



Last Chance for Her Rancher Boss

Author: *Holly Rayner*

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Description: They were best friends once, then it all blew apart, Ten years on, could this be the new start they both need?

Burned by young love that wasn't returned, Meg Whitmore left her small Wyoming town and never looked back. That is, until a new assignment has her retreading old ground, and her new boss turns out to be the one guy she hoped not to run into...

Nash Callahan has had a long time to regret letting Meg get away. Now she's back, and his future depends on working with the woman who clearly hates his guts. Meg does her best to put her feelings aside and be professional, but it's clear that the years have done nothing to diminish the effect her former best friend has on her... Soon the ice between them begins to thaw, and it becomes clear that the one-time class clown has found something he excels at. And selling the ranch isn't a choice he's arrived at lightly, but one that's eating him up inside.

So much for ignoring Nash, Meg finds herself instigating a last-ditch effort to turn his fortunes around.

They can join forces to save the ranch, but can they ever find their way back to each other?

Total Pages (Source): 53

CHAPTER 1

MEG

Meg's schedule ran like clockwork, though that schedule was mostly out of her control, either planned out by teachers or her parents. Mostly her parents. Mostly her mother. Her dad as well, but yeah, her mom had the biggest say in how her days ran. But at night, Meg was finally free. Her parents were always asleep by eleven at the latest, and a nuclear bomb could go off next door and they wouldn't even stir. It made sneaking out almost too easy. Honestly she could just walk straight out the front door, but climbing backwards out the window was way more fun. And she needed all the fun she could get right now.

After shimmying out the window, which was made a little less exciting because it was on the first floor, she set off on her usual route. Walking the streets of Fordswell, alone and in the dark, refreshed her inside and out. The cool breeze tugged at her auburn ponytail as she strode along the sidewalk to Nash's house. Fordswell was a small town, and without any street lights out in the suburbs, not on the edges where she lived anyway, it was so dark out that she couldn't even see the freckles that covered every inch of her skin. On the nights when the moon was shining, everything would be painted in monochrome, glowing silver. She felt like a ghost, like she was invisible, and it was a delicious feeling. It made her feel free.

Nash's house was only a few blocks away, and she knew the way by heart. Walking there in the dark was no problem; she could have walked there with her eyes closed. She knew how to open his garden gate so that the hinges didn't squeak, and she knew exactly how many steps it was to the base of the tree that took up most of the yard.

Twelve. There were nine rungs on the rope ladder that led up to the treehouse, where they met at least a few times a week. Meg had climbed the ladder so many times that the wobbling and swaying of it hadn't frightened her in years. She climbed, muscle memory taking over, towards the faint orange glow that was leaking from the treehouse.

Nash was in there, ready and waiting, keeping himself occupied with one of his handheld video games. He looked like a giant crammed into the little tree house, his dark hair in his eyes and his long limbs all tangled up. But as soon as Meg's head popped through the hole in the floor, he set the game aside with a grin.

"You look like a gopher," he said.

"You say that, like, every time," she puffed, crawling over.

"It's true every time."

Meg tutted and pulled herself into the cramped space. The treehouse had been made for Nash and his brother when they were little, designed for children's dimensions. It wasn't exactly made with two lanky teenagers and all their limbs in mind. Meg tucked herself into her usual corner while Nash leaned against the opposite wall, knees pulled up to his chest to give her space to sit.

They'd been friends for years, gravitating towards each other in middle school. At first it had been a friendship of convenience, of solidarity, the sort made in schools and workplaces all over the place. They weren't exactly social outcasts, not really. But it wasn't like people flocked to be either of their friends. Meg was the studious, A-grade student, forever with her nose in a book or practicing test papers in the library. She was the one with the strict parents and no room for a social life, even if anyone was interested in being her friend. Nash was the class clown, the guy who didn't take anything seriously. He mostly bummed around during class and shrugged

when anyone asked him anything about his plans for the future. Apparently having way too much focus on the future was just as unappealing in a friendship as having none at all.

So they'd started sitting next to each other in class. They paired up as partners when needed and joined forces for group projects. Meg was able to take control of the assignments, bowing to the immense pressure her parents put on her to be a straight-A student, and Nash would do as she asked, going with the flow as always, benefiting from the grades that he shared with her. In return he was a beacon of light in Meg's life. He made her laugh one minute and reminded her to breathe the next. He was a normal friend, a taste of life outside of studying and grades and college applications. He was the best thing in her life.

So the friendship might have started out because they just happened to be in the same classroom, but now, right at the tail end of senior year, Meg couldn't imagine her life without Nash in it. And they were just friends. That was all. She definitely didn't have a crush on him. Nope. Not one bit. And she was going to keep telling herself that; she needed Nash's friendship way too much to throw it away attempting to transform it into anything else.

Besides, she wasn't here to think about stupid feelings that probably weren't even real in the first place. Meg was here because she was desperate to talk and for someone to actually listen.

"She's driving me insane." Meg sighed, launching straight into what she needed to say. "They both are."

Nash gave her a sympathetic half-smile. He didn't need any context. He knew very well how overbearing her parents were. "It's almost over. Just a few more weeks and high school is done forever."

“Yeah, and then college begins,” she said, rubbing her temples like someone two decades older.

“Yeah. And it will be totally different than high school. You’ll only be studying vet stuff. So you’ll be loving every minute of it.”

“I just wish these stupid applications would come back already,” Meg said, not really caring about how whiny she sounded. Talking with Nash was the only time she was able to sound whiny and get away with it. And even then, Nash had said to her on multiple occasions that she wasn’t being whiny at all. She was just expressing her feelings, like how people were supposed to.

“You’ll get into all of them,” Nash said confidently as if it were that simple. Her parents seemed to think the same thing — a rare moment for them to have the same opinion as Nash.

At least she hadn’t had to fight her parents on what she wanted to study, just so long as she studied as hard as physically possible. Veterinary medicine was an acceptable career path. At the end of the day, it was still medicine, and it still paid well. Meg was just grateful she’d never had the desire to be an artist or a musician. Her life now might be difficult, but if she’d been born with a creative streak, it would have been impossible.

“You’re lucky,” she said, aware that she was still definitely sulking and not caring one bit. Nash shrugged again, not a care in the world. “What’s it like to have no expectations heaped on you from birth?”

“Can you seriously imagine me in college?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” She scrunched her face as she thought about his question. “Maybe not in any actual classes, but hanging around the campus? Sure. There are parties at

college, aren't there? I can imagine you at those."

"Very funny."

"If I go to Texas, you could come in my suitcase or something. Live under my bed."

"Yeah. That'll be comfy," he drawled. "You can sneak me pizza and soda. I'll be like the dorm room pet. That definitely won't get either of us arrested or anything."

He chuckled, amused. Meg managed a small smile.

"I could just go to the local college," she said, floating the idea out loud. She'd been wanting more and more to just stay here if she was able to but hadn't actually said anything about it to anyone until right this second.

But Nash frowned. "You're too good for the local college. If you get into the one in Texas, then you should take that one."

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“Hmm,” Meg hummed. She wasn’t so sure. One of the major pros was that she would be three states away from Wyoming, which meant being free of her parents for the first time. There was freedom within reach with that option. The major con was also that it was three states away... and she would be separated from Nash, unable to just climb up into his treehouse whenever she needed to. Meg honestly didn’t know if she could handle that. Having their friendship change that drastically all at once would be rough... even though they were just friends.

“Whatever,” she said, brushing off her jeans. “I might not even get into Texas.”

Nash rolled his eyes. “You will get into Texas. No matter what happens, you’ll get where you’re going, wherever you’re meant to be, that is. I mean, that’s my philosophy. What’s the point in stressing about all these ‘what-ifs’? You just gotta let life happen, you know?”

“What if I want to stay...” she said. Voicing her wants was not something that Meg had ever found easy. Especially when Nash was screwing up his face in confusion at her.

“Why?” he asked, as if that was ridiculous. She had made it well known that she was applying to local colleges for veterinary medicine. But everybody seemed to think she did it as a joke.

“Well, maybe I’ll stay for you,” she said, attempting fragile honesty. “You’ll be lonely here.”

He kept his face screwed up at her like she’d just held up a dead raccoon or

something equally gross.

“Don’t make decisions about your whole life based on whether or not I’m going to be lonely, Meg. That’s just dumb. Don’t live for your parents either. You’ve got to do what you want.”

After finishing his personal philosophy lesson, he shrugged as if it all really were that easy. Meg wished it was. She also desperately wanted to talk about anything other than college right now.

“Have you even bothered asking anyone to prom?” Meg asked, trying to sound as casual as possible. She had been trying to pretend like she didn’t care about prom. But she cared quite a lot, really. And it was getting harder and harder to keep pretending otherwise.

“Nah,” Nash said, nonchalant as ever. “As if anyone would go with me.”

Meg decided to be brave and bit the bullet on the question she’d been dying to ask him for weeks now.

“We could go together?”

Nash looked at her and registered what she said. Then his eyes lit up, and he smiled. Meg’s heart soared. In fact, her whole body felt like it was flying. Flying and floating all at once, a big, fat smile ready to split her face in two.

“Oh my God, yeah!” Nash said, excited, and Meg could feel her knees go jittery that he was actually saying yes.

“We can go as friends,” he added. “I’m so dumb I never even thought of that.”

Meg's spirits came crashing back to earth with enough force to shake her inside and out. She was absolutely determined to keep smiling. Because she wasn't in love with him. Not one bit.

"Yeah, it'll be, like, so much easier, you know? We can go together, and it'll be fun. Prom's just a party at the end of the day."

Nash sighed, content and happy.

"Done and done," he said. "We can go as friends and have a good time and not worry about all the dating politics everyone else is tying themselves in knots over."

"Yeah. Exactly."

Her smile faltered for just a second, not even that, half a breath. But Nash seemed to notice, because he noticed things like that about her.

"Meg?" he asked. "Just as friends, right?"

"Right," she said. Because she wasn't about to completely destroy this friendship over a stupid crush that wasn't at all important and couldn't possibly be reciprocated by the crush. "Just friends."

Meg got up at seven, as always, and ate breakfast at the kitchen table. Routine was important to her parents, and so was a healthy breakfast. Her dad, Vic, was reading his paper. Rebecca, Meg's mom, was buttering a piece of toast with fierce precision. There had been an awkward atmosphere between them during mealtimes. As Meg's senior year was winding to a close, they couldn't exactly say "Go and study some more." Nothing she did now grade-wise would affect her acceptance into college. There was nothing to study for. There was nothing to be late to, nothing to work hard towards. There was a void in Meg's life and, for the first time ever, blank spaces in

her schedule. It seemed to be screwing with her parents way more than it was affecting her.

Conversation had been snappy at best between them over the last few months. And now that Meg was realizing that she was no longer just their kid under their roof and she could make decisions for herself, it was becoming unbearable.

“Still no sign of any responses?” Rebecca asked her, as if Meg would pluck acceptance letters out of thin air.

“It’s like, seven thirty on a Monday, Mom,” she said. “No. There have been no responses.”

Her mom clearly didn’t appreciate the tone, but Vic, who had become a surprising peacekeeper lately, ruffled his newspaper in a soothing gesture. Rebecca tutted but said nothing else.

“Any plans, then?” he asked, genial. “You have all of this free time now.”

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“She could always be looking into college preparation courses?—”

“Me and Nash are going to go to prom together,” Meg said, interrupting her mom. “As friends.” She tacked the last bit on quickly, not wanting her parents to get the wrong idea.

Her mom’s eyebrows twitched a bit at that. Her lips pursed just a fraction. Meg instantly geared up for a fight, and she was sure her own face bore the warning signs: a frown and narrowed eyes. A list of arguments sprang forward immediately, ready to be let loose.

She was going to prom. End of discussion.

Going to a high school party wasn’t going to retroactively ruin her perfect GPA.

Did her mom think going to prom meant that Meg would suddenly lose her mind and start doing drugs behind the schoolgym? That she’d quit everything and run away to a big city and end up homeless?

She wasgoingto prom. She just wanted to wear a pretty dress and dance, eat snacks and hang out with Nash. She just wanted a moment to breathe.

They’d already had this discussion five times. Having it a sixth time wasn’t going to change anything because she wasgoing to prom.

She already had the dress, for crying out loud.

And if she hadn't mentioned it enough already... She was going to prom.

There was a moment of taut silence, like a tightrope stretched out between them, both of them preparing for a battle they'd already had.

Then Vic snapped the tension with a prim shake of his newspaper. "Sounds like a good idea, honey," he said, with a pointed glance at his wife. "As long as you have your phone with you. We're still dropping you off. However, Nash is welcome to drive you home. As long as you text, I see no problem with that. Right, Rebecca?"

Rebecca's lips reversed position, going from a purse to a thin line. She said nothing, just tutted and continued fiddling with her breakfast instead of actually eating it.

All of the tension left Meg's body at once, leaving her feeling like jelly. While her mom ignored them both, she gave her dad a grateful smile. He gave her a nod before shaking out his newspaper and returning to his reading, leaving Meg to finish her breakfast in peace.

Time was behaving oddly. High school was coming to an end and Meg was handing in final assignments, feeling a little lost with no more essays to research or write. Prom was speeding towards them at a ridiculous pace, her blue dress hanging in her closet, waiting patiently. The days ticked by at an alarming rate, her usual routine gone, everyone excited for the end of the school year, for summer break, for prom of course. Meg felt a bit like she was floating.

And Nash had been acting... strange. Well, not strange exactly. It was like he was just focused on Meg more than usual. Like he was looking out for her or taking care of her. Checking in at random times to see if she was okay, or if she wanted to hang out, or if her parents were being unbearable again. If it had been anyone else, she might have started wondering if he had a crush on her... But maybe that was just wishful thinking on her part.

It was getting harder and harder for Meg to convince herself that she thought of Nash as just a friend. Her heart sank whenever she couldn't hang out with him. It soared when she received a text. When they were together, she was deliriously happy, and when they were apart, her thoughts always found their way back to him. Meg could keep Nash in the dark about her feelings, but she could no longer delude herself. Saying they were just friends wasn't going to cut it anymore.

So she walked through her front door on Tuesday afternoon, feeling pretty aimless and confused about life in general. There was nothing left to study for, so what was she supposed to do with a full afternoon of free time? She could go hang out with Nash; that was usually what she would do. But his brother had gotten an award from the track team, so their family was going out to dinner. When Meg opened the front door, she let out a little yelp because her parents were standing right there in the entryway, grinning like idiots.

"You good?" she asked, a hand to her chest. "Have I walked into a horror film or something? Are you actually my parents or have you been possessed by smiling ghouls?"

Rebecca's grin dropped and she rolled her eyes at Meg's dramatics, but Vic just kept grinning, rocking on his heels.

"We have mail for you," he said. Meg's stomach dropped.

Three envelopes were held out to her, and she tore through them in record time. Meg was left slightly numb with shock when all of them were acceptances, including the college three states away.

"Well, that makes that decision easy then," Rebecca said, clapping her hands together with a pleased look on her face. "Living in Texas, won't that be exciting, Meggy?"

Meg felt herself bristle, and her dad noticed too, holding a hand out to her like she might bite.

“It’s up to Meg,” he said. “It needs to be an informed decision,” he added, giving Meg a look. “You need to look at the curriculums and compare which one is going to be the best, what career avenues they have and whatnot. But Meg needs some time to think through it.”

There her mom went pursing her lips again as if the fate of the world hinged on Meg going to the most prestigious school.

“A fancy name doesn’t mean better opportunities,” Meg said, trying and failing to keep the tartness out of her voice.

“In an ideal world, no,” her mom said, folding her arms. “But we live in this world.”

“That’s enough,” her dad said, gentle but firm. “This is a celebration. And Meg has a lot to think about now, don’t you?”

He gave her another look, one that read head to your room so I can talk to your mother. Meg was happy to comply. She’d always seen her parents as one unified being. But towards the end of high school, when things had been verging on maybe just too much to deal with, her dad had become a surprising ally, a voice of reason and a buffer between Meg and her mom. So she took his allyship without complaint and ran off to her bedroom, where even her mom didn’t dare invade.

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In the safety of her room, she certainly did have a lot to think about, weighing the pros and cons of each college, the three letters laid out on the bed in front of her. Though the deciding factor had nothing to do with classes or career opportunities. If Meg was being honest with herself, it all came down to the flutter her heart made whenever she thought of Nash.

Staying local meant staying near Nash.

Moving three states away meant... well, it meant being three states away from Nash. Could she actually cope with that? He'd been her lifeline for so long, her best friend who she no longer thought of as just a best friend, no matter how much she wanted to deny it. He'd kept her sane these last two years, reminding her that there was more to the world than books and grades and pushy parents.

When she thought of moving away to the fancy college with all of the accolades, she had to seriously think about how she was ever going to do it without him. Staying here meant she had access to that lifeline, to his smile, to his carefree attitude that always felt like a fresh breeze on a hot day. Leaving would feel like losing a piece of herself.

She texted Nash, at a loss for what else to do.

I got into all three! Just got to decide.

The response took longer than she expected. Usually he was almost immediate with his answers. But he was out with his family. It just felt like forever.

Amazing!He wrote.So you're going out of state then, obvs?

Meg's fingers hesitated over the phone.

Dunno yet. Gotta think about it.

Nash didn't respond to that at all, which was a little strange. Meg just had to keep reminding herself that he was out with his family. He was busy, not that it had ever stopped him before. But whatever, she was just overthinking things as always.

She stared at the acceptance letters until her eyes blurred, and she still couldn't come close to making a decision. Even though, deep down, she knew the decision she wanted to make. She was just so used to overanalyzing everything with her head that listening to her gut felt like a foreign language. So, she made a plan for herself.

When she met up with Nash at the prom in a couple of days, the first thing she was going to do was confess how she felt. She would just say it, let him know everything, and work out the rest from there.

Prom had turned out pretty much the same as every small-town prom since the eighties had turned out. Crepe paper streamers hung from the ceiling of the gym, and there were snack tables and drinks while teachers and volunteer parents kept guard over everything. Meanwhile the main expense, a light setup that was jittery at best, flushed different colors around the gym at various intervals, completely out of time with the music.

Everyone seemed to be having a good time though. The music was loud, the food wasn't terrible, and the night was still young.

Meg, however, stood awkwardly in the corner, completely on her own. She'd been there for an hour and Nash hadn't shown up yet... Nash had never been the greatest

at time management. He was usually five minutes late to class, maybe ten if something had actually gone wrong. Not an hour. Adding to her rising panic, he hadn't been answering her calls to see where he was. She was seriously starting to worry that he'd driven off the road somewhere, that he was lying in a ditch with broken bones when he finally messaged back to her dozens of texts.

Yeah?

Meg blinked at her phone for a couple of seconds, trying to make sense of that one word. Yeah? That was it? Maybe he had driven off the road somewhere and now had a concussion, because what sort of a response was "yeah?"

Did your tie get caught in a doorframe somewhere? Meg sent, sure there was still some obvious explanation. Don't tell me you actually forgot prom was tonight?

I just didn't feel like going, tbh.

Meg's fingers went a little numb. She wasn't even sure she could type out a response to that.

You didn't feel like going?

Nah.

Suddenly the blue tulle dress she had been so excited to wear felt too fluffy, too itchy and too stupid to be seen in.

What do you mean?

I just didn't feel like going, okay? What's the big deal?

We were going to go together?

Sorry. I've just been caught up with other stuff.

What other stuff?

Like, life stuff, Meg. Trying to find a job. Not all of us are going to college.

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Meg felt herself shrinking. Why was he being so harsh all of a sudden?

You had to look for jobs tonight instead of going to prom? What happened to you'll get where you're going? Go with the flow?

Yeah exactly, that's what I'm doing. Going with MY flow. Not everything revolves around you and your life.

She felt like she'd been slapped. The loud music went quiet, and all of the bright colors seemed to fade into gray.

Okay, she typed. I'll stop bothering you.

She waited, hoping desperately for a reply, for an explanation or an apology. But nothing came.

Then Meg did something that she thought she would never do. She texted her dad to come and get her early. He replied straight away, of course, saying he would be right there and to wait out front for him. Meg did just that, not wanting to spend a second longer in the gym. The balloons and streamers, the dance music playing from tinny speakers, all of it just seemed like a joke now. It was all just a stupid party that didn't really even matter.

That's what Meg tried to convince herself as she stood at the school gates in her blue dress and sandals, arms folded across her chest, trying not to cry. She failed at that too, tears rolling down her cheeks, and she wished her dad could just teleport there.

The feelings kept growing bigger and growing worse. She knew that once she was in the safety of her bedroom, she was going to bawl her eyes out. It was obvious then that this was how Nash really felt, because there was no reason she could come up with to explain it all away. He'd always been a flake, always been late and not committed to anything. She shouldn't be so surprised that he'd acted the same towards her. She clearly didn't matter, not really.

She wiped her cheeks, trying desperately to keep it together while she was still standing on school property. At the very least, her decision about college had been made. No way in hell was she staying here to be near Nash. She would move to Texas and start a brand-new life. One without Nash Callahan in it.

CHAPTER 2

MEG

TEN YEARS LATER

The best thing about working with livestock was that you could lean against them and they wouldn't budge. So if you were, hypothetically, completely exhausted to the point that you couldn't remember what day it was, a cow made an excellent place to catch a few seconds of rest.

Meg was so wrung out that she had resorted to using a random cow on the lot as a pillow, leaning a cheek against her flank. The fur was warm, soaking into her skin, and Meg could almost imagine she was back in bed. Almost. If anyone asked, she would just say she was checking the animal's heartbeat or something. She just needed to close her eyes for a few seconds; that was all...

Having to lean against livestock for a few seconds of rest wasn't exactly where she had envisioned her life ending up, but here she was. It could have been worse. The

cow was clean. Relatively clean, at least.

After accepting admission to college and moving three states away, her veterinary degree had somehow morphed from looking after dogs and the occasional rabbit to learning everything she could about livestock. In her first year of college, she'd somehow convinced a local vet to give her a job as a receptionist, mostly because she just kept showing up. After an incident where they'd needed all hands on deck to dehorn a particularly upset goat, Meg's career trajectory had taken a sharp turn. Some people sought out an adrenaline rush by going skydiving. Meg got her kicks by getting blood work from cattle big enough to total a hatchback. And seeing as this particular heifer was being so accommodating, Meg was going to stretch out her standing nap for as long as possible.

She was so tired that her very eyeballs felt like they were crying out for a break. The hours were always crazy for a livestock vet; that was just part of the gig. They were especially crazy in the role Meg had found herself in. Working for an industrial-sized beef farm, there was a constant stream of tasks that needed her attention. Vaccinations, hoof care, general cuts and scrapes were all ordinary items on her to-do list. Not to mention if an animal decided to get extra spicy or extra stupid, she might have to help wrangle it out of a fence or some other predicament.

Office hours weren't a thing around here. Animals got sick and injured any time of day or night, not just conveniently between the hours of nine and five. This was all fine, really. Meg had known what she was signing up for. Occasionally you were going to get a call at two in the morning that a heifer was having trouble giving birth and you would have to get up and go to work. The problem was that Mitch, the weasel, had found an excuse to call her out almost every night for a month running.

Industrial lots like this, big farms with thousands and thousands of cattle, ran things a bit different to what was in kids' storybooks about old MacDonald. It wasn't a rancher that tended the land, keeping a watchful eye over the herd; it was a company.

The company hired employees, just like they had hired Meg. And the company, in its eternal wisdom, had decided to promote Mitch Walsh, of all people, as lead supervisor a month ago. Which was about the same time that Meg's life had become a living hell. What a coincidence.

"You've been a super good cow," Meg mumbled into the furry flank. "Definitely my favorite cow in the whole yard. You just keep standing there. You're doing a great job."

The heifer didn't bother to acknowledge her gratitude speech, which was just fine. It meant that Meg could keep using her as a pillow for a little while longer.

"Hey, Meg?"

Never mind.

"Go away," she said, refusing to open her eyes. She was going to squeeze out every second of relaxation that she could.

"Are you okay?"

Luckily Meg didn't need to open her eyes to know who had found her.

"I'm on a break, Dougie. This better be a life-or-death situation."

Dougie was quiet and said nothing, but Meg didn't hear any footsteps walking away either... She sighed and prepared to reenter the world of the living, reluctantly peeking an eye open. But she was also going to keep leaning against the cow for as long as humanly possible.

Dougie was an extraordinarily tall farm hand with blond hair, wearing the same

standard-issue coveralls that they were all given. Right now he was looking at Meg with a grimace.

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“Is your walkie off?” he asked with much the same hesitation as if he had just poked a snake with a stick.

“Yes.”

“Ah. 'Cause Mitch was saying that he hasn't been able to contact you.”

“That's the idea.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“Life or death, Dougie. Either spit it out or I'm going to continue with my siesta.”

Dougie's grimace turned into a look of full-blown pain. “Just don't shoot the messenger, okay?”

Meg somehow found enough energy to raise an eyebrow.

Being a woman in agriculture was... a lot. No matter what position you were in, it was always going to be an uphill battle to get the same respect, let alone the same basic decency, as the boys. Especially when you were built like a toothpick like Meg was, who still looked younger than her twenty-eight years. But when you were the head veterinarian in a place like this, a position that was automatically an authority figure, that uphill battle became ten times steeper. Over the last few years, though, all of the farmhands had seen Meg work her magic enough times and now gave her her due respect. Not to mention that they'd seen her flip out enough that there was a healthy dose of fear in the mix as well. So Dougie acting scared, acting like she was

going to bite his head off, had Meg reluctantly opening her other eye.

“What?” she asked, watching Dougie’s throat bob as he swallowed.

“Mitch said there’s a heifer that needs to be assessed to figure out if she’s pregnant or not...”

He took a step back as Meg’s eyebrows rose further up her forehead.

“That’s your emergency?” she asked, almost irate enough to stop leaning against the cow. Almost. Dougie raised his hands in self-defense.

“Not me! Mitch. And I knew not to bother you about that. You have a schedule for checking that stuff. I know that. We all know about the schedule...”

“You’re babbling, Dougie.”

He swallowed, gulping loud enough for her to hear.

“Mitch said that if you didn’t come and do it within the next fifteen minutes, he was going to be reorganizing your calendar for you since you didn’t know how to ‘time manage effectively.’ Please don’t blame the messenger. I’m begging you.”

Meg straightened up slowly, shoulders square, both her eyes fully open. Dougie’s face went visibly pale, and he took a step backwards.

“How long ago was this?” Meg asked, her voice perfectly calm, bordering on cheerful.

“About ten minutes. Took a little bit to find you, you know, with your walkie off.”

“Right. And I’m assuming he’s in his office.”

“Ah-huh.”

“Excellent. Well, if you could start digging a ditch, I’d appreciate it. I’m going to need somewhere to hide his body after I’m done with him.”

“I’ll grab a shovel. If you need anything else, I’ll be... not here.”

He practically ran away after that, and Meg, suddenly feeling very much awake, strolled towards the office where she would find Mitch.

She didn’t bother to knock before she slammed the door open.

Mitch had the gall to look surprised, sitting at his desk, his computer open and his black hat too big on his head. He was a scrawny man, like someone had stretched a piece of taffy out too thin and given it sentience. He’d never been made for working on the yards, always more of a management sort. That was fine; the world needed people like him. What the world didn’t need, however, was someone who let a little bit of power go to their head. People who thought a managerial position made them a god amongst men. People like Mitch.

Meg wasn’t really the superstitious sort, but one saying had always stuck with her. Never trust a man in a black hat. Once again, it seemed to be proven true in the form of the skinny man behind a desk.

“What’s this about you touching my schedule?” she asked, not bothering to close the office door, which was still swinging slightly.

Mitch blinked, slowly closed his laptop and pushed his wheelie chair away from the desk. He folded his long hands over his stomach in a thoughtful position, like he was

some wise old man. Meg had to fight very hard not to roll her eyes.

