gander around the field before I decide where I’m going to graze.”

“What?” Sarah shook her head.

“I needed time to catch up with what you were even saying. You can’t tell me that we haven’t been going at whatever this is like we’ve jumped in the fast lane. Two months. I have literally known you two months, and of those two months, we have spent barely any time together.”

“I can’t—”

“Shush.” Eli put her hand up. “It’s my turn to talk.”

Sarah conceded again.

Shoving her hands into her pockets, Eli stared Sarah down. “Why did you come here?”

“I wanted to see you.”

“Only to see me?”

“Well, and to have this talk, because I really didn’t want to have it over the phone or by text. And I needed to see you, Eli. I need you.”

Eli stepped closer to Sarah, gripping her fingers and squeezing lightly. “I want a relationship with you, but I’m struggling a whole lot with the logistics of how we’re going to even attempt to make it work. You know I don’t travel.”

“I know. I know.” Sarah stepped in. “I told you, I’ll do it. I’ll find time and days off, and I’ll come out here even if it is only one or two days here and there. We have built in breaks for everyone, and I’ll come then, too. I want this to work, Eli, and I’m going to put in as much effort as I can to make that happen.”

Eli nodded in the slightest. “I know you will. I trust you will. I just worry. I worry it won’t be enough, I worry you’ll get burned out and tired, and I worry it won’t be worth it for you.”

Sarah stepped straight up to her, wrapping her arms around Eli’s shoulders and tugging her in for a hug. She dropped kisses onto Eli’s cheeks, rubbing her hands up and down her shoulders and her arms. “You are so very much worth it, don’t ever doubt that.”

Eli nodded, moving to draw Sarah deeper into the embrace and holding her arms tight around Sarah’s hips. She buried her face in Sarah’s neck, drawing in her scent, memorizing it. Slowly letting out a breath that hitched with unshed tears, Eli cupped Sarah’s cheek and brought her in for a kiss.

“So let’s figure this out,” Sarah whispered.

“Yes, but first let’s get to the house.”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

Eli took Sarah by the hand and dragged her outside. Raindrops were already falling, the wind whipping them hard against their faces. Eli dragged Sarah up the trail toward the house, the rain dumping on them when they were no more than four steps from the deck. As soon as they got under the porch, Eli shivered and Sarah wrapped her arms around her, bringing their mouths together in a long, slow kiss.

“How many hours am I down to now?” Eli whispered.

“Thirty-two.”

“We better make the most of them.”

“Sounds like we agree.”

When Eli pulled away, she had a wicked glint to her eye. Kissing Sarah’s cheek, she pinched her butt. “Guess that means you’re making dinner.”

Sarah rolled her eyes and tangled their fingers together. “Only if you help.”

They headed inside, Sarah and Eli cooking while the family’s daughter asked Sarah all kinds of questions about her life, some pointed and boundary pressing while others were far more benign. Eli was impressed with how Sarah deflected most of them, but when the girl asked if Eli was the one the song was written about, no one could mistake the blush in Sarah’s cheeks as she admitted yes.

Their hours dwindled fast, but Sarah and Eli made the most of them. When Eli watched the rental drive off, they had a plan in place for when Sarah would come back, how often she would visit, and how long she would stay. They were going to try, and Eli supposed it was more important that they were both willing to sacrifice to make it work.

Chapter 20

Eli picked Sarah up at the airport this time, wanting the extra three hours together they could get from the drive, but as soon as Sarah emerged from the airport, Eli knew it was going to be quiet. Months of Sarah flying back and forth at every opportunity was certainly taking its toll.

Every time Sarah had come, she'd seemed more and more exhausted, she had slept more and more, and she'd been lazier. Not that Eli minded. She rather enjoyed lying around with Sarah at every opportunity. Summer was coming to a close, and this was Eli's easiest time except that auctions would be picking up soon, and she'd be traveling to other parts of the state to sell the cattle she had raised.

Sarah was supposed to be done with touring by that time, but they hadn't really talked about what they'd be doing or if Sarah would be coming with her. Eli had no idea. As soon as she pulled out onto the highway, Sarah yawned.

"I slept on the plane. I swear I did."

"Sleep on the drive. It's fine." Eli gave her a wan smile. Reaching over she ran her hand up and down Sarah's arm to comfort and soothe her.

Hiding her yawn behind her hand, Sarah's eyes watered. "No, I want to spend time with you. And sleeping time does not count as time, before you say anything."

“I didn’t say it.” Eli’s lips tugged upward.

“You were thinking it.”

“You didn’t say I couldn’t think it.” Teasing, Eli grabbed Sarah’s hand and tugged slightly. “Sleep though. Then we can do other things later.”