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“Meg, we need to have a discussion about you turning off your walkie while you’re on the yard.”

He said it with the tone of a disappointed school teacher, and it made Meg’s eye twitch. Trying to talk to him about anything, ever, was always a matter of going in circles. Like a snake eating its own tail.

“Mitch,” Meg said, with such venom in her voice it would have had Dougie ducking for cover. “Don’t. Touch. My. Schedule.”

Mitch tutted. Actually tutted.

“I wouldn’t have to touch your schedule,” he said, “if you ran it properly. You?—”

“There’s a heifer you wanted me to check?” Meg said, cutting him off. She just wanted to be out of this office, and if it meant appeasing this man, then... whatever. She’d just do it to shut him up.

Mitch paused as if he didn’t know what she was talking about.

“You told Dougie,” Meg said, enunciating slowly so that he’d understand. “That there was a heifer you wanted pregnancy checked or you would rearrange my calendar. Which heifer?”

“Well, not one specifically.”

“What are you talking about?! So you don’t want any heifers checked?”

“I didn’t say that,” he snipped.

“Then explain it to me. Like I’m four, please, because right now I have no idea what you want, Mitch.”

“You need to be more on top of things,” he said, standing up and puffing his chest out as if he were a bigger man. “How many cattle are out on the yard right now that we have no idea if they’re pregnant or not?”

Meg felt her brain cells dying off as he spoke.

“I have a rough estimate for early pregnancies,” she said, explaining slowly, amazed that she had to explain this at all. “And then solid numbers for late-term pregnancies. Is that the information you want?”

“We need solid numbers for all stages. You need to begin testing sooner.”

Oh. My. God. This can’t be an actual conversation I’m having.

Meg simply didn’t know how to respond. The statement was too stupid to even compute. This was just further proof that this idiot, who was in charge of an industrial cattle farm, had no idea how cows worked. Like, at all.

Meg could only describe her current feeling as an out-of-body experience. In fact, it felt just like the end of high school, where for a moment everything was so awful and so hard that hitting rock bottom had provided her a few seconds of perfect clarity. Back then, that clarity had helped her make the decision to leave for college and not look back. Now it was the same. She was done here. She deserved better, and she’d be damned if she ever set foot here again. The moment she made that decision, a thousand-pound weight lifted off her shoulders, and suddenly, Meg could breathe again.

She took a deep, long breath to savor the feeling and looked Mitch dead in the eye.

“I quit,” she said. The satisfaction of seeing his face drop was priceless.

“What?” he asked, his voice rising about three octaves.

“I quit. I’m quitting. I’m going to walk out that door, and you are never going to see me again.”

“W-why?” he stammered.

“Because, Mitch, I would rather eat a brick than have to talk to you ever again.”

“Meg, c’mon. We can work this out,” he said, sounding even more sniveling than normal, which was an impressive feat. “Let’s talk this out. You can’t just quit!”

“Why not?” she asked.

“What are we supposed to do without you?”

She shrugged. “If you’re such an expert, you won’t need me.”

“I am an expert, actually,” he said, puffing out his chest. “That’s why I get paid more than you.”

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Meg actually laughed at that, and Mitch's face turned pinker.

"I really, seriously doubt that," she said.

"How much does a farm vet even make?" he scoffed.

"Two hundred thousand."

Mitch's mouth fell open like a cartoon, and he was momentarily lost for words. Oh, this was so satisfying. She was going to be riding this high for weeks.

"Anyway," Meg said breezily. "Have fun getting those super accurate numbers which are absolutely within the realm of possibility. Don't bother calling me when this place starts burning down the second I leave. Tell Dougie I said bye."

When she turned to actually leave the room, Mitch finally found his voice again.

"How are we supposed to check the — the pregnancies that are important, which is why we were having this talk?"

"I'm sure you'll figure it out. Just make sure you're wearing a really long pair of gloves."

Before he could say anything else, Meg shut the door in his face.

It took her call being transferred three times to people of increasing superiority, but Meg was finally able to speak to someone named Fiona at Head Office who actually

knew what they were talking about. Thoroughly done with any sort of politics or niceties, Meg cut straight to the chase.

“Give me a transfer or I quit.”

There was the smallest of pauses.

“I’m sure we can organize something,” Fiona said in a calming voice, the perfect representative for Human Resources. “Is there a problem in your current position?”

“Yes, his name is Mitch.”

There was the faint tapping of computer keys from the other end of the line.

“I’ll be sure to set up a meeting with you, Meg,” she said, repeating Meg’s name in a bid for familiarity. “We can discuss your concerns, and I really would love to hear any feedback you might have. In the meantime, you’re a valuable asset to the organization and we’d hate to see you go. Let me just pop you on hold, and I’ll see where we might be able to transfer you.”

The same generic tune came on that Meg had been listening to all afternoon, and she settled back in the seat of her truck. She’d stormed off the lot, grabbed her things and not left her truck since. It wasn’t an empty threat that she really was going to quit altogether if she wasn’t transferred, so she’d made the initial phone call to her boss’s boss with all guns blazing. It had done the trick, apparently. She’d been taken seriously. And Meg let herself preen a little at how they all seemed fairly desperate to keep her on the books. She’d known that she was good at her job, but hearing all of them scramble to make sure she didn’t quit was a nice little confidence boost. At the very least, it made her even more determined to never set foot on that lot again to be talked down to by a scrawny man in a too-big hat.

The music clicked off a lot sooner than Meg had anticipated, and Fiona's soothing voice returned.

"Are you still there, Meg?"

"Yep," she drawled.

"Excellent. I'm pleased to inform you that we do have a position for someone of your caliber that we need to fill rather urgently."

Meg felt herself sink into the seat of her truck like her bones were melting. For all of her bravado, it was a relief to know there was a place for her. Thank God for that.

"Is it another lot?" she asked, because despite everything, jumping straight into a new job with absolutely no information wasn't the smartest thing to do.

"No," said Fiona with just a flicker of hesitation. "I understand that you're in Texas currently?"

"Yeah?"

"There's a property in Wyoming that we're looking at acquiring," Fiona continued, sounding more like a thesaurus with every sentence. Wyoming. Jeez, how long had it been since she'd been back there? Too long to think of the answer off the top of her head.

"That's fine," she found herself saying. "Wyoming's fine." Because what was keeping her in Texas? Nothing really.

Fiona's relief was palpable through the phone. "That's excellent, Meg, really. We need someone experienced to evaluate the property and give us some detailed reports

on the land, the current livestock, and that sort of thing. We'll send you with a detailed checklist, of course. It may take a few weeks to get through the whole evaluation since we need to be quite thorough. The current owner has agreed to all of this. He has room and board provided and asks in return that whoever is sent out is able to see to the animals in a veterinary aspect, which I'm sure you'll agree is quite reasonable."

It was reasonable, but Fiona was on a roll with her spiel, trying to convince Meg to take it, she could tell. Meg jumped in with her questions before Fiona could steamroll ahead.

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“So it’s a small place?” she asked. “This property?”

“Landwise, no, it’s quite a decent property, hence our interest in acquiring it.”

Hence? Who used the word hence? Were all office people like this?

“But,” continued Fiona, back on her sales pitch, “it’s currently run by just one person who is no longer able to keep up with the place. He’s been in contact to finally accept our offer.”

Yeah, Meg thought, I bet you’ve been hounding him for years. She couldn’t help feeling at least a little sorry for this rancher, whoever he was. She knew firsthand how persistent these companies could be when there was a piece of land that they wanted.

“Okay. So where in Wyoming is it? North, south, central?”

“It’s quite remote. It looks like the nearest town is a place called Fordswell...”

Meg nearly choked. Going back to her home state was one thing; going back to a ranch outside her hometown was another. Her knee-jerk response was to say never mind, she didn’t want it, no thank you. Then the sensible part of her brain that tended to sound like the voice of her mother chimed in. With the amount of money she earned, she could afford to quit and figure things out, but she’d really be pretty stupid to pass up on a job that was just being handed to her on a silver platter. Maybe it was all some sort of sign from the universe that she should brave going back home and conquer some of her demons or something. Maybe even visit her parents. Maybe.

Either way, spending some time on a smaller ranch, just ticking off a list and looking over a small herd... well, that sounded like exactly what she needed right now.

“You know what? That sounds great,” Meg said, biting the bullet. “I’m guessing you’ll have a bunch of paperwork for me?”

“I will email it straight to you,” Fiona said, sounding ten times more chipper all of a sudden.

The phone call was wrapped up with technicalities and contract talk. Despite the existential dread of moving back close to home after a decade of being away, there was a sense of relief that she really wouldn’t have to go back to working with Mitch. She wouldn’t even have to be in the same state as that idiot anymore. She was just going to work with some guy that wanted to sell his ranch.

So sure, moving back home hadn’t been on the top of her to-do list, but there was no way her new coworker could even be half as bad as what she was used to dealing with.

Right?

CHAPTER 3

NASH

It was a quiet morning, but it was almost always quiet on the ranch, so that was nothing different. Nash didn’t even have to think as he went about his morning routine. It was so ingrained in him these days that his body already knew what to do, like a well-oiled machine.

Dressed in jeans and a loose work shirt, he strode out of the house, the sun barely

risen and the sky still half dark. The first task was to open the stable and let the horses out into the pasture for the day. Gadget trotted straight out of his stall, looking for adventure, while Nickel went at his own pace, as always. Tilly, who was round as a barrel from her pregnancy, stayed right where she was with a sour look on her face. Nash didn't blame her one bit.

"Not much longer, girl," he said, rubbing her nose. She snorted, disdainful, wanting her breakfast, and Nash didn't blame her for that either. He dished out her pellets laced with the special vitamins and supplements to help her through her pregnancy. Not that he could really afford them, but the ranch seemed to be bleeding more money every day, so what was one more thing he couldn't afford? He'd eat nothing but potatoes for a month if it meant that Tilly was healthy. It wasn't the horses' fault that they'd ended up living here. Nash pushed thoughts about possible bankruptcy to the side and got on with his chores. Meanwhile Gadget and Nickel pranced around like it was the first time they'd ever seen grass. Nash was convinced that the two geldings shared one brain cell between them.

The horses taken care of, he jumped in the truck and made his way out to the eastern pasture to check on the cattle. There weren't many to check these days. He only had a herd of about fifty left after selling off more and more of the animals for lower and lower prices, all just to try and make a dent in some of the bills. It had kept him afloat for long enough, but now even that lifeline was wearing thin. Wandering around the field, the sun now properly awake, they all seemed happy enough. They grazed and bellowed to each other, content. Their coats were shiny, their eyes bright. If you were to just look at the conditions of the animals, you'd be forgiven for thinking that the ranch was a success. But it took just one look at the bank statements to dash that assumption.

Usually, Nash would be on his way back to the house after checking on them, back to eat his own breakfast before heading out to chip away at all of the tasks that would need to get done that day. But right now he didn't want to go back to the house, not

just yet. He just needed to sit and think for a bit, to get his head straight.

As of today he would officially be giving up trying to do all of this on his own. It left him with a strange mix of feeling guilty and feeling immensely relieved. It came in waves, which of the feelings was stronger at any given time. This morning it was definitely guilt, loud and proud, so strong that it made him feel slightly sick.

Nash sat on the hood of the truck, looking out over the pastures. There wasn't another soul around, just him and the cattle. Every now and then, one of the animals would come up and sniff at him, begging for food like giant dogs, before wandering off again when Nash showed them empty hands. He might have had to sell off more than three-quarters of the herd, but what remained were probably the most spoiled cattle in all of Wyoming.

The morning sun warmed his face and neck, deepening the tan that covered him head to toe these days, his dark hair flopping over his eyes. He knew he was in desperate need of a haircut, but who had the time? The only part of him that refused to tan was the scar that ran through his eyebrow. It remained stubbornly silver, a permanent reminder of getting bucked off of Gadget and thrown face-first into a barbed wire fence. It made for a good story, at least.

Nash sat out there on the hood of his truck for longer than he should have. It was just sopretty; there was no other word for it. Not one he could think of right this second anyway. He never had been the scholarly sort. "Pretty" would just have to do. Luckily it was true. The grass was such a vivid green that it looked like it was made on a computer, not something from real life, and the sky was getting bluer every second. The fields stretched off for what felt like forever, rising into hills where the old farm buildings lay abandoned, overlooking everything. It must have been a beautiful view to wake up there each morning, but his uncle had rebuilt further north when he'd had an influx of cash. Apparently, the world's best view wasn't as good as more modern houses and barns on flatter land.

Thinking about past generations of ranchers had Nash's guilt flaring again, stabbing him right in the gut. This ranch had been his uncle's pride and joy, in the family for generations. He'd left it to Nash in his will, to take care of it and keep the legacy going. Well, he'd left it to Nash and his brother, Will. But Will now lived in town with his wife and kid, working a stable job as a mechanic like a sensible person. Meanwhile, Nash had stayed here, desperate to keep the place going, to keep the ranch alive. His uncle had done it for decades on his own, and he'd been just fine. Nash had convinced himself he could do it, his unfortunate cocky streak taking over any rational business decisions.

But Nash had failed spectacularly, hadn't he? He hadn't felt cocky about his abilities in a very long time.

Nash rubbed his face with both hands, his stubble scratching against the calluses on his palms. He had done his best, but his best wasn't good enough. Ever since he and Will had taken over, Uncle Keith barely in the ground, industrial farming companies had come swooping in like vultures, wanting to buy the land from under them. They were all suits and nice smiles, sending them mountains of emails and good old-fashioned letters full to the brim with a bunch of lawyer talk. Their most popular phrase was "ideal investment opportunity." Nash kept telling them to get lost, and they would scurry away for a while. But soon enough they would come back with offers and emails, wanting to sweet talk him into selling up.

They'd won in the end, hadn't they? You had to applaud their persistence, even if they were slimy, greedy little things. They had been patient enough to get their way in the end. It would have been easier, emotionally, at least, if it had been as simple as signing a piece of paper and handing the whole place over in one fell swoop. But that wasn't how they did things these days, because of course it couldn't just be as simple as that. Despite hounding him for years and trying to convince him to sell with every dirty trick in the book, now that Nash had officially reached out, the company wanted an evaluation. They wanted to know that what they were buying was actually worth

all of this effort.

The whole thing was... humiliating. Maybe he was just letting his ego get in the way, but that was how it felt. Like he personally was getting investigated with a fine-tooth comb. Maybe it was because he'd poured his heart and soul into this place that it kind of was a personal evaluation. Either way, the sale wasn't going to go ahead without someone on their books coming and personally inspecting every inch of the place. Supposedly it was some super fancy, large animal veterinarian who was also going to test everything from the fencing to the soil acidity. At first the woman on the phone, who clearly worked in an office and had no idea how rural areas actually worked, had said that this "expert" would be boarded in the nearest hotel. Nash had to explain to her that the nearest hotel was a good hour away, and there was an awkward silence after that. He'd told her the vet could board at the house. It would be easier, and he didn't have the energy to even remotely put up a fight anymore. It wasn't really a loss; he was never inside anyway, and he'd wrangled some free vet care out of them to boot.

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Nash checked his phone. It was already past eight, late in the morning by farming standards. The expert evaluator would be showing up any minute now. It would be the polite thing to be there to greet the guy. Nash usually wouldn't care one bit about being polite, but at the end of it all, he still wanted to get a good price. It was better to play nice and make this go as smoothly as possible. Playing nice wasn't going to be fun, but it was going to be necessary. He pulled himself together and got in the truck, driving to the house. The short trip felt like a death march. As soon as this guy turned up, it was officially the end of an era. There was no turning back now.

Nash didn't have to wait long. Just as he climbed out of his truck, the old engine rattling as it cooled, a newer, cleaner-looking vehicle was motoring up his driveway. Midwest Ag Solutions was emblazoned on the side door. Nash had always thought it was a stupid name for the company, considering they were now nationwide. Poor long-term planning, if you asked him. But then again, he was the one whose business was going under, so what did he know?

He waved the truck over to where his was parked, and the driver obliged. Their engine made no rattling, cooling sounds as it was turned off. Nash tried not to feel jealous. He was a twenty-nine-year-old man; he wasn't going to feel jealous over a truck. He just wasn't.

The person who jumped out of the company truck was a woman, her auburn ponytail swinging with the motion. Nash felt embarrassment curdling in his stomach that he'd assumed the expert was going to be a guy. At least he hadn't said it out loud, so he could at least pretend he wasn't a total idiot. The best he could do was to force his face into a tight-lipped smile as the woman reached into the truck and pulled a carry bag out, swinging it over her shoulder. Nash stood a good distance away, hands

awkwardly hanging by his side. He almost offered to help her carry her bag, but he'd already been unintentionally sexist enough for one day. Besides, she looked like she could handle herself just fine.

Actually, the evaluator looked weirdly familiar. Had she been one of the people who came knocking on his door asking for him to sell? No, all those people were office workers and lawyertypes, not people with veterinary degrees. Maybe she was in some of the company's advertisements or something? Had he seen her smiling on a billboard somewhere? The feeling that he knew her wouldn't fade; in fact, it kept growing like a tidal wave, itching at his brain uncomfortably.

Then she looked up. At first there was a wide smile on her face, and she was ready to say hello. As soon as she locked eyes with Nash, though, a confused look crossed her face, and the smile faded like it was dying.

Meg? Meg from high school Meg? No. It couldn't be. But it was... Meg Whitmore, ten years older, even more freckled, which seemed impossible, and now staring at him with realization dawning on her face. Nash's already knotted-up stomach sank even further when Meg's realization morphed into a look of cold, piercing anger.

This wasn't going to be a happy reunion.

CHAPTER 4

MEG

It took about thirty seconds to fully realize who was standing in front of her, and it felt like the longest thirty seconds of Meg's life. Time slowed down to a crawl as her brain tried to process the impossibility standing before her.

Nash? No. No way. There was no way that Nash Callahan had ended up running

aranch. Running a ranch took tremendous amounts of responsibility. Running a ranch took drive, and those were traits that Nash had never had all that much of. This was ridiculous. But the denial burned away pretty quick when the man standing in front of her grew pale and still, looking just as confused and horrified as she felt.

Holy crap, it was Nash. Over the last decade whenever she'd had a fleeting thought of him, she'd still seen him as a gangly teenage boy. But here he was, the fully grown version. His hair was a shaggy mess, overgrown and darker than she remembered. His skin was tanned several shades darker as well, which really was proof that he spent his time outside. A silver scar ran through his eyebrow and down to the top of his cheek. That definitely hadn't been there the last time she had seen him.

Oh, God. What was she supposed to do now? They were just standing there in silence. Nash's arms were at awkward angles beside him, as if he'd forgotten how they worked, while the strap of Meg's bag cut into her shoulder. The bag that was stuffed with clothes and necessities because she was supposed to be staying here for the foreseeable future.

Meg was a nanosecond away from turning around and sprinting back to the truck when Nash finally broke the silence.

"Um, hi."

Well, that was anticlimactic, wasn't it?

"Hi," Meg replied. Every other option right now seemed either ridiculous or just plain awful. Saying hi was a relatively safe thing to do.

"So..." Nash said, seeming to collect himself in slow motion. "You're the fancy veterinarian, evaluation... person?"

He waved a hand in the direction of Meg's company truck, the logo obnoxiously large on the passenger door.

"Yep, that would be me," she said, aiming for a smile and ending up with a grimace. "And you... work here?"

"Uh, actually, I own the place. Technically my brother did too, but he signed everything over to me... Will? You remember Will? But, yeah, just me at the moment."

He paused his awkward ramble and cleared his throat. Because yes, Meg remembered Will, of course she did. Just acknowledging that though, for Nash to mention the past out loud, brought everything back in a rush. Their friendship, which had seemed unbreakable, eternal even. Her stupid crush that she'd gotten carried away with. Memories of standing alone in the corner of the school gym, hope fading with every unanswered text message.

"Yes," she said curtly. "I remember."

She said nothing else because any desire to be nice had fled her body. She wasn't going to try and fake another smile. She certainly wasn't going to help along this limping conversation. Nash could struggle and do it himself.

Meg took a few seconds to give a cursory glance around the place. It looked like a postcard, with green pastures and blue skies. There were some horses milling around, a stable, and an old tractor broken down and rusting, and somehow that only added to the fairytale look of the place.

Nash, apparently, had finally found his voice again.

"They, the company, they said you were happy to stay in the main house?" It came

out as a question.

Was he giving her an out, an opportunity to turn around and run away? Well, that wasn't going to happen. The shock was starting to wear off, and in its place was a whole lot of anger that Meg had been ignoring for the better part of a decade. She was here to do a job. If that made Nash Callahan uncomfortable, then that was just a bonus.

“Yep. That’s right,” she said coolly. Nash just nodded as if he were accepting his fate. Meg couldn’t even bring herself to make her face look neutral. She could feel a frown forming with every passing second.

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“I’ll show you your room, then,” he said. With that Nash turned to the house and strode off, shoulders hunched. Meg gripped the strap of her duffel bag with white knuckles as she followed him.

Inside it was nice, and she really hated to admit it. She had been expecting the usual run-down old farmhouse, cluttered and dusty and dark. The outside certainly looked run-down, with flaking paint and a few missing clapboards up on the second story. But inside it was clean and neat in the entrance, which shot off to a kitchen and a living room. The windows were open, and the house was bright and fresh with the morning breeze fluttering through. There were even houseplants, adding pops of green around the place.

“Uh, kitchen,” Nash said, pointing a finger towards the mentioned room. “Living room. Downstairs bathroom. There’s one upstairs as well, where my room is. And this...”

She followed him down the short hall to a bedroom just as neat and clean as the rest of the place.

“This is where you’ll be staying. If you want to, that is...”

He snuck a glance at her out of the corner of his eye then looked sternly at the bed pushed up against a wall. He was still giving her an out, she realized, an opportunity to say no thank you and walk straight back out the door. Meg wanted to. She wanted to run from this as fast as she could and not look back.

But then her stubborn streak made an appearance. This was making her feel

uncomfortable, sure, but Nash looked like he was suffering about a million times worse. That made up her mind, then and there, to stick around and do her job. She hadn't done anything wrong. There was no reason for her to be the one running away. And if sticking around meant it made Nash feel like crap, well... spite was a powerful motivator sometimes.

"Thanks," she said, walking into the room and throwing her bag down with a decisive thud. "This will do great."

She gave him a smile, lips pressed tight together, and looked him dead in the eye. He was the first to break eye contact, and it gave her a savage little thrill.

"I'll let you get settled, then," he said and fled, walking off, and a few seconds later Meg heard the front door open and close. Meg closed her own door and locked it for good measure, sitting on the edge of the bed.

She needed to think, but there were too many things she needed to think about. And before she could think about any of it, she really needed her heart rate to slow down to a normal level.

Nash Callahan ran a ranch. Nash Callahan ran a ranch that she needed to evaluate. She needed to stay on this ranch with Nash Callahan for a couple of weeks, at the very least, ask him questions off her list, see to his animals, and survey the land.

Nash Callahan had blown out of the past and knocked down the carefully constructed walls that Meg had built around herself. Now she felt stripped bare, out in the open, without a single safety line to cling onto.

There had been no apology from him. She'd fantasized about that sometimes, though she would never admit it out loud. Especially in her first few months at college, living in a Texas dorm. She'd imagined him busting through a classroom door and making a

grand announcement in front of everybody, falling to his knees and begging for her forgiveness and making it all right. She'd still had enough hope in her that Meg had been willing to forgive him if only Nash would reach out. That was the test; he had to be the one to reach out first. But after the disastrous prom night, she'd never even gotten a text. By the end of her second semester, any chance of forgiving him was gone and her hurt had turned into cool, hard resentment.

Up until now, Nash Callahan had been nothing but an embarrassing memory and one of life's harder lessons. She'd imagined him falling to his feet, begging for forgiveness. But there had been no sign that he was remotely remorseful; if anything he seemed bent out of shape that she was there, like turning up had been an inconvenience. So Meg didn't think there would be an apology at all.

And really, when she thought about it, what hurt most was that he probably didn't even remember standing her up at the prom and saying all of those hurtful things. What hurt was knowing that he had no idea how much she was hurt at all.

CHAPTER 5

NASH

Nash felt like he was having an out-of-body experience. As he walked towards the stables, his feet automatically taking him wherever they pleased, it felt like the only explanation. There was a strange numbness all over him, inside and out. He moved like a plane on autopilot.

He ended up back at Tilly's stall. The mare's mood hadn't gotten any better, and she didn't seem particularly happy to have him there. But Nash didn't know where else to go. He didn't know what to do...

The last time he'd seen Meg was the day before senior prom. He'd never seen her all

glammed up in the dress she'd chosen, never seen her under the lights in the gym, because he'd stood her up, hunkering down in his bedroom like it was Fort Knox. He'd been in love with her for years, a deep, matter-of-fact love that was so solid he hadn't realized that it was even love for the longest time. He'd always thought being in love was how it was in the movies; it made you feel sick and stupid. But this had just felt like a fact, strong as concrete. At the end of the day though, he was an awkward teenage boy, Meg was his best friend, and she was way too good for him as it was. So he had kept quiet and kept his love to himself.

It was obvious that she was going to be a superstar vet, that she was a borderline genius at that stuff. And Nash was... well, he wasn't really much of anything. A drifter at best. Even at eighteen he'd been aware of that. He was destined for a normal life, and that was fine. There were worse lots in life to be saddled with.

But then Meg had actually started entertaining the idea of staying in this dead-end town for him. His whole body had revolted at the idea... the thought of chaining her down, of making Meg mediocre just so she'd be close by... He couldn't stand the thought of it. He'd thought it was a joke at first, but then she seriously started comparing the local college versus the one in Texas, and he'd panicked. She couldn't stay for him. She shouldn't stay for anybody or anything; she needed to get out to a place where she could spread her wings and be brilliant. And she definitely needed to get away from her parents, her mom specifically.

So he'd set the friendship on fire. He'd stood her up at the prom, staying home in his fort. He'd ignored her calls and her texts, even though the shrill beeps of his ringtone set his teeth on edge. When he'd finally answered, he'd been a jerk about it, hitting every sore spot he could. All the while he'd been thinking, Don't stay for me. Do something for yourself for a change.

It had been messy, and it had been cruel. She'd never spoken to him again. The older he got, the more he cringed at what he'd done that night. But in his pigheaded,

teenage brain, it had been a desperate attempt to do the right thing, like jumping on a landmine to save someone else.

There was a strange sense of relief in him now, knowing that it had worked. She was a veterinarian, after all, and a livestock vet on top of that, at an industrial farming company. Only the best were hired for those sorts of roles, and they made ridiculous amounts of money doing it. Nash had always known that she could be the best, so long as she had the space to actually grow. So it was worth it, in the end. All of it had been worth it. It was the same mantra he'd been repeating to himself for the last decade, but now he had actual proof that it was true.

He hadn't intended to completely destroy their friendship; that had never been the goal. He'd just wanted to make her see that she was meant for bigger things than this small town and all its small problems. Staying around just because she was friends with him wasn't a good enough reason to stick around, not by a long shot. Having her never speak to him again hadn't been the end goal — he'd tried, in a fit of guilt weeks later, to get in touch with her. But the effort was quickly abandoned when he realized that either she had blocked him on every single messenger platform or she was straight up ignoring him. Nash hadn't really been sure which one was worse.

After the whole thing had blown up in his face, after she'd disappeared forever, Nash had truly realized how in love with her he'd been. He always had been in one way or another, even if he hadn't been aware of it. His brother knew too and said he looked like a sick puppy whenever Meg was even mentioned, and that he looked like someone had died when she left. It would have been easy, so easy, to put his own feelings first, to trap Meg in this nowhere place in the hopes that maybe she might feel the same way as him. That was when the reality of what he'd done really sunk in. Meg was gone. Not just from the state of Wyoming but from his life. She was probably going to be gone forever. It was a very unique sort of grief because the person he had lost was still alive out there somewhere.

He'd never had a North Star to follow, never had any serious goals and ambitions. Nothing had ever called to him the way some people seemed to have callings. The only real anchor in his life, the only thing that had the power to change his future, had been Meg. And then she was gone. Well. It was a successful plan then, wasn't it. And really it was just further proof that he was nothing but a weight on her, like a little kid clinging to her ankles, making it harder to move forward. He hadn't concocted this whole thing as the best thing for him; he'd done it because it was the best thing for Meg. So what if he was hurting? It was his own fault. And it was for the best.

After that Nash had thrown himself into a regular life, taking it all day by day until the days led him here. Now. With Meg standing in front of him with a bag over her shoulder and a stunned expression on her face.

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Nash leaned against Tilly's flank, letting the heat from her fur soak into his cheek. The mare must have been able to sense something was up because she let him lean there without a snort of protest despite her bad mood.

So, what now?

He couldn't turn Meg away. She was here for a job, and his future depended on her doing that job. Trying to turn her away, to get her to leave, would only make things a million times worse. He could be overly nice to her? Pretend like nothing at all had happened and be friendly? But the look on her face... She didn't seem like she was all that open to friendly banter. He would keep it professional; that was the best strategy he could come up with at such short notice. If they had to interact, he would be polite and to the point. The rest of the time, he would just avoid her as best as he could. Was it cowardly? Sure. But it was the best-looking option out of a million really terrible options.

Feeling kind of sick, reality still not quite sinking in, Nash made his way back to the house before he could change his mind. He strode down the hall and knocked on the bedroom door, resisting the urge to run back outside. Meg opened it, looking up at him with a stony expression. If looks could kill, he would have dropped dead.

"Food's in the kitchen," he said.

"Yeah, that's usually where it is," she said dryly, and Nash pressed his lips together to keep from biting back. She clearly hated his guts; that much was obvious. But if Meg had held a grudge this long, then that was on her. He, on the other hand, was determined to be nothing but professional.

“You can help yourself to whatever you want,” trying and failing to sound hospitable. “Food’s being covered by your company.”

“Okay.”

They stared at each other for another couple of seconds.

“Right,” he said, taking a step back. “Let me know if you need anything.”

She shut the door in his face, and he let out a breath. This was going to be the exact opposite of a good time.

CHAPTER 6

MEG

The first three days on Nash’s ranch were the longest days of Meg’s life. Even though she’d hated being on the industrial farm, even though she’d despised Mitch with every fiber of her being, it had still been less painful than this. Even the hellscape that had been high school and the academic nightmare of college seemed preferable to all of this. At least back at the industrial yards she hadn’t cared. She could stomp around the place all she liked; being grumpy was kind of part of the job towards the end. But here... God, it was just so awkward. She could see Nash’s shoulders tense up whenever she was within sight of him. Not to mention her own body turned to ice whenever he was close.

On the lots she was still someone with power. No matter how much Mitch liked to grandstand, the farm hands knew who to go to if they wanted anything actually done and their questions properly answered. Meg held her own perfectly well against all of those men for all of those years, climbing her way to the top. But here, as soon as she saw Nash, she was turned into that anxious teenager all over again. It was a sickening

mixture of nerves, dread, embarrassment and anger. It wasn't even a red-hot anger she could use as fuel; it was just a sad sort of hurt that didn't help her one bit.

She thought she had dealt with all of her feelings about him long ago. Apparently not. Apparently she had just stuffed them away, deep down, and ignored them. Now they were back after festering away in the dark for a decade.

At least Nash was just as determined to avoid her as she was to avoid him. That made it a bit easier. They made a dance of it over those first few days.

And thank God she had a job to do. Meg was able to bury her nose in her checklist from dawn till dusk, barely setting foot inside until she absolutely had to. Determined to give an unbiased review of the property because she was a professional, Meg was pleasantly surprised by what she found on the Callahan Ranch. It was a little run-down, sure. There were windows and walls patched together with duct tape for a quick fix. Anywhere the cattle and horses hadn't grazed lately was overgrown and wild. But overall, the place was annoyingly perfect for what Midwest Ag Solutions was looking for. She managed to tick off a whole page with nothing but positive answers. Compared to some of the horror stories she'd heard from previous evaluations, she could see why the company had been so desperate to get their hands on the place.

The horses were clearly spoiled rotten. The two geldings were friendly, curious creatures who approached her with ears pricked forward. Meg hadn't gotten around to giving them a full vet check yet, but just from a glance she knew they were healthy and happy. There was a pregnant mare too, and despite looking like she hated the world, she still looked healthy. Though all mares seemed to hate the world just a little bit, even when they weren't pregnant. So that was nothing out of the ordinary. She didn't approach Meg with open curiosity, and Meg was smart enough to leave her be. She'd rather not get bitten, thank you very much.

The small herd of cattle here were just as well-kept. Their coats were just as glossy as the horses, and from what she could tell, all their feet were in better condition than even the cattle on the industrial lot. And that was saying something. Meg hadn't known what to expect when she realized Nash was the one running the place, but it hadn't been this. He had always been a slapdash sort of person, doing things halfway more often than not. To see all of these animals in immaculate condition was astounding. And Meg absolutely refused to let it defrost her attitude towards him, even in the slightest.

But still... a tiny, traitorous part of her wanted to be happy that he'd clearly found something he was good at. Or at least passionate enough about that he had been willing to put in the hard work to learn. Not that she had any intention of asking him how he ended up doing this for a living. For three days she had managed not to say a word to him, and he hadn't said anything to her either. That was how she preferred they carry on.

Unfortunately, she was a human being and had to eat. Eating meant going to the kitchen. Going to the kitchen meant a much higher likelihood of being in a room with Nash Callahan. The thought crossed her mind to buy a bar fridge and a camp stove and keep them in her room so she wouldn't have to venture into the kitchen at all. Then she slapped that thought down like she was swatting at a mosquito. She wasn't going to be so ridiculous. She certainly wasn't going to shrink and hide every time she needed to eat. She had to set herself some sort of standards.

Still... Meg usually tried to time her visits to the kitchen so that their paths wouldn't cross. She even listened at the door of her room for a solid minute, trying to decipher if there was anyone else on the ground floor, but heard nothing. Which was still as ridiculous as thinking about buying a bar fridge, but whatever. She was the only one who had to know how wound up she was being.

So in the privacy of her own room and her own head, Meg listened at the door like a

weirdo and made sure that she didn't hear any trace of Nash before leaving, venturing out to make herself some dinner. Well, she'd heard wrong. She waltzed into the kitchen, starving and looking forward to food, to find Nash already there. Meg stopped with one foot in the air, like some sort of cartoon character. At least Nash was equally caught off guard, looking at her with raised eyebrows as he stood at the stove.

It was the first time since she'd arrived at the ranch that they'd been this close. Meg briefly debated if turning around and leaving without a word was an option. But she stood there too long, staring at Nash because he looked more than a little bit ridiculous. He was just sobignow, and here he was, standing over the tiny little stove, stirring a pot with his wooden spoon.

They stared at each other in silence for a few seconds. It was still just so strangeto be back together like this, seeing Nash as an adult and seeing him making dinner like everything in the world was normal. This time, Nash was the first one to break the awkward quiet with a question.

"Do you want some?" he asked, pointing his spoon at the pot. It was some sort of beef chili, the steam puffing out of the pot in fragrant clouds. Yeswas the first thought her stupid, hungry brain threw out. It smelled amazing. It would probably taste even better, especially spooned onto the buttered bread rolls that Nash had ready on the counter.

"No," she said, praying that her stomach didn't rumble and give her away. "I'm going to make a sandwich."

God, why did she say that? First of all she didn't want a sandwich, not really. She had been about to fry up some hash browns or something, maybe some sausage and eggs too. Instead, she was going to make asandwichfor dinner. Why didn't she just say she was getting a glass of water? Then she could have headed straight back to her room

until he was done. Now she had to stay in the kitchen and make the stupid sandwich because her pride was absolutely not going to let her back out of that one. Apparently setting foot on this ranch meant that she'd lost all ability to even think straight.

Her whole brain was scrambled, and it was all this idiot's fault. A decade later and he was sending her into a spin all over again.

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With neither of them saying anything else, Meg went to the cabinets and started preparing the sandwich that she didn't really want. Nash had told her, in one of their microscopic interactions on her first day, to help herself to whatever was in the kitchen, and she hadn't been shy about it. She wasn't going to starve for this idiot, so she pulled out bread and cheese and was determined to set the world record for how fast someone could make a sandwich.

Nash, meanwhile, kept his back turned to her, poking at his chili at random intervals, his shoulders perfectly square and perfectly still. Meg slapped her sandwich onto a plate, put the bread and cheese away, and promptly walked out of the kitchen without another word from either of them. Crisis averted. But next time she was going to be listening at her door much more carefully to check if Nash was downstairs, and she didn't care one bit how much of a lunatic that made her.

Meg dozed for a bit, waking up with her phone face down on her chest, the open window dark, and her stomach grumbling in protest.

She was starving, which wasn't at all a surprise. She'd eaten the cheese sandwich out of spite and determination, but it really hadn't hit the spot after a full day's work. Checking more carefully this time, she was certain that the house was quiet and there hadn't been any footsteps through the hallway. Taking extra measures, Meg peeked her head out to check if the coast was clear. She felt like a meerkat, surveying for predators before she tiptoed down the hall.

At this point she couldn't even be bothered to cook; she was just going to make three more sandwiches and take them back to her room. She didn't care what she ate as long as she wasn't hungry anymore and could fall back asleep with a full belly. She'd

certainly filled up on worse throughout college.

Back in the kitchen she flicked on the light and froze. Sitting on the kitchen counter was a dish covered in aluminum foil with a bright yellow sticky note on top.

Help yourself, it read in chunky block letters.

Meg peeled back the foil, half expecting some sort of booby trap to jump out at her. Instead, it was the leftovers from the dinner Nash had cooked, complete with a bread roll on the side.

Meg thought about whether to eat it way longer than she probably should have. Because if Nash thought that this was some sort of olive branch, then it wasn't going to work. Absolutely not. Except it was working, just a little bit, even though Meg wouldn't admit it under torture. He didn't have to do this, leave food out for her. But he'd done it anyway.

It was Meg's hunger that made the decision for her. She reheated it in the microwave and sat at the table, alone, to eat. It was annoying how good it was, and she wiped the plate clean with the roll, enjoying every last morsel despite herself. With the dish washed and the note in the trash, she scurried back to her room before she was caught accepting Nash's offering of leftovers. If she left no evidence, then at least she could deny this ever happened.

She fell into bed with sleep, as always, acting as the perfect way to escape for just a few hours.

"Meg?"

She had been so deeply asleep that there hadn't even been space to dream. There had just been a deep blackness, empty and silent. But even then, the voice calling out her

name cut through all of it.

“Meg?”

“What? What’s up?”

Meg blinked and rubbed her eyes, trying to get them to open. Her feet were tangled in the blankets and there was a weird cramp in her arm from lying on it, but so many years of being on call overnight left her no choice but to wake up. It was pure instinct at this point.

Nash was standing a few feet from her bed, fully dressed, boots and all. He was using the flashlight on his phone, pointing it at the ground instead of turning on the big light.

“It’s Tilly,” he said, voice soft.

“Who?” The name rang a bell, but all of Meg’s brainpower was focused on sitting up and pulling her hair out of her face.

“My mare,” Nash said patiently.

“Oh yeah. Gray, grumpy. Got it.”

“I think she’s giving birth. She’s all out of sorts. I’m worried...”

His face was all wrinkled up in a frown, making him look ten years older and also childlike at the same time. Meg rolled her shoulders and stood up.

“All righty, let’s go check on her.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. It’s what I’m here for. C’m on.”

It seemed to surprise him that she was so willing, but there was a big streak of relief there as well. She might want to avoid him at all costs, but that was when everything was running smoothly and she could afford to ignore his existence. Hearing there was an animal that needed care instantly switched Meg’s brain into work mode. Personal grudges didn’t count in work mode. So she hit pause on all those emotions, shoving them back into the corners of her brain. She’d follow him out and check on the horse because she’d meant what she’d said. It was what she was here to do.

There was no real point in changing out of her pajamas, so she pulled on her socks and boots, grabbed her coat and trailed after Nash out of the house towards the stables. They followed the bob and sway of the phone’s flashlight in silence. But for the first time since Meg had arrived here, the silence wasn’t awkward.

Nash was clearly worried; that certainly wasn’t hard to figure out. His footsteps were quick as they walked through the dark. It was quiet here, with the rest of the world asleep around them. When Meg was called out on the industrial farms, there was always noise: fences rattling and cattle lowing, the crunch of footsteps, both animal and human. Out here there was a sort of peace that Meg hadn’t felt for a very, very long time. So, no, she couldn’t find it in herself to be cranky about being woken up in the middle of the night.

Even if she was going to be grumpy about it, it was her literal job while she was here as part of the evaluation. No amount of sleep deprivation or decades-long grudges was going to keep her from doing her job. Not to mention, seeing a newborn baby foal? She’d wade through volcanic ash if she had to. A stroll through a field at two in the morning was hardly a challenge.

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As Meg walked in, she noticed that Nash had left some solar lamps on in the stables, illuminating the space with soft, warm light. Tilly was in her stall and was, indeed, out of sorts.

“Hey, girl,” Meg said in a quiet voice. She got an angry snort in return, which was honestly fair. The mare was pacing in circles around her stall, so much so that she had made a track through her sawdust bedding. She would huff and snort, her ears back, pausing to think about lying down, deciding not to and then starting to pace all over again. So she was definitely uncomfortable, but nothing out of the ordinary. Certainly nothing that rang any alarm bells in Meg’s mind. The mare’s eyes weren’t rolling around, and they were still bright and alert. She wasn’t foaming at the mouth or anything, just snorting out of discomfort. She wasn’t happy, but she was fine.

Nash, however, watched his horse with a laser-like focus, taking in every twitch. The two geldings were in their own stalls, heads over the gates and their ears pointed forward in curiosity as they watched Tilly walk in circles. They obviously knew better than to make a ruckus, keeping quiet so that Tilly didn’t snort at them. Wise boys.

“She’s all right,” Meg said to Nash, who had his hands shoved into his pockets.

“She doesn’t seem all right,” he said. There was no trace of an argument in his voice, just pure concern. His frosty demeanor had vanished, and instead he was just a big ball of anxious concern.

“She’s not having fun, I’ll give you that,” said Meg. “But this is all normal, I promise.”

“Hmm.”

Not once did his eyes leave Tilly, his gaze circling with her as she paced. How long had it been since Meg had seen someone this engaged with their animals? This concerned?

People got worried about the cattle on the industrial lots, sure, but at the end of the day, it was all about business. And it was big business too. Efficiency and numbers were king, and there wasn't room for emotions in that mix. So looking at Nash now, well, it was just a little bit heartbreaking.

Meg still had no idea how he'd ended up running a whole ranch by himself. It wasn't like they'd had a proper conversation since she'd arrived, let alone delved into each other's lives. She'd just assumed he was doing all of this begrudgingly, that he wasn't actually invested. But he looked nothing if not invested right now. He looked like it was the most important thing in the world.

“I guess we're having a sleepover in the stable, then?” she asked. Nash finally tore his eyes away from the mare.

“You don't have to,” he started to say, already pushing her away again, already closing himself off and hunching his shoulders. Meg rolled her eyes.

“Yeah, I do. You'll just come running to get me again. And as far as stables go, this is way nicer than where most of my campouts have been lately.”

Nash was still looking at her skeptically. When did he get so closed off to everything? Closed off to help, even? It started an itch in Meg's brain, a desire to find out more instead of just ignoring him. He was still a major jerk, that much was true, but... but now curiosity was biting at her ankles, suddenly more powerful than her desire to avoid him. How did the carefree boy she once knew grow into someone so shielded

and cautious? Meg buried a sigh. Her curiosity was going to be the death of her one of these days.

“Nash,” she said firmly. “I want to, so chill. Besides, I think Tilly’s happier with both of us here.”

Nash’s skeptical look stayed firmly on his face, but they both looked over at Tilly, and Meg’s words seemed to be proven true. She was still pacing and still pretty unhappy with the whole ordeal, but she had stopped snorting and constantly stamping her feet.

“Okay,” Nash said, giving in. “Thanks.”

Meg just shrugged, not knowing what to say in return. The awkwardness between them had returned, both of them watching Tilly to avoid looking at one another. Since they were going to be stuck here for a while, Meg was trying to decide whether she should try to break the tension or let the silence linger when she felt a nibble on the end of her ponytail.

“Excuse me,” she said, turning around and pulling her hair free from Gadget’s mouth. “That doesn’t belong to you.” She gave him a pat along the snout anyway. “You’re a troublemaker then, huh?”

“Yep,” Nash said, answering for the horse. He wasn’t smiling; he hadn’t even relaxed his hunched-up shoulders. But he was looking at Gadget with the same fondness he’d shown Tilly.

“He’s the reason I have this,” Nash said, pointing to the scar that sliced through his eyebrow. “Flung me into a fence for no good reason.”

So that solved at least one mystery. Meg’s curiosity came roaring back like a forest

fire. If they were going to be out in the stable for the rest of the night, surely talking would be better than stilted silence? Her vow to interact with Nash as little as possible wasn't some contract written in blood. She could break it whenever she pleased. Right?

"I was wondering about that," she said, taking the opening she'd been offered. "Looks like it would have needed a fair few stitches."

Nash kept his eyes firmly on Tilly, his arms crossed against his chest. Now Meg was just waiting for the conversation to falter, for him to grunt a half answer and the silence to come crashing back down. But to her surprise, Nash actually answered, even if his voice was cautious.

"My neighbor superglued it shut and then drove me to the hospital," he said. "Didn't break anything, so I got sent home with an ice pack and some painkillers."

"Your neighbor seems very... neighborly, then," she said, even though she wasn't all that sure about the super glue part. A smile made Nash's mouth twitch.

"He is. If you see some crazy old guy named August wandering around, that'd be him. You probably won't. He only emerges, like, twice a year."

"Crazy old guy, noted."

Now that they were talking, actually talking, Meg was desperate not to lose momentum.

"I've got a pretty gnarly scar on my thigh from a steer," she said. It wasn't a pleasant story to latch onto, but it was better than letting them drift back to cold silence.

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“Yeah?” Nash asked. He even looked a little interested, his scarred eyebrow raised and looking at her, rather than Tilly. “What happened?”

“The steer got injured on the lot, no idea how. I was watching him from a distance because, you know, I’m not a complete idiot...”

A quick grin flashed across Nash’s face so fast that Meg wasn’t sure if she imagined it. She licked her lips and carried on.

“Anyway, some absolutely brain-dead farm hand started yelling and banging around to move it into a different pen because...well, I don’t even know why. Anyway, it was stressed, and then it was spooked. And then I had a steer horn halfway through my leg before I had a chance to fully clear the fence.”

Her hand reached down to her thigh instinctively. Meanwhile, Nash grimaced and shook his head.

“I hope you tore a chunk out of the guy,” he said.

“Unfortunately, he’d been fired before I was able to.”

“They could have waited to sack him until you’d been let loose on him, maybe let you kick him real hard in the leg. Seems only fair.”

Was that... a joke? Did Nash make a joke? Well, this was progress, at least.

“Do you need to sit down?” he asked.

“What?”

“Because of your leg? Do you need to sit down?”

Meg smiled, and it felt a little foreign on her face.

“I’m fine. Honest.”

“Mmm.”

He let it drop and went back to watching Tilly with eagle eyes.

Her pacing had stopped altogether, and with a huff, she managed to lay down on the sawdust, rolling onto her side and breathing heavily.

Nash took a couple of steps forward.

“Nash,” Meg said quietly but firmly. “Leave her be.”

Nash looked back at her, his face all crumpled up again.

“What if she needs me though?”

“She has you. She knows you’re here. But it’s better to give them space. She’s calm. That means everything is going okay.”

Nash took one begrudging step backwards, and Meg saw it as the sign of trust that it was. He was listening to her advice even though it looked like he wanted nothing more than to be in the stall with the mare.

“I get that you’re not just relaxing, you know,” Nash said.

Meg looked over at him.

“What do you mean?”

“Like, you’re all calm and collected, but I know you’re keeping an eye on her. I know you’re not just brushing me off. If there were anything to be concerned about, you would jump to it. Whatever you think about me, I know you wouldn’t neglect an animal, any animal, over it. Just so you know.”

All of the ice that had been held in Meg’s chest over the last couple of days melted in an instant. It wasn’t exactly a pleasant feeling, the melting inside her. But at least it wasn’t cold anymore.

“I know,” she said. “Yeah, I know.”

The conversation finally stalled because what do you say after that? The silence that filled the space between them wasn’t hostile, at least. It was just both of them waiting patiently, keeping an eye on Tilly and trying to be quiet for her sake.

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Because Meg couldn't sit still for more than ten minutes without going insane, she gave both Gadget and Nickel a once-over just for something to do. She had to admit again, mostly to herself, that she was immensely impressed with the care Nash had taken with his animals. Without doing literal blood work, as far as she could tell, the horses were in perfect health. The same could be said for all the cattle that she'd been looking over since she'd arrived. So often on these evaluations, the assessors came back with, at best, ranchers trying their hardest to keep up and falling a little short. At worst there were horror stories of straight-up neglect, with animal welfare getting called in before the land was even bought out. But these horses were perfect. Their stalls were immaculate, they were bright-eyed and curious, and Meg had noticed several bags of vitamins and supplements while snooping around.

So maybe, maybe, Nash wasn't being a closed-off, acidic blockhead just for the hell of it. Maybe the guy was just tired. And if he was that exhausted because his animals were this well taken care of, then Meg couldn't find it in herself to keep hating him. She wanted to keep hating him because that would be way easier. Hatred and anger weren't pleasant emotions, but they were easy. Being forgiving and being kind, those feelings took effort. She could still think he was an idiot, sure, but it looked like hate was out the window for now.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye as he sat on a bale, fiddling with a strand of hay, oblivious.

Eventually, Tilly's breathing grew quicker and shallower. There was more snorting and huffing of discomfort with every passing minute. As the birth got closer, she made even more noise. A couple of times Nash went to enter the stall, but Meg shook her head at him. He would frown and look even more concerned about his horse, but

he would obey Meg's silent command and sit back down.

Slowly, Meg stood up and sidled into a position where she could watch what was happening without Tilly taking notice of her. Her policy was to only interfere if something was going wrong. So far, being all up in Tilly's business would only stress the mare out. She was doing just fine on her own.

Then Nash was beside Meg like he'd appeared out of thin air. For such a big guy, he could apparently move in perfect silence. He stood beside her, taking Meg's lead and staying silent and still. They hadn't stood this close together since she'd arrived. Nash was close enough that Meg could feel the warmth from his arm, so close to hers but not touching. She'd been so careful to avoid him that now being this close was overwhelming. It shocked her that he still smelled the same, a smell that had always been distinctly Nash. So many memories came rushing back to her, but this time they were all the good ones. She thought about all of the hours they had spent together in that treehouse until the days towards the end of high school when they'd grown too big but still squeezed inside. With a sudden rush of realization, Meg didn't want to ignore him anymore. She didn't want that icy feeling to come back to her chest whenever she thought about him. In fact she'd very much like to reach out and touch his arm, just to know what the soft flannel of his shirt felt like under her fingertips. Just to properly feel the warmth of him.

Then it all happened in a gush of fluid like a dam breaking, and Meg was thrown back into reality. Tilly whinnied, jumping to her feet with a surprising amount of agility, snorting and huffing once again, head low to the ground. At her feet was a foal, still folded up in a ball, looking around like it was surprised to be there. It was hard to tell what color it was, considering it was still soaking wet, but it looked to be gray, just like its mother. Its tangle of spindly legs immediately tried to unfurl themselves, but its whole body was so off balance just sitting that it wobbled back and forth like a spinning top.

Meg felt herself grinning ear to ear. She looked up and Nash was smiling just as wide. It was probably that she was just overtired, had a long week, and was running on empty, but the sight of it took her breath away. There he was, the old Nash shining through, bright and exuberant. Seeing that smile threw Meg back in time, and she had to fight hard to clamber back to the present.

Nash, for the millionth time, made to step forward as if to enter the stall.

Before she could stop herself, Meg grabbed his arm, her fingers gripping softly.

“Wait,” she said, her voice still soft so as not to startle Tilly or the foal. “Let them bond. She’s doing her job perfectly. You don’t want to distract her from that.”

Nash obeyed, just as he had every time before, stepping back beside Meg. She dropped her hand from his arm like it had been burned and decided to promptly forget that she’d ever touched him.

She focused her entire being on watching Tilly and the foal. She’d been right that Tilly was doing her job perfectly. She was sniffing and licking at her baby, cleaning it up, whickering softly to it. The foal let out a high-pitched whinny, and the geldings started getting restless in their own stalls, wanting to see what was going on. Tilly, of course, just snorted her disdain at them.

Meg and Nash watched, completely transfixed, for over an hour as the foal found its feet. After many wobbly and unsuccessful attempts, it was able to stand, legs spread wide and then began to nurse from Tilly with gusto. Meg was also finally able to tell that the foal was a female.

“She’s going to have just as bad an attitude as her mother,” Nash drawled when Meg told him it was a filly. “I can already tell.”

The thought didn't seem to upset him all that much though. There was still a smile hovering around his mouth, softening his whole face.

"Have you got a name for her?" Meg asked, determined not to think about the possible softness of Nash Callahan's mouth. God, a few sleep-deprived hours in a stable with the guy, and suddenly she was thinking about his mouth. Maybe she needed to get her head checked because this wasn't sane behavior.

"Opal," he said without missing a beat.

Meg raised an amused eyebrow. "Did you have that locked and loaded, ready to go?"

Nash shrugged. "Opal and Tilly, it fits nice."

"Yeah, it does."

As Opal started wobbling around on tiny hooves, the sun started to peek over the horizon. They'd been out in the barn all night, but Meg didn't mind, not when everything had gone so smoothly. Not having to jump in and interfere was always the best possible outcome.

"I'm starving," Nash said. "Let's go get breakfast."

With that, he finally tore his eyes away from the horses and wandered off back towards the house. As Meg followed behind him, suddenly starving, she couldn't help but notice how his shoulders were no longer hunched up like a protective wall. Maybe she wasn't the only one whose defenses had crumbled.

CHAPTER 7

MEG

There's a point in sleep deprivation where you move beyond tired and get giddy instead, like a little kid who's hyped up on sugar. Meg had reached that point long ago and was now pretty much delirious. Even if she went and laid down in bed, she felt too wired to even be able to sleep, like an overtired baby. Not to mention, there was the very important fact that she was starving.

As soon as they got back to the house, the new foal already up and about on wobbly legs, Meg headed straight for the kitchen. Straight to the fridge really, more on instinct than from any idea of what she was going to make. In fact, she stared at the contents of the refrigerator with blank eyes for a full two minutes. Then a pair of large hands rested on her shoulders and steered her out of the way.

"I think I'll be the one cooking," Nash said gently. His usual stony expression had softened in the early morning light.

"I can cook for myself," Meg protested. He just raised an eyebrow at her.

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“Yeah. Sure, you can. Why don’t you make some coffee instead? That doesn’t involve hot stoves and possible burns.”

“I’m fine,” she sniffed but followed his orders anyway, heading to the coffee machine on the corner of the counter.

“I know,” Nash placated, like she really was a cranky toddler. “Consider it a payment for waking you up in the middle of the night.”

Meg pursed her lips but stopped fighting. He was probably right... Handling a hot stove in her current daze probably wasn’t wise. And hot food sounded perfect right about now.

Meg started up the coffee machine, spooning in liberal amounts of grounds. She knew she was properly exhausted when she started getting impulsive. Impulsive over stupid stuff. Like the thought that she should just eat a teaspoon of the coffee grounds. If you could drink coffee, surely you could eat it too? That was what chocolate was anyway. Wasn’t it? They came from the same bean. Surely just a little nibble wouldn’t hurt; it would at least ease her curiosity.