“You make a good point.” Sarah yawned again. “I’m so sorry.”

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“Sarah, please—rest, sleep, whatever. We can talk and spend time together when we get home.”

Her heart clenched. There was no way Sarah had seen her own apartment in Dallas the entire time she’d been on tour. She’d spent more time with Eli than she did anywhere else, and yet for some reason, the word home where it concerned Sarah seemed almost perfect.

Sarah leaned in and kissed Eli’s cheek before she curled into the door and closed her eyes. Eli turned the music down on the radio, and waited patiently for Sarah to fall asleep, which didn’t take long. As she drove toward the house, she couldn’t help but wonder what their relationship would look like after Sarah’s tour was over. Surely she’d have something else to do, like recording a new album or setting up another tour.

They had talked every day, usually multiple times a day while Sarah was gone. Every conversation had ended with the topic of when they would see each other next. The soft sound of Sarah’s breathing was a comfort, but she was still concerned with how truly exhausted Sarah looked. She wasn’t even sure if Sarah recognized it.

Her truck hit a bump as she moved through the backroads, going from one highway to the next in a quicker, more efficient route. She’d taught Sarah that route about the third time she’d come back to visit. It cut off about ten minutes of driving time, which wasn’t much in the scheme of things.

As her own business had ramped up at the B&B over the summer months like it always did, Eli had known it would be harder finding time for Sarah when she did

come to visit. She was still curious what would happen at the end of Sarah's tour, which they still hadn't talked about.

Eli focused on the drive. As soon as she pulled up outside the house, she leaned over and shook Sarah awake. She was met with sleepy eyes, flushed cheeks, and a confused stare until Sarah's brain caught up with her body.

"We there?"

"Yeah." Eli brushed her fingers over Sarah's cheek before she pushed herself to sit up more. "Feel better?"

"A little."

That meant "not much." She could see it—the weariness, the exhaustion, the struggle to keep up with all the traveling and the plane rides. Sarah hadn't good and truly taken a break since those first two weeks when they'd met.

Eli grabbed Sarah's carry-on bag and walked hand-in-hand with her into the house. Opening the door, she dragged Sarah down to the basement and rolled into bed with her after dropping her bag onto the floor by the door. Sarah had brought a guitar with her the second time she came around, and just left it in the den for whenever she wanted to use it, but even the last few times she'd come she hadn't dared pick it up.

Leaning into the headboard, Eli let Sarah snuggle into her side and fall back asleep. She smoothed her hands over her hair and back, letting her fingers slide as gently as she could. She had to do something different. They both did. There was no way Sarah could keep up that amount of travel without a break. They needed to find a better way to make it work, and Eli was pretty sure she knew the solution, as much as she didn't want to admit it.

After an hour, Eli slipped from the bed and went upstairs to make her current guests dinner, having decided to add that option since Sarah had sent her foolproof recipes. She slipped the casserole dish into the oven before she headed out to the barn to check on everything there. She was going to have to do a roundup of her cattle soon and take them to auction. She filled out paperwork, got everything organized, and figured out what week she was going to be gone. Rubbing her lips together, she sighed.

Inside the house at her desk, Eli went through her guest registrations, finding the one week without anyone booked. Immediately, she blocked it so no one could reserve a room from her. It was time for her to take the next step. Picking up the landline, Eli called the one person she knew could help.

He answered on the second ring. “Hey, baby.”

“Hey Daddy.” Her heart melted. His deep, sweet tones always soothed her nerves. “How’s everything going in Arizona?”

“Wonderfully. Your mom’s just out walking the dog.”

“Ah.” Eli’s nerves strained. She wasn’t even sure what to say to him or how to ask him for help. She hadn’t really talked with him much about Sarah, which was odd for her. Normally every girlfriend she’d had that had meant anything, she’d been all about sharing with him, but for some reason, she’d wanted to keep Sarah to herself, to revel in the relationship they were building before bringing anyone else in and spoiling their little world.

“How’s the ranch?”

“Good. Getting ready to go to auction in a couple weeks. Bill said he’d help me do the roundup.”

“He loves a good cattle drive.”

A smile lit on Eli’s lips, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Yeah, he does. Do you and mom have plans for the coming month?”

“No. We weren’t going to visit anyone until the start of fall. You know summers. We try to lay low while everyone else travels.”

“Yeah. Do you think...would you mind coming up here for a week or two?”

“In the summer? Isn’t the house pretty full during the summer?”

Eli’s heart raced, beating rapidly. “I blocked off a week.”

“When?”

“Second week of September.”

There was a pregnant pause on the other end of the line. “Why?”

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“I want to take a trip.”