Luckily, Nash scooted past her to get to the fridge, and she was freed from that spiral of bad ideas. Meg dumped the spoonful of coffee grounds into the machine and decided to keep that particular delirious impulse to herself.

He cracked a half dozen eggs into the skillet, added a colossal amount of bacon to a separate pan and ignited the old-fashioned gas stove. Almost immediately it started to hiss and crackle, and Meg couldn’t think of a better sound in the world.

“I’m assuming that you want some,” Nash drawled, gesturing at the stovetop. Meg had to make a conscious effort not to drool.

“You assumed correctly,” she said and sat down before she was tempted to do anything else stupid. She didn’t need an audience for her sleep-deprived shenanigans, thank you very much.

“My old bossneverwould have made me food for answering a night call,” she said with a yawn.

“I’m not your boss.”

“Contractually, you are.”

Nash just grunted in a disagreeing sort of way. “So your old boss was ungrateful?”

“Just an idiot in general. In a too-big hat.”

Nash snorted. “So he was clearly compensating for something, then.”

“Oh, definitely.”

He shook his head as he poked the eggs around the skillet.

Despite avoiding Nash at all costs while she’d been here, Meg had still been insatiably curious about how he’d ended up doing all of this. Yesterday she had zero intentions of asking any questions, but now... it seemed safer to edge towards asking personal questions with his back turned and his hands occupied by something else.

“So I have a question...” she started.

“Yeah?”

He sounded happy enough for her to ask, not defensive. His shoulders didn't hunch up or anything, so Meg went ahead and asked.

“How on earth did you end up running aranch?”

He turned a little to look over his shoulder at her, eyebrows raised because he definitely hadn't been expecting that. Then he laughed, one bright note, and for a second it was like the Nash she used to know had come back to life. Meg allowed herself a small smile, but only when he turned his back on her, his attention back on the skillet.

“Long story,” he said, poking at the bacon.

“I don't know about you, but I'm not planning on going anywhere anytime soon.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

She waited, letting him think, and sure enough he started to tell his “long story.”

“We had an uncle, me and Will, who passed away when I had just turned twenty. None of us had really seen him much. None of the family had. He was pretty much a recluse towards the end. Anyway, he left the place to me and Will.”

“Oh wow,” said Meg. “And how'd the rest of the family take that?”

“Most of them were just kind of baffled,” Nash said, flipping some eggs. “The rest were just relieved that they weren't the ones saddled with the responsibility of the place. Only a couple were mad that they didn't get the land so that they could sell it for a profit. But I never liked them anyway, so no losses there.”

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From this angle Meg could see a small smile lifting up the corner of Nash's mouth, the sunlight hitting his cheek through the kitchen window.

"Everyone told us to sell it, live off the money, you know, that sort of thing. But me and Will are a little stubborn."

"A little?"

He turned his head again and cocked an eyebrow at her. "Yeah. A little. And we were young and invincible, and we could totally take on a whole ranch by ourselves. Besides, neither of us had anything better to do. I was working shifts at the supermarket, just saving money 'cause there wasn't anywhere to spend it out here. And then I get handed a whole ranch to keep myself busy? I leapt at the chance. Didn't think anything could go wrong. And Will was excited for the adventure of it all. I guess I was just happy to be pointed in any sort of direction, you know?"

Nash had always been so carefree in school. Meg had always seen it as a positive thing, how he rolled with the punches, not held down by anything concrete. But hearing him talk about being directionless, it sounded sad. And kind of lonely.

"And is Will okay?" Meg asked hesitantly. Because she couldn't help but notice his absence while she was sitting here listening. Will had always been a little... odd. Prone to believing conspiracy theories, the sort of person that would fall face-first into a pyramid scheme. She couldn't help but assume the worst...

"He's fine," Nash said, and she could see that dimple on the side of his cheek again that meant he was smiling. "We had a few years working here together, and then he

met Lucy, and that was the end of that. He was head over heels the second he saw her. They wanted to live together and have a family of their own, and out here wasn't the place to do it. Town was better for them. Which I get, you know."

He still sounded sad about it though, as if Will moving on had left him directionless all over again. But then again Meg was probably reading way too much into it. The man before her was as good as a stranger. She needed to stop thinking of the boy she'd known inside and out. Everything was different now. Right? Right. Be practical. Meg just had to be practical. Which was hard when she was this sleep-deprived, but she was just going to have to persevere.

Either way she would have to think about it later because breakfast was ready, and Meg was no longer able to focus on anything but the bacon and eggs in front of her. Nash didn't even ask how much she wanted. He split the whole thing in two and piled up some plates, dumping one of them in front of Meg. He plopped a bottle of ketchup down in front of her as well.

"Do you still drench everything in ketchup like you're putting out a fire?" he asked dryly, sitting opposite and digging in.

"And what's wrong with that?"

"Nothing at all."

How was she supposed to remain practical when he kept remembering her little quirks so many years later?

At least she had a reason to keep quiet for a bit as they both shoveled food into their mouths like they were starving. It was delicious, hot and crispy, with enough grease to leave Meg's lips shiny. Along with the coffee that she got up and poured for them, she finally started to feel alive again. God, had she really been thinking of eating a

spoon of coffee grounds?

Meg's train of thought ground to a halt when she looked up and found Nash staring at her unashamedly.

"What?" she said.

"Are you all out of questions or something?" he asked, poking his fork into an egg yolk so that it ran over some bacon. "Never known you to be this quiet."

"Things can change."

"Yeah, your DNA changed too?"

"I've been eating. Can't talk and eat at the same time."

"Sure you can."

"Not in polite company, you can't."

"In what universe does this qualify as polite company?"

She coughed out a laugh but didn't ask anything else. There were too many questions to ask to pick just one. And this was nice. They were being nice to each other. She didn't want to ask something that verged on too personal and shatter the atmosphere that they'd found themselves in.

"I'll ask a question," Nash said.

"Hmm," Meg hummed noncommittally around a mouthful of bacon.

“This boss with the too-big hat? Is he the reason you came here?”

“He was the final straw,” Meg said honestly. “I made the head office give me a transfer.”

“Made them?”

Meg shrugged. “I’m too good for them to lose. They were falling all over themselves to keep me on the books.”

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Nash whistled and took a sip of his coffee. “See. I always knew you were going to be the best there ever was.”

Meg shoveled another bite of food into her mouth so that she didn’t have to respond. If he’d thought she was going to be the greatest, then why did he shove her away all those years ago, like she’d meant nothing? But that was in the past. Meg wasn’t going to delve back into all that nonsense. It was just a flippant remark from Nash, buttering her up. It didn’t mean he had been thinking about her all these years. It didn’t mean anything at all.

“You really love it here,” Meg said. “Even though it’s hard?”

Nash nodded firmly. “It’s the best thing I’ve ever done.”

“You take excellent care of your animals,” she said truthfully. Nash’s face lit up at that.

“I try,” he said.

“So why are you selling up, then?”

His face fell. Meg felt instantly embarrassed because the answer was glaringly obvious. Money. You could have all the good intentions in the world; if you didn’t have the money to back them up, it was all for nothing.

“Sorry,” she said, and he just shrugged as if he wasn’t offended.

“I gave it my best shot,” he said, making a valiant attempt at sounding chipper and failing miserably.

True, Meg thought. He had given it his best try, but he’d been doing it all alone. He hadn’t had anyone to help.

Well, help is here now. I could help.

How her attitude towards Nash had managed to do a complete one-eighty in less than twenty-four hours, Meg wasn’t quite sure. But she was sure, very sure, that the last thing she wanted to do was rip this place away from him. The thought of ticking off the ranch as nothing more than a suitable asset, for someone like Mitch to run... it made her physically sick.

“I mean, I can always fail your evaluation,” she said. “You know, if you wanted to back out of the sale.”

He gave her a look across the table, waiting for a punchline, some sort of got your moment. But Meg just stared back with a deadpan expression and a shrug.

“I mean,” he said, poking at an egg. “Sure, that sounds great. I don’t want to sell, but I need to. Also, why exactly are you going rogue on your employer?”

“Because working for a major corporation, I’ve come to realize that I hate them. Very much. So say you come up with a magical, last-minute solution to this whole thing... I will happily tell them that the soil is toxic and there are killer bees hiding around every corner.”

Nash rolled his eyes at that. “Because they would believe that excuse?”

“The people who make these decisions aren’t farmers. They’re office people. They

have no idea what actually goes on outside.”

“I’ll keep that in mind if I come across some sort of miracle.”

He thought she was joking, but Meg knew that she was going to spend every waking moment trying to think of ways to save this place.

So much for ignoring Nash Callahan...

CHAPTER 8

NASH

The air was clear in more ways than one. The morning itself was fresh and clean, the way it always was at this time of year. But more importantly, the ice between him and Meg seemed to have melted away over the past two days. Sure, it was still a little awkward when they interacted. But that was more to do with not knowing each other very well these days. There was going to be some sort of awkwardness with anyone staying on his ranch, settling into new routines and whatnot. But it was so much easier now, interacting with Meg. There was no longer a wall between them, and Nash’s stomach didn’t twist itself into knots at the sight of her. It wasn’t like they were suddenly best friends again, and it hurt to think that they probably never would be. But Meg didn’t seem to actively hate him anymore, and that was all Nash could ask for really.

He had no clue what had caused such a massive shift between them; all he knew was that it had started with Tilly giving birth to Opal, the forced proximity between them working wonders. Either way, he wasn’t going to turn his nose up at a gift from the universe. Nash was determined to just go about his day as usual so as not to jinx anything.

He had no clue where Meg was right now, and he wasn't about to go snooping for her. She didn't need to think that he was creeping around and spying on her. Not when their newfound truce was so fragile. So he was in the kitchen, by himself, drinking coffee that you could no longer call hot. For a handful of seconds, he could pretend that everything was back to normal. Pretend the ranch was running smoothly, or smoothly enough. Pretend an evaluation wasn't taking place, and he wasn't really thinking of selling up and moving on. But if he pretended life was normal again, that would mean pretending that Meg wasn't really there. Not all these new changes were bad, he supposed. Meg blasting back into his life was nowhere near bad.

The rumble of an engine snapped him back to reality. So much for having a few minutes to himself. It would be Will, because no one else ever came out this way. Nash would know the rattle of that truck's engine anywhere. Will and his family popped over on the weekends a couple of times a month. Nash checked his phone, because surely it wasn't the weekend already? But there it was, written out plain as day on the screen. With all of the madness that had been going on all week, Saturday had snuck up on him.

Well... guess he was entertaining Will and his wife today. He hoped they weren't expecting any sort of lunch fancier than sandwiches, because grocery shopping certainly hadn't been on his to-do list lately.

Nash drained the last of his coffee — grimacing because it was now the complete opposite of hot — and went out to talk to them.

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Will climbed out of the truck along with his wife, Lucy. They spent a minute getting their baby girl, Sammy, out of her car seat before greeting Nash, who took his time ambling up to them.

“What’s up?” Will asked, aggressively casual as always. He was a skinnier, quicker version of Nash and usually reminded people of a jackrabbit. Lucy, meanwhile, was all soft edges and pale skin. People didn’t tend to give her a lot of credit at first glance, but she could more than take care of herself.

“You guys must be bored to drive out all this way.”

“Heaven forbid we actually like you,” Lucy said with a grin, wrangling Sammy onto her hip.

“Thought we better pop in and see how everything was going with the evaluation,” Will said. He sounded kind of serious, which was so out of character that it took Nash by surprise.

Oh, yeah... the evaluation. He’d been so focused on Meg being the one to arrive that the whole concept of the ranch being looked over had taken a back burner.

“Uh...” Oh, God. He hadn’t even told Will that it was Meg that had turned up on his doorstep. Will was painfully aware of how badly things had ended between the two of them; he’d watched Nash descend into a pit of dread over the whole fiasco. So how was Nash even supposed to start explaining how the evaluation was going? His tongue froze, not knowing what to say.

“Aw, man. That bad, huh?” Will said, rubbing the back of his neck in just the same way that Nash did. While Lucy got distracted with Sammy, who was fussing over nothing in particular, Will grabbed Nash’s arm and pulled him a little way away.

“Come on, tell me. What’s happened? Is it going awful?”

“Well... no. Not awful. It’s going good. I think. Uh, it’s Meg.”

Will blinked a couple of times before he responded. “Who’s Meg? What are you talking about?”

“The person who’s staying here, the one the corporate folks said they were going to send out to look over the place...”

“Yeah?”

“It’s Meg. Meg Whitmore. From school.”

Will looked like he was short-circuiting as he absorbed what Nash had just said. It took a full ten seconds and felt remarkably similar to when Nash had looked up to find Meg standing right in front of him. The whole thing was too much to compute all at once.

“Wait,” Will said, waving his hands about as if it would help to clear his thoughts better. “Like, Meg, Meg? Meg who you were head over heels for to the point it had you acting stupid? That Meg?”

“Shutup,” Nash hissed, because he still didn’t know where Meg was right this second, and if she happened to walk in on this conversation, he might actually self-combust.

Will gave him a dry look.

“What?” he said. “Don’t want everyone knowing about the torch you carried for her? Even though it was visible from space?”

“No. I don’t. Because it was forever ago.”

Yeah, he definitely didn’t feel anything towards her now. God, he couldn’t even lie to himself. Will, unsurprisingly, saw right through him.

“Ah-huh. So she still doesn’t know how bad the puppy love really was?”

“No. And she’s not going to know, because you are going to keep it to yourself.”

Will rolled his eyes. “Seriously? Isn’t that going to make things awkward while she’s here, you know, working.”

If only he knew. But their truce was so fragile right now that a mild wind could blow it all to pieces. There was no way on earth Nash was going to risk it by digging up the past.

“Things are fine,” Nash insisted. “We’ve been civil, getting to know each other again. It’s all good.”

“Ah-huh.”

“But like I said, you’re not going to breathe a word about it and then things will continue to be good.”

Will looked supremely unconvinced. “So you’re going for the whole ‘burying your feelings and hoping for the best’ strategy, are you? Because it’s worked out so well before.”

“There are no feelings,” Nash insisted, and they both knew it was a bald-faced lie. “Feelings are non-existent. She’s here for work, like you said. She’s a big fancy vet for a mega corporation. This is an entirely professional relationship. Any feelings are in the distant past. Very distant.”

“Ah-huh.”

“Yeah,ah-huh. Swear. Not a word.”

Will rolled his eyes again. “Yeah, fine. Whatever makes you feel better, bud.”

“Thanks for the sincerity. It’s touching.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Hey, Nash!”

Lucy was making her way over from the truck, Sammy swaddled up tight in her arms, pouting but content for the moment.

“Hey, Lucy,” Nash said. “How’s things?”

“Aw, you know,” she said with a shrug, her short dark hair getting blown about by the breeze as she handed Sammy off to Will. “Same old, same old. How’s the evaluation going?”

She looked worried as she asked.

“Stroke of luck,” Will announced cheerfully, and Nash was immediately on alert. “The evaluator is a veterinarian who turned out to be an old school friend.”

Nash glared daggers at his brother while Will just smiled sweetly. Oblivious to their

silent feud, Lucy's face brightened a little.

"That's good news," she said. "Takes the formality of it all away, I guess. What's his name?"

"Hername," Nash corrected. "Meg."

"Wow, jeez," Lucy said, looking impressed. "Being a female livestock vet is nothing to sneeze at."

"Yeah, she's pretty impressive."

"Is she?" Will said, eyes wide with mock innocence. Nash was getting ready to duct tape his mouth shut when they were interrupted.

"You guys talking about me?"

Meg had finally made an appearance, and it took all of Nash's self-control to remain standing upright. Ever since she'd got to the ranch, she'd been wearing any combination of jeans, boots and her thick leather jacket. But here she was, walking towards them, wearing a bright yellow sundress, her boots shined up and her auburn hair loose down her back instead of rolled up into a knot on top of her head. Nash felt like he needed someone to do CPR on him, his heart needing to be reminded how to do its job.

Thank God for Lucy, who spoke first and saved him from embarrassing himself.

"I love your dress," she said as a way of greeting. "I'm Lucy, hi."

Meg stopped mid-step and looked down at herself, as if she had no clue about how otherworldly she looked.

“I’m Meg,” she said with a small laugh. “And thanks. I saw other people here and thought I better look halfway presentable.”

“Please,” Lucy scoffed. “I probably have baby spit-up on me somewhere.”

“Same,” Will said, catching Meg’s attention. “How you doing, Meg? Been a while, huh?”

It took a moment, but then Meg realized who it was she was looking at.

“Will,” she said warmly. “Long time, no see.”

“I hear you’re a ‘big fancy vet’ now?” Will said, innocent as anything.

“A vet, anyway, I don’t know about the big and fancy part.”

“Don’t you guys earn, like, crazy money?” Lucy asked.

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Nash sighed internally. He loved Lucy; he really did. She was great. But she had never had a filter between her brain and her mouth. Luckily, Meg seemed to take it in stride.

“Uh, well, yeah... can’t deny that. I’ve worked my way up to two hundred thousand, so, you know, I’m pretty comfortable.”

Will let out a low whistle. “I should have studied harder,” he said with a shake of his head.

“But if you had done something with your life, you would have never met me,” said Lucy with a fond smile.

“True. The world needs degenerates like us.”

“You’re not a degenerate,” Meg tutted.

“Yeah, I am,” Will said, accepting his lot in life.

“He is,” agreed Lucy with a roll of her eyes. “How this man hasn’t died of salmonella yet, I have no idea.”

“Will,” said Meg, looking slightly horrified. “You’re not still eating food beyond its expiration date, are you?”

“It’s just a guide!” he exclaimed, throwing his free hand up in the air. “The supermarkets bump those numbers up because they want you coming back sooner to

buy more food. I've read all about it."

"Oh, my God." Lucy sighed under her breath. Even Sammy gurgled in dismay at her father.

"You're quiet," Meg said suddenly, pointing a glance at Nash.

"I've got nothing to say."

It was true. It was also true that he had nothing to say because he still hadn't recovered from seeing Meg in her yellow sun dress. He'd tried to avoid looking at her altogether, because the second he laid eyes on her freckled shoulders, he was ready to go into cardiac arrest all over again.

"At least tell me you don't eat expired food like this idiot," Meg said good-naturedly, jabbing a thumb at Will.

"It's aguide," Will snipped.

"No," said Nash, because despite joking around, Meg seemed to expect an answer, like she cared if he was part of the conversation or not. "I've got enough problems without getting food poisoning or whatever it is Will is going to end up with."

"Sammy," said Will, talking to his baby. "Your mama and your uncle are very dramatic. Did you know that?"

"Anyways," said Lucy, steering them away from the path that probably led to Will talking about more of his crackpot conspiracy theories. "We were going to come here, and I was going to make some tea because I stick to expiration dates..."

"It's aguide."

“And we were going to snoop on this whole inspection thing under the guise of being polite. But we can just drop the guise and you can tell me all about it. How’s that sound?”

“Oh,” Meg said, still getting used to Lucy’s forthright attitude. “Yeah, sure. That sounds good.”

“Great! So what does a farm vet actually do? Because I get cats and dogs, but what do you do for cows? Do cows get sick?”

Lucy rattled off questions faster than Meg could answer them, linking an arm through Meg’s and dragging her off towards the house.

Nash watched them go. Meg seemed... happy. The whole time she’d been here, she’d been like a stone wall. It was only in the last forty-eight hours that she had even talked to him in full sentences. But she’d just met Lucy and was acting like they were best friends. It made it a thousand times clearer how much she had really hated him upon arriving.

He looked back over at his brother, and Will was side-eyeing him something fierce.

“Yeah,” Will said, quiet enough that only the two of them could hear. “Distant past. Long gone. Definitely no feelings lingering or nothing.”

“Don’t you dare go there,” Nash hissed out the side of his mouth. Nash and Will continued to stand there, staring at each other.

“Boys?”

Lucy and Meg were watching them having their staring contest with raised eyebrows and faint smirks.

“Everything all right?” Lucy finished.

“Fine,” Nash said, sounding a little too chipper to be believable. “It’s nothing. Just brother stuff, you know how it is.”

“Yeah. I remember,” Meg said, with a sly lilt in her voice. “Nothing changes, does it? You two are still exactly the same.”

“They’re never going to grow out of it, are they?” Lucy asked Meg, with a long-suffering shake of her head.

“I doubt it,” Meg drawled, as if they were both lost causes. “I think I read a study somewhere that said your personality is set in stone by the age of eight or something...”

“Then there’s no hope, is there?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Can you stop talking about us like we’re not here?” Will said while the ladies giggled at themselves.

“If you’re feeling left out, stop bickering and come and join the grown-up conversation,” Lucy said, continuing her way to the house without a backwards glance. Will followed obediently, giving Nash one last pointed look over his shoulder. It took all his self-control to not mime a “you’re dead if you say anything” motion at Will. Nash shoved his hands in his pockets to resist the urge.

Meg waited for him. “Are you okay?” she asked when he caught up to her.

“Yeah, why?”

“I don’t know, you went all quiet. Is Will being mean to you?”

She said it with a sly grin. The joy of having her willing to talk to him again was enough to get Nash to smile.

“I’m fine.”

That was enough for her. She nodded and followed the others up to the house while he tagged along behind.

He wasn’t fine, not really, not when he was experiencing a whole new wave of realizations.

Meg had been here all week, and in roughly two minutes she’d shown more warmth and sweetness to Will and Lucy than she had to Nash at all. When he had been standing in the kitchen, he had been thinking how grateful he was that she didn’t seem to actively hate him anymore. He’d thought that maybe this cool, closed-off demeanor that she had was closer to who she was these days, that he was finally getting to see who Meg had grown up to be.

But on hearing guests arrive, with no idea of who it might be, Meg had come out with a megawatt smile and an excess of hospitality.

Eighteen-year-old Nash had thought it best to push her away, all for the greater good. He’d always assumed, or maybe hoped, that any pain he had caused had been fleeting. But now... well, seeing the difference between how she acted around him versus other people, how bad had it really been? How much hurt had he put her through?

CHAPTER 9

MEG

So much about running a ranch came down to the tedious task of maintaining fences. If even one panel goes down without you noticing, then all your livestock can wander off and get lost, stolen or killed. And that's precisely the opposite of what you want to happen to your cattle, isn't it? That was how Nash was planning to spend the day, roaming around the perimeters of each field, checking what might need repairs.

Meg still wasn't used to having so much time on her hands. She'd gone from working till she was borderline delirious to actually having whole hours to herself. In theory it was great. In reality she was bored out of her brain.

"Can I come?" she asked as Nash was chugging down the last of his coffee.

"You want to come check fences?"

"Yeah?"

"Why?" he asked, looking amused.

"Because I'm bored," Meg said with an honest shrug.

"Checking fences is boring too, you know."

"It's less boring than hanging around here on my own."

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There was also the fact that Meg was here in the first place because she was supposed to be evaluating the ranch. Not a whole lot of evaluating had been happening. Nothing at all if you wanted to get technical about it. Between navigating being thrown together with Nash, horses giving birth and recovering from the depths of burnout, Meg had barely even scratched the surface of the job she was here to do. The problem was that now she didn't want to do it. She didn't want to be partly responsible for taking this place away from Nash. Not to mention, the longer she was away from the stifling world of the industrial livestock yards, the less she wanted to add yet another smaller farm to their catalog. As her fragile new relationship with Nash thawed out, she became less and less certain about what she was actually here for?—

“Come on then,” said Nash, interrupting her internal spiral of doom. “You can ride Nickel if you're that interested in coming along.”

They could take the truck around the property, sure. That would be the more efficient way to do things. Instead, they saddled up the horses and decided to do things the old-fashioned way. Nash insisted it was just to keep the horses fit and healthy, but Meg suspected he just wanted the opportunity to go riding. She'd never seen him enjoy something as much as he enjoyed taking care of these animals. But who could blame him? As soon as she climbed on top of Nickel, Nash riding ahead on Gadget, Meg could feel her whole body start to unwind.

This was what she needed. Sitting indoors had never really been her style, and even when she'd been outside on the feedlots with the cattle, it was still a whole bunch of steel fences, flat ground and rectangular buildings.

Nash's ranch couldn't be more different. As they rode from pasture to pasture, the land swelled and dipped, morphing from hills to shallow valleys. The grass was green and thick, so fresh you could smell it, and trees dotted the landscape, making it look like a storybook. Then there was the sky — blue as crystal and reaching on forever. Meg found herself straining her neck with how much she was looking up at it. You'd think she'd never been outside before, but being out here in all this openness was making her realize just how closed off and oppressive the yards really were.

At least Nash didn't have to witness her existential crisis while he rode slightly ahead of her, his head constantly dipping up and down to inspect the fences. Occasionally he'd kick a foot out and tap at some of the wooden posts, but he was so engrossed in his task that Meg was free to soak it all in in relative privacy.

They spent a good hour riding around checking the fences, and even then, they hadn't explored all of the ranch. They hadn't spoken much, but the silence between them was no longer awkward. In fact, Meg had been enjoying herself immensely.

Eventually, Nash came to a halt and Meg stopped beside him. This was the farthest she'd ventured from the house. Right now it felt like they were the only two people on earth.

Nash was giving her a funny look, one she couldn't read at all. It was like he was thinking really hard about something.

"Those fences are looking real good," Meg said dryly, hoping to snap him out of it. "You know, 'cause I've definitely been helping this whole time."

An amused grin flickered across his face. But then the look of concentration came back, and Meg felt like he was looking straight through the middle of her.

"I wanna show you something," he said, and without any more explanation than that,

he took off across the field. Meg followed — of course she did — encouraging Nickel into a canter to keep up with Nash. They were heading towards a cluster of trees, a massive and ancient oak taking pride of place. Its branches spread out like the fingers of a hand. Nash pulled Gadget to a stop as he neared the trunk, and Meg followed suit.

“Nice tree,” she said. “Very good tree. Definitely worth the ride.”

Nash gave her a dirty look over his shoulder as he jumped to the ground. Meg just smiled brightly in return.

“It’s not the tree I’m showing you,” Nash grumbled. “It’s what I made in the tree.”

“Wait, what?”

“Look up.”

Meg did as she was told and noticed the ladder hanging down for the first time. Following it up, she saw the bottom of a tree house sitting above them, held in place in the fork of two branches with elaborate wooden struts.

“You made a treehouse?”

“Yeah,” Nash said, eyes only meeting her sparingly. “Thought I’d recreate the old one, you know. The one we only ever used when we were sneaking around at night.”

Meg looked back up at the treehouse, which was a little hard to see from this angle. Immediately any desire to tease or poke at Nash vanished into thin air. She hadn’t thought about that little tree house in so long... mostly because it hurt to think about. It had been her safe place, her little sanctuary for years. And part of that sanctuary was having Nash there beside her. So Meg had stopped thinking about it, had left it

behind with the rest of her life in Fordswell.

But seeing that Nash had literally rebuilt the treehouse all on his own, that he'd been thinking about it over the years... it left her speechless.

Nash started fidgeting as her silence stretched on.

"Thought you might like to see it," he said, flushing red around the collar of his shirt.

"Yeah. Yeah, I would," Meg said, sliding off of Nickel before Nash could get too embarrassed and change his mind. She wanted to see inside more than she'd ever wanted anything.

He climbed up the ladder ahead of her, escaping her scrutiny. She was still feeling knocked sideways by the fact that he had built this. He was the one that had blown her off so spectacularly, seeming so indifferent the whole time. Now it seemed that he was the one hanging onto memories all this time. It was hurting her head, trying to make sense of it all.

She hadn't climbed a rope ladder in over a decade, and it wasn't nearly as easy as she remembered. When she somehow managed to wobble her way to the top, Nash reached a hand down for her and she wrapped her fingers in his. He hoisted her up and she stood up in the little house, pretending that she wasn't disappointed at having to let go of his hand. Luckily, she was distracted soon enough.

She'd been expecting the same interior as the old tree house, bare boards that hadn't even been sanded, banged together with ancient nails. She expected it to be small too, having to crouch around like a goblin so she didn't smack her head. But this treehouse was huge; she could stand upright and walk around even. Not to mention that it was nothing short of beautiful inside. Nash really had gone all out. There was paint on the walls and ceiling, an off-white, with soft blue painted around the window

frame and the skirting boards. Because the treehouse had floorboards, and they were nicer than the ones inside Nash's house. Sanded and stained a golden brown and clearly so well constructed that Meg knew she could do jumping jacks up here and the place wouldn't so much as wobble.

"How long did this take you?" Meg asked, fingertips against the wall.

Nash leaned back against the wall. "A couple of months for the actual building part. Whenever I had some free time, I'd put together another bit of wall or something. But then I finished it, and it looked kind of boring, so I've been prettying it up over the years. Just bits and pieces. It needs curtains, but I'm terrible at sewing anything."

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“It looks great,” she said, and it was the absolute truth. “Even without curtains.”

Meg pretended she didn’t notice the redness flaring around Nash’s collar again.

“I just always liked the old one, you know?” Nash said, scratching the back of his head. “And I had planned to be here the rest of my life, so I figured I’d rebuild it. This one’s a bit nicer though. But I figured if someday I had kids running around the place, I wanted them to have a really nice treehouse. The old one was great, but I am surprised neither of us got tetanus.”

Meg laughed, because he was right. It was a miracle that neither of them ever ended up in the hospital from a rusty nail. But the laughter died off pretty quickly. She imagined the ranch getting bought out by the company. A company that would see no profitable reason to keep an old oak tree standing, let alone a treehouse. She knew how they worked; this tiny little sanctuary in the branches would be bulldozed within weeks.

She bent down a little and looked out at the view, mostly to distract herself from such dismal thoughts.

“Wow...”

“Pretty nice, huh?” Nash said smugly.

Pretty nice was a pathetic understatement. Just a few yards off the ground made a whole world of difference when looking out at the land. Even the colors seemed brighter from up here. Meg’s attention was taken by the hills on the edge of the ranch

that, until now, hadn't inspired much interest in her. But now she noticed the structures peppered around the place that she hadn't seen before.

"What are those buildings?" she asked. Nash didn't even need to look out the window to know what she was talking about.

He sat down against the wall, his wrists resting on his knees. "That's the old farm, where whoever had first lived here, however many generations ago, originally set up. My uncle rebuilt on a flatter surface because it was 'more convenient' apparently."

"Yeah. Building a whole new set of buildings seems way more convenient than driving up a hill," Meg said, bemused, looking out at the old buildings.

"I never said he was sane," said Nash.

"So are we going to go and have a look?" she asked.

"Why?"

Meg raised her eyebrows. "I'm supposed to be evaluating the place. I figure my bosses will want to know about a whole extra set of buildings up on the hill."

She regretted mentioning the evaluation. It seemed to deflate the good mood that had been growing between them all afternoon. Nash didn't show much of a reaction, but his expressive shoulders sagged a little before he sighed and hauled himself to his feet.

"Yeah, let's go and have a look."

"We don't have to," Meg said, suddenly desperate to keep this good feeling between them.

“No, it’ll be fun,” Nash said with a smile. Meg couldn’t figure out if it was real or not. “I haven’t been up there in years. I should probably go check it out.”

Feeling guilty, Meg followed him down the ladder, which was much easier than climbing up it. But by the time she was back in the saddle, she’d stamped that guilt out, pushing it far away.

She was here to do a job. She knew that. Nash knew that. This wasn’t a vacation. She was here to do a job.

It seemed she needed to remind both of them of that.

They rode in silence, but thankfully it didn’t veer back into that uncomfortable quiet that they’d been stuck in before. Mostly they were quiet because on horseback, heading up the hill to the old house and sheds was a lot steeper than it looked from a distance. Suddenly, Nash’s uncle relocating to a flatter part of the property didn’t seem entirely crazy.

They dismounted and hitched the horses to one of the fences that was still in surprisingly good condition. There was an old cottage, much smaller than the house Nash lived in now, a couple of sheds the same size as the cottage and a barn.

The buildings were old, for sure, and they definitely wore the signs of their abandonment, but they were still in pretty good shape, considering. The wood they were made from was still strong, with no sign of rot.

“Do you reckon we can head inside without the roof falling in on our heads?” Nash asked, peering around the outsides of the structures with a critical eye.

“They look really good,” Meg said. She wasn’t a builder, not anything close. But they really did look good.

“They actually do,” Nash said, mirroring her thoughts. “All right... c’mon.”

He opened the door to the cottage, its hinges squeaking unsurprisingly. Meg followed a few seconds later when there was no sign of the roof caving in.

The word old kept springing to mind. Old, old, old. This was the sort of place she’d imagined she’d be inspecting when she’d taken this assignment.

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There were animal nests here and there, but nothing had chewed its way through the timber or left irreversible damage, so that was good. There was dust and spiderwebs, piles of leaves and general debris. A typical abandoned building.

Nash was looking around the place, his face sad.

“You don’t really want to sell this place, do you?” she asked. Nash said nothing; he just sighed, but that was answer enough.

“No, I don’t.” He said it so quietly that Meg wasn’t even sure he’d meant to say it out loud. She tried not to focus on how sad he sounded. She also tried not to focus on how she was playing a major part in taking this place away from him. She might have held a pretty solid grudge against him for a decade, but there was still a loyalty there underneath it all. The stoop of his shoulders and the resigned expression on his face had her old allegiance to him roaring back to life.

If there was a last-ditch way to help him out, to help him keep the ranch instead of helping to take it away from him forever, then she would jump on it.

The idea struck her, hard and fast. Meg had never really understood why cartoons had lightbulbs above characters’ heads to show that they’d had an idea — such a bizarre connection to make. But right now, that’s exactly what it felt like; a light switching on out of nowhere, illuminating a whole bunch of things.

It could work. And even if the idea was a little bit out in left field, it was a last-ditch effort, after all...

“Oh, don’t make that face...”

She looked over at Nash, who was watching her like she might start biting or something.

“What? What face? What about your face? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You’ve got that ‘I’ve got an idea’ look on your face.”

Meg folded her arms across her chest. “How do you know what my ‘idea’ face looks like?”

“Because it looks like that right there,” he said, pointing a finger straight at her nose.

“You haven’t seen me in ten years. You can’t possibly remember what my idea face looks like,” she continued to protest.

“Oh, but I do, because that face traumatized me one too many times, so it’s been seared into my memory.”

Meg pouted, but there wasn’t much use in arguing because he was right, after all. She had a pretty big idea brewing.

“I just had a thought...” she began.

“Oh God...”

“Do you want to hear it or not?”

“I never said I didn’t want to hear it. I was just bracing myself for whatever chaos crossed your mind.”

“Actually, it’s all about getting organized. So no chaos at all.”

“Ah-huh.”

“We clean these buildings up...”

“And?”

“And lease them out for holiday rentals. Overnight stays, that sort of thing.”

It was like she’d spoken in Swedish or something because he didn’t seem to comprehend the words that had come out of her mouth.

“You know,” she prompted, trying to get Nash to see her vision. “Like a countryside getaway for city people. They’d love to stay in a place like this.”

Nash raised his eyebrows and looked pointedly around the room. “Are you sure about that? Because I’m pretty certain there’s a skunk sleeping in the corner over there.”

Meg resisted the urge to go and look for the skunk and focused on the mission at hand.

“I mean, we clean it up, obviously.”

“We?”

“We. I’ll help.”

“Why?”

She wasn’t entirely sure. It had been years since she’d seen Nash and only a couple of days when she didn’t actively hate him. Partly, the truth was that she felt loyalty to their past selves, the kids who thought they’d be inseparable forever. The truth was, she was just realizing now how desperately she’d missed him. The real truth might even be that this would be an excuse to spend more time with him. All of which was far too raw and crazy to ever mention out loud. So Meg stuck to the most rational answer she could think of.

“Because... At least if we try this and it doesn’t work, then you can hand over the ranch to the company knowing you tried everything. And I can sign off on the recommendation with a clear conscience.”

Nash peered around the place again with a critical eye, as if he was trying to envision what it might look like with a bit of spring cleaning. A whole lot of spring cleaning, really...

“People would really pay to stay all the way out here?” he asked, still sounding dubious.

“Yeah. Rich city people who don’t get to see grass or trees, that sort of thing. We could even make the barn all nice and advertise it as a wedding venue. That would be

a hit.”

Now Nash just looked at her like she’d gone insane.

“You’re telling me fancy city people would pay to get married there?”

He stabbed a finger in the direction of the old barn.

“They’d pay a lot of money, yes.”

“To get married?”

“Ah-huh.”

“In a barn?”

“Yes, in a barn.”

He looked around the dusty and decrepit space with his face twisted up into a confused expression. Meg could practically hear the cogs whirring in his brain.

“I’m assuming we’d have to do some pretty intense renovations before we’d host a spa day here?” he drawled, kicking an abandoned bird’s nest aside and sending up a puff of dust.

“Not necessarily,” Meg said cheerfully, knowing he was inches away from agreeing. “I mean, all the structures look just fine. It would be a matter of cleaning and maybe some fresh paint. Well, not maybe. Definitely some fresh paint. But like, simple stuff, you know?”

Nash chewed on her words while Meg stayed quiet, letting him think.

“All right,” he said, with a shrug and a disbelieving shake of his head. “I mean, it’s not like I’ve got anything to lose.”

He looked over at her, head tilted like he was analyzing Meg now instead of the room.

“And you’d really help me set this up?”

She nodded. “I really would. Like I said, if it doesn’t work, then at least we’ll both have a clear conscience.”

He nodded and held out his hand.

“Well, then,” he said. “Looks like we’ve got a lot of work ahead of us and not a whole lot of time.”

Meg took his big hand in hers, her fingers immediately enveloped.

“I guess we better get started, then.”

CHAPTER 10

MEG

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It was a decent drive to get to the actual town of Fordswell from the ranch, and Meg was anxious the entire way. She tried to pass it off as motion sickness from sitting in the passenger's seat but wasn't very successful in deluding herself. Add in the fact that Nash wasn't the talkative sort and most of the drive being filled with companionable silence, it gave her far too much time to overthink. Despite coming all the way back to Wyoming, coming back to the Fordswell area of all places, she hadn't yet visited the old town that she grew up in. Frankly, she'd been intent on avoiding it for as long as humanly possible.

It was inconvenient to get there, for one thing, a half-hour drive made slower because of the unkept country roads. Not to mention she had everything she could possibly need at Nash's ranch. But if they were going to renovate and decorate the barn and empty buildings on the hill, they were going to need supplies that weren't just lying around the place. They had hammers and nails aplenty and tools for days, but they needed paint if they were going to make it all look brand new. A lot of paint. A lot of cleaning products, too.

The list they'd compiled had Meg worried that maybe the task really was too big to take on. Was Nash only going along with it because he didn't want to back out now? Like some weird sort of macho pride thing? Or was it really a good idea that was going to be worth all this work? Having slept on it, the fever of the fresh idea dying down, doubts were starting to worm themselves in. It wasn't her ranch. She really didn't need to be this invested in it. She was literally just staying here to look at the place, to pass judgment on whether it was worth buying or not. Constructing a last-ditch plan to save the place wasn't part of her job description. Quite the opposite, really.

And it wasn't like her and Nash were close, not anymore. Though Meg wasn't sure if that was even true, because the last couple of days there'd been a flicker of something old coming back to life. Something familiar and warm. Meg wanted to hang onto the feeling with all of her strength. So here she was, driving back to a place she thought she'd never go back to, just to buy some paint and curtains.

Eventually the trees and pastures thinned out, slowly replaced by houses and infrastructure that were jammed closer together the further in they drove. The town had expanded in the last decade, not a whole lot, but enough that Meg could spend the time marveling at the changes. There was a new bus stop in the outer suburbs and street lights now, too. Though the pothole that had been on the corner of Marsh and Wayside Street was still there, like an open wound. Some things never change...

"You're being quiet," Nash said as she stared out the window, thinking about bus stops and potholes. He was looking sideways at her. Meg pretended not to notice his scrutiny.

"Thought I'd give you a break from my yammering," she said.

"This is way more unsettling than any yammering. When you're not saying every thought that comes through your head, it means the thoughts aren't good ones."

She tore her gaze away from the window, looking at Nash, who was still side-eyeing her in between looking at the road.

"What makes you think I'm not having great thoughts? I could be having the best thoughts ever."

"Call it a hunch. Besides, from what I've gathered, it's not like you come back here on the regular."

“I visit Mom and Dad.”

“Yeah? When was the last time you did that?”

Meg contemplated not answering, but Nash wasn't going to let her get away with that.

“Hmm. Four years? Or maybe, like, three.”

To his credit, Nash kept any sort of smug look off his face.

“Stop stressing yourself out,” he said, making a turn towards the main street. “It's not like you're coming here alone. You can even hold my hand if you want to.”

He said it with a smile, making it a joke, and Meg snorted, brushing off the barb. At the same time, she brushed off the feeling that holding Nash's hand really would make the world a better place.

While the houses around town had multiplied, the suburbs shifting into something slightly more modern (even with the potholes), the main street was still exactly the same. It felt like walking backwards in time. Meg felt like she was sixteen again, walking to the bus stop before or after school, vision focused on the cracks in the sidewalk. When Nash parked the truck and they made their way down the block to the hardware store, it was like déjà vu on steroids. Meg jumped a little bit when Nash reached out and touched her shoulder with light fingers.

“Sorry,” he said. “I really will hold your hand if you want. You okay?”

It started off as a joke again, but Nash's voice turned more serious with every word. Meg shrugged but didn't bother faking a smile. What would be the point?

“I’m not sure. I shouldn’t be so anxious to be back. It’s stupid.”

Nash offered a shrug of his own. “It was like a different life, being a teenager. The last time you were living here, you were stressed out of your mind, like, all the time. You had no control over anything. Life was hard. It’s not all that surprising that you’re anxious about being back. I don’t blame you for it. Besides, anxiety never makes much sense anyway. People get anxious about all sorts of weird stuff. So try not to feel bad about it. Okay?”

Meg stopped and looked up at Nash with her eyebrows raised. He came to a halt beside her.

“What?” he asked.

“You’re very philosophical in your old age, you know that?”

“Old age...” he huffed.

“You have gray in your hair.”

“I do not,” he said, on the verge of pouting while walking off. Meg knew he was fighting off the urge to reach up and touch his hair.

“Do you look at the back of your head very often?” she said. “Because I can see at least three gray hairs from this angle.”

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He gave her a halfhearted scowl over his shoulder. “Is this making you feel better?”

“I guess so, yeah.”

“Well, that’s all that matters, I guess,” Nash grumbled, losing his battle and absentmindedly running a hand over the back of his head as they entered the hardware store.

The smell of paint and pine wood was overwhelming from the second they walked through the doors. It was quiet, with only a handful of customers here on a weekday and soft country music playing over tinny stereo speakers in the ceiling. The building had probably had the same sound system since the day it was built.

“Should probably get a cart,” said Nash. “This seems like a cart sort of shopping trip.”

As he wrestled one out of the designated cart area at the front of the store, Meg put a hand on his arm and caught his attention.

“You can leave, you know,” he said to her. “You can hang out in the car. It’s fine.”

Meg smiled because it was a sincere offer. He was worried about her. That alone made her feel better.

“It’s not that,” she said. “I just want to make sure that you’re not going ahead with this crazy plan just to... keep up appearances? Or rise to the challenge or something? We don’t have to put all this work in, not if you really don’t want to.”

He took a moment to think it through, mulling over her words. That made Meg feel better too, the fact that he was thinking about all of this and not just jumping in feet first. It was a skill he finally seemed to pick up over the last decade.

“Nah,” he said finally, yanking his selected cart out. “It’s like you said, if we give this a shot and it still doesn’t work out, then at least I know I really did everything I could. And you’re helping, which makes it not so daunting.”

Meg nodded, more determined than ever and followed him through the aisles.

They had decided to paint every possible surface white and leave the hardwood as it was. It would pass as “rustic,” while the white would make it all look brand new. Plus, it was cheap, and that had been the deciding factor. If they went cheap and simple, they could advertise it as chic and minimalist. If Meg had learned anything from her time at college, it was that the perfect word made all the difference.

Despite growing up in Fordswell, Meg had never been in the hardware store before. She’d never had any reason to. She didn’t think either of her parents had ever held a hammer, let alone needed to buy one before. Nash, however, seemed to know this place like the back of his hand. He led her straight to the paint section, the smell of chemicals thick in the air, and stopped the cart in front of a wall with what looked like a million different paint samples.

“You sure you don’t want to go with this color?” Meg asked, plucking out a paint card the color of a neon highlighter. Nash rolled his eyes and tutted like an old man.

“That’s a no, then?”

“That’s a no.”

Meg sighed dramatically and popped the neon sample back in its place while Nash

scanned the multiple rows of white, cream and light gray options.

“How many different types of white are there?” he muttered.

“A lot, apparently. Do we just flip a coin?”

Nash plucked half a dozen different variations of white paint cards from the wall, shuffled them up like he was playing poker and fanned them out face down in front of Meg.

“Pick one,” he said like he was performing a magic trick. Well, it was as good a way as any to choose. Meg tapped a finger on a card, and Nash plucked it out.

“Swiss Coffee Creamer it is, then,” he declared. “Whose job is it to name these things?”

“I don’t know, but it sounds like a pretty good job to me. Maybe I’ll jump ship and become a color-naming person.”

It had been meant as a joke, but it came out sounding tired and sulky. Nash just nodded, putting the rejected paint cards methodically back in their slots and hanging onto Swiss Coffee Creamer, which really was a stupid name.

“Are you thinking about jumping ship?” he asked, suddenly way more serious than he had been just a minute ago. “Giving up being a vet?”

“I can’t just throw away my career,” Meg said, throwing a paint roller into the cart perhaps a little too aggressively.

“It’s not necessarily throwing it away,” Nash said. “Maybe just downsizing, you know. Or taking a break.”

“Hmm.”

She turned her attention to the wall of painting tools, looking for a roller extender, already knowing she was going to be way too short without one. Nash, however, put a hand on her shoulder and caught her attention.

“Meg?”

“We need brushes. For all the fiddly bits.”

Nash grinned. God, she really did love it when he grinned like that.

“Yes,” he said. “We do.”

“I can’t see any of those pole extenders, so you’re going to have to paint all the tall parts...”

“You’re still anxious,” Nash said, cutting her off and sounding worried. Meg shrugged but didn’t deny it.

“Being back is kind of terrifying, and it also feels like I wish I’d never left. I think that’s the worst of it... wondering what would have happened if I’d stayed here.”

It was a hard thing to admit — that you might have made the wrong choice. Despite their rocky start, being on the ranch with Nash had been the most relaxed Meg had been in who knew how long. And the idea of a break... When was the last time she’d had a break from anything? It was mildly alarming that she couldn’t think of a single example.

Nash just nodded, calm as ever, as if he knew that was what she needed. Just to be heard.

“Well, there’s no way to change what’s already happened,” he said, sounding as if he

wished he could change some stuff too. “All you can do is keep going, you know? Try and make choices a little better in the future. That’s all.”

Meg should probably say something profound in return, but this conversation was a little too intense to be having in the paint aisle of a hardware store.

“You read self-help books, don’t you?” she said, desperate to break the tension. “You’re one of those people, aren’t you?”

Nash screwed up his nose. “No,” he said. “Have you ever seen me read a book, ever?”

“No, but I never thought I’d see you on the back of a horse, either, but here we are.”

“I don’t read self-help books,” he sniffed, pushing the cart along.

“Ah-huh.”

“I listen to them on an app.”

“I knew it.”

“Whatever. It’s different.”

“You keep telling yourself that.”

The bickering felt comfortable and familiar, like an old blanket that was a little scratchy but was so warm that it didn’t matter. The tension in Meg’s body eased.

They got to the paint mixing station in the middle of the store, one of the tinny speakers directly overhead and a little too loud to be comfortable. The guy standing

behind the counter looked familiar, but at this point Meg wasn't sure if she actually knew him or if all this déjà vu was messing with her head.

"Mike," Nash said in greeting. That locked into place who the guy was. Mike Salanger. She'd had history and English classes with him, though they'd never had much to do with each other. He was balding early, his hairline making a retreat from his forehead, and the red polo shirt he wore as a uniform was too big for him. Mike was staring at her, not blinking, like he was trying to figure out a puzzle.

"You remember Meg?" Nash said, handing him the paint color they wanted to get.

"Meg Whitmore?" Mike asked, still staring at her like she was some sort of animal that had been thought extinct.

"The one and only," Meg said, making a sad attempt at humor because, frankly, Mike was making her kind of uncomfortable. She was used to other farmers throwing insults around, being loud, and being stupid in a million different ways. All of that was kind of a rite of passage, their own way of communicating and including her by making her one of the boys. But Mike was just staring. She thought she was just being paranoid, a little too sensitive maybe, until Nash stepped in front of her. He must have noticed too. Mike finally stopped staring, looking like he'd snapped back to reality. Meg felt safer with Nash standing slightly in front of her, his wide shoulders acting like a wall she could hide behind.

This is stupid. She'd gotten so anxious and wound up about this trip into town that she was spinning out from the tiniest things.

"What're you doing here?" Mike asked.

"What?" Nash said, and his voice was a little harsher than it had been during their bickering. A little louder. A little deeper.

“Uh, just wondering what you’re doing back here, Meg?”

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Bolstered by Nash's presence, Meg started to get annoyed. She folded her arms across her chest.

"Working."

"Doing what?"

Good God. It was a good thing she never had anything to do with him in high school because she might have gone insane.

"I'm a large animal veterinarian."

Mike blinked, his stare as blank as a goldfish.

"Livestock. You know... like cattle?"

"Oh..." he said finally. "That's what you ended up doing?"

Before Meg could ask what he meant by that, in her snippiest tone, thank you very much, Nash jumped in.

"We want five cans of that color, Mike, one-gallon cans," Nash said, and Meg could practically feel the rumble in his chest. She couldn't help herself and reached her hand up to grab onto the back of his flannel shirt. Clutching the soft fabric in her fingers steadied her.

This was precisely why she had been so anxious about coming back to Fordswell and

why she'd avoided it for so long. People she hadn't seen since she was a teenager felt perfectly at ease sticking their noses into her business.

"That's a lot of paint," Mike said, making absolutely no move to start mixing it up. "Do you really need that much? What're you painting?"

"You want my social security number as well?" Nash said. "How about my birth certificate? Can I just get my paint?"

Mike looked offended, literally turning his nose up in the air. "I'll mix this up, then."

"Yes. Please."

Meg looked up at Nash, who just rolled his eyes.

"Welcome back," he muttered. "Still regret leaving?"

Meg smirked. But actually, a tiny little piece of her still did regret it. She couldn't explain why, but there it was. After an awkward wait while Mike got their order ready, they collected the paint cans into the cart without any more invasive questions from Mike and fled for the aisles to get the last of their supplies.

"What was his problem?" Meg asked as soon as they were out of earshot.

"He's inhaled too many paint fumes over the years, clearly," Nash said with a shake of his head, steering the now very heavy cart through the store. "But also small-town gossip. Everyone in town thinks I'm some sort of bad guy because I don't stop to chitchat with every single person every time I go to the supermarket. That makes me a suspicious person, apparently. I just don't want them knowing my business. I swear there are some people who would hook you up to a GPS just so they can track your every movement."

“They know we have, like, the internet now, right?” Meg said. “Streaming services? Hobbies?”

“Pfft,” Nash scoffed. “Gossiping is the number one hobby here in good old Fordswell, or did you forget that?”

“I think I forgot it, actually,” she said. “Blacked it out entirely.”

“Wise decision.”

By the time they were ready to head to the counter and pay, Meg’s mood had started to bounce back from Mike’s bizarre form of interrogation. Nash even had a little smile perched on his face. Seeing the cart full of paint and other supplies was motivating, making this plan feel actually achievable.

Unfortunately, Mike was now standing at the counter next to a curly-haired woman with too-thin eyebrows. Whatever. They could pay and leave and never look back.

“I’m ordering everything online from now on,” Nash muttered. “I don’t care about the postage.”

Meg laughed as he started piling things on the counter for the woman to scan.

“What’s funny?” the woman asked, her voice sharp. She was sneering too, and Mike was back to his former staring. Meg didn’t bother to stifle an annoyed sigh.

“A joke.”

“Hmm.”

The woman scanned the items at an aggressively fast pace. Did Meg remember her as well? Yes... Genevieve... something. Meg couldn't remember her last name if her life depended on it. While she hadn't had much to do with Mike in school, Genevieve had taken an active dislike to her from junior year. Apparently, Meg being smarter than her and getting better grades had all been a personal slight in Genevieve's books. But to still be acting like this? They were nearly thirty, for crying out loud. Maybe Nash was right and they'd breathed in too many paint and varnish fumes over the years.

There was more staring at Meg, like she was some sort of sideshow act. Well, not exactly staring... Genevieve looked her up and down like she was evaluating every square inch of her, and considering the crinkle in Genevieve's nose, Meg had definitely failed whatever criteria she was looking for.

Mike might have caught her off guard and weirded her out a little, but getting sneered at was another thing altogether. Meg had officially had enough.

“Are you staring at me for a reason, or do you have a lazy eye all of a sudden?”

Genevieve blinked as if she hadn't expected Meg to call her out. Maybe she was still expecting Meg to be the meek, mild little nerd that she used to know. Well, nearly a decade of working as a woman in agriculture had squashed any sort of meekness out of Meg a long time ago. And knowing Nash was here gave her a borrowed confidence boost.

“Thought you were supposed to be successful or something?” Genevieve sniffed.

“What?” If they were going to be weird and catty to her, could they at least make sense while they were at it?

“Little miss hotshot, Texas scholarship winner, still ended up back here with the rest of us,” Genevieve said with a spiteful little curve to her lip.

Oh, my God. It’s like these people haven’t left high school.

Holding a grudge, Meg could understand. She’d done it herself, to the man standing right next to her. But having your heart and your promises broken was one thing; still beefing with someone you sat next to in class a couple times was something else altogether.

“I am successful. Thank you so much for asking and not assuming,” said Meg. Thankfully the words came out dry and sarcastic rather than desperate to defend herself. Genevieve didn’t look impressed. And Mike just continued looking like a slapped fish.

“Mike said you were just a vet or something...” she continued, scanning the last of the items before ringing them up.

“That’s right. A large animal vet.”

“Well, I own a business.”

“Okay?”

Meg’s lack of admiration seemed to get under Genevieve’s skin in a truly psychotic way.

“I have a question,” Nash said, voice cool as a summer breeze. Genevieve squinted at him like she’d forgotten he was there.

“Have you got a problem with me too?” Nash asked. “Or is it just Meg you’ve taken a dislike to for some reason?”

Genevieve couldn’t seem to comprehend why Nash was sounding offended.

“No? You’re one of our best customers.”

“Ah-huh,” he said with a grin. “I won’t be after today.”

Now, they might only just be rekindling any sort of friendship between them, but Meg knew that smile. That was Nash’s “I’m about to tear into you” smile, the one that gave people a false sense of security before he took them down a peg or two. When they were teenagers it had been an unsettling sort of smile, but on a grown man it was something closer to murderous.

“Do you know how much a livestock veterinarian for a nationwide corporation makes?” he asked, perfectly innocent.

Genevieve looked like she’d been thrown for a loop, but to be fair Meg didn’t know where he was going with this either.

“Uh... I don’t know. How much does someone get paid to stomp through mud all day?”

“About two hundred grand,” Nash said without missing a beat. “Is that right, Meg? Or am I remembering wrong?”

Meg felt just a tiny bit better when Genevieve’s face started turning pink around the

edges.

“Well... yeah, that’s about right.”