Her dad sighed heavily. Eli bounced her heel on the floor. She should probably just have called her mom and asked that way. She’d understand more, maybe—hopefully.

“I just...remember me telling you about Sarah?”

“Yeah. Is it serious?”

“Yes.” The word left Eli’s lips before she really had formed an answer. It was. She wasn’t lying. Everything in her world had shifted since she’d met Sarah, since they’d taken the final barrier down and started their odd little relationship. “I want to go visit her.”

“Where does she live again?”

“Uh...Dallas. But she won’t be in Dallas.”

“What?”

She realized far too late she hadn’t fully explained who Sarah was. Eli picked up a pen from her desk and fiddled with it. “Sarah is Sadie Bade, you know, the singer.”

“You’re dating a musician?”

“Uh...yeah. Anyway, she’s on tour right now. And I was hoping to take a trip for the last week of her tour and stay with her instead of having her come here. She’s getting

really tired with all of it—not that she’d admit it because she’s stubborn like that and made the commitment so she’ll come here if she thinks that’s what needs to happen—but I have to give a little too, you know?”

“I know.” The tender tone in his voice took her by surprise.

Eli narrowed her gaze as she stared at the computer. “What do you mean ‘I know?’”

“Why do you think I’m in Arizona, Elijah? It’s not because I like living in the desert, I can assure you that.”

Eli had never really thought of that. Her parents had always talked about selling or passing on the farm at some point when she was a kid and moving to a bigger city where there were more things to do and people to see—and warmer weather. It had never occurred to her that it had been some sort of compromise.

“When do you want us to come?”

“Whenever you can? I’ve got auction in a couple weeks, after that it’s just the usual stuff, and I closed out booking for the B&B so you wouldn’t have to deal with that.”

“Open it back up.”

“What?”

“Elijah, I love you. And if you really think this girl is the one, that she is worth it, Mom and I will help you figure out how to make it work. It’s not going to be easy. No relationship ever is. We’ve always talked about finding ways to help you three make everything work for the best, supporting you in whatever you needed. If this is what you need, then we’ll be there.”

“Really?” Her eyes budded with tears.

“Yes. Besides, Bill tells me this girl has completely stolen all your attention and you keep letting Cassie get the best of you.”

Eli snorted and wiped the back of her hand under her eyes. “I fixed the damn fence.”

“Well, I’ll have to see for myself if that’s true.”

“You do that.”

“I plan on it. Text Mom the dates, and we’ll book a flight up to see you and watch over the place for a bit.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Anytime, baby.”

“I love you.”

“Love you, too. See you soon.”

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After hanging up, Eli stared at her phone and smiled as warmth burst in her chest. Finishing the rest of her travel plans and figuring out where Sarah was going to be when, Eli purchased plane tickets and a concert ticket. She decided last minute to keep everything a secret, hoping to surprise Sarah with the risk and commitment she had made.

* * *

It had been three weeks since she'd seen Sarah last, and Sarah had pretty much slept the entire time she'd been at the house. While Eli had enjoyed the time with her, she knew Sarah couldn't sustain that amount of busyness for much longer. Surprising her on her last week of shows would be the perfect way to end the tour.

The concert had gone wonderfully well. Eli had sat near the back having to buy cheap last-minute tickets, but it had all been worth it. She would have enjoyed attending the concert with someone else, perhaps her friends or even Sarah's friend, Kara, who she talked about often, but since she hadn't made any of those plans, she'd kept to herself.

As the concert ended, people gathered up their stuff and left the building. Eli knew, from stories her friends had told and from what Sarah had said, that often people would wait out back by the tour bus to get autographs and pictures with her. Eli checked her phone to see if Sarah had texted her, but she hadn't, not yet. She expected she would soon, she usually did as soon as she had a moment when her concerts were over and then she'd be up literally all night running on the adrenaline that came from it.

Smiling to herself, Eli waited until the crowd died down before she headed toward the back of the small theater to see where the tour bus and the rest of the line were. Sure enough, there was a group of about two hundred people waiting outside.

Tugging her jacket a little closer around herself as the night brought a slight chill to the air, Eli pushed as close to the front of the line as she could. A rope was hung, barricading people from getting any closer, which would give Sarah ample space to move and leave if she chose to do so.

The text came almost immediately after Eli got to the rope. She was closest to the bus, could almost touch it if she wanted to. Two security guards stood, one by the door and one by the bus. Eli couldn't imagine living this way, or traveling this way, though she supposed the guards were only there for moments like this.

She didn't send Sarah a text back since she was supposed to be sleeping in her own bed halfway across the country and Sarah would in no way expect her to answer before morning when she would text back and not expect a response until much closer to noon.