Mike was looking between them all like he was watching a game of ping pong.

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“In fact, she’s such an expert in her field that this nationwide mega corporation would probably double her salary in a heartbeat just to keep her on the books. She had a team of fifty-something men under her command at her last post. She’s here for a vacation, helping me out on the ranch, and I’m grateful for it. ’Cause there’s no way on earth I’d be able to afford expertise like hers if she wasn’t kind enough to lend me a hand.”

Now it was Meg’s turn to stare between them all like it was a tennis match. Mike’s expression hadn’t changed much, and that was to be expected. But Genevieve’s mouth was hanging open, her cheeks bright pink as she stared at Nash, then back at Meg.

“So,” Nash continued, not out of steam yet. “Maybe think a little harder before you decide who to look down on next time, all right? And maybe get your own claims to success straight as well because I know for a fact, Genevieve Salanger, that your daddy is the one that still owns this place and you just work here. It’s the only reason Mike has a job here too, so how about you get off of your high horse and hand me my receipt.”

Genevieve was simply too shocked to say anything else. She tore the receipt from the machine and handed it to Nash with a blank look on her pink face. Considering her surname, she must have married Mike, which actually made a lot of sense seeing them together like this.

“Thank you,” Nash said, the picture of kindness. “We’ll return the cart in a second. We’re just parked up the street a little.”

With that, he pushed the cart out of the store and Meg followed, feeling pretty

shocked herself.

“Uh, well, thanks,” she said as they got outside and headed for the truck.

Nash tutted, that old man’s sound he liked to make. “I’ve been looking for an excuse to bring those two back down to reality with the rest of us for years. Insulting you was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Mostly because it was just ridiculous.”

He snorted but also sounded absolutely gleeful, running on an adrenaline high.

“I didn’t realize you had remembered all that information about my job and stuff,” Meg said.

Nash gave her a look like that was a weird thing to say. “Why wouldn’t I remember it? It’s all impressive as hell.”

He said it like it was really that simple. And maybe it was. Maybe Meg really was that impressive.

“She actually married Mike?” Meg asked, because it was the only thing she could think to say.

“No accounting for taste, I suppose,” Nash said and started loading paint into the bed of the truck. And that, it seemed, was the end of that adventure.

Meg had been so anxious all morning that, at first, she didn’t notice the fizzy feeling that had started between her ribs. A tingling, warm sensation that was filling her up more every second. It grew every time she looked at Nash for the remainder of the drive home, all thirty minutes of it. It was the same feeling she had had in high school, before prom that was. And Meg could dismiss the feeling as a crush all she wanted, but she knew deep down that it was so much more than that.

Seeing Nash jump to her defense like that, when he owed her nothing and expected nothing in return... reminded her why she'd had feelings for him in the first place. Now those feelings were back, quietly buzzing around her insides like they'd never left in the first place.

CHAPTER 11

MEG

“Is it weird that I’m kind of looking forward to the cleaning part?”

They were loading all of the supplies they would need into the back of Nash’s truck. Brooms, mops, scrub brushes and every chemical cleaning agent they could legally get their hands on. They weren’t just going to clean the place; they were going to disinfect it.

“I mean, yeah, I’d say that’s a bit weird,” Meg said, looking at him over the bed of the truck. “Do you just really like manual labor or something?”

“No, I mean...” He stopped to think about it. Meg had just been joking, but apparently Nash was perfectly serious about looking forward to their cleaning mission.

“I just mean,” he continued. “That it’s going to be nice to build something again, or at least fix it up. I haven’t been able to do that since I built the treehouse, and that was ages ago.”

“It’s maybe not so weird when you put it like that. But let’s revisit how enthusiastic you are in an hour.”

He grinned at her, looking happier than Meg had seen him since she’d arrived, and

jumped in the driver's seat.

Meg definitely wouldn't say that deep cleaning the buildings inside and out was fun, but it wasn't exactly terrible either. It was satisfying, a deep-in-your-bones sort of achievement. At first it did kind of feel impossible. It took hours just to sweep out all the debris, including cobwebs from the corners, piling leaves and animal nests into bags to dispose of later. She would sweep away some dirt only to turn around and find twice as much. For a while there it felt like she was caught in a time loop from a movie. She didn't even get to see the skunk.

Then, slowly, they started to see progress. The floorboards, once swept and mopped, were beautiful, aged wood that had been worn smooth over the years. There were cornices around the ceiling that looked hand-carved, once hidden by cobwebs and dust. Meg's favorite part was finding a little cubby hole in the wall that she was one hundred percent going to turn into a shabby-chic wine holder. Nash had just shrugged at the suggestion and said that he trusted her judgment.

It took a full day just to clean out the buildings, with the two of them working nonstop. Meg's back ached by the end of it, her shoulder blades protesting with every movement, and Nash was so dirty he looked like a groundhog that had popped his head out of the ground. She probably didn't look any better.

"I'd say we're doing well," Meg affirmed, looking around the barn that was now somewhat hospitable. Nash nodded, drinking deeply from a water bottle.

"I don't know if we got enough paint," he pondered, surveying the walls.

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“I hope we did because that hardware store might be the worst place on earth.”

“Nah,” he said with an evil grin. “I reckon if I go back, it’ll be a real fun time.”

“You’re a menace.”

“Oh yeah, I never said I wasn’t. If they wanna be mean, I can be meaner.”

“All to protect my honor?”

It was just a joke, honest. She’d just said it as a joke. But Nash was instantly not joking.

“I’d do a lot more than that to protect you, Meg.”

Oh... Meg had no clue what to say to that. Nash looked like he hadn’t meant to say any of that at all, his neck flushing pink and his mouth snapping shut. There was a taut silence between them, made more intense by the fact that Meg knew he meant every single word.

“Well, good to know,” she said, attempting and failing to bring back the joking atmosphere.

“Yep. Now you know. So... good. That’s good. Uh...” He brushed off his hands.

“It’s getting late. I guess tomorrow we’ll find out if we really do have enough paint.”

“I guess so.”

They headed for the house to wash up and have dinner, neither of them acknowledging how their conversation had been so similar to flirting.

Any talking between them over the next couple of days kept veering into flirtation. Meg wasn't doing it on purpose, and she was pretty certain that Nash wasn't either. But little things kept happening. He would hand her a paint brush and their fingers would touch for just a beat too long. Meg would catch him watching her with a smile on his face, then his cheeks would burn and he'd look away. Nash would catch her looking at him in much the same manner. For her own sanity Meg decided that it was just the paint fumes getting to them.

This was all in her head, just like her stupid high school crush before the prom night that ruined their friendship. She wasn't going to let stupid little feelings derail her all over again.

They managed to paint the interiors in record time. It was punishing and Meg's whole body ached, but it was worth it. Just seeing all of the walls fresh and bright gave them both a boost. It no longer looked abandoned inside. It looked nice. Maybe not quite livable yet. There were some hinges that needed fixing and some beds that needed building. Nevertheless, it was a massive improvement. All their hard work was paying off.

But if this whole plan was actually going to work, then they needed to be thinking three steps ahead. They needed to advertise the place, which meant taking photos. Which meant that it was up to Nash because Meg was the world's worst photographer. She couldn't even take a good selfie.

They needed to build some furniture for the smaller buildings before they could take pictures, but showing the barn clean and empty was kind of ideal. It looked huge with the bright new walls. Nash was snapping pictures from multiple angles when he stopped and looked at Meg like he had an idea.

“You should get in one of the photos,” he said.

“What? Why?”

“To show how big the barn is,” he said with a shrug.

“I’m not even dressed up. I’m in work gear.”

“Isn’t that the point? To show that it’s in the country? You’re an authentic country person in this authentic country barn.”

Meg rolled her eyes, but she had to admit that it was a good idea.

Nash held the camera up to his face, holding it the specific way fathers did at amusement parks. He spoke up first before Meg could make fun of him for it.

“Look happy,” he said, still trying to get just the right angle.

“I am,” she said, and it was a bit of a shock to realize it was the truth. She’d been satisfied over the last few years, her career traveling leaps and bounds, but happy? When was the last time she’d been this happy?

“I mean, look normal-people happy,” Nash said. “Not Meg happy.”

“What’s Meg happy?”

“Usually it involves cows, or maybe ducks. It also involves looking generally disappointed in the world.”

Meg rolled her eyes. “It’s just my face. I can’t help what my face looks like.”

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“Yeah, so maybe try smiling or something. That usually conveys happiness.”

“Why don’t you stand in for the photos if you know so much about it?”

“Because you’re the pretty one.”

Meg sighed but smiled wide, feeling like she was back at school picture day. She tried to hide just how much Nash calling her pretty had thrown her off, and she had no idea if she was successful or not.

She must have been because Nash was happy to move on.

“Hopefully these do the trick,” he said, flicking through the images while Meg was still reeling. Being called pretty in a throwaway compliment shouldn’t knock her sideways like this. She was being silly again. Especially when it was all just joking around. The compliment didn’t actually mean anything.

Nash looked around the barn, thoughtful.

“You really think this will work?” he asked. God, he sounded so hopeful.

“I think...” Meg said, choosing her words carefully. “That no matter what happens, you should be proud of yourself. You’ve done your best. That’s all anyone can ever do.”

He gave her a smile, and she hated how it made her knees weak to see him like that.

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” he said. Meg wished the jokes would come back because she didn’t know how to deal with all this sincerity. So she just shrugged.

“It was the least I could do.”

“You’re not going to accept the compliment, are you?”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“We’ll see.”

“Whatever.”

She shrugged off the whole interaction as them being tired. Nash was potentially losing his home, and Meg had a part to play in it. They were rebuilding a friendship after a decade, and they had been working like crazy to get all of this done. Emotions were raw and close to the surface. There was no point reading into all of this.

Even so... that fizzy feeling between her ribs was still there, and it was getting harder to ignore it with every passing day.

CHAPTER 12

NASH

How do you thank someone for something huge? Something so big that it was life-changing? Because Nash was realizing that saying, “Hey, thanks for maybe saving my home,” wasn’t really going to cut it. Meg had blown in here and turned everything upside down, and it had been exactly what Nash had needed. And thanks wasn’t going to cut it when it wasn’t just the property that had a fighting chance now.

He had hope again. Not about anything specific, really, just a general feeling about the world. It wasn't all doom and gloom. There was still goodness here.

The most unbelievable part of these past few weeks wasn't even the revival of the farm or the revival of any sense of hope. It was that their friendship was alive again. He had long ago accepted that he was going to regret losing Meg until the day he died, but now here she was, putting on her boots on the porch steps to go check over all the animals. She'd smiled at him as she walked out the door. They'd laughed together. Nash couldn't even remember the last time he'd laughed like that.

It was an insight into a different world, one where she had never left Fordswell, where they had never parted ways.

She needed to go, he scolded himself. She needed to spread her wings. You can't regret all of that because it made you feel lonely.

It was hard to keep track of what he was feeling right now. There were too many emotions, and they were all too confusing. So Nash just tried to be happy that he was, well, happy. He tried to be happy that there was goodness back in the world again, and it was all thanks to Meg, even though she owed him nothing.

So the question remained... How do you thank someone for that sort of thing?

Buying her something wasn't going to work. Meg had never, and still didn't, care much about possessions. And going out somewhere in Fordswell wasn't the most appealing thought when the options were limited to the diner and some fast-food places. But maybe he could take her out while not technically going anywhere? Picnics were nice, right? Women liked picnics kind of as a rule, right? He hoped that was right because otherwise, he was fresh out of ideas.

Nash launched his operation, hoping that his best was going to be good enough...

While Meg was off walking around the property, checking on the animals, he took the opportunity to throw a bunch of things in the truck. A blanket, because that was the most basic requirement for a picnic, right? He didn't have one of those old-fashioned wicker baskets, so he put a bunch of plastic food containers inside a tote bag from the supermarket. It would have to do. The food wasn't going to be five stars, but it was going to be good; Nash could guarantee that, at least. There was potato salad in one tub, some packets of potato chips, bread and other fixings to make sandwiches. If he made them now, they'd just get soggy. He threw a handful of cutlery into the bag as well, and into the truck it went. Drinks... they would need drinks, so he grabbed some of those too.

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Meg was still off somewhere. Somehow she managed to disappear like a ghost whenever she wandered off. Right now Nash used it to his advantage to drive the supplies he'd gathered to the treehouse and set things up. Now the hardest part would be keeping it a surprise.

Meg had barely sat down on the porch steps to pull off her boots when Nash busted out the front door.

“Wanna go for a ride?”

Ambushing Meg wasn't exactly the best strategy, but he was excited and couldn't help himself. He wasn't nervous, definitely not nervous. Excited. That was all.

“Uh, where to?”

“Around.”

“Just around?”

“Sure.”

Meg raised an eyebrow.

“What?” Nash asked, refusing to fidget. He only fidgeted when he was nervous, and he definitely wasn't nervous.

“Yeah, okay...”

Meg pulled her boot back on and stood up. “All right, then. I guess I’m riding Nickel?”

“Sounds good,” Nash said, striding off to the stables before he could chicken out of the whole thing.

They saddled up the horses, Meg throwing him suspicious glances the whole time, and set off through the fields. The sun was just starting to dip into afternoon light, making everything look soft and golden.

“Where are we going, exactly?” she asked once they were riding.

“It’s a surprise,” he said.

She only looked more suspicious at that. “Why?”

“Can’t I organize something fun?”

“I guess you can. It’s just the whypart I’m hung up on.”

“We’ve been working our butts off,” he said, which was true. “We can take a little time to unwind.”

“I mean, sure...” She was clearly still waiting for some sort of trap to spring.

“Will you just come on? You don’t like fun things all of a sudden?”

“I’m concerned, that’s all.”

“About what?”

“You’re not exactly spontaneous these days, you know?”

“I’m spontaneous. I’m plenty spontaneous. I’m being spontaneous now.”

She just smirked at him, swaying a little as Nickel walked along.

“What’s the grin for?” he asked, not caring if he sounded huffy.

“I’m just glad you sound a little bit like yourself again,” she said. “That’s all.”

It was that obvious, huh? How much she’d made a difference in the last couple weeks? Not just a difference to the ranch but to him as well. He felt like he’d been sleepwalking for the last few years, and now he was finally awake.

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Instead of trying to think of something to say, Nash pushed Gadget into a canter, forcing Meg to keep up behind them. At least at a canter it was too hard to keep a conversation going, which meant fewer opportunities for him to make an ass of himself.

Soon enough, they came to the treehouse. He was still worried that this was all stupid, that he should have just said thank you like a normal person. But Nash peeked over his shoulder and saw Meg's face light up in a grin.

"You should have just said that we were coming here," she said, dismounting from Nickel and hitching him to a low-hanging branch.

"It wouldn't be a surprise then, would it?"

"True."

"Come on," Nash said, his nerves still making him jittery. "The surprise is inside."

Meg looked up at the rope ladder curiously, no longer so hesitant. Almost like she trusted him...

He climbed ahead of her to help pull her up. Nash watched Meg's face carefully as she looked around at his pitiful excuse for a picnic. It looked pretty sad and slapdash now that he was looking at it with fresh eyes. But Meg, against all odds, was smiling.

"What's all this for?" she asked, looking through the supermarket bags at the snacks Nash had packed.

“A thank you, I guess. For thinking of renovating the buildings on the hill, then actually helping to make it a reality. I don’t know if it will work. It still might not. But I appreciate the effort, you know...”

Nash drifted off, aware that he was rambling. But the smile she was giving him... God, she was just so pretty.

“Well,” she said, sitting down cross-legged on the floor. “This is great. Thank you.”

He sat down opposite her, thrilled that she seemed to like it. It was a buzz just to see her wearing that pretty smile. He pulled the sandwich fixings and potato chips out of the bag and set them out, Meg’s face growing brighter.

Nash started to feel a little embarrassed again when it came to the drinks.

“Yeah, well... I don’t actually own a cooler, so...”

He handed her a lukewarm can of soda, but she took it anyway and cracked it open. It was good to know that the lack of a cooler wasn’t going to ruin everything, then.

“What sort of rancher are you? Never met a farming man that doesn’t own a cooler.”

“I’m still relatively new to this whole business,” he said, sipping from his own warm can.

“Ah-huh,” she smirked. “Well, maybe if this whole endeavor works out, I’ll get you a cooler. As like a celebration or something.”

Would she still be in his life? After this plan either succeeded or whether it failed... would Meg still be a part of it all? Nash didn’t dare hope that much.

“I don’t want you getting in trouble from your bosses,” he said. “So don’t go throwing your lot in with me if it’s going to blow up this life you built.”

She gave him a look, and before she could just brush it off, he jumped in with a rambled explanation.

“I just don’t want you getting in trouble at work, I guess. I hadn’t thought about that until now, which was selfish...”

All he wanted was to be the opposite of selfish when it came to Meg, at least. But somehow it always kept backfiring. She just shook her head.

“I can make my own decisions, Nash,” she said. “You didn’t force me into this. What? You regret it all of a sudden?”

Never.

“No. I don’t regret you coming here, not that. I’m so grateful for that. Just, the thought that I might actually get to keep this place if this works out...” He was choked up and couldn’t say more.

“I can just give them a negative report,” Meg said, taking a sip of her warm soda. “I meant it when I said that before. I’ll tell them it’s not worth buying. Tell them it’s a floodplain or something. That’ll make them back off. If that’s what you still want?”

“Yes,” he said without hesitation. “That’s what I want. I just didn’t think there was ever going to be a way to fix this.”

“Well, you’re lucky I came along then, aren’t you?” Meg said smugly.

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“Yes,” Nash said again, with even less hesitation. “Yes, I am.”

The cheeky grin fell off her face as she stared back at him. She had been joking, but Nash hadn’t been. Not one bit. He’d never been more serious in his life. The silence dragged on because apparently Meg had no idea how to respond to that, other than take another sip of her drink and avoid eye contact. Meanwhile Nash was hyperaware of how close they were sitting, their knees just a couple inches from brushing against each other. He could so easily reach out and brush loose strands of hair off of Meg’s freckled shoulder.

She cleared her throat and set her drink aside, folding her hands in her lap. Were her cheeks growing pink or was he just imagining it?

“Nash...” she said. “I’m glad I came here.”

It was a simple thing to say, and for anyone listening in on their conversation, it might not seem like a big deal at all. But Nash’s heart soared. There were so many unsaid things packed up in that one little sentence.

Meg was fidgeting with her fingers in her lap and Nash reached out and held them in his own, stilling them. Meg didn’t pull her hand away. She didn’t look away from him either. Meg was sitting very still, like she was waiting for something, and her cheeks really were pink. Nash could drop her hand, go back to making dumb jokes and drinking warm soda. He could stick to the safe option in all of this. But a decade’s worth of longing and regret flashed through him like a lightning strike. Screw safety. He wasn’t going to let this chance escape him, not this time.

He moved forward, his other hand cupping the back of Meg's head, and he pressed his lips to hers.

It was a gentle kiss, soft and sweet and unsure. But pretty soon, with Meg rising up to meet him, it was no longer so gentle, and Nash lost himself completely in the moment.

It felt like coming home.

CHAPTER 13

MEG

Meg spent the morning out with the horses under the guise of giving them all a thorough check-over. She was still here to do a job; she had to periodically remind herself of that. Though work was the last thing on her mind right now. They had stumbled out of the treehouse, abandoning Nash's picnic supplies, and then stumbled back to the main house and into his bedroom. Only when the morning came, with Nash asleep beside her, had Meg been able to bring herself to leave and head outside for some fresh air.

Opal was prancing around, happy as a clam, doing a zoom around the pasture before running back to the safety of her mother. Meg already knew this foal was going to be trouble; she was confident and full of energy and far too smart for her own good. Meg already loved her to bits.

Opal whinnied, and Meg looked up to see a truck rattling up the driveway. As it got closer, Meg could recognize Will through the windshield. She raised a hand in greeting, got a wave in return, and started walking back towards the house. Mostly her stomach was guiding her. The world was properly awake, and she hadn't eaten anything since the picnic yesterday afternoon. She'd been a little too distracted to

make herself any dinner...

Just as she reached for the doorknob, the door swung open and Nash appeared. Meg's hand was still stretched out and she was slightly off balance as she avoided walking face-first into his chest. He looked just as surprised as she felt, blinking like an owl in the morning light, his hair even more disheveled than usual. In each hand he held one of the muffins they had brought from town the other day, and he held one out to her.

Meg took it with a shy smile. God, why was she acting like she'd never met him before?

Well, her brain chimed in, not so helpfully. Maybe it's because, for the first time ever, we're both on the same page. No more stuff going unsaid, no more feeling pushed down or pushed away. We're adults, with our own freedom.

So, it really was like she'd never met him before. She'd never met this version. Meg tried not to think about how daunting that actually was and took the muffin that he offered her.

"Thanks," she said. She'd never had a proper concussion, but this must be what it felt like... scattered thoughts, no real control over her words, tingling sensations in her extremities. Surely these were the symptoms of some sort of brain injury. Surely emotions couldn't make you feel this ridiculous. But of course, Meg knew that they absolutely could.

"It's fine," said Nash. At least they were both as awkward as each other, standing there holding muffins like idiots.

The slam of a truck door brought them both back to reality, their bubble bursting open and the rest of the world rushing in.

“What are you two talking all serious about?” Will asked, strolling over with a lazy smile.

“Renovations,” Nash said, not missing a beat. Thank God he was quicker on his feet than Meg was.

Will made a face as he stopped beside them, looking confused. “Renovations? Uh... why?”

He looked at Meg, who was supposed to be part of the whole selling the farm business. Instead, she had been helping to save it.

“Not here,” Nash said, jutting his head at the house and taking a bite of his muffin. “The ones up on the hill.”

Now Will only looked more confused, and Meg was starting to realize how insane this plan of theirs was when Will, of all people, was looking confused.

“Again,” he said. “Why? Is this part of the sale or...”

“We thought maybe,” Meg said, “we could do the buildings up and rent them out as vacation venues or something...”

Saying it out loud to someone new really did make it sound like a last-ditch effort. Desperate was a word that came to mind. But that wasn't what Will focused in on.

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“We?” he said with a raised eyebrow. “Are you two in cahoots or something now? Aren’t you employed by the enemy?”

“I’m a rogue agent, I guess,” she said with a shrug, and Will cackled. Nash finished off the last of his muffin and shook his head.

“You wanna see how they look?” he said, brushing crumbs off his hands.

“So none of the roofs caved in? No one’s going to catch tetanus staying there, are they? ’Cause that’s just a lawsuit waiting to happen.”

“Do you want to see or not?”

“Yeah, yeah. I want to come look at what you’ve done, you busy beaver. Just want to make sure that everything’s above board, that’s all.”

“There was a skunk living in there,” Meg added, not super helpfully.

“Aw, but they’re cute,” Will said with a smirk. “In a stinky sort of way.”

“You’re both as bad as each other,” Nash said, and went to find his keys.

Will whistled as he looked around, spinning slowly and drinking it all in.

“Jeez, I would never have believed it. It didn’t even look this good in its heyday, I bet.”

Meg couldn't help it; she preened at the praise. She and Nash had worked so hard on these buildings, pouring all of their energy into this last chance for him to keep his family's ranch. What had sounded crazy down by the farmhouse actually seemed plausible as they stood inside the freshly painted barn, smelling of lemon-scented cleaner and white paint. With the morning sun lighting up the space and the tall ceiling rising above them, Meg could so easily see this taking off as a wedding venue, excited guests taking their seats with the scenery spreading out around them.

"Man, Nash," Will said, pulling his gaze away from the ceiling that was now free of cobwebs. "This place looks amazing. Like something out of a magazine. You've done great, my dude."

"You should be giving your praises to Meg," Nash said, deflecting the compliments as if he had nothing to do with all of this.

"I just had the idea," she insisted, which was true. "Nash actually followed through with it."

"Yeah, but I don't know how to decorate stuff," he said, waving a hand. "You're the one who knew to paint it all white and pretty-looking. You knew how to take all the photos too, to make it look good. It wouldn't be looking like this without you."

"I think you're selling yourself short."

"No, you're just giving me too much credit," he drawled.

Meg rolled her eyes at Nash's inability to take even the simplest compliments. In doing so she caught sight of Will, standing there, not saying a single word. His hands were planted on his hips like he was concentrating on something while he was glancing between them, his eyes growing more and more narrow by the second.

Meg started tugging at her hair, rearranging it into a fresh ponytail, her hair tie between her teeth so that she had an excuse to pretend like nothing was happening. Will's eyes grew even narrower, his gaze switching back to Nash.

“You two cool?”

“What?” Nash asked, looking annoyed, his arms crossed over his chest. “What are you talking about?”

“Why’re you acting weird?”

“We’re not acting weird. You’re the one who thought the earth was flat for like two years.”

“Maybe,” Will admitted, more gracious than usual, not letting Nash’s barb distract him. “But that doesn’t have anything to do with why you two are acting all shifty.”

“It’s early in the morning,” Nash deflected.

“Yeah, and you’re ranchers,” scoffed Will. “Being up early is kind of part of the job.”

He was onto them; Meg knew it. Instead of hoping to avoid the inevitable, she just braced herself internally for the moment when he finally figured it out.

“Dude,” Nash said, sighing in annoyance while trying to act completely unbothered. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The deflection might have worked, except that Nash’s neck was turning bright red, and that was all Will needed to know that his brother was talking complete garbage.

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Meg stayed silent and perfectly still. Hopefully, she would just blend in with the surroundings. Everybody would forget she was even there, and Will wouldn't turn his scrutiny in her direction. It was wishful thinking, but Meg was going to take advantage of it for as long as humanly possible. Because when Will put it together, he was going to be insufferable. He was Nash's older brother, after all...

"We're just tired, okay?" Nash said, getting snappy as he grew more defensive.

"Why? What did you get up to last night?" It fell out of Will's mouth as a stupid joke, one that would usually be accompanied by waggling eyebrows, but as soon as the words were out, Will realized why they were acting the way they were. Then a smug little grin brightened up his whole face.

"Oh. Oh, okay. I see how it is."

Nash said nothing, but Meg, preparing to just get this over with, sighed. That was all the confirmation Will needed.

"Oh! Well, thank goodness for that!" he crowed, acting like this was the best news he'd ever received.

That... that was not the reaction that Meg had been expecting. She tried to catch Nash's eye, but he was looking at Will, still perfectly still.

"Whoo, boy," continued Will. "I thought I'd be six feet under before this day came, but here I am, still kicking and getting to witness this miracle firsthand."

“You were expecting this?” Meg asked, still surprised by that. Because according to her, this had only ever been one-sided on her part until very, very recently. But the way Will was acting...

“I mean, no,” Will said, grinning like all of his Christmases had come at once. Meanwhile Nash was still. So, so still. “I never in a million years expected Nash to come clean about this whole malarky. But here we are. I guess I better keep a lookout for some flying pigs as well, because apparently anything is possible.”

He laughed at his own joke, and Meg smiled in an automatic response, her body taking control. Nash still wouldn't look at her.

“Well, don't mind me, then. I'll be off. You lovebirds have a good day. Call if you need me, but I doubt you will. Farewell for now.”

With that he sauntered out the door and back towards his truck, like a cartoon character of some old prospector. Meg was surprised he wasn't whistling a tune and kicking his heels together as he made his grand exit.

Everything slowed down as what Will had said registered in her brain. Nash's strange reaction added to her thoughts.

“Come clean about what?” she asked, even though a tiny little part of her already knew what was coming. She hoped desperately that Will was just being crazy like he usually was.

Nash finally looked at her. He looked so sad. He looked absolutely furious. With each passing second a different emotion flashed across his face, and Meg figured she must be looking exactly the same.

“Nash?” God, her voice sounded so quiet in all this empty space. Nash sighed, and it

was deep and sad. Then he looked her right in the eye.

“I... I had a massive crush on you in high school. Well, massive is kind of an understatement. But, yeah. I carried a torch for you. I guess you’d call it that. That’s why Will was acting like this was a long time coming... because I’ve felt that way for a long time...”

He petered out with a shake of his head.

“You just wanted to be friends?” Meg had always been so certain that was what he’d wanted. Any time she had tried to step sideways into a conversation about feelings, he had shut it down. Just friends.

“But how Will was, like, celebrating just now... Did he know that I was in... that I had a crush on you?”

‘Had a crush’ was such a pathetically inadequate way to describe it. Nash’s eyes flashed with a million different feelings as he put together puzzle pieces of his own.

“It wasn’t just me hiding feelings, then?” he said, not accusing her of anything, just sounding sad.

“I tried to say it,” said Meg, her own eyes darting around the barn. “I didn’t know how to say it.”

“But I did?”

“I don’t know... No. Why didn’t you tell me now about back then?”

It was all coming out jumbled, a reflection of all the thoughts that were whizzing around her brain, all of them too fast to make sense of.

“I didn’t want to lose you,” he said.

She knew how that felt. But her brain itched, still trying to piece things together.

“That’s fine,” she said, processing her thoughts out loud. “That’s all fine because, yeah, I wasn’t exactly able to say it either. But prom...” Her voice broke on the word, which felt so stupid, but she couldn’t help it. She’d pretended for years that it hadn’t completely ruined her, and she couldn’t pretend anymore.

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“Yeah...” Nash said. “Yeah, prom.” He wasn’t looking at her anymore, like he was too guilty to keep looking her in the eye.

“Nash, you were so mean,” she said, tears finally welling up in her eyes. This was the first time she’d talked about it in all these years. She wasn’t even used to thinking about it all that much. Saying it out loud felt like she was falling from an impossible height.

“Nash, you were cruel that night,” she said, and Nash practically flinched at the accusation. “Why did you just ditch me there? If you really didn’t want to go at all, then why weren’t you at least nice about it? I would have understood. Why did you...”

Why did you have to destroy everything?

Meg didn’t say the last part out loud. She couldn’t; the lump in her throat wouldn’t let her. But Nash looked like he knew exactly what she’d been about to say. He hung his head, his hands clenched into fists by his sides.

“I... I didn’t want you to stay in Fordswell just because of me.”

It looked physically painful for him to say. But Meg still wasn’t sure what he was talking about.

“What do you mean? I don’t understand.”

Nash took a deep breath and threw himself into the deep end.

“You were already so close to staying here when you had so many better opportunities. If I’d told you how I felt, you would definitely have stayed. I wanted to make sure you weren’t deciding your whole fate on some stupid kid like me...”

Meg had to take a deep breath as that soaked in. Upset turned to anger. All throughout school, her entire childhood and through her teen years, her parents had micromanaged her choices for her, trying to push her to do what they thought was best. The one person she had trusted was Nash. And here he was, admitting that he had done exactly the same thing.

“So...” she said, feeling like her whole body was frozen. “You knew what was best for me. Just like everyone else.”

He didn’t look at her. Good. So he was ashamed. As he should be.

“I was a stupid kid,” he said softly.

“Yes. You were. What’s your excuse for the last few weeks? For not coming clean from the moment I showed up on your ranch?”

“I didn’t want to lose you,” he repeated.

“Not the point.”

“I was scared.”

“So was I.”

“I’m so sorry, Meg.”

“Me too.”

She took a few steps back, like she was backing away from a rabid coyote or something, not wanting to spook it.

“I need...” Meg had no idea what she needed. She needed to not be here. She needed a time machine. She needed a million different things, all of them impossible. “I need to go.”

“Meg...”

“No,” she said, looking at him with her jaw set. “No, you don’t get a say in what I do. You’ve had enough influence over my life, thank you very much.”

With that, time sped back up to its normal pace. She turned and left the barn, not once looking back.

CHAPTER 14

MEG

Meg sat in her truck, parked on the side of the road, staring out the window at nothing in particular. Her first instinct had been to just keep driving, following the road in front of her and ending up who knows where. As long as she wasn’t on the ranch anymore. It would have felt good to run away. It would have been cathartic to just avoid all of this for as long as possible. But unfortunately the rational, practical side of her brain chimed in as usual.

She was exhausted, she was emotionally spent, and if she wanted to stay somewhere other than Fordswell, she would be driving well into the early morning. So, yeah, this was one of the worst scenarios she could have ended up in, but Meg had to admit that driving into a ditch at midnight because she didn’t want to be here was worse. She would be responsible, because that was what it always came down to, wasn’t it? Meg

being the responsible one. Meg doing the right thing. Meg doing it all on her own. At least for tonight she would stay in a hotel where she could eat, sleep and shower.

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And wasn't it just her luck that every room in town was booked out. Meg felt herself growing more and more brittle with every passing minute.

I could call Mom and Dad.

The thought hit her like a ton of bricks. They knew she was back in Wyoming, back in Fordswell. She couldn't just be here for this long and not tell them. But she honestly hadn't had the time to go and see them, not with all the craziness of trying to renovate those stupid buildings. So, yeah, she could call them. Was she really that desperate?

Yes. And desperate times called for desperate measures.

She pulled her phone out of her bag and dialed her dad's phone number before she could change her mind. Three rings sounded, and Meg was already on the verge of hanging up when he answered.

"Meg?" he asked, less of a greeting and more of a question. "What's wrong?"

That was a blow, but she deserved it. The fact that if she was calling rather than texting, then he automatically assumed that it meant something was wrong... He was right though, so she couldn't even deny it. Well, there was no point in trying to cover it all up with niceties then, was there?

"Can I stay at your house? For a few days?"

"Oh, I thought you were reconnecting with Nash?" he said, still sounding surprised.

“Yeah, well...”

Suddenly there was a static rattling sound and her mother’s voice could be heard loud and clear.

“Of course you can stay. What a ridiculous question,” Rebecca said in her clipped voice. “But please, for the love of God, don’t bring any animals with you. I’ve only just had the carpets cleaned.”

The fact that her mom’s biggest concern was potential animal hair in the carpets and not her grown daughter crashing into their home out of the blue actually made Meg feel just a tiny bit better.

“No animals,” she said, trying to keep the waver out of her voice. “I’ll be there soon.”

“All right, Meggy,” her dad said. “Drive safe.”

Meg hung up, relieved that she had somewhere to go. She tried to focus on that rather than the guilt of how surprised she was at their willingness to have her back. She shook her head, trying to shake it clear, and started driving.

When Meg’s mom answered the door, she looked over her daughter with a raised eyebrow and pursed lips. It was a familiar expression.

“Those are not allowed inside,” said Rebecca, pointing a stern finger at Meg’s mud-caked boots. “As for the rest of your clothes, I’m assuming they’ll all need to be washed.”

“Probably,” Meg said with a sigh that wasn’t even a bit frustrated. She was just so tired. “I’ll throw them in the laundry.”

“Nonsense,” tutted Rebecca as Meg toed off her boots and followed her inside. “You look like you’ve been dragged backwards through a hedge. Give me your bag. Oh, and say hello to your father.”

Without further ado, her mom took the strap of her duffle bag and disappeared down the hall to the laundry room as if this were all a perfectly normal afternoon for everyone involved. But before she could dwell on her mother’s hospitable reaction any further, Vic appeared in the entryway, with his silver hair and neatly ironed shirt.

Less squeamish about dirty clothes than his wife, Vic wrapped Meg up in a hug, his long arms giving her a squeeze. It was nearly enough to tip Meg over the edge into blubbering hysterics. She somehow managed to keep her tears in check and hugged him back.

“Hi, Dad.”

“I’m making lasagna,” he said, forgoing any sort of actual greeting. “And I was thinking of mashed potatoes to go along with the salad. So I hope you haven’t eaten too recently.”

Meg’s stomach growled on cue. “No,” she said. “I could eat a horse.”

“That seems rather against the ethics of your profession,” he said, and Meg snorted a laugh.

“I’m assuming you remember where your old room is?” he asked.

“Yeah, I think I can find it.”

And it really was that easy. Meg wandered down the hall to her old bedroom, which was now a neutral-looking guest room, while her dad continued on with whatever he

had been doing and her mom fussed over Meg's grimy possessions.

She sat on the edge of the neatly made bed and let her shoulders sink. She even closed her eyes for a bit, just for a few seconds where everything was still and dark and not absolutely insane.

What did she do now?

The thought of going back to a job on the industrial lot crossed her mind and she stamped it out just as quick. No way. She was never going back there, not for double the salary and a lifetime of free food. Well, she could always just get another transfer, which was what she had planned to do anyway when the ranch evaluation was done. That idea was dashed just as quickly as the first. In fact, any thought of going back to work for the mega corporation, or any corporation really, made her feel slightly sick. She hadn't realized how much she'd hated it, how miserable every day had been until she'd been surrounded by fields and fresh air.

She'd been so relaxed on the ranch, in a way that she hadn't been in years. Maybe ever. Everything had been so simple, so peaceful, and Meg was only just now realizing that she had envisioned her life continuing there. She had thought her life would continue with Nash...

She flopped back on the bed. Why couldn't things just go well? Her job had been great... well, not great but fine, and then Mitch had taken over and ruined it for everyone. The Callahan Ranch really had been going great, and then she had to find out about Nash's secret agenda. Maybe if he had told her from the moment she'd set foot there what had actually happened, then everything would have still been fine. But then again, she might never have warmed up to him at all. It was all just a line of dominoes, each action dependent on such a specific order. Trying to sift through it all was making her head spin.

Why did life have to be confusing? The planet was old enough now; couldn't someone have written a handy rule book for everyone to follow? At least jot down

some tips and tricks? Here's how to not be an idiot. Five easy steps.

Meg kept her face shoved into a pillow, trying to block out the world and all of the mess she kept finding herself in. She heard her mom walking up and down the hall as she tutted over laundry. She was sure that her dad was at the kitchen table reading while the lasagna baked.

Meg didn't know what she had expected, calling out of the blue and asking to stay with her parents. She hadn't really expected them to say no, but she hadn't been prepared for this sort of open-armed hospitality either. It was like the last decade hadn't happened, like she had just come home from school and retreated to her room. Mom was doing laundry. Dad was reading. Dinner would be ready soon. It was the most potent déjà vu Meg had ever felt, and she looked down at herself more than once, checking that she wasn't suddenly sixteen again. Honestly this day had gone so badly wrong that time travel wasn't out of the question. She had no room left to be surprised anymore.

As hard as she tried to avoid it, her thoughts circled back to Nash. Because outside of all this drama, she was still contracted to do that evaluation on his ranch. Before she would be able to move on in any direction, she needed to wrap that up. Nash had said in the treehouse that he no longer wanted to sell. That he wanted to try this one last time, and he wanted a way out. Meg could be cruel for once and screw him over. She deserved that much, at least, after everyone else had felt entitled to interfere in her life. Right?

But of course she had to do the right thing. Because that was how she was programmed. Being a terrible person would make everything so much easier...

She sat up, grabbed her phone and started typing her official findings. She'd already called her parents and asked for help. After that, typing out an email was easy.

It was professional and to the point. The ranch wasn't suitable for acquisition, and Meg could provide all the necessary paperwork and reasons if needed. But in her professional opinion, the sale should be abandoned. Also, she was resigning. She added the necessary "thank you for the experience" and similar words before hitting send.

A thousand-pound weight was lifted off Meg's shoulders, and she finally felt tears roll down her face. Feeling that release was way too overwhelming to keep inside for a second longer.

CHAPTER 15

NASH

Nash felt like he was currently stuck at the end of a very long tunnel. On the other side is the rest of the world, continuing on as normal, carrying on just fine. Meanwhile he's stuck there, in the dark, so far away from it all. The worst part was he only had himself to blame.

He'd gotten another chance to have Meg in his life. Never in a million years did he think he'd ever get to see her again, let alone means something to her again. Then there she was, on his ranch, in his tree house, in his bed. They were making plans. He wouldn't have to sell the ranch, and he might actually get out the other side of that deep, dark tunnel that he'd been stuck in for years. And now he was right back at the beginning. Everything bright was out of reach. He was alone, and Meg was gone. The old wound in his chest that had never really healed, that had only partially scarred up, well, now it had been ripped open again, worse than the first time she'd left.

He was in a bit of a daze after she drove off. He went into autopilot like he usually did when he had to face the music. He fed the horses, checked on the cattle, did the usual chores, and waited for some sort of feeling to return to his body. When feelings

did start to trickle back, it was anger. Then the trickle became a tidal wave and all he felt was rage. None of it was towards Meg, never towards her. Mostly he was angry at himself, revisiting the loathing he'd fallen into over the course of his life. But then thoughts about a certain brother of his surfaced, and that deep, dark anger found a target.

Nash got in the truck and drove out to where Will lived on the outskirts of Fordswell. The whole way there, part of him wanted to take a different road, to veer off course and find Meg. He should have chased after her, should have left to go find her, to get on his knees and beg for forgiveness. He wanted to beg her not to leave. But no, he'd just stood there like an idiot and let her go. Again.

He only got angrier over the course of the drive, his knuckles white as they gripped the steering wheel. Why couldn't Will, for once, have kept his big mouth shut?

Half an hour whizzed by in a blur and Nash parked his truck in Will's driveway, slamming the door shut hard enough that the side mirror rattled. Will was already out of the house, closing the front door behind him, looking confused.

"Hey, man," he said, cocking his head to the side like he was trying to figure out what was wrong with Nash. "You all good? What's with all the door slamming? I thought you were all loved up and happy for once?"

The rage that had only grown hotter and meaner with every passing minute wouldn't even let Nash speak. He had no words to even begin to explain what was going on in his head. All he could do was storm forward, surging towards Will.

"Hey!" Will said, instantly shifting, feet apart, shoulders wide. "If you swing, man, then it's on. You know I can lay you out in a heartbeat."

Nash forced himself to stop. It was hard, but he did it. Standing just a few feet away

from Will, his hands curled into fists beside him. He did want to take a swing; he wanted it bad. But Will was right; he might be the smaller of the two, but he was quick and hit hard. So Nash stayed very, very still, using what was left of his self-control to lock his feet in place. Will didn't relax, not once leaving his fighting stance, but he did nod.

"All right, what's up?"

"What's up?" Nash asked. It sounded way too casual a question when he felt like the world was falling down around him.

"Yeah, what's up? Why are you in my yard looking like you're ready to murder someone?"

"I'm here ready to murder you because you couldn't keep your stupid mouth shut."

Will screwed up his face in an all too familiar expression. "Me? What did I say?"

Nash laughed a little at that. He was starting to feel a little crazy, and that was scarier than the rage. Rage he could control, but if he started spinning out, he wasn't sure he'd be able to get a handle on himself again. Everything felt way too fragile right now. Will, at least, seemed to finally realize how close to the deep end Nash really was.

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“Do you want to explain to me exactly what I did wrong?” Will asked, holding out a hand as if he were trying to calm down a rabid bear.

“I asked you not to say anything to Meg about me being such an idiot in high school. I asked you not to mention anything about the past, that it was done, that we were moving on from that. You looked me in the face and promised. So, what? You just forgot? This afternoon you started blabbing about us ‘finally getting together.’ Talking about me ‘coming clean’? You had no idea what had happened, and because you threw all your little theories out, Meg’s disappeared, and I doubt she’s ever going to talk to me again.”

Will’s face grew more and more somber as Nash ranted.

“I honestly thought you had filled her in, man.”

“Well, I hadn’t.”

“I just thought since, you know, things were sweet between you two now...”

“Yeah, and you ruined it because it all came out at the wrong time.”

“Don’t blame me,” Will said, growing steely.

“I absolutely blame you!”

“You don’t think she deserved to know, man?” Will said, his own anger boiling over.

“Were you just going to never mention high school ever again? Just pretend it never

happened? She deserved to know how messed up you were about her prancing off to college and never talking to you again. And if she was this upset about it the whole time, then I'm glad I said something, because she really did deserve to know the truth."

"Maybe, but?—"

"No maybe!" Will interrupted, voice getting louder with every word. "You don't get to storm in here like you're on fire and start yelling and cursing at me. It's not my fault that you're in this mess. It's yours. Sorry to be the bearer of bad news."

"You shouldn't have said?—"

"You shouldn't have done what you did all those years ago!" Will yelled, getting up in Nash's face, clearly losing the last thread of his patience. "You shouldn't have abandoned the poor girl, thinking that you knew what was best! You should have reached out, and you should have apologized. You should have done literally anything other than what you did. I was on your side this whole time because you're my brother and because I saw how it ripped you up, but I've changed my mind. You deserve every ounce of that misery because you gave it all to yourself. Meg hasn't kicked you to the curb now because of something I said. She's done it because of what you did. So don't come here launching an attack on me. Go and find her and actually apologize. Or is it too much to ask for you to not be an emotionally repressed jackass?"

They were nose to nose when the front door of Will's house slammed open and Lucy appeared beside them with a fierce frown of her own.

"Enough," she said, in a tone that could melt rock. "Take two steps back from each other now."

Will obeyed pretty much instantly, still looking like he was ready to smack Nash

upside the head. After another piercing glare from Lucy, Nash followed suit and took two steps backwards. Will's words were ringing in his ears, every one of them. They were seared into his brain like a tattoo, and it hurt just as much as a needle to skin.

“And you? You're done gawking?!” Lucy said, pointing her gaze towards the neighbors' house, and sure enough they had an audience. An older couple were watching over the fence with wide eyes. But they had enough decency to pretend to be doing something else when Lucy turned her ire onto them. That was enough to snap Nash out of it, to remind him that there was a world still spinning with other people in it. He was finally able to take a deep breath.

“You,” Lucy said, pointing to Will. “You should've watched your mouth. It's too big for your own good, and you know it. And you,” she said, aiming her finger at Nash like a laser. “You dug this hole yourself. Will is right about that much, at least. Both of you are wrong. Both of you are idiots, and both of you need to calm down and act like grown men instead of little boys.”

Nash had embraced the anger — clung to it — because he knew once that disappeared, he'd be left with nothing but that dark tunnel, empty and cold. Well, here he was, his anger vanishing as Lucy told both of them off. He looked at the toes of his boots, not wanting to look at her, or Will, or anyone. Right then and there he wished that he could just disappear.

“I was just going,” Nash said, his voice sounding flat even to his own ears. He didn't bother to wait for a response, and he definitely didn't look up at either of them. He turned and walked back to his truck, shoulders hunched and hands cramping.

He drove home in silence, the setting sun getting in his eyes because he'd left his sunglasses back at the ranch. His mind was blank, and he didn't feel much of anything. The only thought that crossed his mind was that the future stretched out in front of him, no longer filled with the possibility of Meg at his side. Instead, the

following days, weeks, years... they were all going to be as empty as the road in front of him.

The buildings weren't completely finished. They looked a hell of a lot better, bright and open and smelling of fresh air and fresh paint. But not finished. At first blush it was daunting, but then Nash was thankful for it. It gave him something to focus on instead of drowning in his own thoughts.

There was a whole pile of lumber that had been accumulating under a tarp for years, and he took the opportunity to go through it and salvage the best pieces. He would make some bookshelves for the weekend getaways. They might not have many books on them, but he could put little decorative things on them, like they did in magazines, just to look pretty. He could make some bedside tables as well; they didn't have to be super elaborate. In fact, the more rustic they looked, the better. That was the whole vibe they were going for, after all.

Not they. He. The look that he was going for. Because it was just him now.

He forced those thoughts away, stamped them right down to where they couldn't bother him. He would make shelves and nightstands and maybe some stools. Ha, he could probably make a big fancy headboard for the beds with some of the wood he had. That'd look nice. He'd screwed up everything else; at the very least, he was going to make this work. It had to work. It was all he had left.

CHAPTER 16

MEG

It was rare when Meg couldn't sleep. It was something she'd always been grateful for, being able to lay down on any sort of remotely soft surface and just shut off. It was something that she'd inherited from her parents: the ability to sleep like the dead.

Maybe it was because she was back under their roof and the whole atmosphere was like traveling back in time. Maybe it was because she was no longer working herself half to death and wasn't passing out at every opportunity, desperate for just a little bit of rest.

She knew the reason she couldn't sleep; she just didn't want to admit it. The problem was that Meg couldn't avoid thinking about the reason, no matter how hard she tried. Thoughts of Nash circled around her brain like water going down a drain. She would just start to drift off and snippets of conversation would start strolling through her mind, the beginnings of dreams weaving themselves together. Sitting in the treehouse he had made on the ranch. Doing other things in the treehouse. Sitting in another treehouse in another lifetime and promising to go to prom together, just as friends, of course. Standing alone at the same prom, heartbroken and flashing forward in time to Nash confessing that he had pushed her away on purpose. Because apparently everybody had a say in what she did with her life.

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Then her eyes would flick open, sleep would be long gone, and Meg would have nothing to do but stare at the ceiling of her childhood bedroom. And that all got old very quickly.

At four in the morning, she'd had enough of twisting both herself and the bed sheets into knots. She threw them off with a huff and sat up. The sun would rise soon enough, and she could find a million things to distract herself with. She'd been back for a few days now and part of her felt like she had never left. Mostly she'd just been sleeping, which was super out of character for her. When she would stumble out of her room with bleary eyes, Meg expected to get a scolding from her parents for wasting the day. But they just told her to go back to bed if she needed it. Meg couldn't quite fathom where this understanding attitude had come from until she overheard them talking in quiet voices about how exhausted she looked. Years of burnout from the industrial lots was finally catching up to her... The emotional exhaustion didn't help either.

She padded out to the kitchen, not bothering with the overhead lights. There was enough of a glow from the windows. Toast would have to do; it was all she could be bothered with. Memories of going out to Nash's kitchen, intending to make sandwiches and finding the leftovers he had arranged for her. Dreaming or awake, it didn't matter; she couldn't escape him. Standing in her parents' kitchen, all she could do was think of Nash making her bacon and eggs after they'd been up all night, a newborn foal learning to stand in the stables. Now she was eating toast by herself.

The overhead light flicked on and she nearly jumped out of her skin when her mom appeared in the kitchen, wrapped up in a dressing gown.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” Rebecca said with an apologetic smile, looking uncharacteristically disheveled.

“Sorry,” Meg said, grimacing a little. “I’m clearly too used to living on my own.”

Rebecca shrugged. “And so are we, but it’s all right. I wasn’t able to sleep much. I’m guessing you were having similar troubles.”

Meg hummed a half answer and slipped bread into the toaster. “Do you want any?”

“No, not this early.”

Rebecca sat at the table, watching Meg at the counter as if she were trying to read a book with too-small print. Meg started thinking that she would have been better off tossing and turning in bed. Then she felt guilty about thinking that. Fabulous. Another thought spiral ready to consume her; that was just what she needed...

“Would you like to talk about it?” her mom asked, still watching her. Meg swallowed a sigh.

“Am I acting like something’s wrong?”

“Yes,” Rebecca said dryly. “Sulking in the kitchen in the middle of the night is one thing. But calling and asking to stay here out of the blue was rather a red flag. You’re not exactly here that often.”

The guilt in Meg’s stomach started to grow, and it must have been obvious by the look on her face. Her mom just raised a hand with a small smile. “That’s not a bad thing, just an observation. And you’re welcome here, as long as you need. It’s no bother.”

The toast popped up with a mechanical clang, saving Meg from immediately having to think of an answer. Smearing peanut butter over her breakfast gave her another few seconds to avoid the conversation. But when she turned around, Rebecca was still there, seemingly determined to have a heart-to-heart, and Meg really didn't know how to proceed. Had she ever sat down with her mom and just talked? About feelings? Not one instance came to mind.

There really was no choice but to sit down at the table with her and take an awkward bite of toast. Meg wished her mom had a cup of coffee or something, anything to fill her hands. Instead, they were just folded neatly on the table in front of her as she watched Meg eat.

"Me and Nash had a falling-out," Meg said, despite herself. "Again."

"Ah," Rebecca said with a nod. "Losing his friendship the first time around hit you hard. I'm sorry, Meggy."

Meg shrugged.

"What happened?" her mom asked.

"Why do you care?"

She hadn't meant to say it. It just kind of slipped out. Rebecca looked surprised, shaking her head a little.

"Why wouldn't I care?"

Meg just shook her head, mortified at how petulant she was being.

"Meg," her mom said firmly. "Why wouldn't I care?"

“It’s just...”

“Tell me.”

“It’ll hurt your feelings. I know it will.”

“Maybe that’s why I need to hear it.”

She wasn’t going to back down. Meg knew it. Meg was just so tired of trying to keep all her thoughts and feelings in check that she surrendered and said it all out loud.

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“You never cared about me having friends,” she said. “You never cared about whether I was happy. You never cared about anything like that. I guess I’m wondering why you would care now?”

Rebecca looked blindsided. “Why would you think I never cared?”

“Because you only ever cared about my grades and how many extra minutes of studying I could fit into a day. Nothing mattered except succeeding. Having a social life didn’t matter. Having fun didn’t matter. Schoolwork was the only thing that mattered.”

It came out heated and too pointed, but Meg was too exhausted to care anymore.

Rebecca frowned. “We were maybe a little... too strict.”

Meg snorted. She hadn’t meant to. It just came out, a reaction born from years of suppressing any sort of sarcasm around her parents. Rebecca’s eyebrows shot up.

“We weren’t that bad, surely.”

Something in Meg snapped then; all those years of being restrained and quiet and trying to keep the peace just... broke her. Meg opened her mouth and launched into a rant before her mom could draw breath.

“I was never allowed to do anything if it didn’t contribute to schoolwork. If someone at school had a party, then I wasn’t allowed to go because that was a whole six hours that could be spent doing homework. Because God forbid I get a B plus and not an A.

You wonder why Nash was my only friend all those years? It's because he was the only one who was willing to put up with it. He was the only one who bothered to understand how much pressure I was under.

“And yeah, I ended up going to college in Texas, but the main factor was Nash ditching me, the reason for which I only found out ten years later. Otherwise, I would have stayed here and I can't even begin to imagine how hard you would have flipped out if I'd tried to put my foot down about it. You never even thought of giving me a choice about what I was going to do in school or after it. Thank God I wanted to go into vet medicine because then at least it was worthwhile.”

She had to pause to take in a deep breath and promptly shut her mouth when she registered the look on her mom's face. Her eyes were wide, her mouth pressed thin, and with the light shining just right, Meg could see a sheen of tears starting as well.

“That's why you never visit?” she asked, and God, her voice was so small. Meg had never heard her mom's voice like that, ever.

Meg rubbed her face and the rough calluses on her palms scratched her cheeks.

“I needed a break,” she said, voice flat. “I needed a break from you.”

It was harsh; she knew that. This whole thing was harsh and horrible, but now that she had started saying what she actually felt, she didn't know how to stop. And maybe harsh was okay? Now that Meg was an adult, maybe they needed to burn their old relationship to the ground in order to build something new. She wanted to build something new.

“I suppose...” Rebecca started, smoothing out the edge of the tablecloth. “I suppose I don't blame you, then. If you don't love us because of all that. We were just trying our best, that's all. We wanted the absolute best for you.”

“It’s not that I don’t love you, Mom,” Meg said, working hard to keep a calm and neutral tone. “I tried so hard all the time because I loved you. I just wanted you to say good job. Well done. This has all been worth it. We’re impressed with how you’re doing. I just wanted you to say anything other than ‘now do better next time.’”

There was another pause. While Meg’s words were flowing out of her like a faucet, Rebecca didn’t seem to know what to say.

“Well,” she said after collecting her thoughts. “I thought all of that went without saying. Of course we were proud of you. Are proud of you. Of course you excelled because you’re excellent. You always have been. I thought it was obvious how pleased we were with you — with where you’ve ended up. I suppose... I suppose we assumed wrong.”

It healed something in Meg to hear her say that. Part of her must have known all along that that was how they’d felt. It was why she’d never stopped loving them. But to hear it... all she had needed was to hear the words being said. Maybe there would be cracks between them; maybe there always would be. And even though it was teenage Meg who had needed to hear her mom say it most, at least it was better late than never.