Another hour passed before the back doors opened. Some in the crowd had left, giving up on waiting for Sadie Bade to emerge, but Eli held strong, knowing this was about to be the biggest reveal, the biggest outing of herself she'd ever done.

Sarah started on the far end, signing whatever people had brought and taking quick pictures with them. Eli's toes curled in anticipation, wanting Sarah to look over at her and see her standing there, wanting to call out to her and make some sort of scene, grab her attention, but she wouldn't. Sarah loved her fans, loved giving them that face-to-face time when she could and building those relationships, so Eli hung back and let Sarah work her way toward her.

By the time she got halfway through the crowd, Eli's stomach was a mess. Her

shoulders were so tense, she was pretty sure it'd take all week for the knots to come undone. Sarah turned to grab a CD from someone, and she stopped short. Their eyes locked. Sarah's dark brown ones widened in shock as she hastily signed the CD and shoved it into the waiting fan's hand.

Immediately she ran over to Eli, stepping over the rope and launching herself into Eli's waiting arms, their mouths pressed together in a heated embrace. People snapped photos, but Eli couldn't even think about it as the crowd around them cheered. When Sarah pulled away, she punched Eli lightly on the arm and laughed.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Thought I'd give you a break from traveling."

Laughing, Sarah grabbed Eli's hand and dragged her to the other side of the rope line. She kissed Eli's cheek again and grinned at her. "I'm shocked you're here."

"I wanted to surprise you."

"Well, you succeeded."

Eli squeezed Sarah's fingers tightly. "Go do what you need to do. I've got all week."

"The whole week?"

"Yup."

"You sneaky son of a bitch." Sarah planted a loud kiss on Eli's lips before turning to finish with her fans.

Eli tried to step away from everyone, but she wasn't sure where to go. She didn't

know if she'd be allowed on the bus or if that was where Sarah wanted her to go or what. She stood awkwardly to the side and let Sarah be the Sadie everyone knew and loved.

It was unexpected when Sarah grabbed her hand and dragged her inside the bus, spinning around and putting her hands on her hips. "How did you get away?"

"I called my dad."

"And he came for the whole week?"

"Two weeks. Him and my mom."

"So I have you for a whole week?"

"Yes, but you're going to have to tell me what to do because I'm already lost."

Sarah laughed, her voice sending a thrill through Eli's body, and she stepped in close, wrapping her arms around Sarah's back and pulling her in for a hug. Sarah felt wonderful in her arms, warm, full of energy and excitement. She fit, which was something Eli wasn't sure she had ever experienced before.

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Sarah pressed a kiss to Eli's neck, then her cheek, before she smiled. "Just so you know, I'm not the only one who gets on the bus."

"I remember."

"So we only have a few minutes before everyone else joins us."

Eli nodded. "I figured. Are you leaving tonight for somewhere new?"

"No. Hotel."

"Good." Eli nuzzled her nose against Sarah's ear. "Because I don't have a room."

Chuckling, Sarah dashed her fingers under Eli's shirt. "When did you get here?"

"Last night."

"You're shitting me."

"No." Eli smirked. "It was late, though. I did get a room last night, but then I explored a bit before going to the concert. I figured you'd be busy."

"God, I love you."

Eli's tensed but then relaxed. She'd known it all along. Everything about Sarah had been different from everyone else she had been with. Leaning in, Eli pressed her mouth to Sarah's, tangling their tongues as she dipped her hands into her hair and

held tight.

When they finally parted, Eli grinned. “I’m not leaving my ranch.”

Sarah snorted. “No, I know that. I’d never expect you to. I know you love your ranch more than you love me.”

“Not more, Sarah. Just longer.”

Sarah’s lips thinned into a line and her eyes narrowed as she worked through what Eli had said. “Did you just say what I think you said or am I imagining things?”

“Never imagining things.” Eli grabbed Sarah’s ass and pulled her in again. “I do love you.”

“Oh good. And here I thought I was the only one.”

“Never.” Their lips brushed again just as the doors to the bus opened.

While Eli tried to move away, Sarah pulled her in even more, giving her a long, deep kiss. When they parted, Eli gave her a funny look as she spun around, gripping Eli’s hand behind her back. She grinned at the other band members. “Guys, this is Eli.”

They all said “Hey.” Eli was struck speechless until Sarah tugged on her arm.

“She’s staying the week.”

“Good. Then maybe you’ll shut up about her.”

Sarah laughed wholeheartedly. “Unlikely.”

She turned again and pressed a kiss to Eli’s cheek. “You’ll get used to it.”

“I will, but only for you.”

“I know. And thank you, Eli. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”