“I don’t hate you,” Meg said softly. “You know that, right? I can be angry and also not hate you.”

Rebecca nodded solemnly. “I am proud of you, Meggy. I’ll be sure to say it out loud from now on.”

There was an awkward silence, and Rebecca cleared her throat.

“Is there anything else that needs to be said?” she chirped, suddenly businesslike. “Any other skeletons that need to be cleaned out of the closet?”

“I used to sneak out.”

Her mom blinked at her, looking more like an owl than ever. “I beg your pardon?”

“In high school. I would sneak out at night and go hang out with Nash.”

“How often did you do that?”

“Like four times a week.”

Her mom’s mouth hung open like the hinge of her jaw was broken. “Wha— How?”

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“You guys sleep like the dead. It wasn’t hard.”

Her mom took a deep breath and shook her head. “Well. The more you know. Any other secrets to divulge while we’re at it?”

“Can you handle any more?”

“Not really, no.”

“Then no. No more secrets.”

“Good. Sneaking out... my word.”

A smile crept onto her mom’s face as she shook her head in amazement. Seeing that, Meg knew that this was all going to be okay.

CHAPTER 17

MEG

Being up so early, Meg figured she would make breakfast for everyone. Her mom had disappeared back to bed for another hour or so, and then her dad had wandered out. And everything seemed kind of normal again. Not that any of this felt super normal... but it felt nice.

Maybe they weren’t all going to be holding hands and skipping through daisies anytime soon. But after having that conversation with her mom, there was a weight

off of Meg's chest that she hadn't known was there. A forgiveness that smoothed out plenty of rough edges in their relationship in one fell swoop. And because her thoughts were constantly returning to Nash, she started thinking about forgiving him. Maybe she should be brave and be the one to reach out, to rip off the Band-Aid and actually talk about things. The more time she spent away from the ranch, the more she wanted to go running straight back.

The number of life-changing realizations Meg was having this week were starting to give her a headache.

Sitting at the table, having breakfast with her dad, Meg marveled over the fact that he still read a physical newspaper.

"I didn't know you could still buy newspapers?" she said. "Who sells them? A merchant by the side of the road? A small boy shouting the headlines and asking for a penny?"

"I have a subscription," said Vic, not once taking his eyes from the page. "Would you like the crossword pages or not?"

Of course he had a subscription. That would be the most economical way to get newspapers, after all. Meg held out her hand despite herself. It wasn't like she had anything better to do. Vic extracted the pages neatly and passed them over to Meg. Rebecca emerged at some point, looking ready for the day, and they all sat together like it was some sort of postcard for a strong family unit.

"I love you very much, Meggy," said Rebecca. "But this is... strange."

"We've been having a very enjoyable morning," Vic said, peering at his wife through his eyeglasses, ready to deflect a potential fight.

“No, it is strange,” Meg said. “Enjoyableandstrange.”

“As long as you two are agreeing,” Vic said, sounding exasperated. “That’s all I can really ask for, isn’t it.”

Meg got bored with the crossword she was working on and flipped over the page to find a different one. Her heart sank through the floor.

There was a half-page advertisement for the hillside buildings, complete with the photos she and Nash had taken. They looked great; they really did. It looked exactly how they had envisioned. Nash had clearly taken steps to get things advertised in order to get bookings coming in. The thought that she wasn’t there helping stabbed Meg through the ribs. She wasn’t mad at him though, not anymore. Now she was mad at herself. She could easily reach out, call or text or drive back there. She just didn’t know how. And seeing everything they had worked on together printed out in front of her was like the universe giving her the most literal sign it could think of.

Her mom looked at her over the top of her coffee cup, her eyebrow raised as usual, this time with curiosity.

“Meg?”

“Still need to catch up on some sleep, I think,” Meg said with a half-hearted attempt at a smile. She left the newspaper page on the table and retreated to her room.

She flopped down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Even though the advertisement was still out in the kitchen, she could clearly see it, imprinted into her mind like her brain had photocopied it. The photos had turned out great. It looked bright and fresh and inviting, just what they had been going for.

Going back to the ranch was out of the question. Her knees felt unstable at the

thought of it. Not to mention she knew that if she were to make the drive out of town towards the ranch, she would find any excuse she could to turn her truck around and drive back in the opposite direction.

But she should call him... right? Or text. Something. The more time that passed, the more Meg had been able to really think about Nash's perspective in all of this, which is what she should have been doing a whole lot sooner. He'd been a stupid kid, trying to protect her, trying to do what was best for her. Meg was the one with a chip on her shoulder about getting bossed around.

And since the conversation with her mom... well, that had added a whole new layer to it as well. Her parents weren't the villains; they never had been. Meg had known that deep down. But seeing how upset it had made her mom to learn just how badly it had affected her over the years... it made Meg a million times more forgiving than she had ever been before.

She had just managed to repair everything with Nash, to reconnect. So what now? She was going to throw it all away because he'd gone about things the wrong way when he was still just a confused kid? That was petty, if nothing else.

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So yeah, the more time that passed, the more she realized that she needed him in her life, maybe more than ever. The problem was that the more time that passed it was becoming harder and harder to reach out, to smooth things over and try and fix it all over again. She was scared; there was no use in denying it. Maybe she was just a coward, and maybe she was an emotionally unavailable workaholic. Maybe she was both. Probably both.

Meg crept back out of her room towards noon, mentally exhausted from turning over everything in her head all morning. She needed lunch, and if that involved pasta, bread or potatoes, even better. Her dad joined her, quiet as always but seemingly happy just to spend some time with her. It didn't help Meg's mood, thinking about how her mom must have told him about their talk. Hurting either of her parents hadn't been her intention.

"I have made a decision," Rebecca said, entering the room and making her announcement with fanfare.

Both Meg and Vic looked up from what they were doing and blinked at her before shooting a glance at each other. Vic just shrugged because apparently, he had no idea what was happening either. Meg couldn't help herself and took the bait.

"A decision?" she asked, feeling like she was poking a beehive with a stick.

"Yes. We are going to go on a girls' trip together." Rebecca nodded like she was adding a full stop to her sentence.

"Oh, okay," Meg said, trying to inject as much enthusiasm as she could muster into

her voice. Not that she thought it was a bad idea; it was just a little out of left field, was all. But after last night, the last thing Meg wanted to do was reject an olive branch that was extended towards her.

“When are we going to do that?” she asked while her dad watched on, silent and amused.

“Today,” Rebecca said, with another nod of her head.

“Today?”

“This afternoon, to be more precise.”

“That’s... sudden.”

“You need a pick-me-up,” her mom said, smoothing her already smooth hair. “And there’s no better pick-me-up than a girls’ trip. It will be good for the both of us. Work has been simply tiresome this past month.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that, Mom. So a getaway, okay. But, uh, where are we going?”

“Think of it as a surprise. I’ve sorted the whole thing,” she said with a flap of her hand. “I’ll drive. You don’t have to worry about a thing. Check-in is at two. Pack your bag, and we’ll head off.”

“I only have work clothes. Farm clothes. I don’t have anything nice with me, Mom.”

“Nonsense. I saw that lovely dress in the laundry yesterday. It’s all ironed and hanging up for you. No need to thank me.”

“Okay...”

Without further ado, Rebecca flounced out of the room, presumably to go and pack her own bag for their trip. Meg and her dad shared another look. He seemed just as clueless as she was.

“She’s in a good mood,” he said dryly. “I guess you’re going on a vacation?”

“I guess so,” said Meg. “And I guess I’m wearing that dress. I can’t believe she ironed it...”

“I don’t think I’ve seen her use an iron in twenty years. So, yes, dear, I think you should wear the dress.”

“I’ll eat before I change, then,” Meg said, determined to at least finish her lunch before her mother could spirit her away to God knew where.

CHAPTER 18

NASH

The retreat had officially been open for less than a day, and already there was a booking. Nash had nearly fallen over when the notification came through: two guests staying overnight in the smallest building. Paying for that half-page spread in the newspaper had been worth it, apparently.

It would have been nice to feel the relief that all of this was working out. But Nash was honestly just way too nervous to feel anything other than slightly sick. He did a final tidy-up of the building that the first guests would be staying in, making sure that they would have everything they needed. It didn’t take too long, and soon he was left with nothing to do but wander around the ranch, trying to distract himself.

The horses were out in the pasture grazing, and the sun was a white dot in a sky blue as the sea. The foal would periodically sprint around, testing out its legs, before running back to the safety of its mother. Opal was already a naughty thing, though, sticking her nose in places that were going to get her into trouble.

Other than a nosy foal, the ranch looked stupidly idyllic, like a picture book or something. He hoped it would all make a good first impression on his very first guests. Word of mouth was the best form of advertising, after all. If these first guests had a great time, if they told even one other person, that would be the boost this place needed to really get going.

Please just let this work. The thought ran around his head on a loop, driving him half insane with the repetition.

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As the hours dragged on and Nash well and truly ran out of things to distract himself with, he went from trying to ignore the anxiety to focusing all of his attention on it. It was easier than acknowledging the sadness that was creeping around the edge of his thoughts. He wished Meg was here. He wished she could see how nice the buildings had turned out now that he'd added the final touches. He wished he could say he was sorry and have her believe him. He wished for a lot of things that were probably never going to come true.

Finally, he heard the telltale rattle of a car coming up the dirt driveway. He tried to look busy, because standing there looking like he was waiting for them would just be creepy. And that was definitely not the impression he wanted to make. So instead of waiting there awkwardly, he set about moving a pile of spare lumber piece by piece to a separate pile, even though there was no reason to do so.

When he deemed it safe to turn around and greet his guests without coming off as insane, he turned around with his best megawatt smile, which promptly fell off his face in shock. Meg was walking towards him, looking unsure. But she was wearing that sundress, and she looked beautiful as well.

Her mom was there too. Nash hadn't seen Rebecca Whitmore in a decade, but she looked basically the same. While Meg looked hesitant and shy, Rebecca waved a hand with a big smile of her own.

"Hello, Nash. Long time, no see."

"Uh, yeah..." he said, trying to piece it all together. "Are you..."

“I booked, yes. I wanted to see what you were getting up to these days. Also, you and Meg really do need to have a conversation.”

She was as blunt as ever. Nash had no idea how to respond to that, but Meg laughed. Actually laughed. As if she and her mom were on good terms or something.

“What are you doing with the lumber?” Meg asked.

“Trying not to look creepy,” he said. The complete ridiculousness of the answer made her smile, and that made Nash’s heart come alive in his chest for the first time in days.

“She surprised me with a girls’ trip,” Meg said, jabbing a thumb at her mom. “So yeah, hi. I guess.”

“I did say, Meggy, that it would be the last time I meddled in your life, but you really must talk this out with each other. No more sulking. Oh look, a baby,” her mom said, shielding her eyes as she gazed over at Tilly and her foal. “How delightful. You two catch up. I’ll be admiring the horses.”

Without further ado, she waltzed off to the fence to do just that, leaving Nash alone with Meg on the driveway.

“She tricked me,” Meg said dryly, gesturing at her mother, who was giving Nickel a tentative pat on the nose.

“Yeah,” said Nash. “I didn’t think you’d be back here willingly.”

Her face fell. “I wanted to come back...” she said, voice almost too soft to hear.

There was an awkward pause as she folded her arms over her chest. Nash wanted

nothing more than to sweep in and use his own arms to wrap her up, squeeze her tight and make her feel safe.

There was an order to this though, wasn't there? They should talk first. Then he should apologize, even though it would be stilted and awkward and horrible. But there was an order. But you know what? Screw it. Following the right order of things had never done him any good.

He stepped forward, closing the distance between them and wrapped his arms around Meg, folding her in, holding her close, his cheek pressed against her hair. Nash waited for Meg to push him away. He half expected her to slap him, maybe. He deserved it. Instead, she softened, her whole body loosening in his arms as he held her. Her fingers hesitantly gripped onto the front of his shirt and then gripped harder when she realized that he wasn't letting go.

"I'm sorry," he said, lips brushing against the warm strands of her hair. He'd thought of so many elaborate things to say, a million long-winded apologies. In the end it was just "I'm sorry." But it sounded right. It felt right.

"I know," she said. "I'm sorry too."

Nash pulled back slightly to look at her face, but he simply couldn't bear to let go of her shoulders. He didn't want to let go of her ever again.

"What are you sorry for?" he asked, confused. He was the jackass here, not Meg.

"Because..." she said, thinking so hard her eyebrows pinched together, her hands still gripping his shirt. "I don't know."

"Well, we can both be sorry," he said, attempting a smile. "It can be like a bonding experience or something."

“Yeah,” Meg said with a little laugh. “We’ve got to start somewhere, I guess.”

He rubbed her upper arms, feeling Meg’s muscles relax ever so slightly beneath his hands.

“So, I was going to give my first guests a tour around our freshly renovated buildings,” he said, not sure where to go from here but stumbling forward regardless.

“Did you have a speech ready?” she said with a sly little smile.

“Yeah, I did actually. It’s really good, too.”

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“I have to hear it. To get the whole experience, you know?”

This was good, right? Nash was so prepared for everything to keep falling apart that he was honestly kind of surprised that she was still standing here in front of him — that she hadn’t vanished into thin air.

“Mom?” Meg called, looking over at Rebecca, who was still fascinated by the horses. “Me and Nash are going to go look at the buildings now that they’re finished.”

Rebecca flapped a hand in their direction, dismissing them as she held her phone at various angles, taking pictures of the horses. Nash figured that Meg’s mom intended to give them all the time in the world to talk in private. He felt a flash of warmth for the woman, which was just as surprising as everything else that had happened lately.

“It looks great,” Meg said as she entered the small building where his “guests” had booked to stay.

“It’s all pretty much the same since you saw it last,” he said with a shrug. “Just the little extras.”

“Yeah, but details make all the difference.”

She stopped wandering around and looked at him. There was a small smile on her face, and Nash desperately hoped that he wasn’t imagining it.

“I love you,” he said.

Nash didn't know which of them was more shocked. He hadn't been planning on saying it. He'd just been thinking it, and the words had leapt out of his mouth. Meg was staring at him with her eyes wide and unblinking.

“Uh—”

Before she could say anything else, before the moment escaped him, Nash let the rest of the words he needed to say be said. He wasn't going to waste maybe the last chance he'd ever get...

“I do,” he said, with all of the conviction he could muster. “I love you. I think I always have. And I was such an idiot for pushing you away for some stupid sense of obligation that was all in my own head. And I'm sorry. I'll always be sorry, because you're the only one who should have the final say in what happens in your life. And I'm sorry that it cost us ten years together because we'll never get that time back. But I hope... I really, really hope that you believe me when I say that I never want you to leave again.”

The only reason Nash stopped was because he needed to take a breath.

Meg was still staring at him, but she was blinking again, some of the shock wearing off.

“I don't want to leave,” she said simply. “Is it... I mean... is it all too much, too soon?”

Nash shrugged and said what he really thought.

“Maybe. But so what if it is? Who cares? I mean, your mom tricked you here so we could talk. Will was jumping up and down about us being together. Maybe we've just got to jump in?”

“So I just move in? Just like that?”

She was smiling as she said it, taking a step closer.

“You kind of already have,” he said, smiling wider as she moved even closer. “We’ve already been living together.”

“The separate bedrooms thing would have to change.”

“Oh definitely.”

Meg stopped in front of him, her smile fading as her expression turned thoughtful and serious. She rested a hand on his chest, and Nash was sure she would be able to feel the thrum of his heartbeat beneath her fingers.

“I can’t hold a grudge against you for something you did as a kid. Especially when I know how sorry you are. Hanging onto all of that would only waste more time, and I’m so sick of wasting time.”

So was Nash. Screw it. He wasn’t going to waste another second.

He put his hands on her shoulders, his fingers cradling the curves, and pulled Meg even closer to him. He kissed her, his lips touching hers, and it felt like coming home. For a fraction of a second, he was terrified that she would pull away and say that this was all a mistake. But then she leaned into him, her body rising as she went up on her tiptoes, her arms wrapping around his neck.

He was never going to let go of her ever again, not when he had a decade’s worth of love to make up for.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER: MEG

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Opal was being a major pain and taking immense pleasure in it. The yearling hadn't even reached her full height yet and she was already causing mischief: stealing hoses, jumping fences and ignoring every command thrown her way. Today, the chaos she decided to sow involved taking every bucket she could find and throwing them about the yard. She had also attempted to knock over the water trough, which had been cemented into the ground for this exact reason.

“Were you a rodeo clown in a past life or something?” Meg asked the horse, attaching a lead to her halter and moving her to a safer pasture that was free of buckets. “Like seriously? For someone a year old, you have a serious propensity for mischief.”

Opal just whinnied, delighted at all of the attention she was getting because of her exploits. Meg couldn't even be angry at her. She'd somehow ended up being Meg's horse, the same way that Tilly would only ever listen to Nash. And as naughty as she was, she was also one of the smartest animals Meg had ever encountered. Which was going to become a serious problem, because it was only a matter of time before she figured out how to work the latches on all the pens.

“Go on,” she said, letting Opal loose in the corral so she could blow off some steam without damaging any more property. Not to mention the adult horses needed a break from her insanity for a couple of hours. Meg sat on top of the fence, watching Opal trot around gleefully, squealing and snorting at the top of her lungs. Beyond the corral the sun was starting to dip into mid-afternoon, lighting up the pastures in a gentle, golden glow.

When she had first set foot on the ranch, a little over a year ago, Meg's first thought

had been that it looked like a storybook illustration. It still did. In fact, it was probably even more true than it had been before. With the money they made from the Hillside Rentals, there were funds and time available to fix up the whole ranch. The main house was looking just as fresh as the buildings on the hill, and the horse yards had new fencing. That was mostly because Opal was feral and they needed to keep her contained, but it still looked nice.

The remaining cattle were mostly here to keep the grass down and because Nash just couldn't bear to part with them if he didn't have to. In a few years the herd might multiply back to the numbers it had once been, but for now they were just some very spoiled cows, eating grass to their hearts' content. Plus the guests from the city just loved taking pictures of them, especially when there were any calves bouncing around.

"Hey," came a grunt from behind Meg. She turned to find Nash wandering over to her, looking tired, which was pretty normal. But he didn't look stressed these days. In fact, she'd never really seen him so happy.

"What did she destroy this time?" he asked, jutting his chin at Opal.

"Threw a bunch of buckets around. Attacked the water trough. Nothing too terrible."

Nash rolled his eyes. "Yeah, she's an angel."

Opal whinnied louder as if she knew she was being talked about.

"Are you busy?" Nash asked.

"When?"

"Now."

“Nope. The only thing on my agenda was to deal with this delinquent.”

“That’s a job that never ends. Come on, then, before she destroys something else.”

He gave Meg a tap on her thigh, always finding an excuse to touch her as much as he could and walked off in the direction of the house. Meg swung off the fence and followed.

“Why? What’s up?” she called after him. All manner of things sprung up on the ranch that needed their attention. She’d stopped trying to predict what her day might hold a long time ago.

“Jump in the truck. I’ll show you.”

“Okaaaay. Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Is pestering you with more questions going to work?”

“Nope.”

Meg sighed. “Fine. Just let me wash my hands. The delinquent slobbered all over them.”

Getting pulled away to do something last minute with Nash was nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, she did the same to him on a regular basis. But having the reason be a surprise was new... Life on the ranch was busy, and the only way they got to spend any real time together was to see an opportunity and take it with both hands. Though getting in the truck and actually going somewhere was new. But asking questions wasn’t going to reveal anything, was it? Meg was just going to have to be patient and

wait to see what scheme Nash was cooking up.

“Busy” was an understatement really, considering how wildly successful the Hillside Rentals had become. Within a month of starting up, they were pretty solidly booked out. Apparently they were filling a niche that they didn’t know existed. Being on a hill was the main attraction instead of a deterrent... people loved a good view.

Nash had seized the beginnings of success and refused to let go, riding the momentum and adding new features to keep the place fresh and exciting. Meg’s idea of hiring out the barn as a wedding venue had been a hit, with the wedding parties staying in the surrounding buildings for convenience. Tours of the property soon became an option as well, with Nash as a guide explaining about the small herd they still had and the crazy uncle that had moved from the hill to flat land. It had become a more and more elaborate legend over time, but that was half the fun. Once Nash had the idea to throw in horse riding lessons as an add-on option, bookings had doubled, leading to a lengthy waitlist. Only the geldings were available for actual riding, but Tilly was at least content to be groomed by strangers if she deemed themworthy — or if they fed her snacks first. People were allowed to approach Opal at their own risk. She was going to make the perfect rodeo horse one day and a complete menace to society.

Running the rentals, the tours and the lessons kept Nash busy from dawn till dusk, and he’d never been happier. These days he walked with his head high and his shoulders back, ready to take on the world. It made Meg smile just to see how light his steps were these days. He’d finally found a purpose, and his purpose was thriving. There was no stopping him now.

Meg, meanwhile, was kept busy with her own work. When she’d promised Nash to stick around, to run this place together, she had assumed she would just be running the rentals with him and tending to their own animals on the ranch. But word of mouth soon got around that there was a new livestock vet in the area, and she

was good. One call out to a neighboring farm turned into another, and before Meg knew it, she was fully booked with appointments. She was asked to look at everything from horse dentistry to cattle vaccinations, stray kittens and elderly donkeys with arthritis. That was probably her favorite patient.

Somehow, completely by accident, she'd fallen into the image of a large animal vet that had once seemed like a fairytale. The image she'd had for her life at the start of college had now become a reality, driving around country roads and seeing to all sorts of animals from dawn until dusk. The lingering fear that she would have to return to an industrial lot took time to disappear, but disappear it did. So Nash wasn't the only one with lighter steps these days.

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It didn't leave Nash and Meg much time to just hang out. But there was lost time to make up for, lost years, and both of them were determined not to waste a second. So when Nash said come on, I want to show you something, she went. When she said hey, come sit with me while I order new vaccines for the herd, he pulled up a stool and sat beside her. They carved out time with each other with all the care of a sculptor, making sure never to miss a day of being together. It had taken them this long to reconnect; Meg, for one, wasn't going to take it for granted.

She climbed into the truck, still not sure what could warrant a full-on surprise, but happy to go along for the ride. Hopefully Opal wouldn't burn the place to the ground while they were busy.

Nash drove through the pastures, and only when they arrived at the old oak tree where Meg had first spotted the buildings on the hill did she realize where they were.

"The treehouse?" she asked as they climbed out of the truck and wandered over to the rope ladder.

"Yep."

"What are we doing at the treehouse?"

"It's a surprise."

"But we're here now. You can tell me."

"Nope."

“You’re a pain.”

“Yep.”

Without any extra comment or even the slightest clue, Nash climbed up the rope ladder with that surprising grace of his and disappeared into the small building. Meg didn’t bother complaining or arguing; it would get her nowhere, so she started to climb up after him. She gave up halfway up the ladder though, hanging there with a huff. Her thighs were burning from chasing Opal around the yard all afternoon. Nash poked his head out of the entrance and shook his head at her.

“Come on,” Nash said. “Are you getting old or something?”

“I mean, yeah,” Meg said with a shrug. “I kind of am. I’m not exactly twenty-one anymore.”

He tutted in that old-man way of his that she secretly loved, grabbed her hand and hauled her up into the treehouse. Meg sat on the edge of the opening with a huff, her legs hanging, taking a second to get her bearings before she looked around.

She had been expecting some new renovations, and that would be the reason why Nash had brought her up here. Maybe he’d finally put curtains up? But there were no renovations and no extra decorations. Instead there was a full picnic spread out on a tartan blanket on the floor. The last picnic they’d had here had been sandwiches, supermarket bags and cans of lukewarm soda. This was something else entirely. On top of the blanket was an actual picnic basket, made of wicker, just like the movies. There was an ice bucket with a bottle of champagne resting in it, the sunlight from the window glinting off the glass. Champagne glasses sat beside it, ready and waiting. Meanwhile, on a platter in the middle of the blanket was an assortment of cheeses, crackers, meats and fruit, all laid out like some sort of still-life painting. It looked... perfect.

Then there was Nash, standing in the corner of the treehouse, looking about as awkward as a brand-new foal learning to walk. Which only made the whole scene more perfect, even as Meg grinned at the whole ensemble.

“What’s all this?” Meg asked, wriggling into the treehouse properly and trying not to knock anything over in the process. Against all odds, she actually succeeded.

Nash mumbled something, his neck burning bright red. He always got the most embarrassed by the things he’d put the most effort into.

“Nash, I love it,” she said, reassuring him. “It’s amazing. I just don’t know what it’s for?”

“Our anniversary,” he said, much clearer this time but with his neck turning an even brighter shade of red. “It’s for our anniversary. It’s been a year since our last picnic in here, and I thought... you know... I thought I’d make a thing of it.”

Oh.

Well...

Meg simply refused to cry. Absolutely not. She needed at least two glasses of champagne before she was going to let herself cry. So when a few tears leaked out the corners of her eyes, she swiped them away and pretended that they absolutely didn’t exist.

“Oh, I love it,” she said, smiling up at him. “This is amazing.”

“Yeah?” he asked, suddenly looking so much younger, desperately hoping that he’d done a good job.

“Yeah, absolutely. So stop standing there like you’ve forgotten how to use your feet and come sit down with me.”

He didn’t move though. Was he okay? Had he fallen out of the tree while setting this all up and banged his head or something? Because Meg had seen him nervous before, but right now he was just acting weird.

Nash hesitated a moment longer and seemed to be bracing himself for something. Meg briefly wondered if Gadget had thrown him from the saddle again and he had gotten a concussion that way. But then Nash seemed to be mentally prepared, and he moved towards Meg as she sat on the blanket. As he lowered himself, instead of sitting he got down onto one knee and looked at her like he was seeing her for the first time.

Meg, for a few seconds, turned into a complete idiot, all of her brain cells vanishing without a trace. She had no idea what he was doing, entirely perplexed, until he pulled a black velvet ring box out of his back pocket. Nash opened it up, his hands shaking ever so slightly, revealing a delicate ring cushioned within, a single diamond glinting in the middle of the gold band. Then all of Meg’s brain cells returned, hurling her into sensory overdrive.

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“Meg,” Nash said as she stared at him with her mouth hanging open. “I get it, if this is too soon. But I love you so much, and I’ve loved you for so long...”

He cleared his throat and swallowed before he continued.

“I just love you so much,” he repeated with a little smile on his face. “And I’m done wasting time, so I wanted to ask if you would marry?—”

“Yes.”

Nash blinked, and his grin widened. “You didn’t let me finish the question,” he said, laughter at the edge of his voice.

“I don’t care. The answer is yes,” Meg said with her own laugh.

“Can I still ask the question to the end?”

“You can if you want, but the answer is yes.”

He just laughed, reaching forward and taking her left hand, then sliding the ring onto the appropriate finger.

“Meg, will you marry me?”

“Yes.”

He kissed her, still up on one knee, bringing his lips to hers and cupping her cheeks in

his hands. He pulled away and rested his forehead on hers.

“I’m glad you washed your hands from the Opal slobber,” he said, and Meg laughed.

“Yeah, this would have been pretty gross otherwise.”

“Especially because I forgot to bring any forks with me.”

“You would have just had to hand-feed me.”

“I can still do that.”

He settled down out of his kneeling position, reached over, slid a hand around the back of her neck and pulled her in for another kiss. One kiss melded into another, and it was a few minutes before Meg could bring herself to come up for air.

“I love it,” she said. “I love you. I love everything about our life together...”

This time she really did start crying, and she couldn’t deny it, even though she hadn’t had a single sip of champagne. But Nash’s eyes were misty too, shining in the afternoon light, so Meg didn’t feel quite so silly for the tears.

“I love you too,” he said, his voice soft, his hand squeezing the back of her neck. “I always will.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Despite everything they’d been through to get here, or maybe because of it all, Meg knew that his promise really would last forever. There was no doubt about that.

The End